

Sharon R. Mazzarella
General Editor

Vol. 5

Ruth Nicole Brown

BLACK
Girlhood
Celebration

TOWARD A HIP-HOP FEMINIST PEDAGOGY



PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
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For Maya Sanaa

Your two-year-old will remind me that it is always worth the fight if you need
it and that the presence of little Black girl beauty only brings joy unparalleled to
the struggle.

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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

So, here I sit, a White feminist Girls' Studies scholar of a certain age, attempting to write a preface for a book about Black girlhood. Had I written this preface a few short months ago, I probably would have begun by reciting what Aisha Durham (2007) calls the "wave metaphor"—the oft-recited history of the evolution of feminist activism from the first wave of early twentieth-century suffragettes, through the second wave of "women's libbers" of the 1960s, and on to the third wave of riot grrrls in the 1990s. Most likely, I would have written that Girls' Studies as a field emerged partly from this third wave form of feminism, heeding its call for scholars, policy makers, educators, and all manner of adults to listen to the voices of girls. I am guessing I also would have written that the field of Girls' Studies is, in part, a response to the proliferation of girls-in-crisis tomes such as Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* (1994) that dominated both the academic and public discourse about U.S. girls' in the 1990s. In fact, I know I would have written these things because I have done so before.

Girls' Studies equals third wave, or so the received history of the field would have us believe, and so I thought until I read Aisha Durham's manuscript "All Up in My Kitchen! Fingerwaves, Sistercurls and Extensions of Hip-Hop Feminism in the Third Wave" (2007). Although I was the respondent on Durham's panel at the 2007 National Communication Association conference

in Chicago, and was supposed to be applying *my* scholarly expertise and years of experience to evaluating *her* manuscript, it was Durham who challenged my understanding of the evolution of Girls' Studies; who exposed for me what the wave model of feminist history leaves out; and who laid bare what she calls "the contentious interrelationship between hip-hop feminism and the third wave." Her paper exposed, in part, how the unquestioned regurgitation of the wave model of feminism's history (Durham prefers the term "herstory") has served to reproduce and perpetuate the invisibility of Black female bodies, lived experiences, history, culture, and theorizing. Moreover, she challenged feminists to "theorize feminism through alternative modes of intellectual production," and to focus on the role cultural representations play in the identity development of Black girls. More important, she positioned hip-hop feminism not as a reaction to third wave or other White-centered feminisms, but rather as "the development of Black feminism and U.S. third world feminism in the contemporary." Clearly, there are pages missing from the feminist intellectual history books, and Durham along with other hip-hop feminists, including Ruth Nicole Brown in *Black Girlhood Celebration*, are challenging all of us to rethink this history and, for those of us White feminists, to acknowledge our own complicity in its perpetuation.

In chapter two of *Black Girlhood Celebration*, Brown (citing the work of Marnina Gonick, 2006) contests what have become the two dominant yet competing discourses of Girls' Studies, the "Reviving Ophelia" and "Girl Power" schools of thought. Specifically, Brown argues that, like the wave metaphor, these "discourses also effectively silence and exclude the experiences of girls of color in general, and Black girls in particular." Yet she is "not interested in squeezing Black girls into the Reviving Ophelia and Girl Power paradigm." Rather, like Durham, who is not interested in incorporating Black girlhood into the wave metaphor, Brown argues instead for the creation of a discourse that places Black girls at the center. This is precisely what she does in *Black Girlhood Celebration*.

Defining Black girlhood as "the representations, memories, and lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female," Brown takes us on an intellectual and celebratory journey that is part feminist theory, part social narrative, part performance-based autoethnography, part poetry slam, and part dance cipher. It is, as she describes it, "activist-driven scholarship" articulated through the example of Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT), a Black girl-centered program located in a small, Midwestern university town.

In explaining SOLHOT (chapter three) and in working toward a hip-hop feminist pedagogy (chapter six), Brown shakes up our understanding of Girls' Studies as an academic field, challenges traditional "empowerment" programs for girls, and deviates from the conventions of "appropriate" academic writing style. Nowhere is this more evident than in chapter three in which Brown "enacts" SOLHOT's "resistance to being completely organized" and "commitment to freestyle." Specifically, instead of describing SOLHOT in standard, dry academese, Brown includes, without elaboration or explanation, a diverse collection of texts written by herself and/or others. Emails, poetry, song lyrics, letters, newspaper article reprints, meeting agendas, activities, and theory jumble together to create a dynamic and thoroughly evocative picture of SOLHOT. In this way, she both confronts what she calls "the problem of language" in trying to describe SOLHOT and also allows the reader to experience SOLHOT rather than simply read about it.

Lest the reader think this book is simply a description of a single program in a single community, I should clarify that *Black Girlhood Celebration* is not about SOLHOT. Rather, SOLHOT is the vehicle through which Brown articulates a hip-hop feminist pedagogy—a pedagogy that has implications far beyond SOLHOT. *Black Girlhood Celebration* is both theory-driven scholarship and theory-building scholarship, culminating in Brown's compelling and successful attempt to work toward a critical hip-hop feminist pedagogy in chapter six. (I am purposely not providing a definition of hip-hop feminist pedagogy in this preface, as it is best left for chapter six, after one has read all that has preceded it.) *Black Girlhood Celebration* is also activist, but not in the prescriptive, "how do we save girls" sense. *Black Girlhood Celebration* is part of a dynamic process of an ongoing dialogue that genuinely includes the voices of Black girls. Showing how a hip-hop feminist pedagogy is neither about "programming" nor "mentoring" nor "girl-empowerment," *Black Girlhood Celebration* takes us on a journey celebrating Black girls of all ages.

Black Girlhood Celebration is now the fourth book published in the "Mediated Youth" series. Interestingly, though not a series focusing specifically on girls or Girls' Studies, all four books thus far have been about girls, each in its own way adding something to the dialogue on girls and each listening to the voices of girls themselves. *Black Girlhood Celebration* is the first book in the series to focus specifically on Black girls and to incorporate hip-hop feminism into the discussion, thereby greatly expanding the scope of Girls' Studies as a field. In fact, several months ago, when I first read Brown's proposal for *Black Girlhood Celebration*, I wrote a note that the book had the potential to be "groundbreaking

in terms of its topic, its theoretical grounding, and its methodology." I have not been disappointed, and neither will the reader.

Sharon R. Mazzarella
Series Editor
May 31, 2008

Note

1 I focus specifically on U.S. girls in this preface since this book is about Black girlhood in the U.S.

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PINKY SWEAR: *SOLHOT* & DR. RUTH NICOLE BROWN, PIONEER

"The spirit will not descend without a song."

—African dictum, Blues People, Leroi Jones

"The concept of *Solhot* was born out of disturbing research that reported that girls, particularly adolescents, were at-risk and suffering from societal pressures instrumental in the development of low self esteem, loss of voice, and self-inflicted harmful behaviors.

—Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown

First Person Plural

3-6-9 the goose drank wine. The monkey chewed tobacco on the streetcar line. The line broke. The monkey got choked. They all went to heaven in a little rowboat. Clap. Clap.

This introduction is personal. *Solhot* is my reminder that there were Black girl songs that I grew up singing in South Carolina. *Solhot* reminds me that not much happened in my little Black girl life, or my big Black girl life, that was not graced by song and dance. I have been away from this critical memory for too long. Every alphabet of this introduction holds my DNA.

There are many tribes that intersect my Black woman American life, but the research that helped Dr. Ruth Nicole forge the birth canal for *Solhot*, concerns members of my most intimate tribe—Black girls. I have not always liked being a girl but I have never wanted to be anything but a Black girl. The “not liking” had more to do with how I was treated, not how I got along with myself, when the world finally backed up and gave me room to do what I came here to do.

I make a living by teaching in the Academy. But I make a life, by living, writing, feeling, thinking, and dreaming in the present and historical air of the communities that raised me as a Black girl child, then set me loose (capable and prepared) out in to the world.

I am here to introduce the field notes and findings of a fierce young pioneering artist and scholar, Ruth Nicole Brown. Dr. Ruth Nicole has set herself, and those who believe as she believes, out on a journey to discover and explore what it means to be a Black girl growing up beneath these “disturbing” contemporary findings. What does it mean to be a Black girl in America, two hundred years after the legal abolition (it took so much longer) of the African-to-America slave trade? What does it mean to be a Black girl growing up on the eve of the first Black Democratic nominee for President of the United States? What does it mean to be a Black girl in a world where the dominant sounds and images of Black girls in the public sphere, regardless of anybody’s run for President, remain those Black girls who are loud and accustomed to being abandoned on rooftops (so what’s the big deal?), Black girls who are relegated to the background of life (pancake boxes included), Black girls in trouble, Black girls to fear, or change, or enlist in rigid and regular discipline, and thus ultimately, save.

What does it mean for a bright-eyed Black woman scholar *not* to focus on someone else’s community, but to focus on and value her own, turning it into her life’s work? For such a scholar to make the time for the questions, and to search for the critical crucibles that shape the lives of these Black girls, means that there is a Black woman scholar in the world who is as devoted to the freedom and uplift of Black girls now, as Harriet Tubman was to the freedom and uplift of the whole enslaved lot of us.

Solhot’s fearless leader and the author of *Black Girlhood Celebration*, Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown, artist-scholar, playwright, researcher, good listener, mother, hip-hop devotee, defines and uses hip-hop culture and feminist methodology as the way in, “to transform oppressive institutions, policies, relationships, and beliefs” in young women. This is groundbreaking. No, this is the

old hallowed ground breaking open. It’s not for the faint of heart. It’s not for the weak of spirit. It’s not for those who like to go along with the program. It’s not for those who prefer control. It’s not for the un-courageous.

When you look and you listen to these girls give testimony, as they graduate from the program, as they move on out into the world, you quickly realize that their time together has truly made something tangible, something life long, something that makes me want to extend my pinky finger to each and every one of them, just to be sure that ‘the deal’ they have uncovered and discovered waiting deep inside their joyous genius hearts, is sealed. *Pinky swear.*

100 Times

I have been asked at least one hundred times to travel and talk to young girls about the path of my own life. I have been honored to do so. But I have never been asked to travel and listen to any young girls talk about how they see the world or how they think the world sees them. Always while there, in the middle of whatever I have come to say, even if I look up and reach out in hopes of lifting up a two-way conversation into the air, most of the girls still look lost. What could I possibly want to hear from them? (Everything!) I’ll admit, I didn’t push hard enough and *Solhot* makes me wish I had.

This foundational model of Black girl powerlessness is the same model that Dr. Ruth Nicole experienced before inventing *Solhot*. She and hundreds more of us, “Role Models of Success,” experienced the moment in much the same way. Certainly, we don’t all view the set-up with the same eyes. Speaking only for myself, in each and every one of those, “You Too Can Be A Success,” invitations, was the absolute theory of Black girl as empty vessel and Black woman as vintage wine. In every situation the stage was set for my having the answers for the girls I was about to meet, who had been carefully instructed to keep mostly silent and still. This pre-fabricated stage remains the set design for far too many of us who travel in the world, who call ourselves, “working with” young people. *Black Girlhood Celebration* makes me want to change this set design.

Free Black Girl Iambic Pentameter

“We do not have a language that accurately describes what it means to work with Black girls in a way that is not controlling their bodies and/or producing white, middle-class girl subjectivities.”

—Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown

Solhot does not begin with the lie that Black girls are some type of aberration of the norm. It begins with a question that is as old as dirt, a biblical question but not a theocratic one: "Ain't you got a right to the tree of life?" **Black Girlhood Celebration**, the book, is the necessary primer for the birth of this call and its affirming response—Yes!

She would be embarrassed to hear me say it, but I believe that Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown, is spiritual daughter to our Harriet Tubman. Her big mind and her even bigger desire to lead this charge, into a territory that demands both insights and answers is core critical resistance and action. This is work and research that has not been done, and not been compiled, in the 21st or 20th century. **Black Girlhood Celebration** speaks volumes about Dr. Ruth Nicole's deep connection to Black love and that familial circle that is wider than the self.

Bam Bam Bambara

Thirty-eight years ago Redbook magazine published an article by the Black American writer, Toni Cade Bambara, entitled, "The Children Who Get Cheated." In it Bambara wrote:

"The Black community now is moving toward solutions to a problem—the mis-education of our children—that would have provoked bloody warfare in a lesser people. In several major cities throughout the country, the Black community has become increasingly adamant in pushing for community control, for we regard the current system of remote control by non-neighborhood whites as a manipulative attempt to keep Black parents invisible, mute, and powerless.

But when you boil it all down, the essential ingredient of education is two-way learning: mutual understanding, mutual respect, dialogue. So most teachers under the present system are, very simply, incompetent to teach our children.

They are incompetent because they have too little knowledge of, too little appreciation for and very little professional encouragement to learn about the Black child, his {her} worth, his {her} possibilities. It would be asking too much, perhaps, to expect a white person conditioned by the social mores and myths of this country to have any attitude other than outright racist or paternalistic in dealing with a Black person.

But that is of course, what we must demand of teachers who come into contact with our children—that they have to think more clearly and more honestly than they're trained to, too react more authentically to what they experience with the Black student rather than to what they think they know of Black children, to adopt a

nonwhite perspective. For what the drive for community control represents, actually, is a long-overdue reaction to the intellectual imperialism of white America, the white control and conditioning of Black minds."

"A Classical People Deserve A Classical Art"

Lorraine Hansberry was born and raised in South Chicago, Illinois. Ruth Nicole Brown was born and raised in South Chicago, (Chicago Heights) Illinois. Something must be in South Chicago water that teaches the power of art and fosters the art of power. Hansberry believed that, "A classical people deserve a classical art." Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown, fellow playwright, and believer in the power of art to guide and illuminate, believes Black girl dance is classical in the African and African American tradition. Classical, by definition, relates to the most highly developed stage of an earlier civilization and its culture.

Invisible Black Girl

All understanding is not always available to the tongue. I am a woman deeply connected to my body. I make decisions about jobs and sweethearts, and whether I should walk down unfamiliar streets with information received from my belly, not my head. I believe I understood the power of the body even as an infant, through my umbilical cord, that tiny floating "arm" that my mother used to stay in touch with me all the way through the birth canal. This understanding of the body came to me through my poetic sensibilities. I have and keep a fierce responsibility to my body as well as to my mind. I hold on to this responsibility by way of words, language, and silence. I also understand the power of the physical, most especially through the heat, sweat, and heart-pounding pleasure of dance. Not Arthur Mitchell's Dance Theatre of Harlem, not East St. Louis' Katherine Dunham or the precision choreography of Pearl Primus. Please! My dancing expertise was always extra-local. The sweet sweat and heart-pounding evenings came by way of Friday night high school dances, in community centers, in Sumter, South Carolina, or, the very subversive *Blue Light in the Basement* dances thrown together in a flash at somebody's house in the neighborhood, the neighborhood where we lived and grew and eventually left. Later, that remarkable sweet heat and sweat followed me to the all night Saturday night dances in the Upper Lounge of Talladega College, hosted by the Omegas, Kappas, Sigmas, Alphas.

Dr. Ruth Nicole knows dance too. She dances with her girls, their mamas, and the other teachers in the room. She probably dances with her self. I think a Black woman who dances with her self is probably some kind of unspoken Black girl tradition, no matter what part of the country we hail from. Those of us, who love to dance, cannot always wait for a partner to come and take our hand. The music is there, the drapes are closed or not, the one who loves to move must have her way with it. Dr. Ruth Nicole is not afraid of dance or its power, language or meaning. Turn some pages in **Black Girlhood Celebration** and she will tell you herself that to dance is to be fierce and free in the body that brought one here to earth.

With dance as her instruction manual, Dr. Ruth Nicole, is teaching Black girls to not be afraid of their bodies. Images of the **Solhot** girls and women dancing, remind me, so deeply, of my old old love for this Black woman sacred movement. But why did I have to be reminded? How did I ever let it go? I was the young girl-poet known for writing poems beneath hundred-year-old oaks by day and closing down dances in the upper Lounge by night. When did I allow the gaze of the outside world to make me hyper-conscious of my love for dancing? I was the young woman poet who left the dances in the Upper Lounge of Talladega College drenched, spent, and smiling. I appreciated dance so much before I moved into the un-dancing Academy. There are things whispered, by well-dressed power brokers in some professional environments that should be considered a kind of murder, “You can’t dance like that—out in public—and be taken seriously in this life—or receive tenure.” The moment I abandoned the dance floor, I also abandoned some core element of my Black girl self. *Pinky swear.*

Dancing is **Solhot’s** way of saying; *I am here. I will not compromise who I am. I love who I am. See me. This is my body that I am moving. I know I look good. I know I feel good. You can’t make me feel bad about this body moving in this way. This is my Black classical tradition. Step back. I’m about to represent.* Dance is widely known as one of the forms of Black expression that has unquestionably survived Afrophobia.

In 1995, only a few months before her death, Toni Cade Bambara, who had never ever used the word “mentor” in my presence or direction, but who had regularly invited many of us in the Atlanta community, to sit together, to talk openly about writing, sent me a postcard from her hospice bed. She had just received a copy of my second book of poetry, **RICE**. The one line postcard read: “Do Not Leave the Arena To the fools.” Her passionate entreaty to me: Write, Black Girl! Spin your words out onto the page until they enter the larger world circle. Don’t let anyone think they can have their “important” conversations without you, present and accounted for.

“The Education of the Storyteller”

In her last book of essays, *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions*, Toni Cade Bambara captures a precocious scene from her girlhood with her Grandma Dorothy, no blood relation, but nevertheless an older woman involved in her ultimate day-to-day raising. In the pages of the essay, Little Toni has come home to announce, hands on hips, that she has been taught and proudly comprehends the much acclaimed Einstein “Theory of Relativity.”

Toni Cade Bambara, as little girl, sets out to be clear in her explanation to the older woman that the “Theory of Relativity” is not one of their usual daily subjects, not one of those “call-and-response deal{s} but a {high} theory.”

‘Uh-hunh’ Grandma Dorothy says, ‘well get on with it and make it lively, ‘cause I haven’t tapped my foot or switched my hips all day.’

Little Toni tries to explain to Grandma Dorothy that this is not from that (rhythmic/African) sidebar of understanding where they usually pull and discuss their grandmother/granddaughter things. Little Toni reminds Grandma Dorothy that what she has learned at school is not a “song but a theory.”

“Well do it, honey,” Grandma Dorothy says, keeping to the pattern of her African self, exclaiming, “just give me a signal when it’s my turn to join in the chorus.”

Frustrated, little Toni announces, hands still on hips, in the true selfish, self-centered tradition of American pedagogy, modern instruction, and ultra capitalist competitive knowledge, that nobody knows the theory but her.

“Cynthia don’t know it and Rosie don’t know it and Carmen don’t know it—just I know it.” This statement is made while striking an extra-proud peacock color pose.

It is Grandma Dorothy’s response to her granddaughter’s proud announcement, remembered to us by one of the most brilliant writers and activists of our time, that remains the compass, whenever I need to find my way back home, whenever I have moved too far away from something that I need to wrap myself back inside of. As a Black woman, poet, teacher, auntie, friend, partner & lover, one who has been absolutely passed the responsibility, care and culture of the community that raised her;

“Madame,” Grandma Dorothy tells Little Toni, “if your friends don’t know it, then you don’t know it, and if you don’t know that, then you don’t know nothing. Now what else are you pretending not to know today, Colored Gal?”

***Solhot* Lesson #962: What Are We Complicit In Asking Our Black Girls Not To Know?**

Black girls know the answers to a wide universe of things but nobody is asking them any questions. We live in a complicated world and Black girls are complex beings. Nobody gives Black girls credit for being complex or for negotiating the height of those complexities. Before Bambara's essay ends she leaps forward thirty years to surrender her Black girl-woman truth to her reader: "It was Grandma Dorothy who taught me critical theory, who steeped me in the tradition of Afrocentric aesthetic regulations, who trained me to understand that a story should be informed by the emancipatory impulse that characterizes our storytelling trade in these territories as exemplified by those freedom narratives which we've been trained to call slave narratives for reasons too obscene to mention, as if the "slave" were an identity and not a status interrupted by the very act of fleeing, speaking, writing, and countering the happy-darkey propaganda. She taught that a story should contain mimetic devices so that the tale is memorable, sharable, that a story should be grounded in cultural specificity and shaped by the modes of Black art practice—call and response but one modality that bespeaks a communal ethos."

Hip-Hop Hips

Dr. Ruth Nicole points her girls untoward the arena. She guides them to the middle of that No-Black-Girls-Allowed land where laws are made, hip-hop songs are written, produced, and sacks of gold futures are handed out.

Hip-hop, the music, is the modern Congo Square, freedom landscape, for young Black people, Black girls included. In mainstream hip-hop Black girls are considered passive, secondary, unimportant actors, relegated to the ranks of the seen but not heard. In mainstream hip-hop the belief is "I will use your fine Black body, as backdrop, but don't step center stage for any of this other." Black females are never credited with the knowledge of their musical culture, never included as an integral part of the stage.

Solhot's embrace of a Black feminist hip-hop-ology dismantles this dishonest landscape and builds upon the knowledge that Black girls have deep understanding and passionate rhythm, word-swing, motion and free hand. Black girls are the original creators of body élan. "Hip-hop is more than Tupac and Biggie." Dr. Ruth Nicole postures. She is so right. *Solhot* brings together rhythm, word, and dance, then steps into the necessary deconstruction of the national and international gaze upon the bodies of Black girls. In *Solhot*, Black girls hammer and craft a new language for their own "desire and desirability" refusing to allow

Black girls to pretend that they do not know. They know and they know they know.

The Art Daughter

"Art Daughter" is what the old woman who lived on the porch across from my grandmother called me. "Miss Rita" was her name. She never called me by my birth name. She called me what she saw me doing out in the world. She knew I would answer her back in this life by becoming that name. She knew calling me that name would enter me, and stay. Miss Rita and my grandmother did for each other, as Black women who share community often do for each other, without planning to do and without asking. They were both widows who had left farm country, and moved more into town, after their husbands died. I was the oldest granddaughter. I was quiet and dutiful and never very far from my pencil or my journal book. Miss Rita saw all of this from across the yard on her porch. I sat on my grandmother's porch every evening after finishing up whatever assigned tasks she had set out for me that day. On the porch, across from Miss Rita's eyes, I scribbled out Black girl words. The years passed and evidence grew that my scribbling was evolving and paying off. Whenever a poem appeared in the newspaper or in a book, my grandmother walked that evidence the fifty or so feet to Miss Rita's porch. Miss Rita called me "Art Daughter" until the day she died. "Art Daughter" was her name for me. She called me what she thought I might need, a reminder of her faith in my Black girl desire.

The *Solhot* Sanctuary

What does it mean to have a sun-drenched intimate cathedral of space created for the questions Black girls want to ask? What does it mean to have a 21st century sacred place for their 400-year-old, my-mother-was-not-inferior-and-I-am-not inferior-either attitude? What does it mean to have a shrine of a place for the way a Black girl wants to shake and move? This is not blasphemy. This is *Solhot*. This is the meeting house, where the soul and the eyes of Black girls connect. This is the Black girl praise house, where the heart and heel, glide in. This is the open door where straight girls come eye-to-eye with gay girls and don't always say the right or kind or politically correct thing, but learn to not look away from each other. This is a place where incense, the perfume of the ancestor's, alerts Black girls that they have not entered yet another house of distorted mirrors, but a room where the eyes of others, different and similar

to her own, give back a reflection of truth, something real she can hold on to, where she, Black girl, just might appreciate and fathom other divine, good, and possible things about herself.

Solhot is in the tradition of the old Camp Meeting Revival, where the longed for spirit makes the journey to be fed and is fed. **Solhot** is not a religion but **Solhot** is in the ancient tradition of Black women and girls creating sacred space. **Solhot** is the voice of Ida B. Wells saying, "I wish I could put my arms around my people and fly away," but instead firing up her anti-lynching campaign. **Solhot** is the voice of Fannie Lou Hamer saying, "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired," but then spending the rest of her life empowering Black people to rocket out of their "place." **Solhot** is the shimmering voice of Barbara Jordan echoing, "I will be an insurgent," at the Nixon Impeachment hearings and never leaning back in her big Congressional easy chair. **Solhot** is not new. **Solhot** is the revival and reconstruction of the first floor, the very foundation, of core Black culture. **Solhot** is an old old promise kept. The sealing of a deal, tantamount to a handshake; a Black girl pinky swear.

These Black girls, on the brink of womanhood, are learning differently in this **Solhot** circle of intimacy and trust. Maybe their learning has begun with emphasis on the pinky bone:

The pinky bone is connected to the hand bone. The hand bone is connected to the arm bone. The arm bone is connected to the elbow bone. The elbow bone is connected to the shoulder bone. The shoulder bone is connected to the neck bone. The neck bone is the most celebrated bone in a Black girl's body—just ask her mama or her mama's mama. Now strike your pose, Black Girl. *Pinky swear.*

When we reach the end of this critical book, **Black Girlhood Celebration**, may we all follow Stokley Charmichael's directive; "Go home and tell {y}our daughters they are beautiful."

"3-6-9 the goose drank wine. The monkey chewed tobacco on the street car line. The line broke. The monkey got choked. They all went to heaven on a little row boat. Clap. Clap. My mama told me, if I was goody, that she would buy me a rubber dolly. My auntie told her. I kissed the soldier. Now she won't buy me a rubber dolly. 3-6-9 the goose drank wine. The monkey chewed tobacco on the street car line. The line broke. The monkey got choked. They all went to heaven on a little row boat. Clap Clap.

Nikky Finney
Poet and Professor of Creative Writing
Smith College
Northampton, MA
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INTRODUCTION

Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy is an innovative examination of how performances of everyday Black girlhood are mediated by hip-hop culture in the context of a Black girl-centered experience called Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT). I define Black girlhood as the representations, memories, and lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female. Black girlhood is not dependent, then, on age, physical maturity, or any essential category of identity. SOLHOT as a political project values the contradictions, paradoxes, and truths that emerge from articulating Black girl celebration as a worthwhile goal.

Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths is my practice of the when, where, and how of Black girlhood celebration. SOLHOT is me being a bravebird en masse with other bag ladies and b-girls to make our selves visible and heard, and to make our silence understood to each other and to the communities in which we live. SOLHOT is inspired by the change makers like Ella Baker who valued the power young people possess. SOLHOT is doing what my mother has always done, not complaining about her community but working to make it better. SOLHOT is trying to be the professor who creates ideas with her students, not for them. SOLHOT is about creating narratives of Black girlhood, not relying on what has been said before as a definitive "last word." Narratives created about Black girls without our input never seem to recognize our worth, our

value, and our power: SOLHOT is about giving new form and function to the narratives we speak, sing, dance, and/or act out.

In *Black Girlhood Celebration*, I offer practical insight and empirical evidence about one way to celebrate Black girlhood in a contradictory culture that both loves and hates Black girls' and women's bodies, talents, and intellect. Through personal testimony, interviews, and contributions of SOLHOT participants, along with critical analysis of scholarship on girls' studies, hip-hop, and youth programming, I present a glimpse of what it means to be *with* Black girls as Black girls and women sharing moments of celebration, enduring dilemmas, and irresolvable contradictions. My hope is that the kinds of conversations invoked by doing SOLHOT resonate with others who love Black girls and then encourage the purposeful actions of creating new knowledge about who we are that is grounded in our everyday and night experiences.

My purpose for writing this book is to share some of my most personal and political motivations of working with Black girls in community spaces, a conversation made necessary because, I believe, we lack a language that accurately describes what it means to work with Black girls in a way that is not about controlling their bodies and/or producing White, middle-class girl subjectivities. This is my attempt to maybe not create the language but start the dialogue of a way to be new about Black girlhood. SOLHOT is not about etiquette training, managing girls' behavior, punishing who they are, telling them who they should be, or keeping them busy (meaning not sexually active). Nor is SOLHOT a free for all where anything and everything goes. How we walk this talk is at the heart of the analysis presented in this book.

I aim to create a dialogue that emerges from my work with Black girls in SOLHOT. Based on my previous research experiences and critical reflections on the purpose of SOLHOT as a space of Black girlhood celebration, I desire to enter into conversations that address the following questions: What is significant about growing up young, Black, and female during this particular historical moment? In what ways does power constrain and enable Black girls' and women's bodies, voices, and ideas? What is the role of hip-hop in constructing complex meanings of Black girlhood? What are the generational tensions between Black girls and women that facilitate celebration (or not) in SOLHOT? How can we define a critical hip-hop feminist pedagogy, and why is it central to Black girl celebration?

This activist-driven scholarship has a political agenda: to advocate social justice by affirming that the lives of girls of color have meaning. Black girls' lives are inherently valuable and so is Black girlhood. Some people do not act as if

this is the case, including Black girls themselves. In the midst of all this, as a goal this book speaks directly to many well-meaning adults and state directives that attempt to "empower" girls without an understanding of what it means to be a Black girl and to participate in a Black girlhood that is mediated by race, class, gender, sexuality, and hip-hop. I am convinced that it is possible to transform popular and apolitical "girl empowerment" into a kind of work that is focused on personal and collective emancipation in a way that speaks to the material realities of Black girls.

The citizenship of Black girls is inherently tied to their social-political identity as marginal group members (Cohen, 1997). Their childhoods are not free from injustice and inequality, and, as they negotiate state structures and agencies that are often hostile to their well-being, Black girls experience politics at an early age, with girls of color taking political action and learning political skills (Hurtado, 1996). According to Patricia Hill Collins (2000), age offers little protection from assault, as far too many young Black girls inhabit hazardous environments as a result of the social, political, and economic location invoked by marginality. Mary Pattillo-McCoy (2000) warned that while lower-class neighborhoods are clearly hazardous to Black girls, neither do middle-class neighborhoods afford Black girls security, as Black middle-class youth in general live in communities with more poverty, worse schools, and more crime than their White middle-class peers. Moreover, the intersection of class, gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality and race position Black girls and women in such a way that the public does not recognize their experience, strength, or knowledge (Brown and Gilligan, 1992). *Black Girlhood Celebration* aims to bring into public focus what it means to be a Black girl marginalized with so much to say yet lacking formal mechanisms to be heard. However, more than this, of critical importance is gaining understanding of how and why some of our girls act so uninterested and unmoved by their own power and genius. Our girls' disinterest in their own work may be a problem common to girls of marginal populations, but regardless, this very disinterest motivates me to combat the forces that encouraged girls to disbelieve themselves, their stories, and their truths in the first place.

Due to the desire of many to empower Black girls, while lacking a clear understanding of how, defining an original critical hip-hop feminist pedagogy becomes necessary. Absolutely necessary. Although Black feminists are by no means the only group interested in supporting Black girls, they have perhaps been the most visible in questioning how to engage young Black girls in particular about the misogynist images transported through hip-hop culture (Guy-Sheftall,

2002; Pough, 2004; Radford-Hill, 2000). *Black Girlhood Celebration* articulates the pedagogical stakes involved in working through contemporary performances of Black girlhood, performances that are influenced by and influence hip-hop culture among young people—who easily discern how hip-hop structured and structures a crucial part of their coming of age narrative. Like other approaches to critical pedagogy, learning and engaging hip-hop feminist pedagogy links the practices of education to democratic principles aimed at the transformation of social action (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres, 2003). This book advances a critical hip-hop feminist pedagogy that focuses on the quality of working relationships between Black girls and women and presents a wonderfully intricate understanding of Black girls' relationship to hip-hop, in the context of the many communities of which they are a part, that consciously builds on the insights, warnings, and cautionary tales of Black women, feminists, womanists, and beyond.

A hip-hop feminist pedagogy of Black girlhood celebration is defined in this book, through a critical examination of contemporary Black girlhood, as:

- Mediated by hip-hop in ways generations removed cannot recall
- A socially constructed and political intervention in the lives of Black women becoming
- a political act of resistance that values Black girls' ways of being, and
- an organizing construct, which allows for a production of citizenship that presumes the inclusion and active participation of Black girls and women and interrogates process of marginalization as it relates to race, gender, class, sexuality, and age.

* * *

Dear Reader,

Saving Our Lives, Hearing Our Truths (SOLHOT) is a gift brought to us from Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown. While she is extremely modest and will shy away from taking credit for this project, her creativity and her dedication to Black girls are the driving forces behind SOLHOT. More than an after-school program focused on Black girls and building self-esteem, SOLHOT is dedicated to young Black girls and encourages us to create a space that is all our own, be it physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually. In this space we discuss, dance, reenact, shape, reshape, and reform the politics of Black girlhood. We talk about

what it's like to be us (strong, confident, sassy, young, hopeful, Black, proud), the things that challenge us (school, work, relationships, family, survival, self-image, health, safety), the things that help us (talking, sharing, creating, dancing, being ourselves, depending on our sisters), and the things we want in the future (success, achievement, accomplishment, health, wealth, safety) all in the span of two hours. SOLHOT is free, SOLHOT is freeing, SOLHOT is SOOO HOT, and though two hours may not seem like a long time, we change the world (our world and the world we live in) every Tuesday and Thursday in two hours.

SOLHOT is swinging backsides, free, with attitude, sass, and spirit

Hairstyles straight, natural, curled, blow-dried, locked, and if you got something to say about it that's not showing us love then we don't want hear it.

SOLHOT is beautiful skin caramel, chocolate, tan, chestnut brown that gleams with the beauty of the scars of being a Black girl child, where we spin, talk, and politic about being young, free, and wild.

SOLHOT gives us a chance to Little Sally Walker, Batty Dance, chicken noodle soup, and put a soda on the side all while we talk about what it's like to be us with pride.

SOLHOT is church for our spirit when we need to be reminded of how precious we are, it anchors us to a solid foundation when we go too far.

SOLHOT is where dreams take shape in the form of collages, poems and songs, and where we right the rumors that they spread about Black girls that are wrong.

SOLHOT is us.

SOLHOT is Alia getting that last point across, it's Sasha telling us what answers on the quiz are false,

It's Deborah, Janae, and Sabrina being our Dreamgirls, it's Dr. Brown pushing us to change the world.

It's Barbara with the camera glued to her hand, it's Barbara being shy and refusing to dance.

It's Michelle reminding us to think outside the box, it's Missy or Gemini with her pretty brown/red locks.

It's Cyprus and Tameka inspiring the artist inside, it's Nia and all of us playing games OUTSIDE.

It's Pookie coming with the cool attitude, it's Shantae reminding us when we're being rude.

It's Tanisha with her wisdom beyond her years, it's Niya and her smile and that calms our fears.

It's Baby girl playing shy all the time, It's Cha-Cha coming with a poem/rhyme.

It's Keana being motivated, it's Nee-nee, Zee, and Zoe never being underestimated.

It's "Adorable Jones" with her cool pose, it's the incense circle and how we close.
 It's Latanya's singsong voice, it's us remembering that we have a choice;
 It's deciding what and who we want to be on our own terms whatever our mood,
 It's beauty shining through like the sun at the highest noon,
 It's cuts for luck and scars for freedom,
 It's for remembering where we from,
 It's for surviving every lie they put into us now, and not to conform.
 It's for Black girls raising our hands the worlds our platform.

Love,
 Cha-Cha
 (A SOLHOT homegirl)

* * *

SOLHOT is a space where Black women and girls come together to try and be positive, to try new things, to relate to each other in ways that challenge the status quo, to work together. And because our coming together—to be loved and to say “I love you” and to admit how we don’t feel loved sometimes—is a powerful political force; I never underestimate a word uttered. When Black girls talk casually to each other and they know they are not being judged, many truths emerge. And just to make sure everyone recognizes it, a girl full and sure of herself will finish her words with the following declaration: “Know that!” In this moment I hear her saying more than two words. I hear her telling it like it is, suggesting we better learn something; I hear her saying I’m here, and I can teach you something. She’s asking to be held accountable, and she is telling you she is going to hold you accountable. Know that.

“Know that” presumes I had something important to say and I said it. So now it becomes your responsibility to act like you know. An absolutely beautiful moment of baby girl Black girl genius.

It should happen more, I think.

In all the ways the girls keep telling us, in the ordinary moments of life sometimes extraordinary lessons are learned. In the silences we keep close yet wear on our sleeve, in the genius wrapped up and disguised as “talking back,” in being together under intentionally different circumstances, those who don’t really “count” demand accountability. At the risk of romanticizing Black girls, I think we should listen more. Period. They keep telling us.

Know That!

* * *

Hip-hop feminist pedagogy is made public and collective during those road trip backseat conversations in the car triggered by a song that gave meaning and significance to your girlhood, those long-distance over the phone conversations with your little sister who insists on wearing that, saying that, being that, and your own endless self-reflection about how you want to get involved in something bigger than yourself but don’t really know what. I define hip-hop feminist pedagogy as the practice of engaging young people using elements of hip-hop culture and feminist methodology for the purpose of transforming oppressive institutions, policies, relationships, and beliefs.

People who identify as a part of the hip-hop generation and with feminism are currently organizing under the label “hip-hop feminism” to build community and to contribute to feminist discourse and activism. My introduction to hip-hop feminist organizing came by way of the first ever 2004 National Hip Hop Political Convention in Newark, New Jersey, where I organized with young women as a part of the Progressive Women’s Caucus (PWC). Later, in 2005 I attended the “Feminism and Hip Hop” conference organized by the University of Chicago’s Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture. The conference brought together students, scholars, artists, performers, and celebrities to define what it means to politically organize on behalf of young people with an adept gender analysis that critiqued the ways hip-hop mediates norms of femininity and masculinity as well as constructs new images of both. These events were memorable for several reasons; not least among them was that in both spaces, conversations about Black girlhood and the influence of media, culture, and politics were central.

Joan Morgan’s (1999) now classic text *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip Hop Feminist* brought “hip-hop feminism” to the people. Morgan’s quest for empowerment grounded in the complexity that sisterhood was not only sincere and refreshing to many but gendered the discourse of hip-hop in such a way that made women and girls visible while it also racialized discourses of feminism with a contemporary historicity that valued young women of color. Morgan (ibid, p. 232) wrote, “The quest for power is not a solo trip. This book only starts the journey. Only you can complete it.” *Black Girlhood Celebration* is in direct conversation with Morgan’s text adding my own experiences to issues and experiences that resonate with Black women and girls growing up in the time of hip-hop and prominent Black feminist legacies. Moreover, my articulation of hip-hop feminist pedagogy is my specific contribution to Morgan’s question of power and the political utility of sista-hood that definitely eschews the observed do-nothing apathy of some young people.

For example, Lil' Kim as popular icon is one such phenomenon that entered the lives of many women and girls in such a way that required contemplation on the interconnectedness between feminism, hip-hop, Black womanhood, girlhood, and power. I remember throwing a party once, and someone I invited commented that he was surprised that I purchased and played Lil' Kim's music because I was a feminist. His comment wasn't like "let's talk about it" but more like a pronouncement, "I thought you were a feminist but not if you own a Lil' Kim CD." Once Morgan (1999, p.56) articulated, "The powerful richness and delicious complexities inherent in being Black girls now—sistas of the post-Civil Rights, post-feminist, post-soul, hip-hop generation," I at least had a way to start conversations about who I was in order to then ask what I thought were really interesting questions. Many of those questions are posed in this book (see chapter three). After *Chickenheads*, neither feminism nor hip-hop could claim ignorance of the other; hip-hop feminism was on the come up.

However, my identification with hip-hop feminism remains in question. Although collective actions have occurred, and literary pieces and scholarship have been created before and since these conferences, people are still amazed: "Why do you claim hip-hop feminism?" ("Isn't that really just Black Feminism?" they seem to imply). Hip-hop, as we know it (now being a second-generation hip-hop head and all), is over, so why claim some music you don't listen to anymore? There are others who haven't yet read Morgan, missed the conferences and conventions, are not aware of the existence of hip-hop feminism and who continue to ask the proverbial question, "Isn't hip-hop feminism an oxymoron?"

Simply stated, I love hip-hop feminism because I am in the daily practice of celebrating Black girls. I am committed to a research agenda that examines the multiple, contested, and complex ways girls of color, particularly African American girls, negotiate decision making, employ the rhetoric of self-esteem, and oppose punitive social policies in the contexts of their everyday lives. As an artist-scholar who is also committed to creating scholarship that is engaged in the communities of which I am a part, I created SOLHOT as a space to collectively celebrate Black girlhood with others who also feel so compelled to organize under this construct. The girls with whom I work, the girl I used to be, and my daughter who I am raising cannot recall girlhood without hip-hop. As a result, I can appreciate that those organizing under the banner of hip-hop feminism are having the kinds of conversations that are fundamentally concerned with the experiences of African American girls, and girls more generally, so that within hip-hop feminist discourse, the issues and concerns

relevant to what it means to be hip-hop, young, Black, and female, and vice versa are always on the agenda. It is my hope that this book will contribute to current scholarship and community work by advancing a theory of hip-hop feminist pedagogy that emerges from practice. My practice of hip-hop feminist pedagogy is SOLHOT!

Know that!

* * *

A Note on Girl-Saving vs. Saving Our Lives

Before SOLHOT, I did not know how to work with girls in a way that did not depend on their powerlessness. I only knew what it meant to be a part of a program where the goal was to empower girls through group mentoring. The concept of the program was supported by research that concluded girls, particularly adolescents, were at-risk and suffering from a host of social pressures and societal ills that contributed to low self-esteem, loss of voice, and self-inflicted harmful behaviors (Pipher, 1995). The program's ideology was also supported by the societal recognition that mentoring, pairing a presumably capable adult with a presumably needy child, is inherently beneficial, although many inadequacies exist in the research literature to support this claim—and even more profound is the lack of attention given to the risks involved in mentoring (Rhodes, 2002). In the girl empowerment program I was a part of, group mentoring was highlighted as an innovative practice that was grounded in gender-specific ways of knowing and learning, extolling the healthy benefits of women's and girls' psychological development in relationships (Gilligan, 1982). The program's primary working assumption was that women and girls, through working in relationship with each other, could mentor girls into strong and healthy women in as little time as an academic semester.

I used to really believe that.

As a participant in employing girl-saving psychology to girls who were more than the sum of "risky" behaviors and pathology, it did not take long for me to understand that while the goal was "girl empowerment," a one-size definition of girls and/or empowerment would not fit all. In any case, thinking of girls only in terms of popular psychology and academic literature based on samples of White middle-class girls had devastating effects, if only on me. I was a Black girl from a working-class background and also the researcher, the participant, and the observer whose professional training warned me of the dangers of both becoming

completely immersed in a culture that was not my own and intervening to the point of changing it so that it was no longer the same after I left. However, the phenomenon of mostly White middle-class women working with predominantly Black girls from working-class and low-income backgrounds, guided solely by dominant paradigms, was far from unique. Certain dynamics emerged whereby the program's empowerment operated very much like marginalization.

Ethnographic fieldwork facilitated my acquisition of knowledge about the program unknown to outside observers: despite the good work by the program and its volunteer mentors, the program unwittingly contributed to the marginalization of some participants. It was not that I wanted to focus on the negative aspects of the work, but our inability to remain critical meant that we only heard, focused, and celebrated what we wanted to see. The meaning made of our actions in such a contradictory context politicized explicit and implicit socialization processes of the program. For example, my analysis of mentor and mentee relationships based on the rhetorical property of stories (Feldman and Sköldberg, 2002; Feldman, Sköldberg, Brown, and Horner, 2004) revealed how three key volunteer practices, namely resisting modeling, seeing difference, and talking with girls, enabled mentors and volunteers to see themselves in each, often interrupting sites of memory, authenticity, power, and privilege (Brown, 2006). Each of these practices inspired a consciousness that challenged volunteers to find the intimate space inside the differences between themselves and the girls that either facilitated connection or reinforced borders of difference that resulted in disconnection (*ibid.*).

However, even the most critical participants realized that there was something in the work that also yielded to an understanding of power that was not grounded in conflict. Ethnographic fieldwork also facilitated an acquisition of knowledge about the program rarely acknowledged by political scientists: beyond practices of marginalization, the politics of socialization in the program were grounded in building connections through relationships between girls and women. Although politics are rarely conceptualized as connection, my experiences in the program confirmed that relations of power were at times constructed in such a way that created an energy that was interpreted as "positive" and "intuitive" to volunteers. When this occurred, volunteers spoke about believing in the program's mission, though how they actually created connections was recognized in the process of explicitly talking about politicized issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and age rather than an outcome of the girl-saving psychology that was embedded in the program's image and daily routines.

As a speaking Black woman, I shared my observations and insight with those in charge of making decisions—and was met with resistance. I was aware

that my researcher status meant I was privileged in certain ways that suggested I should actually not rock the boat, that understanding the members' ways of seeing things was more important than disrupting the research setting. I read in methods textbooks, sections, and appendices that, as the researcher, I was better off by not intervening. But I had been raised in certain traditions of Black womanhood (i.e., talking back) that I valued and were essential to all I knew about being raised a Black girl, like most of the girls who were in this program with me. So I decided to act. Some relationships were made stronger because I acted, and a few relationships were permanently severed. But the learning did not end. Out of this struggle I learned two things: the researcher that was written about in methods texts, both confessional and technical, was not someone like me—a young Black woman with a different history of labor and working in the field. I felt most accountable to the girls with whom I was working, and I made sure not to intervene at their expense. This was largely and perhaps only possible because there was a strict decision-making boundary: the adults made decisions about how to empower girls, and the girls were the objects of our empowerment. Confrontations over the kinds of decisions we made, then, were only witnessed by the adults; though, perhaps, indirectly, the girls knew. People with whom I was learning in the program had different relations to structures of power and privilege, and I don't think that my academic affiliation gave me any kind of magic ability to become equal to them or superior (and here I'm speaking of both the children and the adults—given who I was, my position was always and at once uniquely situated in relation to everyone, but never equal). Second, I learned that girl empowerment as a means of girl-saving is inherently problematic. Who is a girl? Whose girlhood is being saved? What about girls who are not in trouble? What if girls' trouble goes beyond a loss of voice? What if gender matters less in some circumstances than race, class, or sexuality? What about intersectionality? What about power? What if I don't want to be saved (by you)?

Admittedly, my experience as a girl saver was not all bad, and neither was the program. However, after I finished my research, I had no interest in recreating that kind of space, and I wanted to see whether what I learned could be practically applied to creating something different. Perhaps not better, but more just. What kind of a space could be created where Black women and girls could come together and be recognized and valued for our diverse ways of being—where we could see ourselves and/or hide, but, above all, be recognizable and accountable to each other (if we so chose)? Could we come together to not be empowered or be about the literal business of girl-saving, but to speak back to

those very things said and written about us, about our Blackness, girlhood, and youth? While I do not believe in the rhetoric and practice of girl empowerment as currently commodified, I do believe in women and girls coming together and falling apart for a common purpose, understanding that it all is a valuable way of testifying to who we are, what we have overcome, and our dreams yet realized. Especially as Black women and girls, creating an intentional space to be young, Black, and female—and whatever other identity marker we find significance in claiming—is worthwhile. For this reason, I suggested SOLHOT, not completely out of a reaction to girl-saving programming and girl empowerment rhetoric. Black women and girls have historically created sacred spaces to tell it like it is and to be told. And that history and thought I too bring with me, while also looking to create a new language and a different way of being that does not depend on the impossible racialized equation of a complex woman being the savior of a complicated girl in need of saving. With full intention of speaking to the contemporary specificity of what Black girlhood means to everyone involved (which is different than what it meant and means to me), what I know now is that what we need to be saved from, as Black girls and women working together, is not ourselves but structural forces that work to posit us as the very “risky” problem, an aberration of normal.

Methodology

The *how* of SOLHOT came through the process of being with girls and women and then together writing out our reflections, collective meditations, and side-bar conversations. Therefore, everything in this book is personal, and some aspects of how I chose to write about the process, motivations, and outcomes of SOLHOT include telling a part of my story. At best, academic writing informed by personal narrative is deemed nonscholarly; at worst, it is decidedly self-interested. Such criticisms are not without justification. It is widely acknowledged by those performing similar kinds of writing that personal narratives failing to directly inform the primary argument of the research can have detrimental consequences (Abu-Lughod, 1988; Behar, 1997). That said, the inclusion of personal narrative in this book situates my research squarely within a tradition of intellectuals who view the practice of writing as more than a way for academics to talk among themselves, who realize the radical possibilities of writing to create communities, transform ideas, and inspire people within and outside of the ivory tower. Academicians from a variety of disciplines have

used personal narrative as a way to communicate a different worldview and to show the dynamic relationship between insider and outsider perspectives. Scholars who blur boundaries between the personal and the political often argue that the scientific standards applied to social phenomena reinforce a false dichotomy between the self and the work, and, even more to the point, Louise Smith (1994, p. 286) suggests that every text is a self-statement, leaving readers to ponder whether or not “it’s autobiography all down the line.”

Trained as a political scientist and now institutionally acknowledged as a scholar of gender and women’s studies and educational policy studies, who writes for more than professional gain, I find myself split at the root: I am at home in multiple disciplines. Yet I am displaced as a writer whose scholarship does not aspire to any traditional disciplinary standard. Furthermore, I have found that claiming myself as an interdisciplinary scholar does not translate into any kind of safety. Sometimes my work will be paraded as innovative, other times ignored and dismissed as distracting; more often than not, it will be questioned. Yet the practice of writing is by extension a beloved means through which I am able to express what I have to say, and it seems that whenever my pen contacts paper and/or fingers glide across the keyboard to write, the disciplines or disciplinary controls dissipate. As Audre Lorde (1984) reminded us, “writing is more than a luxury.” I write to connect with others who are also split at the root: never awkward or half-hearted or equivocal about drawing on the best of many different disciplines; I use poetry; I write essays; I rely on empirical evidence; I cite scholars, journalists, and artists; I use pseudonyms; I show and I tell; and I use hip-hop conventions of rhyme and flow.

As I wrote *Black Girlhood Celebration*, I strived to create an interpretation of culture and social action that is personal, poetic, dramatic, and embodied (Denzin, 2003). I realize that this kind of writing is not without critique. Ruth Behar (1997, p. 12) warned, “No one objects to autobiography as such, as genre in its own right. What bothers critics is the insertion of personal stories into what we have been taught to think of as the analysis of impersonal social facts.” The critics probably still believe this, but those writing and doing the work know differently, and so I write for us and to us.

Black Girlhood Celebration employs the methodology of ethnography, in particular autoethnography, to make sense of what and how I witnessed SOLHOT. Autoethnography can be defined as a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts (Spry, 2001). I started with my reflections on my participation in and observations of SOLHOT, and incorporated the analysis and contributions of other SOLHOT participants as

I came to them in the writing process. Moreover, though many people have been involved in SOLHOT, the purpose of this book emerged through the autoethnographic delight of singularity: I wrote this book for and about those people who watered SOLHOT consistently, carefully attended to its roots, and in all ways admired its petals.

I focused my research on the everyday dilemmas and celebrations intuited as joy supreme that emerged in SOLHOT. This kind of orientation to the project required me to raise as many questions as possible about how to celebrate Black girls as my academic training and practical experience enabled me to provide answers. For this reason, this analysis should be of use to others outside of the very specific setting from which I write. I also focus primarily on SOLHOT's second year of operation because, although it has become an expected and welcomed community event after having demonstrated early success in its first year, the novelty of SOLHOT also means that the goals and relationships between participants in the second year will be most in negotiation. My interpretation of events and subsequent analysis of them is the foundation of this book: there are of course other ways of seeing SOLHOT and hip-hop feminist pedagogy that are equally valid.

Interpretive research is especially useful to construct a story that explains how the insights gained from a study of one particular setting may be translated to other settings (Feldman, 1995). Using interpretive methods, I seek to make a convincing argument about the relationships between Black girlhood celebration (the what) and SOLHOT (the how). *Black Girlhood Celebration* provides an account of how to celebrate Black girlhood in spaces beyond SOLHOT by constructing a hip-hop feminist pedagogy that can be translated to programs and educational settings that aim to resist "programming" with girls, particularly Black girls, at the center.

Current Literature on Black Girlhood

This book is centrally about the political project of celebrating Black girlhood. I focus on some of the dilemmas and issues that arise from engaging in this work with an understanding of the broader context that strictly emerges from practice. I have chosen to delve deep in the work of being with Black girls, and this book reflects both the limitations and accomplishments that stem from such an approach. My voice, as presented in this text, is singing a song ala Corrine Bailey Rae—that is, my goal is to paint a picture to get you to feel

something more than it is to show off my range. This book does not provide a comparative understanding of African American girlhood. The *Urban Girls Anthology* (Leadbeater and Way, 1996 & 2007) is incredibly comprehensive in its scholarly study of girls from diverse backgrounds, covering a wide range of issues from mentoring relationships to motherhood, reflecting a variety of disciplinary approaches and methodologies (including comparative approaches). *Black Girlhood Celebration* foregrounds the specificity of working with a group of people under a construct of Black girlhood so that the interpretation that emerges inspires the reader to think differently about Black girls and Black girlhood. My research on African American girlhood builds on and benefits from the legacies of Black Feminist scholars, hip-hop studies, and critical theorists (Basu and Lemelle, 2006; Chang, 2005, 2007; Collins, 2000; Delpit, 1995; Forman and Neal, 2004; Freire, 2000, 2001; hooks, 2003; Morgan, 1999; Peoples, 2008; Perry, 2004; Pough, 2004; Pough, Richardson, Durham, and Ramist, 2007; Rose, 1992 & 1994; Sharpley-Whiting, 2007; Springer, 2002). The way in which I was guided to research and write this story was most inspired by the work of Kyra Gaunt (2006).

Kyra Gaunt's *The Games Black Girls Play* (2006) creatively engages personal narrative with an adept analysis of Black girls' contributions to hip-hop via handclapping rhymes, embodied movement, and double-dutch. Gaunt's meticulous analysis of the musicality of Black girls' rhymes and games is steeped in formal musical theory while also remaining accessible to readers without technical training. A foundational premise of Gaunt's book, which is also assumed in *Black Girlhood Celebration*, is that Black girls' expressive culture and agency demonstrate creativity and ingenuity that many mass producers of popular culture have sampled without citation. Black girls are assumed actors in Gaunt's book, and Blackness, girlhood, and youth are theorized for the purpose of understanding the material realities and everyday experiences of Black girls on our own terms (author and "informants" included). Gaunt's book centrally engages Black girls' relationship to hip-hop culture and is written seemingly with an audience in mind that not only plays and played double-dutch, sang and sings chants, but also are fierce intellectuals, whose lives demonstrate the wisdom that was passed on to them by those who came before. *Black Girlhood Celebration* seeks to continue the courageous scholarship advanced by Gaunt to provide a situated analysis of Black girlhood in context of hip-hop feminist pedagogy that aspires to similar sincerity.

Besides Gaunt's work, *Black Girlhood Celebration* finds company in an exciting cohort of feminist scholarship on girlhood. Much has been made of

concerns about girls coming to voice, a benefit of which includes the articulation of a complex understanding of the way silence functions in girls' negotiation of self (Brown and Gilligan, 1990; Harris, 2006; Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan, 1996), identity formation (Brown and Gilligan, 1990; Buckley and Carter, 2005; Gonick, 2006; Harris, 2006; Mazzarella and Pecora, 1999), consumerism (Chin, 2001; Lamb and Brown, 2007) and in relationship to media representations and media-making (Kearney, 2006; Stokes, 2007). Jacob (2002) and Caroll (1997) provided interviews of Black girls and girls of color, transcribed into first-person narratives, defying academic categorization in order to privilege the concerns and interests of girls. Wilma King's 1995 and 2005 research on African American childhood and slavery made visible the contested and multiple ways Blackness and girlhood intersect and are reproduced historically (King, 1995, 2005), providing a necessary foundation for the contemporary portrayal of African American girlhood found in this book.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983), Joyce Ladner's *Tomorrow's Tomorrow* (1971), and Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1977) are canonical texts that we can use to rethink Black girlhood, particularly from the perspective of Black women writers. Moreover, Black girlhood has been made the subject of analysis from the explicit standpoint of Black women looking back and forward through autobiography and memoir (hooks, 1996; Jordan, 2000; Nelson, 1999; Patton, 2007; Walker, 2000). There have also been several studies that focus on Black girls' experiences in different institutions including schools (Carter, 2007; Evans-Winters, 2005; Fordham, 1993; Grant, 1994; Morris, 2007), social services (Cox, 2005; Stevens, 2002), language (Richardson, 2006; Goodwin, 2006), and the child welfare system (Roberts, 2003) that all provided insight into other arenas of Black girls' lives, outside of a setting typically referred to as after-school.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter one gives a broad overview of why the celebration of Black girlhood remains an overlooked yet valuable political project. I argue that the narratives created about how Black girls function socially and politically work in ways that render their voices silent and their power muted, in spite of the can-do rhetoric of girl empowerment. In chapter two, I extend this argument by interrogating what I call "narrative discrepancies"—the in-between space of interrelated discourses on girls' studies, hip-hop feminism, and gender-specific

girl empowerment programming, which claims to be about hearing girls' voices yet simultaneously does not hear Black girls speaking. In chapter three, I provide an overview of SOLHOT that is explained through the voices of participants and also through my own experiences of and motivations for organizing under the construct of Black girlhood celebration. Chapter four focuses on the meaning made of Little Sally Walker as played and performed in SOLHOT. I explain Little Sally Walker as a Black girl dance cipher that provides a means to build community among girls and women that is grounded in Black girls' ways of knowing, being, and moving, while also creating the space for learning and teaching to occur with Black girls, without the culprit of control reigning as domination over bodies and more than bodies. In chapter five, I focus on the poems, rants, and stories shared in SOLHOT by its participants. I contextualize their productions within the process in which they were created, complicating what it means to be a part of a project that encourages "girls' voices" while also realizing what is at stake in their representations. This book concludes with a framework of a critical hip-hop feminist pedagogy that is inspired by SOLHOT. I offer a definition of hip-hop feminist pedagogy and provide an explanation of how this kind of community engagement breaks from traditional methods of community work, politics, and education.

A significant objective of *Black Girlhood Celebration* is to name a hip-hop feminist pedagogy that recognizes and validates the everyday work many young women of color are doing on a daily basis to create lasting social change. Beyond adding to scholarly literature on hip-hop feminism and contributing to practical issues concerned with organizing and programming "girls," my hope is that this work validates what many young women are speaking, doing, and resisting in their communities, whether hip-hop feminist and proud or not.

I see you sis, and I'm so glad we're here!

POWER! NOT PROGRAMS!

The lyrical text of artists such as Amel Larrieux, Erykah Badu, and Toni Blackman reveal the fluid borders between Black girlhood and womanhood. They remind us of the lived realities of Black girlhood and womanhood that no one else deems significant. In their artistry, the pain and possibility of Black girls and women are named and conjured with the sacredness afforded to everyday saints. Personal stories of girls betrayed, becoming women anew, move us toward collective healing and recognition. We are not what happened to us. We are more than what others have defined us to be. More than necessary, the words spoken, sung, and rhymed reveal the complexity of Black girls and women's experiences, exposing to the world our own critical understanding of the meaning of our own lives. We know that the "she," "girl," and "woman" identified in the music of Larrieux, Badu, and Blackman relate to Black girls at the age of 50 and Black women made independent at age 11. When Black women and girls hear ourselves spoken, rhymed, and sung back to us in a way that is appreciated and familiar, we should never miss the chance to celebrate. Importantly, to remember Black girlhood does require Black women to forget themselves.

The magic of bravebirds, bag ladies, and b-girls singing a Black girl's song embodies a resistance to institutional narratives that define Black girls and women as the problem. Yet the problem is that Black girls are not typically

included in the conversations that shape our lives and destiny. In spite of the everyday conversations Black women and girls have about who we are, what we endure, and the change necessary to creating a more just world, we are readily dismissed. Black women and girls are called out of their name. We are not invited, included, and heard even when we speak. Sometimes the conversations are explicitly about Black girls and women, and still no one thinks we should be there. At times Black women gather in their associational clubs and do not think that the voices and experiences of girls are central to their project of self-determination that is directly designed for future Black girls. All too often, for example, spaces dedicated to Black girls are constructed in ways (e.g., not having Black women and girls in leadership positions) that make the presence of Black women's and girls' bodies and intellects impossible, therefore missing critical opportunities to talk about the what, when, and why of either a memorable or a missed Black girlhood.

Recognizing the intellect, humanity, and daily negotiations Black females make, regardless of age, under less than inspiring constraints underscores a political project of Black girlhood celebration. To be together as "Black girls" creates the kinds of moments that allow us to change ourselves and the communities of which we are and are not a part—we, who we really are as Black girls, not being the problem.

Let me give it to you plain:

I'm in favor of Black girlhood. I have long since felt a pride about being exactly as I am with a Black girl identity ranking high in my list of defining identifications. Ascriptive, yes. Beloved also. Yet, I grew up knowing that something about who I was as a Black girl was discounted. Seen as illegitimate. I wasn't really "the one." Not based on some tragic incident, but just the regularity of living as a Black girl in a particular time, space, and place translated back to me that I was not enough. My intellectual curiosity was called "nosey," my interest in how the world works was labeled "actin' grown," and my silence was overly encouraged—while at the same time I was raised to talk back. Finding out about and then surviving daily racist, sexist, misogynist, and classist acts against my somewhat privileged self also structured the implausibility of me, as a young Black girl, holding someone or something accountable. Let alone people with whom I assumed share a similar fate. Yes, I enjoyed playing games, singing songs, and make believing, but at all times as a Black girl I had to be aware. There was something out there trying to get me. Looking back I learned that while I was negotiating an enjoyable Black girlhood by most accounts, it was defined more by existing than by moments of being a self-loving Black girl. It was over before it really began.

What I know from trying in earnest to create spaces of Black girlhood celebration as a grown woman is that celebrating Black girlhood with women and girls of diverse ages is rarely if ever about "childhood innocence." Neither can the work of celebrating Black girlhood be fully understood as "girl empowerment," "volunteering," nor "mentoring" as popular sloganeering would have us to believe. All too often this terminology lacks and devalues the political specificity of what it means to be *with* Black girls. In celebratory moments of Black girlhood, our conversations invoke failed educational systems, troubled family situations, and complicated peer relationships. Our actions demonstrate social inequalities, our talk is its own language yet to be translated, our interactions speak fear of the unknown, and our aesthetic is too stylish to be gotten right by anyone else.

Those who work to validate Black girls' ways of being in company and collusion with others who identify as or did once as Black girls must admit that community making is continually contested terrain. The purpose of coming together under a less than all-encompassing label like Black girlhood is felt by us to be worthwhile, but at the same time, we understand that we are not working to create a cohesive sum. Often times what we get by coming together is a wide gaping distance between two girls, a girl and woman, or two women, a distance as alluring as Lake Tanganyika—serene and deep, but not really knowing those waters, we become paralyzed at the thought of falling in. Because I do not want to become one of those adults who seek to manage Black girls into being and becoming the norm—White, middle-class minstrels of femininity—regardless of the rhetoric that describes the work I do, when I am in the moment of looking at who we are face to face, listening to what we say and how we say it, while knowing what has been said and done to us, I can feel the wisdom and frustration in the righteous rhetorical declaration of June Jordan (1980), "and I can't tell you who the hell set things up like this."

The more I do the work of celebrating Black girlhood, the more unsure I am about how to explain with any kind of absolute certainty what produces a Black girlhood so devastatingly devalued that more often than not we find it hard to recognize ourselves. Black girlhood is invisibility in the midst of hyper-visibility. Black girlhood is secrets in the midst of all of this attention to girls' voice. Black girlhood is hurt in the midst of playing. Though it may inevitably be easier to create spaces that recall, recreate, and revel in a childhood innocence that we have never experienced, the challenge of Black girlhood celebration is to remain relevant. To be relevant means we take the time to comment and dialogue about the kinds of policies, everyday interactions, and norms that give

meaning to Black girlhood, where we live, for us and for those with whom we live. The goal is to create a space that facilitates collective action, and then to organize that space so the girl with so much to say can say it, the girl with nothing to say can dance it, and the girl who wants to say it, but cannot write, will learn. By definition, such a celebration requires that I never define what Black girlhood means or what successful celebration looks like—by myself. The significance of Black girlhood celebration is building on what we have learned as Black girls and Black women and then liberating ourselves from it.

Let Her Be Elevated!

In a spoken word poem titled “The Thickness” (2001), Scott brought public attention to the everyday ways Black girls are often subjects of violence simply because they are Black girls. As a third-person observer of a Black girl waiting for the bus, Scott names the sometimes contradictory and paradoxical bigness she sees in Black girls. The primary opposition set up in the poem is a dichotomy between appearance and the mind, as both are described as having unlimited possibilities. In terms of appearance, the gaze is representative of a larger culture that describes Black adolescent girlhood in terms of promiscuous sexuality and deviant behaviors (Tolman, 1996). In the poem, the audience is witness to the sexual predatory request to “be let in” to her thickness, as the Black girl’s bigness is reduced to her physical attributes. Earlier in the poem, the girl is described as a laundry list of body parts that is then challenged by Scott who affirms that the bigness of the girl serves as a metaphor for the depth and breath of her personal power. That “she is so big” becomes the mantra that allows her to celebrate all she has overcome. She’s big enough to survive and to decide what she wants.

In the poem, heterosexist male fantasies of sexual conquest, negative media images, and misogynist popular culture are explicitly named culprits that prevent Black girls from loving themselves. By providing a structural explanation, the grand narrative that Black girls’ worth is based on their “thickness” in terms of a desirable appearance is at odds with the “bigness” Scott sees in them. According to Scott, Black girls’ intrinsic value is derived from just being “created.” What is made clear by the end of Scott’s performance is the idea that supporting girls of color represents an act of political resistance in the face of cultural and societal pressures that seek to undermine the selfhood of young Black girls.

Scott’s poem also suggests that Black girls’ lived experiences are politicized in specific ways. First, it centers Black girls as subjects of popular discourse. In

this poem, we are forced to contemplate the life experiences of one adolescent Black girl. As we think about the girl in the poem, Scott provides multiple lenses through which we view how the girl looks to others and witness the kind of exploitation she endures on a daily basis. Second, in terms of public spaces, Scott suggests that the norm for Black girls is violation, rather than support and celebration. Because the girl in the poem remains nameless, she could represent any girl whose life is shaped by the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and class in such a way that those everyday events, typically assumed as mundane, such as waiting for the bus, invoke a call for justice. Scott forces us to think about other girls who may also find themselves in similar situations, making a case to recognize the experiences of Black girls as a group. Third, in Scott’s performance when she repeatedly sings, “Let her be elevated,” one becomes hard-pressed to think of a public time, place, or space, where the celebration of Black girls is a common occurrence. As such, her words resound as part desperate plea, part powerful spiritual invocation. Importantly, the poem’s critical nature unmasks the political and sociocultural realities of Black girlhood in a way that places responsibility on the audience, soulfully inciting collective interest and action in supporting the worth of Black girls. Scott’s poem educates those unfamiliar with spaces that are hazardous and hostile environments for Black girls, and provokes those who fail to reflect on Black girls’ celebration because the contrary has become mundane and accepted.

While Black female artists such as Scott provide a public critique of the politics of Black girlhood, such types of knowledge, although enjoyed by fans everywhere, do not readily translate to spaces where the goal is working with Black girls to change some of the same issues Scott addresses in her spoken word poem. There exists a gap between what Black girls and women know about their lives, and the expertise that constructs programs and policies for us, but never with us. This gap is created by relations of power that structure Black girls as objects of empowerment-programming, for example, but rarely as the decision makers about how and what empowerment may mean for us. Equally problematic, decision makers rarely think about the ways they are implicated in the girl empowerment project, often making decisions and creating activities for the girls, dismissing how they too could engage in the process as participants, allies, and comrades.

Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT) is my practice of hip-hop feminist pedagogy that champions a kind of Black girlhood celebration that works against programming. In SOLHOT it is our stories as Black women and girls that are privileged. The narratives we create about Black girlhood

reflect the diversity of the group, so that there are as many narratives defining SOLHOT as there are participants in the process. We constantly work to give ourselves permission to create a narrative in the form and function that is most personally liberating. This means that sometimes we share our narratives publicly, and at other times, we enjoy what we have to say and how we say it privately because it belongs to us. And no one can tell us that we're wrong. Not in SOLHOT. When we begin to think about how the narratives created by us in SOLHOT counter or collude with popular messages and stereotypes about Black girls and women, critical revelations about working with Black girls simultaneously rise to the surface and infect our deepest sensibilities. To many of us, this means transformation experienced as liberation.

Organizational theorist Barbara Czarniawska (1997, p. 14) wrote, "Other people or institutions sometimes concoct narratives for us, without including us in any conversation; this is what power is about." She argued that it is useful to treat identity as a continuous process of narrative where both the narrator and the audience are involved in formulating, editing, applauding, and refusing various elements of the ever-producing narrative (ibid., p. 49). As Black girls and women in SOLHOT, we think of ourselves as both the narrator and the audience, actively resisting totalizing narratives of Black girlhood that do not include us.

Moreover Czarniawska's performance-based metaphor works because as the music of Amel Larrieux, Erykah Badu, Toni Blackman, and Jill Scott make clear, their narrations of Black girlhood and womanhood contain elements of recognition and identification that are sufficient for me and presumably others to mobilize around. Calling attention to the complexity and contradictory contemporary processes of gender and race in the lives of Black women and girls highlights compelling narratives of ourselves as visible and invisible, bagged down, and brave. Their music personified shows that Black women and girls similarly positioned should have each other as a source of support; sisterhood remains in style. In the complex negotiation of cultural relations, no matter how deceptively manipulative popular culture can be, it remains possible for culture as politics and as communications to embody our "deepest hopes" and act as "a means of reshaping individual and collective practices for specified interests" (Lipsitz, 1994, p. 17). Certainly more subtle than perhaps the played out rhetoric of mentorship, the aesthetics of the aforementioned artists "singing a Black girls' song" (Shange, 1977) have been commercially categorized as poetry, spoken word, rhythm and blues, neo-soul, rap, and, by many women and men working in the community with young people, as reasons for coming

together to talk about the ways in which the youngest Black girls negotiate all the seemingly new and old problems inherent in patriarchy, capitalism, racism, and related systems of oppression and domination.

There would be no SOLHOT if it weren't for women artists like the Black blues women Hazel Carby (1992) wrote about and the artists I listen to and cite who continually provide new aesthetic foundations from which to contest the terrain of sexual politics in relation to working-class culture and Black middle-classdom. SOLHOT as a cultural space continues the production of the ever-produced narrative of Black girlhood featuring Black women and girls coming together, contradicting each other, resisting, creating new ways of being, and falling apart.

Power, Not Programs: A Political Work For the Children

Experience has taught me that you cannot program Black girlhood celebration. More specifically, there is no magic after-school program, girl empowerment intervention, or some kind of gender-specific club that is capable of positively working for every girl involved. Especially Black girls. Why? Because we come with so much stuff, so many bags, so many reasons for being brave, and so many styles that it all cannot be absorbed into a single structure that was not even possibly created by Black girls themselves. Black girls marginalized by race, class, gender, sexuality, and schooling rarely find themselves in the position of desiring to create the kind of programs that were responsible for inventing their own oppressive memories and meanings of Black girlhood.

I wanted to work with Black girls and women to celebrate who we've been, we are, and who we can be together. Therefore, I take responsibility for starting SOLHOT, as a suggestion. I wanted to know whether anyone else would come together in the name of Black girlhood celebration. Much to my surprise, Black girls, older and younger, came with hopes of being seen and heard, to get a hug and to be hugged. Black girls, older and younger, came to teach and to learn, to write poetry and rhymes and share stories about themselves. Black girls, older and younger, came to inspire and to be inspired, to question and to observe. Those who were not Black came as allies to support the work. Mostly, Black girls and women came to SOLHOT to claim a space to be young, Black, female, and everything else we deem important about ourselves. And we keep coming. SOLHOT is a way of being together, a utopia of Black girlhood celebration.

Therefore, to call SOLHOT a program is to miss the point of our work and the reasons for our consistent and contested coming together and falling apart. Although SOLHOT looks to outsiders like a “program,” meaning that we meet for a specific time in a particular space, it is not. Although SOLHOT looks to outsiders like “mentoring,” meaning that we work with Black women and girls, it is not. Although SOLHOT looks to outsiders like “girl empowerment,” meaning that it is a positive gender-specific (or exclusionary) space, it is not.

During the 2004 National Hip-Hop Political Convention, State Senator Nia Gill (D-NJ) commented that young people need power, not programs. And I agree. Programming for programming’s sake attempts to manage young people’s lives. Programming for programming’s sake defines young people as the problem. For example, although girl empowerment is the professed goal of many gender-specific programs, power is rarely considered, and when left to function without question, many program processes marginalize some of the same young people they claim to be “empowering” (Brown, 2007). Without analyzing power within and outside of the program context, empowerment is translated into patronizing do-gooderism that fails to empower anyone, in the best sense of the word (Boyte and Farr, 1997).

Academic theories of structuration argue that power refers to a person’s capability to transform the rules and resources that structure action in ways that “make a difference,” by producing an interaction that results in the given social practice having a different meaning than before (Cassell, 1993). More specifically, power is defined as the transformative capacity of human action (Giddens, 1984). Therefore, seeking transformation in youth programming, for example, requires the recognition that power is ever-present and ever-working, and then acting as if we know power is at work; young people as well as those in positions of authority (typically adults), then, are ultimately political actors. As political actors, we become responsible for creating new social practices whereby the actions of program participants are not interpreted as disruptive to the goals of the program but indicative of the program’s program and our potential to make power.

Specifically, when working with Black girls, recognizing power requires an understanding that because institutional narratives so often frame Black girls’ actions as too loud, too much, too sexual, too disruptive, we must work to resist these narratives created about us. We have to try and come up with another way of being and relating that breaks routine and invites creativity. This is hard work. Real hard work. But this is how we make power to be used toward socially just ends.

In SOLHOT, I have come up with a few rules to live by that, if nothing else, serve as reminders to be Black girls, anew. For example, one rule that I talk about in great detail in chapter four is that, in SOLHOT, we are fundamentally against the control of Black girls’ bodies. This means that the adults in SOLHOT have to unlearn the need to control the girls—because some girls just want to move all the time, some want to talk all the time, some never utter a word, and a lot of girls have real problems that keep them “busy.” It is in these moments when *we*, Black women, confess *they* are getting on our nerves and say things like, “I just wanted to do what my mama did and shut her up.” Moreover, for the girls who attend public school, the success of their day often depends on their docile body, and because SOLHOT is not school, we do not have to have disciplined bodies as a prerequisite. But because disciplined bodies are not undone by word alone, we all have to unlearn how to be ourselves in our bodies, free, for at least four hours out of the week.

So if power in SOLHOT is not about control, how do we make sense of what many would call Black girls’ “disruptive” behavior? We recognize it and then act as if power matters, not programming. In SOLHOT, we validate and acknowledge that the most disruptive of Black girls’ actions point to the boundaries and limitations of our collective practice. As Hartsock (1996, p. 42) explained,

The point is to develop an account of the world that treats our perspectives not as subjugated or simply disruptive knowledge but as primary and constitutive of a different world, an account that exposes the distortions of the view from above.

Even in youth programs aimed at doing things differently by “empowering” young people, program processes do not necessarily translate into doing things so that Black girls’ and women’s voices and bodies are included, heard, and valued. Therefore, when Black girls act up, they are often made out to be the problem rather than the program, where power is about control. But Black girls are not the problem. Neither is their so often-called disruptive behavior. What their actions embody are types of knowledge about the ways the world works for Black girls living, working, and/or studying in a particular time and space. These types of knowledge are too often punished and disciplined rather than seen as partial answers to the messy yet critical questions, such as Black girl celebration—for what purpose? And for whom? In many cases, their actions question programming: And to whose benefit? Empowerment for whose sake?

In our attempts to make sense of our own lives and the lives of other people, the work many of us do in the name of youth development, girl empowerment, or, in my case, Black girlhood celebration, tries to create an alternative

or counternarrative of identity (Czarniawska, 1997; Delgado and Stefancic, 2000). Yet, when power relations are not recognized or constantly challenged, the narrative we construct is often singular, linear, and predictable—which is absolutely contrary to the lived realities of working with and organizing Black girls and women in particular, and young people and adults more generally.

Consider this: One way power relations are often transformed by Black girls is by following the legacy taught to us by our mothers of talking back (hooks, 1989), turning it out (Sparks, 1997), having a niggerbitchfit (Nelson, 1997), and/or bringing wreck (Pough, 2004). Many times when the routines, rules, and structures that govern a particular Black girlhood celebratory practice are not working or are not relevant, a girl or a few girls will usually speak out, question, and/or leave the space (either physically or by mentally checking out). The particular ways in which Black girls speak, whether loud or silent, however, is often interpreted as disruptive, not as exposing “the view from above.” So what happens? Black girls are told by adults who weren’t raised to understand or never took to the time to learn the nuanced implications of demanding Black girls to “shut up or speak” and therefore disregard that they have already spoken (or not) and communicated what they needed to say. But, it’s a no-win situation for the Black girl who is immediately labeled the troublemaker, or the adult who did the labeling.

At one extreme, trouble-making Black girls may be punished by being expelled from the group or somehow made to leave. More commonly, trouble-making Black girls are made the target of the adult who relies on their position to label, supervise, and interrogate her about every word uttered or move made. Rarely, even in spaces of girl empowerment, are girls, especially if they are Black, listened to. Rarely are they thought to be smart. Rarely is their home culture affirmed. But there is a way to comprehend their actions as intentionally creating a space that is more inclusive, more relevant, more explicitly responsive to unyielding power dynamics. And yet, if we do not critically think about their actions, we collude with the dominant programming of Black girls’ bodies that insists they are the problem. Not the program. And definitely not us. Not those invested in a program’s singular narrative of who we need Black girls to be. To get funding. To make us feel good. To be good feminists, Black women, teachers, mentors, whatever. This holds true whether Black girls’ actions are shrouded in middle-class White norms of “civility” or accompanied by hand and neck gestures, rolling eyes, and curse words.

One of the greatest gifts of owning how power works in programs and experiences labeled as “programs” lies in appreciating disruption, because inherent in the “disruptive” critique is yet another narrative of who Black

girls are. If we acknowledge that power is ever-present, and that power does not have to be about punishing girls, these assumptions should accompany another: Everyone in the program is capable of transforming the program into something more meaningful. As many programs hope to incite youth to collective action and/or voice, sometimes the context of the program offers itself as a foundational step to grasp how power is different than control is different from authority, providing a space where we can work with Black girls and also can together transform the rules we play by, thus changing the game.

What if we abandon the notion that we Black girls are not good enough? What if we got rid of the thinking that says programming makes young people better? What if we did not define “adolescence” as inherently problematic? What if we valued who Black girls are, including what they say and how they speak? What if we understood Black girls as producers of knowledge rather than consumers? What if we recognized that there is no magical age when one “gets over” the racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia that collude to make us, as Black girls and women, the problem? Power, not programming, would become a point of emphasis that grounds the logistical work of when, where, and how to create a space for Black girls. I believe when grounded in concerns of power, working with Black girls is understood in a historical, sociopolitical, cultural, and educational context that allows for the possibilities of transformative processes and critical collective projects. For me, this is the epitome of Black girlhood celebration. It can be better than any one of us now know.

Certainly by paying greater attention to power relations than to programming, I am calling for an explicitly political approach to Black girlhood celebration. However, the explicitly political approach is not a common one. Nina Eliasoph (1998) found that people go to great lengths to avoid politics especially when working with children. Eliasoph (1998) declares:

What does it do to an issue, to say that it is “for the children?” It is evidently part of what it means for an issue to become mainstream: it is not “political,” it’s “for the children.” It’s persuasive—who could be against children? The problem is that in this volunteer-style approach to children and politics, the “for the children” aspect colonizes the “political” aspect, rather than “politics” coming to be seen as a thing that is “for the children” ... “For the children,” volunteer-style, assumes that children do not themselves want to discuss issues, debate, and learn. It assumes that children are not uncannily adept at intuiting social realities, but are just natural and static beings. (p. 246)

When, for example, the language of volunteerism is used in SOLHOT, it typically results in trying to change “those loud Black girls” to use Signithia

Fordham's (1993) phraseology. Furthermore, because terms such as mentor, programming, and youth development are all equally problematic, I am seeking a new way to describe Black girlhood celebration as practice in SOLHOT. SOLHOT is not "for the children." SOLHOT is for all of us who identify or are identified as Black girls, who are less than celebrated on a daily basis, yet are committed to dropping our bags, spitting our rhymes, and healing our hurts. This is political work whose form runs the gamut, from socializing to organizing, but the function remains the same: It is a political action to create multiple and contested narratives of Black girlhood worth celebrating.

In this work, my understanding of politics is inclusive, and not only attempts to center Black girls in the traditional "who gets what, when, where, and how" equation (Lasswell, 1990), but also makes power a necessary lens through which to examine the ways in which those in a body marked as Black, female, and young experience marginalizing processes of racialization, gender, class, and sexualization in collective constructions and individual performances of Black girlhood.

In SOLHOT, the celebration of Black girlhood is about creating spaces where ways of being alone and together depend on each one of the narratives we create that speaks who we are and want to be into existence. Certainly, not all of what we do or say is celebratory, but even in our anger, frustration, and bitterness, we challenge each other to be new. This expectation of ourselves, and the support to see it through, is always a cause for celebration. Speaking back to institutional narratives, family narratives, and cultural narratives are all fair game to be challenged and rewritten in SOLHOT among a collective of girls and women to whom we don't mind being accountable.

How these narratives are created and celebrated, even while some narratives contest others or are equally valuable, is a matter of pedagogy. Though there are several lenses through which we can see how Black girls and women are engaged in a way that is like SOLHOT, from my perspective, hip-hop feminist pedagogy best describes the way and the why Black girlhood is celebrated in SOLHOT.

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THEORIZING NARRATIVE DISCREPANCIES OF BLACK GIRLHOOD

Everyone seems to be interested in the influence of misogynist lyrics and dehumanizing images of Black women and girls represented in mainstream hip-hop. In "Hip-hop vs. America," Black Entertainment Television's (BET) three-part series, several prominent rappers, critics, and academics (primarily male) addressed in part the outcome of misogyny and sexism in commercial hip-hop. Artist responsibility, corporate greed, and U.S. ideologies were taken to task in the interrogation of negative images and lyrics of women and girls used to generate massive profit. Panelists voiced concern about parental rights, the role of audience, and in particular the influence of the media on children and young people, especially Black girls and women. But who cares?

Actually, I mean this literally: who cares?

If one really cared, one would take the time to consult people who have spent lots of time, energy, and study on the complex and constantly negotiated relationship between hip-hop, capitalism, gender, and race. In response to "Hip Hop vs. America," scholar-activists Moya Bailey and Leana Cabral wrote a letter that was sent to BET employees and was later widely circulated over the Internet. Their statement is straight forward and to the point,

Now we find it is no longer a racially unifying act of resistance to challenge these images within the Black community, but rather a divisive battle that pits Black men against

Black women, artists and cultural critics, etc. ... Spaces for unifying conversations and healing must be generated, where perspectives from women are equally honored and respected. Panelists who can speak to that sort of nuanced and complex conversation were not present. What about hip-hop scholars Joan Morgan or Tricia Rose, MC and hip-hop activist Toni Blackman, self-proclaimed feminist men Byron Hurt and Mark Anthony Neal? We speak out because once again our actions were silenced and mis-read. We speak out because once again we are talked about instead of being included in the conversation. *We speak out so that we can say we did, even if no one is listening.* (*italics added*), Bailey and Cabral, 2007).

It just makes sense. Like so many other parts of their daily experiences, Black girls are noticeably and pathetically absent from discussions about hip-hop. For the girls with whom I work in our community, as is the case with my girlfriends, hip-hop gives meaning to our girlhood. This makes us experts. Our expertise is rarely acknowledged.

Consider this complicated example: I was working at a community center with a group of girls. It was the first time I had met them, so I concentrated very hard on learning their names. One girl in particular had the polysyllabic yet familiar name of "Tameka" that I mistakenly mispronounced as "Tamesha." When I "called her out of her name," she responded, "Get it right, get it tight." A graduate student, Nita, who now works with me in SOLHOT, accompanied me on this expedition and afterward shared with me how "disrespectful" the girl had been in correcting me—me being a Black female adult with a doctorate degree. I shrugged it off. To Nita's dismay, I was not bothered by the girl's defense.

"I did call her out of her name," I responded. "Besides, I rarely take offense to the language. She was probably quoting some rap song I'm too old to know about."

Nita trusted me.

But she did not believe me.

In a paper for class, Nita wrote an insightful paper worth quoting at length about our experience,

I must admit it bothered me that Tameka was being so "disrespectful." Dr. Brown pointed out that she didn't find her disrespectful at all, and she welcomed the chaos of the girls. They had been cooped up in school, following rules all day, so being loud was okay. She also took Tameka's comment (in regards to mispronouncing her name) simply as a kid singing some rap song that she herself wasn't familiar with. So then, why was I so bothered by Tameka's behavior? Her loud, abrupt manner irritated the girl I used to be, and displeased the woman I am. Yet here I stand, striving to be a womanist,

and getting offended because this little girl won't act like a "little girl"? Here I began to evaluate my thought process to understand my issues ... Tameka had a similar attitude regarding girls at school. She claimed that you have to exude toughness by striking first so they back down, and you are not seen as weak. Another interesting observation regarding Tameka was her use of rap songs to express and bring attention to herself. She made reference to at least 8 different songs during the interview, loudly using phrases from each to make her point on various topics.

On my way home from the recreation center that night, I searched for the hip-hop station on the car radio. Not even one mile from the community center, I heard the song "Ms. New Booty" boosting the chorus, "get it right get it tight!" The year was 2006, and Bubba Sparxxx, a White rapper from LaGrange, California, rapping an oft-used misogynist trope of objectifying Black women's backsides, was the rapper Tameka decided to quote that night at the recreation center. Catchy beat aside, the lyrics confirmed my suspicions.

Tameka sampled a line from "Ms. New Booty" to speak to me. In my work, I found that Black girls literally speak through hip-hop. Even as she corrected me, I did not think she was talking back to me or speaking disrespectfully. Tameka was demonstrating a literacy that at one time I too was well-versed in. On account of the words of this Black girl's speech, Nita's interpretation of events, and the popular song, I was prompted to look up the lyrics. When I next saw Nita and returned to the center, we talked about the lyrics of "Ms. New Booty." This hugely popular song (after I first learned of the song, thereafter I could not stop hearing it) was used to begin a conversation with the girls about the objectification of Black girls and women in hip-hop that included a historical tribute to Sara Baartman, whose genitalia was displayed and dismembered from her body after death, for at least the pleasure of voyeurs fueling White supremacist imaginations about Black women's sexuality (see Hobson, 2005; Sharpley-Whiting, 1999).

Although lovers of hip-hop music are rarely assumed to be critical in their conspicuous consumption while doing the soldier boy (with lyrics that mean more than a dance but a specific sexual act) or quoting "Ms. New Booty," findings from Cathy Cohen's Black Youth Empowerment Study show that Black youth listeners are not passively duped. According to Cohen (2007, p. 15) "most young people agree that rap music videos contain too many references to sex and that these videos portray Black women in offensive ways." Cohen's findings also complicate current understandings of rap music consumption that posit the primary consumers of rap music are White middle-class males. She wrote, "Black youth report listening to rap music and watching rap music videos more often than other young people, with 58% of Black youth listening to rap

music every day" (ibid.). Listening to the music and purchasing it are no longer causal correlations. Hip-hop is everywhere. Black girls are critical consumers, creators, and interpreters of the music that everyone, for all of their concern, has forgotten and/or ignored.

I listen to Black girls and I insist on including them in the conversation. Because I insist on listening to what Black girls say and do not judge how they say it does not mean I'm naïve. It does mean that I acknowledge Black girls as experts on their own lives, including the ways hip-hop is lived and created by Black girls. When we begin to think about, speak out about, and act on how the narratives created by Black girls counter or collude with popular messages and stereotypes about Black girls and women, we are required to find a different way to interact with each other and become new.

In this chapter, I make the argument that Black girls have been organized out of very specific conversations about ourselves, so that spaces dedicated to the visibility of girls ironically rely on discourses based on Black girls' absence to explain the lack of leadership, intellectual contribution, and presence of Black girls and women in programs supposedly about "girl empowerment." However, Black girls are governed by such discourse that invokes their well-being but does not value their presence and dissentious, affirming, and/or commonsense expressions.

Black girls' knowledge and presence have been excluded and deemed unimportant in three surprisingly interrelated academic discourses: hip-hop, girls' studies and girls' programming. Both popular academic discourses rhetorically render girls visible but in ways that are extremely problematic. In hip-hop mainstream culture, girls and Black girls are known too well and therefore are hypervisible, but as they are not credited or counted as active participants in the culture politic, they are assumed passive dupes. In "girls' studies," an emerging subfield in gender and women's studies concerned with explaining representations of girls' lives and creating empirical evidence about girls' lived experiences, the girl norm is suspiciously White, middle-class, and heterosexual. Furthermore, these spaces may recognize the absence of girls' knowledge and voices socially, but do little to include Black girls' lived experiences, expression, and critical commonsense in programming structures and engagement.

My intent is not to reconcile the absence of Black girls with a simplistic call for Black girls' visibility. I am more interested in specifically making central hip-hop feminist voices that have long since articulated the urgency of Black girlhood. It is hip-hop feminism that not only acknowledges Black girls as experts

on their own lives, but more than that, hip-hop feminism makes it possible to articulate a complex understanding of Black girlhood—and maybe more remarkably, in the context that Black girls might claim themselves: a context of hip-hop. Hip-hop feminists are seemingly always absent from conversations about hip-hop and feminism in the midst of their presence in the academy and in the community as grassroots cultural workers. Those organizing under a hip-hop feminist cause are having conversations about the ways hip-hop matters to Black girls' lives, in ways that others assume to see only as influenced by the music.

Hip-Hop Feminism, Girls' studies, and the Academy

This chapter documents the narrative discrepancy that already exists in regards to Black girls and discourses of hip-hop, girls' studies, and girls' programming. I analyze the diverse and creative ways hip-hop feminists work tirelessly to create the kind of spaces that echo Bailey and Cabral. Hip-hop feminists are working overtime to generate unifying conversations and healing where perspectives from women and girls are equally honored and respected.

Revising Ophelia: Black Girl Studies in the Academy

Marnina Gonick (2006) argues that "Reviving Ophelia" and "Girl Power" are two contemporary organizing discourses of girlhood that produce and reproduce the neoliberal girl subject. *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (1995) is a book written by leading psychologist Mary Pipher (1995) that argued girls lose themselves in adolescence and many resort to self-inflicted physical and mental harm. Girl Power references the early nineties subculture movement that made gender an issue in the grunge and punk music scene. Since then girl power has become commercialized as a stand in for anything girly and pink. Given the influence of *Reviving Ophelia* and Girl Power on popular and academic discourses to frame "girls" as "problems" of which late capitalism and self-help therapy can cure, both operate as dominating narratives about girls. Many people writing and working in concern for girls have heard of or have come to see some brand of *Reviving Ophelia* and Girl Power as guiding their actions and ideas. It is hard to dispute in the academy or in community-based settings dedicated to girl programming that these narratives permeate popular

thinking about the kind of subject well-intentioned adults should usher girls into becoming.

Gonick (2006) argued that *Reviving Ophelia* and *Girl Power* are not two competing narratives but rather both function toward the same neoliberal end. Moreover, beyond contributing to the neoliberal project of favoring personal responsibility in lieu of collective organizing, *Reviving Ophelia* and *Girl Power* discourses also effectively silence and exclude the experiences of girls of color in general, and Black girls in particular. These are notable silences and exclusionary mechanisms that are mute to the voices and expertise of Black girls.

So in conversations about girls, what about Black girls?

I am not interested in squeezing Black girls into the *Reviving Ophelia* and *Girl Power* paradigm. Little about that discourse addresses the material realities of Black girlhood. But I am very much interested in naming a framework that places Black girls at the center—a framework that addresses the issues, needs, and concerns of Black girls growing up post-9/11, consuming and creating hip-hop, experiencing increased imprisonment and lockup, being educated under supreme court-ordered consent decrees for supposedly desegregated public schools, lacking formal for youth by youth community spaces, an ever-expanding inequity of foster care and child protective services, and enduring residential segregation. In girls' studies, the demonstrated narrative discrepancy calls attention to girlhood yet ignores the ways girlhood is produced differently given the intersection of diverse categories of identity. Dominant girls' studies paradigms leave a host of questions unanswered, including, and extending beyond, what narratives of girlhood value who Black girls are and who they become as women? What spaces dedicated to girls not only include Black girls but, more to the point, do not harm their sense of self and chosen communal affiliations? In what ways do girls marginalized by race, gender, class, age, and sexuality experience girlhood? Whose experiences are excluded and for what purpose through academic constructions of girlhood?

For Colored Girls ...

somebody/ anybody
sing a black girl's song

Lady in Brown, in *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered*
Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf

If ever a canonical text could be named from which to think and rethink Black girlhood, Ntozake Shange's 1976 *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered*

Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf is a top contender. Shange's choreopoem was based on her personal experiences and those of her friends and colleagues while studying women's studies in northern California. What many social scientists would contemporarily exalt as performance ethnography, reality theater, or ethnodrama, Shange received acclaimed success signified by a Broadway run for creatively retelling the stories of women of color in poetic form set to music. The characters were not named but rather referred to by ladies of different colors (e.g., *Lady in Red*). The storyline was not linear but rather fluidly emerged from interactions and rhythms between the characters as a collective and as individuals. Most important, the poems spoke with great complexity about what it meant to grow up Black and female in the United States.

For Colored Girls affords the possibility to engage the role of art as theory-producing text, a concern typically marginalized in social science approaches to knowledge production and inquiry. Moreover, any thinking about how Shange and her collective of friends, comrades, and sister-girl activists collaborated on *For Colored Girls* requires a treatment of the "choreopoem" as methodology, explicating and engaging conversations about collective aims to social problems while privileging individual narratives. Ahead of her time, this question of method has yet to be engaged as a way of presenting knowledge that aims to produce Black girlhood subjectivities that require her to tell her story, and to be heard in company of those who share a similar experience, and to call into question, where is the love?

For my mother, in order to make sure her last child/second daughter knew who I was, it was mandatory that I attended all events that told a Black woman's story. There were the exceptional events like going to see *The Color Purple* at the movie theater as a clandestine rite of passage, and the ordinary events, like being allowed to stay in the company of my aunts' or mother's girlfriends when they were discussing a "serious" matter like women's health, relationships, and lessons learned. Halfway grown, maybe 16, the most memorable Black womanhood-in-training event was going with my mother to see a production of *For Colored Girls*. I did not know anything about what we called a "play" before seeing it, but the moment my security guard sister called to say she was on duty at Chicago's South Shore Cultural Center and would save us seats for the next show, my mother commanded me to "get ready." My grandparents had migrated to Chicago's south suburbs from Kentucky during the 1930s for work, and my parents and siblings remained close to home. As a child, I knew that my parents did not like going to "the city," and as a result, we rarely went. Therefore, when my mother,

who never drives to the city, hopped in the car quickly without directions, I was immediately aware that we were going to see something special and that possibly my mother had a past and/or present life that I did not know about which involved knowing her way around Chicago.

As we settled into our seats, I observed immediately that this was a Black female space. Our space. So many Black women, young and old, daughters, mothers, lovers, sisters all were eagerly anticipating something good. I could tell by the body language and big smiles that I was in for a treat. My mother's prologue was stated as the lights dimmed: "Listen carefully, they tellin' the truth." I watched as the cast, sweet and sassy grandmamma types sporting dreadlocks armed with instruments and a repertoire of funk music selections, made music. In the band, there were also new school newcomers with candy-coated voices who interacted with the audience, serving as a bridge between us and them. They started with a concert of their own music; these women were a band first, actors second. With little interruption in between, the cast members became "colored girls." This production taught me the language, secret dreams, fears, and fluidity of Black girlhood and womanhood. Just like Joan Morgan's mother, my mother found it her duty to take me to see *For Colored Girls* "to see where the play fit into our lives" (Morgan, 1999).

Although my teenaged life separated me from a host of the musical references in the text, the stories were familiar. I could tell a story, even if no one asked me, about my own "graduation nite," "no assistance," "abortion cycle," and "a laying on of hands"—which were just a few of the poems in the piece. Given the format of *For Colored Girls*, a nonlinear storyline that depended on the women coming together and then speaking individually, I imagined that if the cast were me and my friends, we could tell our stories. There was room and a way to tell the stories not yet shared in that text. Therefore, while certainly descriptive of Black girlhood, Shange's text is not sufficient. There were stories that remained untold.

After the play, there were a few words—"thank you for taking me"—shared between myself and my mother. Mostly, I was quiet in contemplation. I wondered, would I ever know the fate of the woman in red? Would I become a revolutionary, or fall in love with one like the lady in brown? Where do you draw the line between Black girlhood and womanhood, the choreopoem made me ask, because some of those Black women characters acted like girls, and some of those Black girl characters acted like women.

For Colored Girls is a poetic acknowledgment based on Black women's and girls' lived experience that makes public our private relations for the purpose of breaking silences, to change systemic invisibility and exclusion so that we

can heal. When we see our selves as Black women and girls hurt, as decision makers, acted upon, abused but beautiful, often all at the same time, we can take up our bed and walk.

When somebody like Ntozake Shange sings a Black girl's song like *For Colored Girls*, some of us are healed.

Thirty years after *For Colored Girls*, we still have a hard time sustaining a conversation about the violence against Black women and girls. Which is precisely why we need to talk more about the little Black girl, a six-year-old, St. Louis second-grader who was sexually attacked by a group of ten to twelve boys at school. Black girls' and women's voices too often remain invisible and not valued at a time when our bodies are most commodified, consumed, and made hypervisual in popular cultures. When an invitation was extended to me to give a postproduction talk after *For Colored Girls* at the New School for Social Research, I was validated in the belief that we are not yet where we need to be. The cast, talented, wise, and critical, found it necessary to do this production because as Black women they wanted to create some room on their campus where they were valued. It is no wonder as part of their movement they organized a beautifully relevant production of *For Colored Girls*.

But I want to be past *For Colored Girls*, really. Wouldn't it be nice to enjoy *For Colored Girls* as a historical artifact of our mother's generation? I want to go out for post-show cocktails with Black feminist, womanist female and male friends to talk about how the lady in blue is so passé. I might joke, "Girl do you remember when we only dreamed of walking with revolutionaries instead of being one?" We could then dance in the name of our ended search for suicide, because, as a group, Black women, young and old, learned what came after the rainbows. *For Colored Girls* would be relevant only as Black women's history.

Scholars continue to make the case that if Black girls experience girlhood at all, it is because one was intentionally created for them (King, 1995; Ladner, 1995). The self that Black youth in general are expected to build is one that will discount them (Radford-Hill, 2000). This being the case, the subject of Black girlhood complicates the current framing of "girls' studies" as emerging in the discipline of gender and women's studies. The kind of Black girl subject produced by Shange's text is not usually considered in discourses about girls' studies. This erasure of the complexity of Black girlhood means that, though some of us have since been engaged in the project of understanding the significance of race, age, class, gender, and sexuality on a target population that is perhaps most marginalized, including in communities of color, spaces that exist for Black girls to tell their story, listen to other stories, come together and be

who they are individually are also necessary. This also includes Black women and girls who do not see themselves in Shange's text. Academically, we lack a viable framework created from Black girls' lived experiences to name and to critique the kinds of Black girl subjects they willfully resist.

A Hip-Hop Feminist Speaks Out (Again)

My hip-hop feminist politics and pedagogy is grounded in the political/social activism of working with Black girls in particular, girls of color in general, to remix, rethink, create, cipher, and dance, and break dance, for the purpose of Black girlhood celebration. Each of these things is a starting point from which I relate to Black girls in a new way about the issues some of us face and obstacles and some of us hold on to, like past lovers, too close for too long. After all, it is Black girls and women who are simultaneously hypervisible in the music videos, continuously invisible as creators and contributors to the culture, and visibly underground organizing as hip-hop feminists to challenge hip-hop as everything masculine, homophobic, heterosexist, sexist, and commercial. When I seek out conversations about hip-hop and Black girlhood, I have found company in the scholarship and activism of those organized under a hip-hop feminist identification.

When I am asked whether I am a hip-hop feminist I usually answer yes—even though the ways in which I am hip-hop have never been articulated in the body of scholarship that is now called hip-hop feminism, and I certainly do not look the part. Hip-hop as a cultural phenomenon should not be essentially reduced to a love for rap music, as is so often the case. But I suppose if I were asked whether I was a house feminist, I would also say yes. Being born and raised on the south suburban side of Chicago means that house music influenced my coming of age as much as hip-hop. But I have also not written anything to contribute to the scholarly literature on house music, and I'm uncertain whether folks are organizing under house feminism. If so, I'm down. My preference, however, as far as labels go, is Black feminist. Yet, if I consider the laundry list of adjectives that I don't mind claiming, I would be a hip-hop house Black feminist scholar artist activist from the Midwest. That just about sums it up.

And then it doesn't. As I write this piece, my compact disc changer includes the sounds of Beres Hammond, Amp Fiddler, Amel Larrieux, Donnie (truly, I love "neo-soul"), "I'm Here" from the musical *The Color Purple*, and a few salsa tunes. When it comes to rap music, I am listening to what is considered old

skool by current standards, usually nineties rap music. Yes, TLC really counts as rap and as hip-hop!

My two-year-old daughter learns to "wave her hands in the air" to the oldies but goodies like "Just to Get By" by Talib Kweli and Lauryn Hill's hits, including cuts from *Unplugged No. 2.0*. Despite the lack of musical complexity as the critics pronounced (of which I never agreed with or noticed for that matter because I'm so not musical), Hill's performance was to me both prophetic and brilliant. We listen to Common because he represents the southside of Chicago. Every now and then, I put in some Nas when he was everything Brooklyn, and Kanye West mostly because he clued the world in to a talented poet friend who goes by the name J.IVY. At other times I listen to female Detroit-based emcees such as Invincible and Njeri Earth. But mostly, I'm a house, so-called neo-soul, unsigned artist junkie, reggae, salsa, gospel, Motown/Philly soul sound kinda girl. I don't watch music videos because I do not have cable TV. I do not read hip-hop magazines (unless Lauryn Hill is on the cover). I catch hip-hop television such as *Flavor of Love* or Snoop's *Fatherhood* on reruns when I visit family on the weekends. I had to search for the local hip-hop radio station where I live after the event at the recreation center, but I did not program it in my car, no need. Until the release of Common's *Finding Forever*, I have not purchased, downloaded, or bootlegged a rap CD in years (unless it was from an underground artist I knew personally).

I detail my relationship with hip-hop music because, as important as it is, it does not epitomize hip-hop. Though my self-confession may disqualify me from anything hip-hop for others who probably also share a similar relationship, it validates a complicated if not abusive relationship. Just as for the Black girls I talk to on a daily basis, my relationship with rap music is tenuous. This recognition and relationship grounds my hip-hop feminist politics and pedagogy. But, hip-hop is more than rap music. It is definitely more than corporate-financed rap. Hip-hop is more than the usually cited four elements: deejaying, graffiti, break dancing, and emceeing. Hip-hop is more than its origin's narrative starting in the Bronx, created from hard times and diasporic Black male youth cultural practices. In the repetition and subsequent iterations of this hip-hop birth story, the underground artists and cultural workers start to lose ground.

According to Bakari Kitwana (2002), those in the hip-hop generation include people born between 1965 and 1984, who came of age in the eighties and nineties, and who share a specific set of values and attitudes. Though Jeff Chang (2005) acknowledges that generations are fictional, when older Black folks, for example, of the Civil Rights generation ask me, "What happened

to ya'll?" (as if they have forgotten that it was them who raised us), I feel connected to a youth culture that I can't imagine without hip-hop. I know I'm not alone.

I am also a hip-hop feminist in part to make it known that I disagree with what is often publicized as our shared set of values and attitudes. For example, Kitwana's (2002) book opens with a commemoration of Pac's and Biggie's deaths, the two moments that "marked a turning point" for the hip-hop generation. He wrote of their death and subsequent martyrdom, "Not only had we, the hip-hop generation, come of age, but more importantly, we were conscious of our arrival." So much of what is documented as hip-hop is focused solely on celebrating Black male masculinity. And yes, the first time I heard Tupac, I remember vividly that it helped me name all the contradictions in me being happy about landing the lead in my high school's production of *To Kill a Mocking Bird* as Calpurnia, the Black maid. But hip-hop is more than Tupac and Biggie. Significant though they were, they were not the movement. In our public imagination, the hip-hop head sports baggie clothes, curses, gang-bangs for fun, walks with a swagger, could respond to a question by quoting rap lyrics off the cuff, ending every sentence with "son" because you shine like one. Masculine (and thanks to Slim Shady not just Black).

My hip-hop coming of age story is different. I knew long before Biggie and Pac's deaths that I was a part of a movement that was *generational*. Growing up a Black girl child, my hip-hop membership was marked by biker shorts, bright red lipstick, hoop earrings, and an asymmetrical haircut I longed for and only received as a high-school junior. For Christmas, my older brother gave me my first tape recorder and radio boom box. Later that summer, I received my first tape. Salt-N-Pepa's *HOT, COOL, and VICIOUS*. I didn't know all the words to every Wu-Tang, Rahkim, and SugarHill Gang anthem, but it didn't matter. But every time I heard Salt-N-Pepa's "Push It", I knew it was my turn to shine, as I sung that song while dancing with the faith of a church(ed) girl I came of age during a time when girls' desire was all the rage, and hip-hop was in part to thank.

Actually, Kyra Gaunt (2006) concluded that really it's the other way around. That hip-hop should have thanked me, that Black girl who played Black girls' games. Gaunt argues Black girls' sphere of musical activity represents one of the earliest formations of a Black popular music culture. Girls are its primary agents: they are the leaders in composing the beats, rhymes, and multilimbed choreographies of handclapping games, cheers, and double Dutch, as well as their accompanying chants (Gaunt, 2006, p. 183). Gaunt proves her case by

showing that artists such as Jay-Z and Nelly made millions by sampling from those everyday Black girls on the corner singing, just as I did:

Down Down Baby
Down by the rollacoster
sweet sweet baby
I don't want to let you go
shimmy shimmy coco pop
shimmy shimmy wow
shimmy shimmy coco pop
shimmy shimmy pow

Gaunt, in her book, introduces the readers to LaShonda in the last chapter. LaShonda helped her out in documenting Black girls' songs. Gaunt's work became more than valid in that moment because I realized rather quickly from the listing of songs that LaShonda was a friend of mine who grew up one street down from me. In our neighborhood "Eastgate" was known as the Blackest section of our not so affluent suburb because it was rather segregated. The spectacular aspect of growing up in Eastgate for me meant always wanting to get to the courts, to spectate, not to play basketball. Go to the park and run up that hill to see the really cute boy who I secretly crushed on. The more ordinary days in Eastgate meant playing inside with my cousin who lived across the street, and once I became older it meant playing double Dutch or doing cheers outside with schoolmates and girls who lived nearby. In Eastgate, "cheers" were serious Black girl battles. In a social and cultural capital sense, we were like gangs. Groups of girls formed a posse and challenged girls on any street corner in particular to battle using our words and cheers to rhyme, our bodies to make beats.

Tell it tell it tell it like it is (uh oh)
Tell it tell it tell it like it is
My name's Nicole (tell it tell it)
I'm on the line (tell it tell it)
And I can do it (tell it tell it)
To the Capricorn sign (tell it tell it)
And you know what? (what?)
And you know what? (what?)
Your man was in my body and he did some karate and he knocked
on my door but he didn't get no mo'!

That's how I remember one of my favorite cheers; if I was an ethnomusicologist like Gaunt, I'd break down the musical notation and reference the popular songs

we sampled from and those that sampled us. The memory, however, only allows me to make sense of how Black girls speak through hip-hop to give meaning to their lives. These games were banned from the schoolyard because they incited the same danger as red and blue colors in the city.

Because I have the cultural capital to know what it means to do Black girl call-and-response in hip-hop fashion, playing games I only remember and no longer play, I believe one gift of working with Black girls is that they require Black women to “go back” to missed memories or parts of a Black girlhood they never knew, as a means of communication and connection. This is a lot of work. Yes, I also encourage that we the adult women do it. This is the work involved when working with Black girls. This is the saving of ourselves, not saving them from being Black girls playing Black girl games. The primary reason I identify as a hip-hop feminist is because I see myself and the Black girls with whom I work as creators of the movement as much as consumers.

But do not get it twisted; the hip-hop womanist revisionist project is necessary because, to use the metaphor of Rachel Ramist’s film, no one knows our name still. Black women and girls are incredibly invisible in mainstream hip-hop and are not named as creators of the culture; so when they do hip-hop, it comes off as imitating boys, not as their own contribution. Therefore, it completely blew my mind that as I was sitting in SOLHOT, full of beautiful Black girls and women, 15-year-old Jaquese asked me with complete sincerity and curiosity, “Who is this?”

“Excuse me?” I say in a way that prompts her to repeat herself, just so I have an extra minute to fully consider what I already heard.

“Who is this?” Jaquese said pointing to a picture of Salt-N-Pepa in *Hip Hop Divas* (*Vibe Magazine*, 2001) brought in by Esha, another hip-hop feminist scholar homegirl.

I was beside myself.

I had to go there. But before I did, I made eye contact with every other woman who I knew could go there with me. I started to rap and quickly those whose bodies also remembered joined in.

Our smiles were wide and big as the Black Diaspora. We ended the discussion there. If Jaquese did not know before, she knew immediately after our impromptu performance. Some girls applauded our rendition and announced, “Oh, that’s Salt-N-Pepa.” Some of the women in SOLHOT took it further to ask what female artists the girls were listening to. Some of us continued conversations about other favorite Salt-N-Pepa songs. Those completely unfamiliar with hip-hop, then and now, questioned why. We were talking and

having the discussions about gender, women, hip-hop, and media portrayals of Black women in hip-hop. We talked about misogyny, underground artists, independent labels, and emcees no one had heard of. We found out who among us could rhyme, beat box, and break dance. Like so many other hip-hop feminist collectives, identifying as hip-hop feminist or not, these conversations are occurring with Black girls and women who too often are not considered experts on the very issues they live, create, influence, and are influenced by.

As a hip-hop feminist, I feel connected to those who know that Black women do not exist as objects of scorn for the sole purpose of providing rappers and White male shock jocks with new material. Let the press tell it, and it’s like Black women don’t mind being called “nappy headed hoes.” Yet what is left unsaid is that Black feminists in general and hip-hop feminists in particular have always objected to rap lyrics and videos that sell misogyny, homophobia, and system-reproducing values along with the infectious beats. Hip-hop feminists have been most vocal and simultaneously most silenced in their critique of Black male patriarchy as produced and reproduced through hip-hop. But too rarely we remain those Black girls playing Black girl games on the corner of our Eastgate, not visible and sometimes not visibly respected for making it possible for others to speak (and profit) in the first place.

In 2004, the first National Hip-Hop Political Convention (NHHPC) was held in Newark, New Jersey. The purpose of the convention, patterned after other U.S. Black political social movement events, was to establish a solid infrastructure that takes hip-hop beyond the boundaries of entertainment. The hope was that the convention would play a major role in bridging the gap between the civil rights generation and the hip-hop generation. The NHHPC was the result of national and international organizing efforts that gathered in Newark to vote on a political agenda that represented the political agenda of the hip-hop generation.

According to scholar and hip-hop feminist Zenzele Isoke (2007), NHHPC was the product of the efforts of more than 200 community organizers, activists, artists, professionals, and educators between the ages of 17 and 40 from 33 U.S. states and ten countries who came together because they agreed that hip-hop could be used as an effective organizing tool for social and political change among the hip-hop generation. In a chapter of her dissertation titled “Hip Hop as a Translocal Political Space for Black Feminist Activists,” Isoke interviewed 29 Black women activists organizing in Newark, New Jersey, the host city for the 2004 NHHPC, and documented their diverse struggles to politicize a gender-specific national agenda in the various arenas of politics that they organized. Isoke, founder of the Progressive Women’s Caucus

(PWC), a collective of Black women that proudly identified with hip-hop as feminists, womanists, and mothers, intimately knows of what she writes. PWC was in large part successful not only for incorporating "gender justice" into the NHHPC national agenda and platform, but also for leading a campaign that made so much sense; many individuals who were initially resistant later claimed the outcomes of PWC's organizing efforts as their own. Isoke (ibid.) wrote,

Although Newark activists now more receptive to feminism, gender as an important organizing issue remained elusive in Newark until 2007. After national radio host Don Imus attacked the Rutgers women's basketball team, "Gender Justice" was overwhelmingly adopted as part of the agenda leading up to the National Hip Hop Political Convention in 2008.

The Progressive Women's Caucus of the NHHPC organized subversively because issues that were specific to the lives of women were conspicuously absent from the first two drafts of the NHHPC agenda and events. Living in Brooklyn at the time, I was fulfilling my hip-hop Brooklyn Renaissance dream of writing my dissertation between Lil' Kim's hood and June Jordan's suburbia. It was then that Zenzele, a friend I consider as close as a sister, called and invited me to stir some shit up. Both of us writing on the subject of hip-hop and feminism, claiming hip-hop feminism, living, and working so close to Newark, New Jersey, we were determined to not be erased, yet again. Relying on our social networks of brilliant and talented scholars, artists, and activists, a collective was brought together with the sole purpose of creating a space at the Convention to speak as hip-hop feminists, even if no one wanted to listen.

After meeting for nearly a year, the PWC decided to champion the following issues during the Convention:

Reproductive rights/reproductive health
 Rape, sexual abuse, and sexual violence
 Economic violence
 Domestic violence
 LGBT rights/representation
 Identity
 Public health
 Paradigm shift
 Sexual exploitation of girls
 Criminal justice
 Environment

It was a completely subversive organizing mission. Many of the institutionalized leaders in the mainstream hip-hop political community, women and men, were against having anything to do with Black feminism (Isoke, 2007). Kimala Price (2007), PWC member concluded that we had mixed success as our efforts were met with some resistance from both male and female convention planners who questioned the need for a women's caucus. In spite of entrenched resistance, we continued the legacy of articulating an inclusive agenda that would make visible our love for hip-hop, women and girls, feminism, and the multiple communities of which we were a part. During the convention, the Progressive Women's Caucus did the following:

- Lobbied issues that were specific to gender and sexuality, to make sure they would be modified and ratified on the convention floor
- Designed and organized panels at the convention that were explicitly anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-heterosexist for the purpose of empowering and promoting leadership among women and girls
- Organized NHHPC attendees under a label of "hip-hop feminism" to insure that the PWC issues were adopted at the state and local organizing committees
- Distributed questionnaires to conference attendees that asked what they thought were the most important issues facing women of the hip-hop generation. Of the 500 distributed, 232 completed surveys reported that the three most important issues facing women of the hip-hop generation included poor self esteems, degrading images of women in the media, and reproductive health, specifically HIV.

Most significant to me was the panel organized on media, misogyny, and hip-hop with Aisha Durham, Angie Beatty, Rachel Ramist, and Toni Blackman. Ramist's film *Nobody Knows Our Name* chronicles female contributors to hip-hop culture to make the argument that although we are part of the culture, and have been, we are rarely seen and heard. *Nobody* still remains an apt metaphor for hip-hop feminists. In hip-hop discussions, town halls, music, scholarship, and artistry, I want to hear hip-hop feminists more than the tired old school representatives (usually male) who always pontificate on their love for women and directly acknowledge mainstream rap's obsession with misogyny, but fail to recognize that the more we hear their voices, the less we hear from emerging scholars. As long as the same old representatives continue to hold their public commentator positions, the more they problematically extend the stereotype that hip-hop and Black masculinity are one and the same. "But we keep speaking ..."

I want to hear the voices of hip-hop feminists more because, not only do we have insightful contributions to make, we are also unafraid to remain

critical of ourselves and what we do in the name of this movement that many still consider an oxymoron. For example, Byron Hurt's film *Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, in spite of his "male feminist positioning," reproduces the invisibility of women as cocreators of hip-hop. As hip-hop feminists we must remain critical. The woman whose comments open the film is none other than Toni Blackman. Yet Hurt doesn't even provide the audience with an idea of who she is, further perpetuating not knowing our name.

The same Toni Blackman, whose wisdom permeated the NHHPC and spoke on the PWC's media and misogyny panel, is undoubtedly one of our generation's dopest emcees. As an extension of her artistry, Blackman is an international hip-hop ambassador and has developed young hip-hop artists in the many organizations she has founded and directed, including the Freestyle Union, and most recently, the Artist Development Institute. Among the young people with whom Blackman works, she sees that those who initially come to her organization clinging to self-defined labels, such as rappers (gendered as male) and journalers (gendered as female), are both capable emcees. In the development of their writing and recitation skills, Blackman requires that they do not use language that is sexist, homophobic, or degrading to women.

Blackman is also an acclaimed author. Her book *Inner-course: A Plea for Real Love* (2003) is a collection of poems that includes the relevant "The Feminine Voice in Hip Hop" that poetically demands that those whose voices are gendered feminine, be heard. Echoing Blackman's sentiment, I've said it before and I'll say it again, hip-hop feminists are not up and coming—we are here and doing.

Hip-Hop Feminism and the Limits of Girl Empowerment Programming

Hip-hop feminism tells us that Black girls and women are speaking to the discrepancies and the contradictions. Perhaps then, the question is not what are we saying, because we've said it, but how do you listen, yet claim to not hear? How are Black girls and women visible enough in some cases to be invited to the party, the video shoot, the classrooms, and the panels, but our presence is only meant to be symbolic? Why do people continually discount and disconnect what we know and say from the body through which we speak?

Girl empowerment as a programming objective claims to be about the contrary: girls' voices, visibility, and presence are supposed to be valued. There are many programs, initiatives, and groups that have as their mission

the empowerment of girls, including Black girls. Perhaps somewhat of a contradiction, empowerment is often translated as "giving voice" to girls who presumably lack one. In particular, Black girls often have something to say and say it. Annette Henry (1998) well understood the complexity of African Caribbean girls' voices when she wrote,

I recognize that one cannot "empower" or "give voice" to girls merely through weekly writing activities. In fact, more recent observations of African American and African Caribbean girls in classroom settings have shown me further complexities of this notion of "voice." It has become clear that although Black girls may "learn" to be silent or complacent in classrooms, they, indeed, have a lot to say.

As some kind of twisted neoliberal citizenship formation would have it, rather than encouraging Black girls' way with words, they are often not only punished for what they say but also how they say it. Ignorant of many Black girls' lived experience with voice as empowerment in their everyday lived experiences, which could range from "If you don't have anything nice to say don't say it at all" to "Open your mouth if you got something to say," many well-intentioned adults miss the complicated ways Black girls do speak out and thus fail to realize the limits of girl empowerment. Yet in grassroots community-based programs, national nonprofit initiatives, university civic engagement projects, and clinical prevention and interventions, empowering girls, especially marginalized girls, is the professed goal and celebrated outcome, with little regard given to the way meanings of empowerment differ greatly depending on the context and individuals involved.

It seems to me that initiatives that organize "girl empowerment" often work with Black girls because, as the definitive "at-risk" population, the organizing nonprofit profits most from changing speaking Black girls into "empowered" Black girls, meaning silencing their speech and actions. These very same empowerment programs often remain uncritical of program leadership that rarely looks like the people whom the program claims to be "empowering." Therefore, even in spaces that desire speaking girls, Black girls speaking is not desirous. Furthermore, Black women speaking as leaders and/or peers in these girl empowerment efforts are few and far between.

But do not take my word for it. Consider the work of Bemak et al. (2005), creators of Empowerment Groups for Academic Success (EGAS). EGAS boasts that the program eschews control for "true empowerment." For EGAS the route toward true empowerment and social justice requires operationalizing multicultural counseling strategies that require school counselors and adult

facilitators to cocreate a group process whereby youth labeled as "at-risk" define the agenda and generate a greater internal locus of control for the purpose of self-improvement. The innovative features of the EGAS approach, as identified by the authors, is that it takes into account the influence of social, psychological, and environmental factors on academic performances and adheres to a "culturally sensitive" philosophy for developing effective interventions.

Focusing specifically on Black girl empowerment, the EGAS intervention consisted of seven African American adolescent girls, all identified as at-risk for academic failure, two European American facilitators (with the university professor being the lead facilitator and the school counselor cofacilitating), and two female Taiwanese and Korean graduate students. As reported in their research, the girls set the agenda and defined the group's norms in their 45-minute meetings, which occurred over the duration of one academic school year. The authors celebrated their work as a success, detailing the unique feature of their working group as well as girls' self-reported outcomes of improved school attendance, more vigorous study habits, aspirations of the future, fewer disciplinary referrals, and better grades.

On the surface, Bemak and colleagues seem to have Black girl empowerment all figured out. Their model claims to value girls as decision makers, expecting them to give input on the group's format and structure. It also seems that EGAS welcomed everyone involved, as the authors report that everyone felt good about being a part of the process. However, reflections and critiques of the EGAS model of African American empowerment by colleagues engaged in similar work illuminate underlying tensions and contradictions that justly question and critique their "true empowerment" strategy.

Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy (2005) criticized the validity of Bemak's findings. Positioning herself as a Black woman who read their work "anticipating great insight," what Holcomb-McCoy found instead were fundamental flaws and limitations. For Holcomb-McCoy, achieving empowerment for African American girls must be questioned in a process like EGAS that does not articulate racial and feminine self-determination, interrogate the implications of racial mismatch between the girls and facilitators, and incorporate the intellect, wisdom, and commonsense of Black women.

In response to the EGAS model, Holcomb-McCoy unapologetically declared what I have heard other Black women discuss among themselves, "I believe that empowerment groups for African American girls should be lead by at least one African American female. Groups designed to empower African American girls should be implemented using an Afrocentric feminist perspective." The response

from Bemak was dismissive. He acknowledged her critique as "idealistic" in the sense that asking for racial matches and Black women's leadership was a flight of fancy, given that public school students are predominantly youth of color, and school administration, particularly counselors, are mostly White. Bemak contended that racial matching is "highly improbable" and "devalues" the contribution of multicultural education. Holcomb-McCoy's other criticisms were not addressed, with Bemak missing both points and the importance of learning from criticism that, if heard, would only strengthen the EGAS model as it applied to Black girls. Bemak's problematic treatment of Holcomb-McCoy's critique embodies the limitation of the EGAS model and exists as a cautionary exemplar of how otherwise innovative approaches to girl empowerment may reinforce the very same issues of control they seek to resist.

African American girl empowerment cannot exist as empowerment (in the highest sense of the word) where Black women's bodies are not valued and their intellectual contributions are denied or nullified as wishful thinking. I too question a program that claims to empower Black girls but has not one person who looks like them in a position of authority. Researchers, nonprofits, and schools can be relentlessly creative in attaining grant money to support "at-risk" programming, but have such little imagination in recruiting (and/or paying) Black women cultural workers. As Paulo Freire (1998) reminds us, it's not that White people in leadership positions have to abandon their work, but they must realize that as long as they hold positions of power, they are making it impossible for a person of color to do so. The failure of Bemak to apply the same rigorous standard of true empowerment to those facilitating the process as they do with girls points to a weakness in their model and raises concerns for programs that promote Black girl empowerment.

It is also important to remain mindful that while necessary, inclusion signified by holding significant positions, is not sufficient. I know from years of working in a girl empowerment program that even though I was in a leadership position as a Black woman, my visibility and intellect were challenged by Eurocentric programming norms and unjust social structures that allowed for all that I said to be heard only as "trouble-making" rather than critique. My job as the Black woman in a leadership position was to model "empowerment" for the Black girl program participants. The program, as it effected myself and the Black girls with whom I worked, was more about silencing our discontent and critique than it was about celebrating my voice and way of being. I was uncomfortable with who the program wanted me to be. I also did not want to change the girls with whom I worked. I wanted to change the program. I needed a

different conceptualization of empowerment—one that spoke to the complexity of growing up young, Black, and female in the United States with diverse and contested affiliations to multiple communities.

A presumed shared experience between symbolic leaders and everyone else is the reason many girl programs and nonprofits hire Black women to be the face of the organization. However, their duty is not to relate to the Black girls who may be the primary program participants; these Black women are being paid to model how to be silent, the kind of Black girl who maintains status quo. As long as she goes along with “the program,” everyone is happy and empowered. But if you have been a Black woman in this position, or a Black girl in this kind of program, you know that something else was absently at stake. While I would argue for the inclusion of hip-hop feminism thought and practice in community work with Black girls along with the presence of Black girls and women, rather than Holcomb-McCoy’s suggestion of using “Afrocentric feminism,” the larger point is not to be missed; Black women’s and girls’ intellect, wisdom, and commonsense should be central to spaces seeking to support and speak to African American girls’ lived experience.

Black women community advocates, intellectuals, and activists have been vigilant in bringing the celebrations, contradictions, and struggles of growing up young, Black, and female in the United States to public awareness. Just ask a hip-hop feminist. Black feminists and womanist scholars have a longer history, yet they remain relegated to the margins. They have identified and explained prominent themes central to African American women’s and girls’ lives including a commonality of experience having a legacy of struggle; the interlocking nature of multiple oppressions; denigrating and dominating images of Black womanhood; legacies of Black women’s activism as mothers, teachers, and community leaders; and the recognition of differences (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1997; Lorde, 1984). Without an explicit commitment to Black women and girls as contributors, creators, and thinkers, we must question whether Black girls are being socialized to merely cope with their stigmatized identities under the banner of “girl empowerment,” or whether they are able to resist and transcend who others have defined them to be.

Without consulting a hip-hop feminist, womanist, humanist, and/or Black feminist, or a person who loves and understands the complexity of how Black girls are socialized, well-intentioned girl empowerment programs may face the same limits as those reported by Bemak and colleagues. In scholarship documenting the EGAS approach, program participants (seven Black girls) are identified as “at-risk” throughout the research report. The authors do not find

fault with the educational system that has labeled them as such. Incorporation of hip-hop feminist pedagogy would challenge those working with young Black girls to facilitate a process whereby they resist being defined by deficit labels as a necessary practice. In this way, the EGAS model may unintentionally perpetuate a colonial legacy: experts in risk and prevention programming, who are mostly White, middle-class individuals, are not encouraged to engage in analysis of the ideology that informs at-risk categorizations, preventing them from developing a critical understanding of the interdependence between the at-risk reality and the socioeconomic and cultural context in which girls rise to the at-risk reality in the first place (Friere, 2001). Because so many girl empowerment programs work with Black girls without infusing the way they operate in tandem with Black women and girls’ critical thought and pedagogy, we need to pay more attention to the processes and programs involved in socializing Black children (Radford-Hill, 2000). As Bemak’s research demonstrates, even the more successful programming aimed at Black girl empowerment dismisses the importance of Black women’s leadership and ignores the contradictions of Black women’s and girls’ knowledge, intellect, and wisdom at the expense of becoming “empowered.”

Conclusion: Humanizing Discourses of Black Girlhood

Black women and girls have a lot to say, and not only about the negative images of women pervasive in much of the commercially supported music industry, including and extending beyond hip-hop. Some of what Black girls and women know about their beloved and perpetual identification and disidentification with all things hip-hop has been spoken about by emcees such as Toni Blackman, scholars such as Aisha Durham and Zenzele Isoke, and the Black girl who you dismissed as “loud,” but who you somehow also managed not to hear. On the issues that give meaning to growing up young, Black, and female in the post hip-hop global and transnational consumed and created cultural context, we are rarely consulted in spite of everyone’s musings about what that woman shaking her booty in a scantily clad bikini to a dope beat on the television station of your choice signifies as I walk down the street, or instruct a student, or spend time with my family.

Theoretically, there exists a narrative discrepancy. There are many public and private conversations about hip-hop, women, feminism, girls, and

empowerment, with Black women and girls, hip-hop feminists, Black feminists, scholars, and humanists speaking about the same subject, while at the same time, there is little recognition that we who are young, Black, and female have anything to say. Or worse, have said nothing on our own behalf.

Academics newly organizing under the subfield field of girls' studies all too often pronounce dominating discourses of girlhood that mostly explain the experiences of White, middle-class, heterosexual girls. These same academics and many well-intentioned but uncritical adults use this very knowledge to then create programs that address "girls' problems" devoid of any insight that may address how all girls do not have the same problems in general, and that girlhood itself is not the problem more specifically. The ways race, class, sexuality, gender, age, knowledge, and neighborhood make a difference in the lived experiences of Black girls are often seen as threats to girl empowerment programs that are based on Eurocentric ideals and ways of being. Those intersections in the lives of Black girls are not seen as an intellectual critique that acknowledges the limits of girl empowerment for girls marginalized by race, gender, class, sexuality and age, which could possibly embody new ways of relating to Black girls, and rethinking academic constructions of girlhood. What we have to say about being young, Black, and female, who love and hate what the mass public knows as hip-hop, has been said before by many speaking as hip-hop feminists, and those organizing around hip-hop feminism.

The gaps, holes, fissures, and wide-open wounds created from such a kind of narrative discrepancy affect us all. There is something being done about it just as sure as a hip-hop feminist is right now blogging about the latest derogatory image of Black women that has been produced and distributed by any and everyone's media conglomerate, making millions from their narrative of who we are supposed to be. Everyday people who are working to end racism, sexism, homophobia, and structural inequalities are surely working on behalf of a humanizing discourse of Black girlhood.

My own practice of hip-hop feminism is most clearly articulated in SOLHOT (Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths). In SOLHOT, those who do and do not identify as hip-hop feminists nevertheless acknowledge that part of what growing up young, Black, and female means involves making decisions about who they will or will not listen/dance/sing out loud to. In SOLHOT, Black women who critically consume, live, remember, engage, create, and contribute to hip-hop culture and politics work with Black girls who love and hate hip-hop. As a matter of hip-hop feminist pedagogy, I believe in creating spaces where Black girls and women can have the conversations that need to be had

in order to connect with the girls we once were, the girls we are, the Black girls and women with whom we live, the women we've become. SOLHOT is about Black women and girls redefining a way of being together that makes it possible to celebrate our selves and to see ourselves worthy of celebration. In this way, SOLHOT is about creating something new out of the old—a hip-hop idiom that never goes old. SOLHOT is about our ciphers moving like a rolling stone, not organizations, or 501(C)(3)s. My contribution to this movement is a hip-hop feminist pedagogy of Black girlhood celebration.

· 3 ·

SAVING OUR LIVES HEAR OUR
TRUTHS/WE ARE SOLHOT!



In SOLHOT, we try to remain aware of the small moments like a beautiful Black girl enjoying herself, working on a project, and smiling. In these small moments, this Black girl does not stand for all Black girls, only for her beautiful self.

* * *

In thinking about how to describe the subject of this book, Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT), to someone who has never attended SOLHOT makes me quite uncomfortable. When beginning an attempt to present the work of SOLHOT in a clear and concise narrative, I am immediately confronted with the problem of language. There is no shared and familiar way of describing the work of SOLHOT without relying on overused words that often conjure up meanings that are completely unrelated to the experience that is SOLHOT. For example, although I could use words like mentoring, after-school, youth program, intervention, civic engagement, service learning, or education for liberation, one may gain a better idea of how to frame SOLHOT but lack an understanding of how we operate. Another problem is these words would make SOLHOT seem definitive, that is, the work we do could be neatly categorized—yet this would be contradictory to the work we do. Mostly because Black girls and women are often stereotyped to be only one way, I do not want to classify SOLHOT as one-dimensional.

In SOLHOT we open a session with an activity called “Just because” to intentionally provide a complex self-definition of who we are in spite of people’s first impression. “Just because” was introduced to SOLHOT by Joelle. I am not certain where Joelle learned of this activity or what inspired her to create it. Regardless, this activity has allowed us to name ourselves as individuals, to reveal personal contradictions, to share deep secrets, to validate those identities that are meaningful, and to create a group identity that recognizes and celebrates our diversity.

Just because I _____

Doesn't mean _____

My name is _____

And I am _____

Psst. Go ahead and fill it out!

* * *

Why Aren't We Shocked?

The New York Times

October 16, 2006

By Bob Herbert, Op-Ed Columnist

“Who needs a brain when you have these?”

— message on an Abercrombie & Fitch T-shirt for young women

In the recent shootings at an Amish schoolhouse in rural Pennsylvania and a large public high school in Colorado, the killers went out of their way to separate the girls from the boys, and then deliberately attacked only the girls.

Ten girls were shot and five killed at the Amish school. One girl was killed and a number of others were molested in the Colorado attack.

In the widespread coverage that followed these crimes, very little was made of the fact that only girls were targeted. Imagine if a gunman had gone into a school, separated the kids up on the basis of race or religion, and then shot only the Black kids. Or only the white kids. Or only the Jews.

There would have been thunderous outrage. The country would have first recoiled in horror, and then mobilized in an effort to eradicate that kind of murderous bigotry. There would have been calls for action and reflection. And the attack would have been seen for what it really was: a hate crime.

None of that occurred because these were just girls, and we have become so accustomed to living in a society saturated with misogyny that violence against females is more or less to be expected. Stories about the rape, murder and mutilation of women and girls are staples of the news, as familiar to us as weather forecasts. The startling aspect of the Pennsylvania attack was that this terrible thing happened at a school in Amish country, not that it happened to girls.

The disrespectful, degrading, contemptuous treatment of women is so pervasive and so mainstream that it has just about lost its ability to shock. Guys at sporting events and other public venues have shown no qualms about raising an insistent chant to nearby women to show their breasts. An ad for a major long-distance telephone carrier shows three apparently naked women holding a billing statement from a competitor. The text asks, “When was the last time you got screwed?”

An ad for Clinique moisturizing lotion shows a woman’s face with the lotion spattered across it to simulate the climactic shot of a porn video.

We have a problem. Staggering amounts of violence are unleashed on women every day, and there is no escaping the fact that in the most sensational stories, large segments of the population are titillated by that violence. We've been watching the sexualized image of the murdered 6-year-old JonBenet Ramsey for 10 years. JonBenet is dead. Her mother is dead. And we're still watching the video of this poor child prancing in lipstick and high heels.

What have we learned since then? That there's big money to be made from thongs, spandex tops and sexy makeovers for little girls. In a misogynistic culture, it's never too early to drill into the minds of girls that what really matters is their appearance and their ability to please men sexually.

A girl or woman is sexually assaulted every couple of minutes or so in the U.S. The number of seriously battered wives and girlfriends is far beyond the ability of any agency to count. We're all implicated in this carnage because the relentless violence against women and girls is linked at its core to the wider society's casual willingness to dehumanize women and girls, to see them first and foremost as sexual vessels—objects—and never, ever as the equals of men.

"Once you dehumanize somebody, everything is possible," said Taina Bien-Aimé, executive director of the women's advocacy group Equality Now.

That was never clearer than in some of the extreme forms of pornography that have spread like nuclear waste across mainstream America. Forget the embarrassed, inhibited raincoat crowd of the old days. Now Mr. Solid Citizen can come home, log on to this \$7 billion mega-industry and get his kicks watching real women being beaten and sexually assaulted on Web sites with names like "Ravished Bride" and "Rough Sex—Where Whores Get Owned."

Then, of course, there's gangsta rap, and the video games where the players themselves get to maul and molest women, the rise of pimp culture (the Academy Award-winning song this year was "It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp"), and on and on.

You're deluded if you think this is all about fun and games. It's all part of a devastating continuum of misogyny that at its farthest extreme touches down in places like the one-room Amish schoolhouse in normally quiet Nickel Mines, Pa.

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* * *

You will know SOLHOT has occurred because of our scent: SOLHOT smells like Nag Champa (or sandalwood) incense.

* * *

SOLHOT *Gossip*

An older Black woman wearing a coat made of mud cloth informed me that her niece used to go to SOLHOT. I asked her what her niece's name was. She told me. "She came once," I replied. I knew immediately who she was referring to.

"She went twice," the aunt said.

I stood corrected. In any case, I offered that I noticed that she had not come back and inquired as to why. SOLHOT doesn't work for every Black girl. Still, too rarely do I follow-up with girls who come once or twice and never return.

The aunt went on to say that her niece did not approve of the language the girls used in the program. Her niece told her that girls in SOLHOT cursed, used bad language, and nobody disciplined them. Quite righteously, the aunt added her own two cents: "My niece said nobody checked the girls on their bad mouths."

As it were, the aunt confronted me at a university lecture featuring author Jill Nelson who presented a talk titled, "Who You Callin' @\$%&*!?: The Assault on Black Women by Popular, Political, and Personal Culture." I attended the lecture with some of the adults and girls from SOLHOT. Two girls stood with me during the entire conversation with the aunt, mind you.

Yes, in SOLHOT some girls curse and use bad language. Some of the adults in SOLHOT are bothered by the language and call the girls on it. Sometimes the girls apologize. Sometimes the girls catch themselves first, laugh, and then change their words. Other times girls and adults curse and use bad words as if no one has ever objected. I also told the aunt that some girls do not curse at all.

SOLHOT is not a "character program" but rather a political project where multiple literacies are encouraged and questioned. The challenge for us is to

create a space where we can all be together in spite of coming from places where cursing is allowed, or not allowed, used to describe an object, or used to harm another person. I asked her, if we cannot change the situations that produce “bad mouth girls,” what kind of support would her niece need to speak up and say how she experienced some girls’ way with words? I truly wanted her niece to stay with SOLHOT rather than dismiss any one of the girls as “bad” because of the words they used.

At this point the aunt’s disposition changed. “Well, that’s asking a lot of a twelve-year-old girl.”

“Yes, it is,” I responded, “but that is what SOLHOT is about.” I also told her that as the facilitator of SOLHOT, I’m asking the community to hold us all responsible. So that, for example, if her niece told her the language went unchecked by the adults in SOLHOT, we would appreciate it if she could come in and be an aunt to SOLHOT, since admittedly not all girls have a female caretaker interested in their well-being.

“I don’t have that kind of time” was her response.

I don’t have the time not to try is how I immediately felt.

“I’m trying.” I said out loud. I thanked her for her comments and encouraged her to ask her niece to give us another try. I have yet to see either one of them again.

* * *

A SOLHOT Goal

Love

It is all about love. SOLHOT is explicitly in celebration of Black girls’ complexity and is therefore antisexist, antihomophobic, anticlassist, and antiracist in our work and practice. Love us, or leave us alone.

* * *

From: Ruth Nicole Brown
To: SOLHOT homegirls
Sent: Monday, October 01, 2007 7:17 PM
Subject: SOLHOT Tonight

First of all, thank you for coming out and showing up! I have to say after putting my tired baby to bed, getting a shower, eating dinner, and even after two Advil I still have a massive headache.

Today is just the beginning. SOLHOT is a process. Most of all, everyone was excited to be there and Black girl pride was expressed on many a decorated bag and through Yung Envy’s words. So many moments kept me aware that some of us really miss the SOLHOT of yester-year but that is why we really have to enjoy everything that happens in the moment because we don’t get those moments back ... we have to look forward. I am also really missing you Nita! It must have been the craziest batty dance/jigalow remix that I’ve ever seen, real hectic. I’m with Tanya, on Wednesday—let’s stick to what we know. Nita come prepared on Monday to break it down once again—We need you sis!! Let’s also realize that it is not just an age thing. Some of the middle-school girls were real chill. I think they all wanted to be there—correct me if I’m wrong. Small groups are very necessary if there are five or more girls. I appreciated the music! I needed Shauna to remind everybody that yes we are getting in the circle now—thank you. I’m feeling the weight of SOLHOT happening on Mondays (manic). Especially on Mondays when the rent is due.

Now that I’ve gone shopping and got everything in the bins, can two people volunteer to get the bins out of the front office before the program starts? This was the longest running SOLHOT in history. We are always done in two hours if not before. Let’s keep time and definitely make sure we are in the incense circle by 5:45 p.m. and no later. Wednesday it’s all about group norms ... Anything else people must have on the agenda? I was really inspired by what some girls need SOLHOT to be ... expect us to represent ... let’s do it. On Wednesday I’ll bring juice, water, and chips. Is anyone down to lead the “hair” small group—that could go a number of ways. I’m too tired to process anything more. But, again thank you!!!!

* * *

SOLHOT Is ...

SOLHOT is a space for Black girls organized by Black women, girls, and those who love and care for Black girls. In U.S. society, there is rarely the space or opportunity to be a Black girl and celebrate Black girlhood in all of its complexity. SOLHOT provides such an opportunity. At SOLHOT we dance, sing, discuss important issues, create a circle of support, and act together to improve the communities of which we are a part.

Based on the knowledge and interest of those facilitating SOLHOT, each meeting has a theme. Themes we have addressed in the past include self-love and respect, hip-hop, violence against girls and women, self-expression, schools, Black history, slavery, Puerto Rican resistance, and beauty. But SOLHOT is a dynamic space that depends on spontaneity, improvisation, and making something out of nothing—so what exactly happens is always determined by the will of the group. The themes and activities of SOLHOT are in many ways a response to adult interest and organizational accountability; so for this reason, it is not the most important aspect of the work. Actually, some sessions are theme-less.

What is most important to the success of SOLHOT is the way in which we treat each other while we are together. SOLHOT is a spirit, a way of being together, an act of love that requires us grown folks to do the extra work of monitoring our group's process when we come together.

SOLHOT Isn't ...

SOLHOT isn't the traditional kind of "Girl Saving" or "Youth" saving program. The name SOLHOT signifies its many contradictions and aspirations. Much has been written about girl studies/girl power as a liberal project of child saving that dates back to the early part of the twentieth century. Saving Our Lives may appear on the surface as a nod toward that project of youth management, but it is not. Frequently, I am called on this preface title, both because of the child-saving ghosts it conjures in skeptics, and because of the gerund-saving—which sounds funny to many. I am quite familiar with both criticisms, but I have been reluctant to change SOL because when SOLHOT works, I do quite believe that lives are saved by collectively acting on our own behalf.

How the "saving" happens is not in the logistics and activities, but in our coming together. In SOHOT we acknowledge our common problems to each other. We feel it together. We walk through it together. While we walk, we talk about what's real outside of this problem.

* * *

"social rehabilitation"

you gave up on us adults because in many ways, you felt we gave up on you
what you were being told and taught felt so irrelevant to your lived life that the
resistance bubbled up in your center and exploded in the face of your street corner

you were bored but couldn't find the words and ways to tell us
so you acted out because you wanted and needed to be heard
but we didn't listen

now you're "programmed" 24/7
academics, life skills, crafts, healthy ways ... social rehabilitation
before we send you out into the streets tonight ... we'll have you sit down at a table
and show us you got manners
carry on conversation
hold a fork
slice a piece of chicken
prove to us that you can live in the watered-down, superficial ways we grown folks
live most times

but last night, i noticed how beautiful the brown color was in your hair
i loved your curves and how you rocked those dope jeans
i admired your courage to speak your mind and admit you weren't interested
even with the frown on your face, i was able to imagine your amazing smile
you were so tall, so very elegant

i hugged you and assured you that you are loved ... if only in my mind.

Barbara

* * *

Today's Agenda

TOPIC: Run Away

Today's prep: Bring yourself and any information you have about girls/
women and violence. In terms of adults—I believe today will only be me,
Cha Cha, Barbara, Zoe (running a little late), and Jennifer?

Physical Activity:

The Batty Dance

Op-Ed: We are going to talk about the Op-Ed piece Barbara circulated to
the group early this week.

Run Away: What is Ludacris' song "Run Away" all about? We have to ask
the hard questions—so let's come up with some answers.

Top Ten: What are the top ten issues facing Black girls in Champaign?

Top Ten: What are the top ten solutions—what can we/you do to change
this community for the better!?

Welcome Banner: Where are we to run away to? Let's create that "town"
and make a welcome banner inviting all to our community that is love,

safety, and celebration for Black girls like us. Don't forget to make people aware of what we are doing to create this community.

Affirmation: Incense Circle

* * *

Coalition

SOLHOT is a collective cipher. As a group there is no intention to become incorporated as a nonprofit. Often, social institutions do not have as a central mission the celebration of Black girls' and women's skills, talents, and intellect. Therefore, we enter into coalitions with these institutions to raise organizational awareness of how to be our allies.

* * *

Greetings,

I was sitting in the women of color feminism reading group thinking about ya'll the entire time. I have spent four years in the C-U (and I have yearned to be back on the coast, back on the east at least) ...Yet, what I really longed for was a place called home.

With this group, I feel like I found a homeplace—and homegirls that make my life (and life's work) meaningful and with purpose.

I remember being a Latanya—with young women from area colleges coming to “rescue” us, and I envied them and resented them. I remember feeling like my mother, my values, my community were all dysfunctional and that these women were so “togetha” with their booksense and picket-fenced lives. I came to this project, nervous that I could be reproducing the same sentiments.

I truly believe what sets this program apart from any other that I've participated in is the serious commitment to engendering a community that is responsive to the needs and desires of all of the participants. The fact that we can all speak as girls, women, lovers, daughters and mothers about our triumphs and failures, fears and fearlessness is so refreshing. I am honored to be invited, and welcomed, by all of you. My spirit is renewed.

Nicole, thank you for birthing this idea AND having the courage to put words to work. Your continued encouragement makes me want to live up to that me that I still see in my dreams.

A Grown (growing) girl,
Esha

* * *

The Batty Dance Remix

(created by Nita, inspired by the Urban Bush Women and Jay-Z)

Show me what you got lil' mama

Show me what you got young lady

Show me what you got lil' mama

Show me what you got young lady

Remix that dance

Batty dance

Batty dance

Batty dance

C'mon!

(stomp stomp stomp clap body roll ... do your thang)

(stomp stomp stomp clap body roll ... do your thang)

* * *

SOLHOT is dynamic, meaning it changes week-to-week, semester-to-semester. Some times are better than others. Since we have only been working together for one and a half years, there is no way we would claim to have this Black girl thing all figured out. But it is amazing that some people think of SOLHOT as “the answer.” Speaking for myself and many of the adult women with whom I work, we are only still asking the questions. There are many questions we are working through at this moment:

1. What do you do when girls do not want to make a “product,” and the “process” has been often self-deprecating?
2. Is it necessary to first inspire the will in Black girls that what they say, think, and do can make the community a better place before you tell them that you want to hear what they have to say?
3. Can SOLHOT both be a space for Black girls in all of their complexity and also produce something tangible to be publicly consumed?
4. What do you do with Black women who just “know” they have it all figured out—who define the girls as the problems without recognizing their power and privilege?
5. If SOLHOT is about decolonizing our relationships with Black girls, how much time is necessary? In SOLHOT we need more time.
6. What are we to do with the hurt that comes from witnessing the most beautiful, smart, and brilliant Black girl insist on instigating, cursing, acting out, and resisting her own power?

7. How can we transform these very White, middle-class spaces out of which we operate into spaces that support Black girlhood celebration?
8. As a "leader" of SOLHOT, how do I convince everyone that I am not the one they should be waiting on to save them?
9. What good are predetermined activities when some girls who attend high school can barely read and write at a third-grade level?
10. What does Black women "giving up" on Black girls look and feel like? And would we admit it if we saw it in ourselves?

* * *

Dang Ya'll ...you gone make me cry. I told my best friend last night after our session, "I feel like I just came from church, my soul is so full, so on fire and so mended from the energy that we create by just being ourselves." I love SOLHOT and, like Barbara, Dr. Brown I can truly say that this semester has saved my life. Being a part of SOLHOT (in just these 3 sessions ... that's crazy, right?) has probably been more useful to me than it has to them. I need(ed) SOLHOT to help me heal. This is the best year that I've had in this place and I've had 3 hard, long, self-deprecating years to compare it to. I smiled all night in my dreams last night ... the Orisha and my ancestors woke me up this morning and told me so ... love, Cha Cha

SOLHOT Is the Place To Show You Have Confidence in Yourself

Change

You be the change, save yourself! What we do in SOLHOT may be more memorable than what was said. What we do in SOLHOT is up to you. If the girls come up with idea about doing something (at the club, in the community, change the world) then use your strong Black woman (or adult) powers for good and make it happen. Don't leave it up to the oldest person, the most educated, the richest person (or whatever) in SOLHOT. You should not be concerned with saving the girls but saving yourself. Do what you know needs to be done in SOLHOT.

SOLHOT Is Bootyful

Because the stories that the body can tell are not the same conversations that we speak or sing (Gaunt, 2006), in SOLHOT, we do Black girls' games. We do Little Sally Walker. We do the Batty Dance. While we dance, we also theorize. Evelyn Hammonds (1994) wrote and we need to remember,

Reclaiming the body as well as subjectivity is a process that Black feminist theorists in the academy must go through themselves while they are doing the work of producing theory. Black feminist theorists are themselves engaged in a process of fighting to reclaim the body—the maimed immoral Black female body—which can be and still is used by others to discredit them as producers of knowledge and as speaking subjects. (p. 145)

Therefore, as movers to the music, "we are thinking with and through the body just as much as we are writing or inscribing memories into the world; this embodied literacy is taken for granted" to quote Kyra Gaunt (2006) and not often articulated. Except for two hours, two days a week in SOLHOT.

SOLHOT Is a Place to Learn

Batty Dance
Ba-ah-ty Dance
Batty Dance
Ba-ah-ty Dance
My name's Dr. Brown
And here's my chance to show my sisters
My batty dance ...

Every Tuesday and Thursday night from 6–8 p.m. I look forward to going to the Community Recreation Center for Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT) to shake my batty. At SOLHOT we bask in the brilliance of Black girlhood and that means that for at least two hours we can be free!

I can count on a group of talented, beautiful, and smart girls and women to be at the Center ready to greet each other in truth. We share hugs, kind words, and daily updates with ease and anticipation. SOLHOT is a private party held in public where we can be ourselves. We can be young, silly, sexy, bold, uncertain, and curious, and we won't be punished for what we think, say, or do. At SOLHOT we can tell the truth about our lives, families, and community and know that we are not the problem. On

the daily, so many people and places try to control Black girls and women like us, but in SOLHOT we are not told how to be. In the company of homegirls (Black and beyond), we celebrate our lives because Black girls are not the problem.

At SOLHOT we are the answer. That is what makes SOLHOT so special, so sanctified, so important. It is a positive place to celebrate the girl and the grown in us, to create a connection, to be renewed. It may be the sound of Latanya's voice, Kalen's prophetic wisdom, or Yung Envy's beautiful singing voice that inspires us to keep going. It may be Nita's energy, Cha Cha's dedication, or Joelle's "just because" activity that stays with us all through the week, encouraging us to keep on moving. SOLHOT exists because

Our girlhood is too important to put off until we are old
 Our self-worth is too glorious to be concerned about what somebody else said
 Our education is too important to only happen at school
 Our knowledge is too critical to be dismissed

So we sing and dance, recite and create poetry, teach and learn, feel grown up and enjoy our girlhood all at the same time. We have taught the girls how to do old school dances like the whop, and they have taught us how to do the chicken noodle soup (the dance, not the canned good). This semester we have talked about issues of self-love, respect, beauty, girl/womanhood, hair, school policies, healthy relationships, violence, activism, Black history, community empowerment, and hip-hop. And we have so much more we want to do.

I am honored to have played a role in building a bridge between the university and community for the purpose of celebrating the wonderful possibilities of Black girlhood. To everyone who has ever come to the program, you are SOLHOT. Respect!

SOLHOT Is Where You Find a Little Sister

Multiple Truths

Greet each other in truth. Connections are meaningful when Black girls and women are known for who they really are. This means you cannot be afraid to share with the girls the truths about yourself. The girls will probably perceive you as someone who "had made it" (read: not like them).

Do not be afraid to tell Black girls how you are making it or not, your successes and failures, your dreams and struggles. It seems that what Black girls really value in an introduction, for example, is knowing who you were raised by and what that person taught you that has shaped the person you are today. Speaking about one's past and formative experiences lets everyone first recognize that you HAVE a past, and that your past might be like theirs, or not like theirs, but that either way you both have one, and that makes you very real people right now—beyond the bodies we travel in.

SOLHOT Is a Place to Get Your Mad Boogie On!!!!

SOLHOT Gossip

It's been noted that some of the homegirls think I romanticize Black girls. While shopping at the grocery store, I ran into one of the homegirls. During an intense conversation about what is not working in SOLHOT, she made me aware of the word on the street. We were in front of the seafood counter. Immediately defensive, because I am human, I shot back, "Well, if I'm romanticizing the girls, what would you say if I said I think some people stereotype them?!"

I do not think I romanticize the girls. But it does not matter because some people with whom I work feel as if I do. That is enough to paralyze them from being with the girls in the way SOLHOT demands. Therefore, this is a problem, because SOLHOT requires all of us to act on our own behalf—which includes creating the kind of space that does not depend on a charismatic leader.

Now let me say sort-of-tongue in cheek, sort-of-really meaning it, "at the risk of sounding romantic" as a preface to what I've learned about working with Black girls.

At the risk of sounding romantic, I think if we work with Black girls and act with Black girls (listening and speaking, doing and thinking, dancing and challenging our selves), our interpretation of what happens in the group (e.g., the use of negative language) requires a creative pedagogical encounter. Not complaining. Not fault-finding. Not inaction. Not blame. Not judgment.

At the risk of sounding romantic, I'd rather place fault with what we have not tried rather the inability of a particular person. This, I learned,

makes me a proponent of decolonizing our relationships with Black girls. Which is exactly what I mean—at the risk of romanticizing Black girls.

SOLHOT Is Where We Girls Can Be Our Selves

Just because SOLHOT works with Black girls and Black women doesn't mean we are a program.

Just because SOLHOT operates after-school hours doesn't mean we're "after-school" and not about education.

Just because SOLHOT is organized by adult women doesn't mean we're an adult-led program.

Just because SOLHOT is for Black girls doesn't mean we're all African American.

Just because SOLHOT is one of few spaces dedicated to celebrating Black Girls doesn't make us "the answer."

Our name is SOLHOT
and we are complicated!

SOLHOT Is Where Girls Can Learn from Women and Women Can Learn from Girls

Spirituality

"It feels kinda like church" when SOLHOT is at its best. Not because we are a religion, but rather because we act out of a spirituality. In SOLHOT, things happen that defy time, space, place, age, gender, race, etc., so it's a metaphysical experience as often is the Black church experience. Moreover, church is the one place where Black people gather as emotional and spiritual beings, as is SOLHOT. Respect the sanctity of Black girl spaces.

SOLHOT Is Where You Find a Big Sister

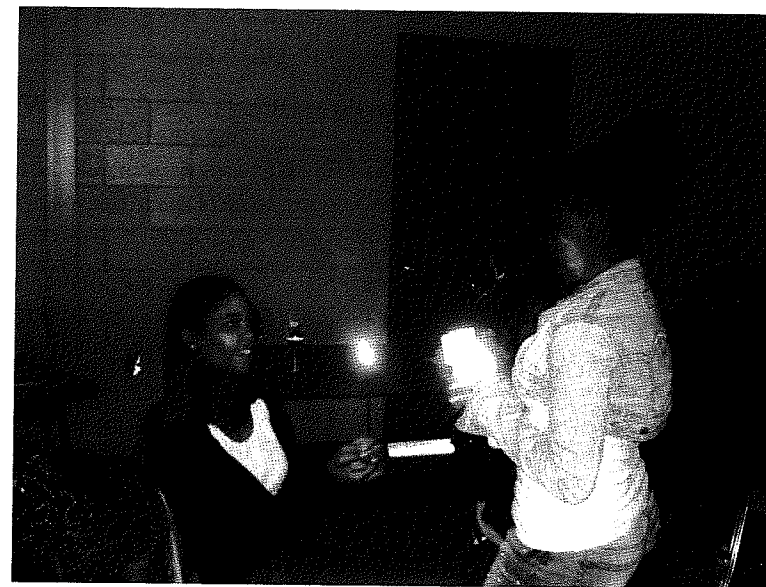
The way the universe works ...

I was checking my email, and reading the hip-hop feminism listserv that was talking about a community group called HOTGIRLS, Inc. I paused

for a moment to really reflect upon how SOLHOT continues to be instrumental in thinking out my Black girl self. You are so amazing, and I just feel so grateful to have participated. When I say SOLHOT saved my life, I mean it.

I'm looking at the picture of us in the cipher ... I am truly blessed to have been a part of the group.

-Esha



SOLHOT Is Full of Happiness

"I am a woman. I am looking for reasons for pride in my gender identity."

June Jordan (1998, p. 35) from *Affirmative Acts*

In her memoir of girlhood titled *Soldier*, June Jordan (2000) wrote honestly about the war that was on against a Black girl who was supposed to be a boy. In her narrative, to be a girl was not thought of by her father as valuable. In her womanhood, then, it makes sense that Jordan continued to look for "reasons for pride."

SOLHOT as practice is mediated by theory and utopian visions of what should be for Black girls. It is a space created where we can think about who we are as girls and girls who should have been boys. As long as soldiering remains a lived metaphor for Black girlhood, we are in need of getting together to name our reasons for pride in our gender identity.

SOLHOT Is Where We Make Friends

In SOLHOT we all show up, day after day, week after week. To be together. But why? Let us not forget how complicated SOLHOT is.

bell hooks (2003, p. 35) wrote,

Every black person and person of color colludes with the existing system in small ways every day, even those among us who see ourselves as anti-racist radicals. This collusion happens simply because we are all products of the culture we live within and have all been subjected to the forms of socialization and acculturation that are deemed normal in our society.

SOLHOT is a space that requires whoever is present to think through new ways of relating to Black girls in a way that is healthy, respectful, and just. This means that we do not do “what our momma did” just because that was “the way we were raised.” So many people are interested in working with girls but not working with themselves. As a result, when things “are not working,” they look outside themselves to find the culprit. I am suggesting that, thus far in SOLHOT’s short history, if there was ever a problem, it came from grown folks who did not honestly confront our own collusion with the system. My own singular self included.

Because when we are Black women working with Black girls and Black girls working with Black women, as Joan Morgan acknowledges, we are competing not just with ourselves but with images of who we are supposed to be. Morgan (1999) wrote, and I am in complete agreement:

I was asking this sixteen-year-old to sift through so many conflicting interpretations of femaleness and Blackness and free her voice. In order to do this she was going to have to liberate it from the stranglehold of media-stereotypes—the pathetic SheNayNay impersonations of Black male comedians, the talk-to-the hand Superwomen, the video-hos, crackheads, and lazy welfare queens—that obscure so much of who we are. And she was going to have to push her foremothers’ voice far enough away to discover her own. (p. 26).

* * *

Power

Power is always present. Power does not have to mean control. Develop Authority—Do not punish. SOLHOT is an emancipatory space. To maintain this idea means that the adults should not punish the girls, but rather develop our voice and theirs as a voice of authority. Black girls have been “raised” and they know when they have gone too far—usually another girl will tell them so. Support the girls that are recognized as leaders among their peers. Piggyback on what they said and reinforce what they said and how they said it.

* * *

From: Ruth Nicole Brown

To: SOLHOT homegirls

Sent: Tuesday, October 03, 2006 9:06 PM

Subject: Re: SOLHOT Today:)

SOLHOT today was QUALITY. I am truly amazed with the intensity of our work. Today was also extremely intimate to me given the small group size and also just because I can see the connections between people becoming so strong. I was a little distracted with the little one there (Maya Sanaa always has so much to say—are you surprised?) so I am extremely grateful that you all have made SOLHOT your own and if necessary I can chill in the cut. I thank Barbara for the reminders, which I need so often. I appreciated Cha Cha’s words about her best friend because yes—sistagirlsoulmates are the best, Joelle the Pages document is supadupa fly, and Nita we will be doing the batty dance until we get it right. What I appreciated about the girls today was how they seem to be right there with us, with Meena feeling herself enough to kind of lead/facilitate the activities. She makes sure we are on track. Yung Envy is a rock star and Kalen really knows she will be one of us—very soon and I think that is exciting to her. Too bad Alia had to leave early—what do you make of her shyness to bounce the batty? SOLHOT is growing ya’ll. I spoke with someone today about doing another SOLHOT elsewhere, after-school hours next semester—and I really wouldn’t be moved to keep growing if ya’ll didn’t give SOLHOT so much life! Ache. See you Thursday.

* * *

I say we want to accept Black girls in SOLHOT for who they are. Sometimes volunteers take this to mean that we are always what we say, literally. This does not have to be the case. Sometimes what we say as black girls is extremely violent,

hurtful, and homophobic. If I hear anything homophobic, I intervene. But me being just one person in a room of thirty people, I don't hear everything said.

SOLHOT is for queer Black women and girls and their allies just as much as it is for everyone else. Yet because a person's sexual identification is not always something that is visible or neatly defined more often than not, I do not know how people identify or with whom they share love. But I do not assume that all the girls are heterosexual. I also do not believe it should be up to someone who is queer, bi, or gay to become a spokesperson for talking about queer identity specifically, or sexuality more generally. The volunteer homegirls in SOLHOT are thoughtful and smart women who are able to talk theoretically about how sexuality, race, and gender intersect and how these abstract concepts play in out in the lives and through the mouths of us all.

What we do not stand for are comments like "that's gay" clearly meant as a derogatory statement.

Always, I mean every time since SOLHOT began, the girls bring to SOLHOT their questions, concerns, judgments, and experiences about "being gay." Sometimes girls are "out" to some of the homegirls and their Myspace homeland, sometimes homegirls are "out" to other homegirls, sometimes girls and homegirls talk about having a "gay" parent, relative, and or friend. But never, I mean ever since SOLHOT began, has anyone publicly spoken from a personal standpoint of being queer, or bi, or curious to everyone in SOLHOT. I think given some of the homophobic exchanges by girls coupled with the very small urban, big rural city-town in which we live, in addition to the power and privilege attached to working with "other people's children" (see Delpit, 1995) talking about sexuality, queer identity, and "being gay" feels dangerous for many.

In any case, this is one example of what Anna, a homegirl volunteer, contributed to the array of SOLHOT activities:

Theme: Sexuality

We will start in one large group and watch a slideshow with images of female celebrities. Straight, lesbian, and bisexual celebrities are included in the slideshow. I'll be showing it from my computer, but I posted a copy to youtube.com so you can watch it before hand if you'd like: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2vztdnZFns>

After the slideshow, we will split up into 3 groups. Each group will spend a short period of time debriefing the film. Here are a few sample questions: "Which images were shocking?"; "Were there women/girls you know of that were not in the slideshow?"; "Why do you think they were left out?" Just so you know, I organized the video to illustrate the

virgin/whore dichotomy (among straight women) and the butch/femme dichotomy (among lesbian/bisexual women). You can also ask them questions to see if they uncovered these dichotomies. The girls can also discuss their personal definitions of sexuality and sexual orientation. Wrap up the discussion by letting the girls read sexual orientation definition cards aloud—just so everyone is on the same page.

Each group will start off doing one of the following activities. If the girls finish one activity, they can try another activity on the list.

Defining Our Sexuality

Each girl will receive a sheet of paper with the following sentences they will complete using images of women and girls as found in popular magazines:

The media tells me I have to be _____
 But I wish I saw more _____
 Right now I am _____
 When I grow up I want to be _____

When the girls are finished they will discuss their choices with the group.

Issues in Defining Our Sexuality

A volunteer will read an op-ed piece about the violent murder of 15-year-old Sakia Gunn who was sexually propositioned and then later stabbed by her attacker. The last reported words of Sakia Gunn were, "We're gay." We will then read from an article posted on workers.org. by Imani Henry on June 21, 2007:

"On June 14, four African-American women—Venice Brown (19), Terrain Dandridge (20), Patreese Johnson (20) and Renata Hill (24)—received sentences ranging from three-and-a-half to 11 years in prison. None of them had previous criminal records. Two of them are parents of small children.

Their crime? Defending themselves from a physical attack by a man who held them down and choked them, ripped hair from their scalps, spat on them, and threatened to sexually assault them—all because they are lesbians.

The mere fact that any victim of a bigoted attack would be arrested, jailed and then convicted for self-defense is an outrage. But the length of prison time given further demonstrates the highly political nature of this case

and just how racist, misogynistic, anti-gay, anti-youth and anti-worker the so-called U.S. justice system truly is."

* * *

Black girls are more than what others have defined us to be.

I'm continually relearning how this lesson matters for schools, families, the foster care system, the criminal justice system, after-school programming, politics and government. I am thinking about how to unlearn the implications of this lesson in everyday interactions between Black girls and women that take place in SOLHOT.

SOLHOT is about Black girlhood celebration. Black girlhood celebration that insists on recognizing the complexity of Black girls as a group. In SOLHOT we are:

Those loud Black girls who excel.
 Those loud Black girls who don't go to school.
 Those quiet passive aggressive Black girls who get the loud Black girls in trouble.
 The Black women who missed their girlhood.
 That "crazy" Black woman who remembers the Black girl within and loves her fiercely.
 The Black women who fear Black girls and are scared to speak to them.
 The Black girl turning woman who loves the girls just like her mother did and although she didn't appreciate her mom's way, she does the same because she doesn't know another way to be.
 The Black girl motherless child.
 The Black girl mother.

* * *

Urbana Finds Schools "a Tale of 2 Districts"
News-Gazette Staff Writer

Published Online May 2, 2004

By Anne Cook

URBANA—Christina doesn't spend a lot of time in her office at Urbana schools' headquarters.

As parent liaison at Urbana schools, Christina travels to families' homes. She tracks down parents at church, at the laundromat, at the Super Kmart.

"It's catch as catch can," said Christina, who taught in Chicago public schools for 19 years before she moved downstate about a decade ago.

"Some parents avoid me. They know when I come, it's a sticky subject. Their kid's not doing well in school. I try to turn that situation around and communicate with them."

Donaldson's job is a direct result of Urbana schools' action, after an equity audit, to shed more light on why students are having trouble and to get their parents involved so they understand what's at stake.

"One thing we learned from Urbana's equity audit was that the district's doing a wonderful job with the majority of students, but it's a tale of two districts, one for the majority students and one for African-American and low-income students," Christina said of the creation of her job.

"We wanted to be more aggressive with those students who weren't achieving, and one thing we know is that parental involvement can affect student achievement," she said.

Urbana's graduation rates show why officials are concerned. In 2002, the overall high school graduation rate was about 80 percent of all students, but only about 48 percent of the students from economically disadvantaged families graduate. In 2003, the overall graduation rate rose slightly to 81 percent, but the rate for economically disadvantaged students dropped to 45 percent.

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* * *

The Incense Circle

We dim the lights.

Everyone is given a stick of incense (usually Nag Champa). One person also has a burning white candle. The person with the candle lights their incense. With the candle burning and the incense smoking, she walks over to someone in the circle and lights her incense. At the same time, speaking loud enough for everyone to hear, she tells that person to whom she stands face to face about someone she wants the group to KNOW and to REMEMBER.

Then she gives that person the candle and takes her place in the circle. The person whom she faced now takes the candle and travels to someone else. They light the incense of someone else and tells them about someone they want them to KNOW and REMEMBER.

This goes on until everyone's incense is burning and someone close to all of our hearts has been named and remembered. We young ones are grounded in the safety of our ancestors and loved ones. Some of us acting younger than our years paint the sky with incense smoke, urging others to watch us make the smoke from the incense dance.

* * *

Voice

Black Girls Are "TOO LOUD" To Be Told To Quiet Down—So do not do it. In SOLHOT we have a rule for the grown folk: You cannot tell the girls to be quiet. This requires us to become comfortable with Black girls' voices—whether they are loud or silent. It is not about Black girls coming to voice. It is all about listening to and loving Black girls' unique articulation of voice and silence.

* * *

SOLHOT Schedule*

4:00–4:30 p.m. We eat and do the batty dance.

4:30–5:30 p.m. We discuss a topic of the day and perform and/or do an art activity.

5:30–6:00 p.m. We clean-up and do the incense circle.

* At every moment the schedule is subject to change.

* * *

From: Ruth Nicole Brown <rnbrown@uiuc.edu>

To: SOLHOT homegirls

Sent: Thu 28 Sep 20:35:04 CDT 2006

Subject: Re: SOLHOT Today:)

Hey Ladies

Is it just me or do you all still smell the incense? I wanted to offer up a freestyle reflection about tonight before my baby gets home:)

Tonight was definitely different than Tuesday. In a word—wild sums up the night. The girls had so much energy!!!! I felt all of my thirty years because truth be told—I can't even REMEMBER when I had so much energy for so long.

It was a good night. We had two new girls who are both equally amazing in their own light. We also had lots of creative expression—which was really something—only I couldn't quite grasp the significance of the words spoken because a few of the girls were, well, just wild.

And these, I guess, are the moments I most LOVE when working with girls (Nita you would have cringed:). While Tuesday was good, I definitely appreciate the spaces created for girls to let go, be young, and wiggle. NOT that too much was lost because of their wildness—I mean the creativity it takes to create "the incense dance," which, for those of you who were absent, was movement with incense—was really good, although I'm still choked up, literally. And when I witness nights like tonight, I see the girls demanding that we move, celebrate our bodies, be loud and have that too be okay.

I do agree with Cha Cha's suggestion that we go over what we believe in at the beginning of each meeting (this will be especially helpful as a reminder about what we are trying to create). I wish we would have started with a physical activity as well—I'm sure that would have helped. And I think it may be good to just have a moment if necessary where we all let go—or let the girls who need to dance, dance, while the girls who need to write, can write.

I don't at all want us to be serious all the time, and I do want us to respect them as young people who need to be loud, who need to move, who need to just let go even if it makes us feel kinda old:)

I guess I'm excited that they were there, ready, willing, and waiting to meet us. This is really good work, ya'll, and it's going to be different each night. I also know that being there, as Barbara reminds me, begins the goodness. We gotta keep it going. I can't wait to we get to the dance topic—it's going to be a party for real!! And didn't you love the excitement in Latanya's voice when she kept asking, is this a party? is this a party? I mean, if we don't celebrate ourselves, then who?

On that note, I have got to take off these clothes and try and air myself out from the incense. Thank ya'll for showing up and showing out once again.

Responses are welcome!

* * *

Throughout this book I do not want to create a "model," "curriculum," or "program" that suggest that the author, researcher, or practitioner knows "the" way or that someone can translate "best practices" without having visited or known a

given community. Working with Black girls as Black girls is a liminal construct that has to be continually reconsidered to interrogate the utility of any intervention claiming absolute relevance and answers of which SOLHOT does not.

* * *

SOLHOT

COMFORTABLE PLACE TO TALK

Black girls meet to discuss their interests and issues they face

By AMY F. REITER

URBANA—When Sheri started a discussion about stereotypes, the University of Illinois student started with the word itself.

“Do you know what it means?” she asked a group of Black girls.

Reluctantly at first, the girls sitting in a conference room at the Urbana Free Library on Wednesday started listing their ideas about what the word means (“to judge,” suggests one) and what are some common stereotypes about races or genders.

The girls, along with several UI students and group leader Ruth Nicole Brown, a UI professor in educational policy and gender and women’s studies, are part of SOLHOT, a program designed to be a “safe space” for them to talk about issues in their lives, Brown said, SOLHOT stands for “saving our lives hear our truths.”

Brown asked the girls to think in terms of their experiences rather than generalizations, and to avoid phrases like “all people, or all Blacks, or all girls.”

One teen remembered talking about stereotypes in school, but said she slept through a lot of the discussion. She’s wide-awake now, participating and throwing out her own stereotypes of others and discussing other stereotypes she’s heard.

Brown started this group last year partly to learn about how to engage Black girls in learning. As part of her research, she’s interested in learning about the interests and issues facing Black girls and how the comfort zone created in the library room could be recreated in other settings, like a classroom at school.

An example: “One of the things I learned is that Black girls are punished for being loud,” Brown said. “In SOLHOT we celebrate the loudness ... we flip the rules.”

Within that conversation about stereotypes, the girls and women discuss a range of topics, from ebonics—a dialect of English often spoken by Black people—to sex to the importance of hand-washing.

In other sessions—the group meets Mondays and Wednesdays through December and will resume in the spring—the girls do art projects, dance, sing and other creative activities. And when the girls talk, it’s a free-form movement, a constant flow from topic to topic and person to person.

“It’s a program that I wish I had when I was (a teen),” said a UI graduate student. “It’s a chance for the girls to express their creative side. ... It’s the one place they can truly express themselves.”

Carol, the young adult librarian at Urbana Free Library, said students come from the Don Moyer Boys and Girls Club and Urbana public schools. “I’m thrilled to see those girls doing something that interests them,” she said. “I think it ends up being a support group for everybody, in addition to creative expression.”

Teanna, a student at READY school in Champaign, said she feels comfortable talking about anything at SOLHOT. “It’s somewhere where people could just go to be themselves,” she said, adding that topics have included “life, boys, drugs.”

Her peers second that. “Some Black girls (have) problems that they can’t always talk about, so they come here,” said Angelique, a freshman at Urbana High School.

“It often looks to outsiders like a mentoring program,” Brown said. “For four hours out of the week, we are really trying to create a space where we are trying to celebrate who we are, the questions we have and to try out different ways of being a Black girl.”

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* * *

Growing Pains

I am not comfortable in SOLHOT, no one seems to be.

SOLHOT has never pledged to be a “safe” space.

Though I do not want to change the girls, I do want to change SOLHOT.

The struggles we had this semester were challenging: many girls with very real issues involving the criminal injustice system, foster care, and family

disruptions. Other issues were all too common but challenging nonetheless: girls talking about starting fights, being in fights at school, suspensions, entering and exiting schools for periods of time, racist teachers, and such. Then there were the Black women issues of refusing to see their class privilege, wanting to “reform” the girls, showing up to SOLHOT when they wanted to, not learning the girls’ names, looking to me to be someone I’m not.

What has been our hardest semester ever has also been our most necessary.

Embedded in all of our frustrations is what should have been an obvious observation: SOLHOT is growing. We have girls who come to SOLHOT with poem in hand ready to perform, and we have other girls who come with poem in heart but not the skills or courage to put it to the page. Some only write when they want to write, so SOLHOT time together is about being there and creating a poem or song, later, on their own terms in their own time. A few girls just want to be there and quite literally do nothing else. The exciting part of all the tears, long conversations, debriefings, and intentional one-on-one conversations is that we are, after a year, experiencing growing pains. These pains hurt. But it is becoming clearer that SOLHOT has to be as dynamic as the girls. We are looking to “restructure” SOLHOT into three separate spaces with three distinct functions: there will be a SOLHOT drop-in for girls and women who need the space to be there when they need it; there will be a SOLHOT photo project that occurs at school; and there will be a SOLHOT drama team consisting of mostly high-school students who have already decided that they have something important to say and want to share it publicly.

For many different and similar reasons, women and girls of color seek permission to be great. I am not naïve enough to believe that because I speak the words, “you will be great,” as I so often do, the girls and women believe me and act great. Really, there are moments when I do shrink rather than shine. But, by giving my own self permission to grow in spite of our contradictions, local constraints, globalized labor market, patriarchy, sexism, racism, consent decrees, and self-hate, I hope to show myself as great without saying it—but definitely believing and acting as if I love Black girls. The Black girls with whom I work. The Black girl I used to be and sometimes recall. The Black girl daughter I am raising. The Black girl who requires more space, time, energy, affirmation, and celebration.

* * *

Self-Definition

As Black girls and women, we are experts on our lives. Period. SOLHOT is a space where our expertise collides with those narratives written about us. I wait and listen to whose story we most believe by the ways we act and do not. We are finding a language to be known for who we really are and have that be all right.

LITTLE SALLY WALKER

In this chapter, I discuss the important role of social dance in SOLHOT. Yet, in telling this story it is necessary to look back. Before there was ever such a thing called SOLHOT, I was much more familiar with and steeped in the world of girl empowerment programming. I worked in a girl empowerment program for three years in the role of assistant program director. It was during this time that I read everything that came my way about girl-power and what we could do about our failing and troubled girls. I must admit that even while I was engaged in that discourse I didn't really buy in to it completely. The images, the examples, and the language used to describe these troubled girls reflected the narratives of mostly White, middle-class girls. Furthermore, the other Black women who worked with me and I got used to being in the position of absorbing the girl-power rhetoric just to be able and ready to translate it into something meaningful for that queerly situated girl who somehow found herself at the throws of can-do-it-all-but-please-don't-do-it girlhood.

While my experiences with girl empowerment were enough for me to abandon the discourse and begin my search for a different language, all was not lost. I still believe there is something worth celebrating when we organize as girls and women, adding modifiers and monikers as necessary. In my previous work, I observed that the magic of our coming together often occurred outside of the girl empowerment program. It was then when I began to wonder, what

if the project of celebration could allow for more of those “out of program” experiences?

In SOLHOT, dancing is one way to escape “the program” while being together. Part of this understanding was learned in my position as “girl-empowerer.” It has been proven and developed in my work with SOLHOT.

* * *

I thought this was just an innocent free time for students, a much-needed break in their otherwise highly disciplined and routine-filled school day. However, as I walked naively into the gym, I found the music loud and the lights low. There was a DJ on stage spinning R&B and hip-hop, and I quickly understood why the girls were in such a rush to leave our mentoring program to get to “Fun Day.” Fun Day, an after-school activity, transforms their everyday reality into a nightlife fantasy.

I maneuvered easily through a congregation of students to get a closer look at a group of dancers that seemed to be drawing a lot of people’s attention. In the center of a captivated audience, I watched four girls dance like they were in a music video. Each performed accordingly, challenging the others to create a more impressive move. The more impressive the move, the more shocked I became. The girls danced as if they were at least twenty-one, at a club, on a Friday night.

Dancing like that, how could anyone, no matter how strong, get past what they were suggesting—and maybe even inviting? In Celebrating All Girls, we spend ten weeks providing girls with the tools to build their selves up, encouraging them, and ideally their family, to remain strong for a lifetime. Surely, these girls have learned that performing for others by shaking their booty is not the best way to get attention.

Then my song came on. Before I knew it, I was at the center of the circle, shaking it fast. A little concerned that a girl would look at me and think, “She dances like an old person,” I got over that quick and almost forgot where I was. In call-and-response tradition, the song asked, “How low can you go?” and I felt my self working down to the ground and then having just a little trouble working my self back up again. I subtracted some hips and added a smile on my way back up, as I was beginning to realize that I should probably tone my gestures down to what’s “appropriate” for a middle-school gymnasium. The girls approvingly pointed and laughed, quite in surprise that I accepted the singer’s challenge. As we clapped our hands, replacing the drum of old, and Cha-Cha-Cha-ed our way throughout the Diaspora, the circle became home. Our collective celebration balanced effortlessly on the borders of Black woman/girlhood, allowing us to see parts of ourselves in each other.

Field notes on “Fun Day,” October 26, 2000

* * *

Creating meaningful connections between Black girls and women cannot be programmed. Though many programs have some kind of positive benefit to the mentor and the mentee as their aim, meaningful lessons may neither feel good

nor occur during the time the program is in operation. This insight was gained as a “volunteer” in a “girl empowerment program” that was not SOLHOT. It was at Fun Day—far outside the girl empowerment program—that transformed typical binary power relationships (women vs. girls, youth vs. adults) and facilitated greater insight into the life-changing meaningful actions that can exist when women and girls decide to interact with each other (Brown, 2006).

A few girls who typically attended the empowerment program were sympathetic enough to stop by and inform us that nobody was going to come to the program that day because of Fun Day. To our credit and commonsense, instead of meeting with just a few girls, we combined our monies for the entrance fee to attend the event. An after-school festival-like PTA fundraiser, Fun Day not only included music, games, and food but also proved to operate much like a music video set.

Once in, the girls who chaperoned their “mentors” to Fun Day quickly bypassed the games and food and led us directly to the gym. Then they ditched us. Standing in our cool college mentor/girl empowerer clique, I learned a lot by being there. There are so many rules the girls have to negotiate in-school, so many middle-class standards to resist that I underestimated the potential of a space like Fun Day—a party that was in complete opposition to public school norms—to also be a learning experience.

At Fun Day, not many people were dancing, and most of the middle-school students were observers, standing in awe of the really good dancers. I was drawn to a group of four Black girl dancers. They had drawn the largest audience.

At first glance, I was glad I stayed. Clearly, I thought as I watched them, mouth wide open, our work is needed here. I dismissed the girls’ dancing as antithetical to our girl empowerment goals. This was not who I wanted the girls to be. I judged them without hesitation. I also made sure that the other volunteers taking in the amusement of Fun Day turned their attention to the girls we needed to correct. I was completely snotty about it. As if I was watching videos on BET or MTV, I wondered, why do girls willingly and publicly agree to disgrace themselves? Literally, I wanted to know, how do they move like that?

“What about the boys who were watching?” questioned a comentor who noticed that many of the boys seem to be taking notes for different reasons signaled by mischievous grins and admiring smiles. The mentors with whom I worked did not seem to care that other girls may also be watching and desiring, reinforcing, in the same way as the program, subtle silences around homosexuality. In any case, we were all guilty of reading the girls’ dancing as inappropriately sexual, even though it may have been singularly expressive. Black girls are too entrapped by histories of Black womanhood that equate

Black female bodies with sexual labor and immorality. We could not imagine them any other way—premature video vixens doomed to victimhood, modern day Hottentots, on display like Sara Baartman.

And I, too, was guilty.

As I watched the girls dance, my fear was grounded in the possibility that their 11- and 12-year-old, fully developed womanish bodies prematurely allowed them access to dance in the way that demands the wisdom of women, not the curiosity of adolescent girlhood. In her work on the aesthetic of the Black female body, Janell Hobson (2005) eloquently wrote about how Black girls dancing in groups in a female-centered space celebrates affirmation and pleasure in their bodies, while also claiming that these same scripts also prepare them later for the male gaze. My fear was forward-looking, thinking of the girls mostly in terms of who they would become if left to my imagination, where a masculine heterosexist gaze defined them. My fear was also magnified by the shameful belief that because Black girls and women rarely draw an applauding and captive audience in public, the unique experience of dancing before a crowd of onlookers would lead them to swallow it whole. These thoughts validated my own experiences. I had been in that school for years, and Fun Day was the first time I saw a group of Black girls being encouraged by peers to keep going, to get it right, to achieve.

Plotting our obviously necessary girl empowerment intervention into this nonsensical display of bootyliciousness, the DJ made an intervention of his own:

Dunt
da-dunt,
Dunt
da-dunt ...

I heard the rhythm of a song that my Chicago, south suburban, self could not resist. The unmistakable beat of the Cha-Cha slide by DJ Casper (aka Mr. C), a remixed version of the African American dance classic, the electric slide, allowed me to remember what I know (dare I say who I am?). While the song played I forgot where I was. At the time, I perpetually longed for the place I knew as home. Chicago Heights, a working-class south suburb of Chicago, is where my family has resided for two generations. In my part of town, not dancing the electric slide at any family or fictive kin function is a sure sign of not belonging. I felt immediately home joining the company of Black girls who had held the crowd's attention for the previous two songs.

I became who I knew myself to be.

While dancing I learned that the boundaries between those at the center and those at the margins are not fixed. It does not have to be that way. There was no fee for participating. Gaining access to what was historically a Black girl space was not related to race, gender, or age. But open to those who danced. While dancing, I forgot my mentor status, defined as who I was supposed to be as a woman who supports girls. Instead, I found myself in relationship with my newfound crew. Sliding right then left, I communicated who I was, my personal history, and my excitement to be with them in that moment. The girls shared secret glances that suggested the same. Individually and collectively, we were loving who we are. Like the Urban Bush Women's "Batty Moves," as explained by Brenda Dixon Gottschild (2003), by dancing in Fun Day we too "shifted the paradigm, our body parts are not objects but subjects. The Black female (dancing) body is given back—or takes back—what has been stolen by the white colonist gaze since the days of Sara Baartman." Certainly, I felt free.

But this is the tricky part.

* * *

Dancing provided an opportunity to displace temporarily how others defined us and instead to define ourselves—our personalities and our visions of the world—by the way we moved. Through our connection, I was able to convey more of my whole self—fearful yet hopeful, like the girls, and becoming more of my own woman. Through dance, I offered my body as a site of collective decision making that authoritatively recognized who we were and wanted to be.

I eventually shared this piece of writing in a public presentation, where I was challenged on how I made sense of my participant observation. "But, aren't the girls still participating in and colluding with misogynist messages embedded in much of the music that profits from Black women's bodies and labor without the possibility of them owning the means of production?" someone academically posited. Another person offered a practical comment, "Well, them girls just need to put on some clothes and pick up a book." Certain kinds of feminists gestured something like, "I just have a problem with feminist readings of this kind of dancing that attempt to turn it into something positive and empowering, when really I am not sure that it is." While each perspective made me aware that my interpretation of what happened is often less than satisfying for diverse audiences, these comments also led me to think that somehow my point was missed. The point of my argument about dancing with girls is that sometimes it is not that deep. Looks can be deceiving.

Let me be clear; the insight I gained by dancing at Fun Day was that this Black girl dance cipher operated as a site of collective decision making. Yes, there were free riders standing idly by watching, critiquing, fantasizing, and gazing; but they were not punished for not dancing. However, once on the inside, I learned just how much communication, decision making, and true acknowledgment was occurring. The dance cipher was political, and the dancers, political actors. Yet our politics were not grounded in conflict. It was not the kind of power dynamic that could be described using terms such as hierarchy, control, or leadership. But power was felt in the action, in the social communication of one person daring their body to move unexpectedly, against the norm, relying on another to keep the narrative in motion. No, our dance cipher did not change the world. But if we define girl empowerment as the program did, or celebration as I prefer, namely as an ideal that encourages feelings of self-love, mind-body connection, peer support, physical activity, listening, and creating connections between girls and women, then it was certainly that.

While dancing, I was a part of a community where we were respecting each other's right to be. Each person did the Cha-Cha-Cha as they wanted. Memories of home were being both remembered and escaped. Whether free-styled or choreographed, our self-presentation to the onlookers morphed between sexy, selfish, and sly. We resisted uncomplicated categorizations. We traversed history, as age did not define our chronology. Younger girls agreed to follow my lead. For example, if I did something old school like the cabbage-patch or running man, they did it too. If someone younger broke out with the stripper dance or the forties, it was respected and tried out by women and girls who in their everyday life are too responsible and/or tired to be intentionally sexy or trendy. We accepted the invitation to be who we've forgotten we could be. The way we danced was anything but static and isolated—two things very much oppositional to being liberated Black girls and women. It was in the unprogrammed moment of Fun Day that I came to understand dancing as a way of being who I am in the presence of other Black girls—also beautiful.

Besides dancing, we were also playing together. Play has been known to accomplish connectedness. In his book, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Element of Play in Culture*, Johan Huizinga (1950, p. 14) wrote:

The child is making an image of something different, something more beautiful, or more sublime, or more dangerous than what he usually is. The participants in the rite are convinced that the action actualizes and effects a definite beautification, brings about an order of things higher than that in which they customarily live ... In play, "representation" is really identification.

I am not a professional dancer. Moreover, Fun Day occurred when I was a graduate student and the academic training that I underwent seemingly required a disconnect from my body (no rest for the weary, no nutritious meals for the broke, no fun for the scholar). Fun Day required me to pull my fragmented self together again or rather to accept my fragmented self. Meaning, to dance, I had to bring all of who I was. Not an invention. Not a role to model. Not someone who had made it.

More Than Dancing: What I See, Know, and Feel When We Dance

Self-expression is inherent in dance. Therefore, to dance, you must have a self and something you want to express. Having a self and means to articulate your thoughts, ideas, and desires are often the goals of many gender-specific programs. For girl empowerment programs in particular, the goal is for girls and women to work together to achieve a higher quality of life. Yet we rarely dance.

Black girl dance ciphers are critical to understand the power that is embedded in the processes by which we have been socialized in our bodies and disciplined out of certain spaces. Black girl dance ciphers embody and display not necessarily sexual pretense but the erotic as power as defined by Audre Lorde (1984), as sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. This kind of power often escapes academic writing on the subject of "Girl Power" and practical accounts of youth programming because racist, sexist, ageist, and middle-class biases have programmed us to monitor Black girls who "dance like that"—rather than join with them to learn that it's really more than what we are able to see. On the surface, standing outside of the circle, power is most often translated as control, understood as making someone do something they would not have ordinarily done (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962). But once inside the circle, power is revealed to be more complicated and illusive than that. More than questioning the music, or sociopolitical context in which they dance, why is it the bodies of Black girls that onlookers seek to punish and consume? Free riders, who observe but do not participate, miss the opportunity to extend the cipher and learn who we are and can be together.

In Black girl dance ciphers, there is something "at play" that transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action (Huizinga, 1950). The

meaning of Black girl dance ciphers is contextual, fluid, and requires being there. Huizinga (1950) theorized, "If we find that play is based on the manipulation of certain images, on a certain 'imagination' of reality (i.e., its conversion into images), then our main concern will be to grasp the value and significance of these images and their 'imagination'" (p. 4). The embodied freedom of Black girl dance ciphers is the result of our willingness to play together. It is grounded in our shared understanding that images of dancing Black girls and women are hypervisual in contemporary U.S. culture, mediating daily interactions that at times assume (or depend on) our powerlessness. But we remain unknown, unseen, and unheard. Black girl dance ciphers embody a continuum between voice and silence.

I want to see more dancing as a way of knowing and doing the work of what is recognized as girl empowerment, critical pedagogy, and/or community building. Dancing not only provides the opportunity to historicize and politicize relationships between Black women and Black girls but also acts as a public means to renegotiate our personal and public relationship with our bodies. Dancing together requires that well-meaning adults learn what is important and unlearn what is not relevant. Participating in Black girl dance ciphers means changing the location of where "girl empowerment" occurs, and therefore requires a willingness to take risks and enter a place of "not knowing." For example, many people would be embarrassed to participate in Black girl dance ciphers. This embarrassment is good. Maybe it will cause you to be aware of (if not motivate you to search for answers to) a few critical questions that should be asked in any mentor-like situation: "What difference does my race, class, age, nationality, and language ability make in this situation? How do I enter (and leave) the cipher with respect? What if I'm rejected and no one wants to dance with me? Do I know the music? Do I have something to contribute and express?"

Black girl dance ciphers offer a meaningful moment that symbolizes the possibility of engaged learning. Learning by doing. Learning that extends beyond what is good for the girls. University preoccupations with civic responsibility, engagement, service learning, and state-sponsored girl empowerment programs may provide the opportunity for cocreating this kind of knowledge. But often, explicit critical lessons about citizenship, power, and community are programmed out. Black girl dance ciphers, an apt metaphor, allow us to critique how power and possibility give meaning to the lived experiences of Black girls' and women's bodies (which are often characterized as undisciplined) and who we can be together, in relationship.

Little Sally Walker in SOLHOT

Characters: Visualize 20 Black women and girls between the ages of 11 and 40. We are white, brown-skinned, dark, shades of toffee, and butter-pecan Rican, standing in an amorphous circle. We are excited, tired, smiling, looking around, and serious. Mostly our hair is dark brown to black, and it is permed, short, natural, twisted, broken-off, uncombed, locked, curly, straight, braided, long, puffy, and ponytail-supported. Our body sizes range from lil' bit to thick. We are sporting mostly jeans and college sweatshirts, ponchos, T-shirts, sweaters, tight long-sleeved blouses, and coats that are not taken off. Not even indoors.

Setting: A nonprofit space dedicated to supporting neighborhood children. Bookcases doing their job outline the perimeter of the room. Those teacher-store plastic alphabet letters border the walls. During the day, this room is empty. After school this room is for elementary-school-age tutoring and homework help. During the hours between 6 and 8 p.m., for two days out of the week, it is where SOLHOT occurs.

Scene: In SOLHOT, we always begin our meetings with a dance grounded in Black girls' games. When one volunteer created a dance or cheer just for SOLHOT, the girls quickly caught on and taught us a game they do called "Little Sally Walker." Sometimes we do the "Batty Dance," and sometimes we do Little Sally Walker. On more than one occasion we remixed one cheer into another, making it extra funky. Regardless, we dance.

ACT ONE

We are coming from the end of hectic school days, unyielding jobs, and family dinners. We made it to the club in spite of unwelcome shouts of "hey baby" and younger brothers and sisters who need to be watched while mama works. For some this is our third program of the day that someone else created on our behalf. For others this is the first time mama and daddy let them attend the club on a school night. After submarine sandwiches, chips, and water, sometimes we are still hungry but join the circle anyway. After writing term papers and completing assigned readings, we join the circle. After checking on the baby, we join the circle. We are fearful, full of anticipation, and eager. We are here. Who is going to start it off? Where do we begin?

A leader emerges from the group.

All (Chanting):

"Little Sally Walker ..."

Everyone starts to clap.

"Walking down the street

She didn't know what to do"

**Another leader emerges from the group.
She moves into the middle of the cipher
and stands face to face with someone she
picked.**

All:

"So she stopped in front of me"

Saying, "gone girl do your thang ..."

*This time I'm going to
bounce and swing my
arms side to side and
see if she can get with that.*

All:

"Do your thang, switch."

*Oh I got that and a lot more
little mama.*

All:

"Gone girl, do your thang,

Do your thang switch."

**It is now time for the person
standing in the circle to trade
places with "Sally" and become
the one in the middle, the person
who chooses.**

All (Chanting):

"Little Sally Walker ...

Walking down the street

She didn't know what to do

So she stopped in front of me ..."

**After walking, strutting, or
standing, she is in the middle of
the cipher and she stands face to
face with someone she picked.**

All:

"Singing, gone girl, do your thang ...

Let me represent my

Hometown with the walk!

**What!!! No she didn't! Laughter.
Smiles. Whoa! She can dance!**

All:

"Do your thang switch,

"I seen that dance before."

"How do you do that?"

"Oh yeah, she from L.A. ain't she ..."

All:

"Gone girl, do your thang

Do your thang switch."

**It is now the turn for the person
standing in the circle to trade
places with "Sally" and become
the one in the middle, the person
who chooses.**

All (Chanting louder):

"Little Sally Walker ...

Walking down the street

She didn't know what to do,

So she stopped in front of me"

**After walking, strutting, or
standing the middle of the cipher and she
stands face to face with someone she
picked.**

All:

"Saying, gone girl do your thang ..."

*Throwing my arms up more
like Stella getting her groove
back than a bored Sally Walker,
I get close and boldly swing my
booty from side to side. They wouldn't
expect this from the church girl.*

**Hallelujah. And the church said,
Amen!**

All (*Laughing hard*):

"Do your thang, switch.
Gone girl, do your thang,
Do your thang switch."

**The person she chooses boldly
trades places with "Sally" and
becomes the one in the middle—
the person who chooses.**

All:

**The chant turns more into a
rhyme. Thus, the hip-hop version.**

"Little Sally Walker ...

Walking down the street (uh oh)

She didn't know what to do (uh oh)

So she stopped in front of me ..."

**It is clear that she knew long
ahead of time who she wanted to pick.
She doesn't waste her time and stands in
front of a friend instigating something she
wants to share. Eye contact and wide
smiles are consistent. Her friend has been
waiting to be picked as long as she has
been waiting to choose since the last time
she played Little Sally Walker in
SOLHOT.**

All:

"Singing, gone girl, do your thang ..."

*I may be 12 but what you know about head up, arms
bent like isosceles triangles,
looking at the palms of your hands while
each hand goes up and down, bobbing head first to the
right then to the left.*

Laughter. Giggles. Commentary.

"I'm not woooorthyyyy!"

All:

"Do your thang switch.
Gone girl, do your thang,
So your thang, switch."

*I do this dance I remember so well because my cousin who
is 13 years older than I am taught me. When I was a child.
We trade places. Finally, it's my turn!*

Laughter. Release. Freedom.

**We play until everyone has
a turn to be picked and chosen.**

THE END

The SOLHOT Function of Little Sally Walker

The playing of Little Sally Walker symbolizes what SOLHOT is about. We play Little Sally Walker, or a similar Black girl game, after we eat, to begin SOLHOT. Little Sally Walker is our greeting to each other, an orientation for the first-timers. Little Sally Walker organizes social action in SOLHOT through music and dance, as play and ritual. We mark off this sacred space by standing shoulder to shoulder in a circle to speak and to center ourselves in collective Black girlhood celebration. According to Hobson (2005) the "batty as a site of resistance" can be found when old and young, the living and the ancestors, come together in black girls' ring games. It is then as Hobson (*ibid.*, p. 111) acknowledges,

In that instant, the leisurely, youthful game of sashaying and hip shaking transforms into sacred space, a fluidity recognized in most African based cultures. Moreover, this added spiritual component elevates black women's dance to a higher plane of aesthetic appreciation.

Still, getting into the circle is often difficult. Immediately we have to come to terms with the bitter reality that for us to play Little Sally Walker means

acknowledging that what we have been doing before, and what we will return to after the game, is not play. Yet, we always play because the play moment extends beyond our time together. In SOLHOT, Little Sally Walker, as an iterative and repetitive performance, creates a feeling of being "apart together," to borrow Huizinga's (1967) terms, creating magic that lasts beyond the duration of the individual game (p. 12). This is how Little Sally Walker acts as play and ritual, being both holy and sacred (ibid.).

Little Sally Walker, an emblematic Black girl dance cipher, mediates experiential learning, culture, and identity. In this dance cipher, the knower (Black girl/woman participant) chooses to be at the center and makes who she is known by deciding how her body moves and how her peers/public should act. She then chooses someone to relate to individually in the midst of this collective action. After her turn, she trades places with someone else, thus communicating that while at once the teacher, she too has something to learn. Both the circle and the center are claimed as home.

The explicit educational possibilities of Little Sally Walker lie in its function as play and ritual. Learning who I am and who I want to be by engaging the body, making and holding sustained eye contact and having fun, is quite serious education. It is also inherently political work. In that moment of reciting rhymes, keeping the beat, and dancing, you have to make sure we are singing the same version of Little Sally Walker. Are you singing the lyrics like they did in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, before your grandparents migrated north? Or are you singing the south suburban Chicago remix you learned while in elementary school more than 25 years ago? Were you born in Salt Lake City, Utah, and although you identify proudly as a Black girl, you have never played Little Sally Walker before? Since this thing called hip-hop is older than you are, how do you lead the group so that the rhyme becomes more a rap than an old-fashioned singsong? After all, our identity is at stake. In SOLHOT, even though we are all in some ways comfortable enough to organize under a label of Black girlhood, we have to consider the predictable laughs when a White person does the latest dance move well; the typical shock when a heavy-set girl does a dance so dope, nobody can follow her; the Black girl who is too stiff; the little mama who is overtly and proudly sexual. We must negotiate the space between the picked and the chosen before someone gets the wrong or the right idea. We have to be willing to come out of the corner we were hiding in to play, despite the possibility of being uncomfortable, to be seen and heard on our own terms.

Power is ever-present in Little Sally Walker. The mere imitation of demonstrating control, on the other hand, holds the fateful threat of undoing

our play. When domination shows up in the game, it is over. Domination does not show up in the unwilling participant. We can tolerate that. The game will go on. But the real culprit of unraveling the cipher typically manifests in those overly disciplined bodies that don't have much play practice. Through the chanting, we can distinguish and facilitate the healing of a Black woman girl child whose youth was stolen. Little Sally Walker, after all, is also ritual. However, what cannot be tolerated is someone whose disciplined indoctrination shows up when they become Sally and, for example, take "too long" to teach us a move, confirming that what they are about to dance is over-choreographed to the point of leaving little surprise. This translates as domination. Why, Black girl, can't you move the way you want to move on a whim? Why, Black girl, can you not think for a moment about yourself, what you want to say, and how you want to say it? Why, Black girl, are you still seeking someone's permission and/or approval to dance? This is domination. The game is over. This is not playing.

The form of Little Sally Walker fluctuates. It depends on who is there and who is not there. We may be full of laughter or barely getting through it. In contrast, the function of Little Sally Walker is consistent and necessary to Black girlhood celebration. Grounded in Black girls' ways of knowing, we may not have created the game but have certainly perfected it. Little Sally Walker provides the possibility of creating a narrative of self in communal company that insists on complex identities, transnational articulations in local context, and fluid literacies that enable everyone involved "to read" who we are and what we want to be, by temporarily, no matter how brief, displacing social stigma, intrepid marginalization, and ugliness.

Black girl dance ciphers as a method can be taught and used with any group of people who voluntarily associate. However, it is the meaning of how the dance and song is performed, decided, and expressed through Black women's and girls' bodies that makes this particularly powerful (in the erotic sense) and necessary in the celebration of Black girlhood. When we are doing our dance and being encouraged by others to "gone girl do your thang do your thang, switch" we claim our healing, decide our own education, and participate in a special political process. This democratic participation is fully engaged because our whole body is in it. Gottschild (2005, p. 147), taught us,

The Africanist value played of the democratic autonomy of body parts stands in sharp contrast to the Europeanist value on unity and line (meaning straight line) working toward one objective ...The Africanist dance aesthetic favors flexible, bent-legged postures with the component parts of the torso independently articulated forward, backward, sideward, or in circles as well as in different rhythms.

Some of the girls with whom I work claim they are not African, but when we dance, part of the healing surely comes from owning all that we are.

I don't know if we are dancing in a way that others who are not present will understand.

* * *

To understand what dancing does, you have to dance.

To understand a Black girl dance cipher, you don't necessarily have to be a Black girl (although if you are, that automatically puts you in the honors track, so to speak, with the expectation that you can learn), but you do, at least, have to be an ally. An ally is someone who knows a few Black girls personally—meaning there are at least a couple of Black girls to whom you have listened.

One of the homegirls, Barbara, videotaped a performance of Little Sally Walker in SOLHOT with her cell phone. She sent the video to me via email as a .mov file. The opportunity to view the dance outside of my body, outside of being there, felt like digital indulgence. Before watching the file I wondered whether being sent through cyberspace would give it so much mileage that it would become impossible to translate the sanctity of Little Sally Walker. I know what it feels like to do it, but how does it feel to watch it as media?

Every time I watch the video I learn more about the girls with whom I work, the purpose of SOLHOT, and the sanctity of Black girls and women coming together for the purpose of collective celebration. In spite of being somewhat technophobic, I have come to play the .mov file religiously. Each viewing inspires new insight. I could be in the worst of moods before opening that file, but as soon as I drag the mouse over the triangle and right-click, a smile appears. Just from watching the video I get happy.

Once a SOLHOT evangelist of sorts, I decided to share my joy. First, I played the video version of Little Sally Walker for my daughter's father. He also does work in the community with young people, so I knew he would get it. At my house in the kitchen, leaning drunkenly happy over the breakfast bar as I watched, I smiled, giggled, and foreshadowed the really good parts. I talked to him a lot about SOLHOT. On numerous occasions he watched our daughter longer than our mutual agreement allows so that I could organize. I thought that by showing the video I was letting him in on the secret that is SOLHOT.

"So what did you think?" I asked in a way that wasn't really a question but more like saying, "Wasn't that the best thing you've ever seen in your life!"

"What am I supposed to say?" He asked in a way that was really a question. "You all were dancing. Okay ..." He waits for me to explain.

I go numb. I stare at him expressionless.

"Is that all you saw? Forget it then." I forfeit.

* * *

Invited to a conference, I addressed the audience about SOLHOT for the first time in a public academic setting when the questions turned to my current work. It is impossible for me to talk about SOLHOT and not get excited. As I spoke, I realized the same sort of giggly excitement that accompanied my viewing of Little Sally Walker with my daughter's father could be called passion. This familiar passion sneaks up on me among this academic crowd sitting in a room where the scientific rigor intentionally works to keep the passion out. Nonetheless, I go on and on about SOLHOT as a space that is about dance and movement more than it is about anything else I know.

I made sure to bring the Little Sally Walker video even though I did not plan on showing it. But, as if just announcing a Cannes film festival award winner, I serve as a live trailer of the cell-phone-produced video to promote SOLHOT. Speaking to the audience with great enthusiasm, I introduce the video by saying something that implies, "And this is the genius of SOLHOT ..." I drag the mouse over the triangle and right-click.

The audience watched a short clip of the video unmoved. The volume of the video was equally as loud as the silent audience. There were exceptions of course. Barbara, the same SOLHOT homegirl who recorded the dance with her cell phone, attended the talk and was searching for tissue to wipe her weeping eyes as she viewed her production on the big screen.

The video ends. I, novice academic, boldly ask the audience, "Any questions?" I remain all smiles. Someone looking like a "real" researcher raised his hand and said something to the effect of "So you all dance. Who does not dance? Tell me about how SOLHOT creates community and exists as a site of political education."

I didn't really hear his question. My excitement spoke more loudly than his skepticism. I seriously engaged him about my hunch that we were doing something real good, even if I didn't have an extended insightful scholarly reflection or the empirical evidence to prove it. I looked at that man and spoke ad nauseam about the joy, the wonder, and the necessity of dancing together for the purpose of Black girl celebration—and about the educational possibility of getting free.

I thought I answered his question, so I called on others and answered their questions in much the same happy way.

After the panel, an astute audience member asked for my attention. They wondered whether or not I was concerned about the video reinforcing stereotypical images of Black girls in a hip-hop hypervisual hypersexualized kind of way.

While debriefing my talk with a good colleague and friend who attended, she suggested that my next paper would have to be titled "More Than Dancing" and be written for those who just don't get it. It was at that moment that I realized that the first question asked by that "real" researcher and the others who followed voiced what was probably a shared agreement among others in the room. Some people did not get it. Some people may have thought they got it but did not know the right words to explain it. Some people may have been afraid to challenge my Black feminist positionality. I was completely unaware.

As a scholar I realize I have to make better sense of Little Sally Walker by providing a clear interpretation of what was happening in the video, beyond "just dancing." It would be irresponsible to show the video and not provide the historical, theoretical, and empirical context of what Black girl dance ciphers mean.

I know the power of Little Sally Walker because I can feel it. I dance this kind of Black girl dance cipher at least twice a week with others committed to the celebration of Black girls. I know we are doing much more than dancing.

If you don't dance, maybe you will never understand.
If you don't listen to Black girls, have I said anything?
Can you hear me?
Understanding cannot be programmed.

But What Makes Sally Walker a Black Girls' Game?

In SOLHOT, Sally Walker is a Black girl. Period.

Drawing from the wisdom of Robin Kelley (2004) who notes that to say something is black, does not necessarily mean it's entirely black; I say Little Sally Walker is a Black girl thing that also includes elements beyond Blackness and girlhood. The game of Little Sally Walker and others that may be identified

as chants, cheers, ring games, and so on were not necessarily invented by Black girls. Just perfected.

According to Wilma King (2005, p. 430), during slavery, many play activities of Black children were more like those of White children than activities in any other facet of their lives including their education, work, and treatment. This noted similarity in play among children of different cultures and national origins makes it impossible to say definitely where a game like Sally Walker originated (Gaunt, 2006; King, 2005). Although it is noted that formal European games often became a part of the slave child's repertoire, with regional color and ethnic flavor adding distinction (King, 2005), King's analysis of slave children's play finds that children of African descent gave their songs unique sounds, with varied clapping rhythms, while adding dance steps and body motions that were unmistakably a part of their cultures.

In her book, *The Games Black Girls Play*, Kyra Gaunt (2006) also contends that the games such as Little Sally Walker and Double Dutch may have been European in origin and introduced to enslaved African children by the children of U.S. slaveholders. Yet Gaunt argues that the way the game is performed by Black girls is grounded in Black musical traditions constructed by living, race, gender, and embodied experiences (Gaunt, 2006). More critically, Gaunt contends that Black girls do more than just borrow from Black popular music-making in their game playing—they are in part responsible for creating what we have come to identify as Black popular music. Gaunt (2006, p. 1) rightly declared, "But everyday, black girls generate and pass on a unique repertoire of changes and embodied rhythms in their play that both reflects and inspires the principle of black popular music-making." The origins of Little Sally Walker are not as significant as its innovation.

Little Sally Walker as performed in SOLHOT exemplifies the oral, intergenerational, and transnational transmission and appropriation of musical ideals and social memories (Gaunt, 2006). Moreover, it is the processes of racialization, gender identification, and classed understandings of Little Sally Walker as a Black girls' game that is given meaning through our bodies. In SOLHOT, our bodies read to the rest of the world on the continuum of night black to dark tan, from developmentally mature to budding, from second-hand clothes to name-brands and designer labels. All of us were born in the United States in one historical period or another. Some of us are more than Black. Some of us have been accused of not really being Black. English is not always our home language, and even if it is, we can and do speak a different kind of

English. This is also why some of us already know Little Sally Walker (albeit a different version) and some of us have to be taught.

During slavery, King documents the ring game "Little Sally Waters" differed according to its participants. She wrote that White girls knelt in a circle and sang:

Little Sally Waters,
Sitting in the sun,
Crying and weeping,
For a Young man.
Rise, Sally rise
Fly to the East
Fly to the West,
Fly to the one you love best.

The movement of Little Sally Waters consisted of the girl in the center standing and acknowledging one of the players who in turn sat in the circle as they sang the words "Rise, Sally rise."

Black children sang:

Little Sally Walker
Sittin' in a saucer
Weepin' and crying'
For some young man.

King attributes the name change from Waters to Walker and the weeping signifier to the reality of forced Black family separation during slavery.

The version of Little Sally Walker I was taught in SOLHOT went like this:

Little Sally Walker ...
Walking down the street
She didn't know what to do
So she stopped in front of me
Singing, gone girl, do your thang
Do your thang, switch.
Gone girl, do your thang
Do your thang, switch.

Marjorie Goodwin (1991) argues that activities rather than societies are the most relevant unit for analysis in studies of culture. The activity of young peoples' talk exists as social action, implying relatedness and hierarchy in children's social world. What I have learned by playing Little Sally Walker in SOLHOT, from singing these particular words and dancing together is that the

name Sally Walker remains what it was for subjects under slavery, studied by King. Thus, oppression as a primary signifier of Black girlhood endures.

Furthermore, Walker, the protagonist in our rhyme, is bored out of her mind in what has been identified as either a rural town or small urban Midwestern city. In this way, our play reality merges with Black girls' lived experiences of being in a location in which they often find themselves walking down the street with nothing to do. This also validates part of why I organized SOLHOT in the first place. In larger metropolitan cities, a major concern many people have about starting a youth program is duplication of services. "Does something like the kind of program I want to create already exist in this area?" we often ask. What good is yet another program for girls?

This concern held me back from initially starting anything when I first arrived in town. However, after conducting a year of informal research on existing girl-centered programs in area, the absence of youth-defined spaces, whether youth-led or adult-led, was devastating. Though I do not believe in the righteousness of youth programming for the sake of youth management, when spaces can be organized in the awareness of its limitations, and girls keep coming, I believe in the work as political action. We all need a place to be. To feel loved. To dance.

The SOLHOT version of Little Sally Walker also reflects a shared interest and participation in hip-hop culture. To date, all SOLHOT participants have come of age in one hip-hop generation or another. As such, we often rely on hip-hop ideologies and practices to "remix" Little Sally Walker. For example, a loud voice will take hold of the others, and a rap of the verse ensues. At times, a Black girl beat-boxer will contribute to the remix, encouraging the bringing down of certain dances that invoke everything hip-hop. It is important to note that while commercial hip-hop typically colludes with White supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchal values, women and girls have always participated in hip-hop culture. In SOLHOT, the relationships between Black girls and women with hip-hop often emerge in our remixes of Little Sally Walker. More than the overt music-making and dance contributions, the way in which we agree to be together in the cipher is also homage to hip-hop aesthetics and ideals. Imani Perry (2004, p. 107) defined the cipher as follows,

A privileged outlaw space. Those inside the cipher are central, so it claims an insider rather than outsider consciousnesses. The best way to describe the term, one popularized by the Five Percent Nation, is that it indicates a mystical and transcendent yet human state, that it creates a vibe amid a community; as well as a spirit of artistic production or intellectual/spiritual discursive moments.

In SOLHOT, ciphers are sacred and this explains why believers from a church-going background often make analogies between church and SOLHOT. Moreover, Little Sally Walker demonstrates the hip-hop value of defiance, in creating something new out of the old (or something new out of nothing) and of taking up space, not in ways that are permitted but in all the ways we choose (Ards, 2004). Our Black girl dance cipher operates within a familiar rhyme and spectrum of dance, but as hip-hop consumers and contributors, we innovate Little Sally Walker sometimes beyond traditional recognition.

The only problem is this: some Black girls do not dance.

Once I was invited to do a workshop with a group of girls with whom I had no previous relationship. As a way to start the workshop I instructed the group to gather in a circle to do a cheer. It didn't work. The girls did not play. Over-choreographed Black girl dance ciphers do not work because Black girls resist—often times, for very good reasons.

Playing Little Sally Walker requires trust.

I do not “plan” to dance anymore with people who consider me a stranger. Instead, if the moment arises, I follow the Black girls' lead. When in a group of Black girls, whether it is a formal and structured meeting, or in an informal setting with family and/or friends, if someone says, “Let's play this game” (or do this cheer/rhyme—always a Black girl in my personal experiences), I dance regardless of how tired I am, unprepared, and surprised by our surroundings. When we create a circle, look eye to eye, and assert ourselves into the space, the opportunity exists to celebrate the complexity of Black girlhood. The magic begins.

However, keep in mind that in Little Sally Walker-esque play, there are bound to be girls who opt out of their peer's invitation and will be in the midst of play but not participate fully. I'm not talking about the spoiled sport who comes to play but does not move, as they are fulfilling the very significant role of witnessing. Rather, I suggest that it is necessary to be aware of the girl who “hogs” the center or takes “too long” to choose a peer to replace them as Sally Walker, or the girl who “runs from being chosen.” These disruptions perplex me always. What does this twisted and subversive participation mean? I'll admit my preference is for everyone to dance together, to be fully present in the moment. I even go to great lengths to assure nondancers like myself that mere movement will suffice in place of the latest dance step. The attempt to over-choreograph is always present. A Sally who remains in the center too long or protests the center cipher challenges my belief in developing authority. I have to remember that not everyone enjoys being at the center. Not all Black girls take comfort in their bodies. Not all Black girls like to dance or move. Even in a space of women

and girls with shared interests, even after weeks of proven commitment, the risk of not dancing is always present.

Yet the girl who threatens subversive play also plays a critical role. She is the embodied reminder of the fragility of the cipher. At any moment, the sanctity of Little Sally Walker, or an alternative Black girl dance cipher, can always come undone.

Conclusion: You Can't Just Dance Anywhere

This chapter focused on the meaning made of Black girl dance ciphers. Black girl dance ciphers provide a means to build a community among girls and women that is grounded in Black girls' ways of knowing, being, and moving. Undoubtedly, dance plays a significant role in Black girlhood celebration. However, not just any dance will do. Only when Black girl dance ciphers operate as play and ritual, does the space open itself up to articulating the complexity of Black girls as a group. These ciphers provide a space for learning and teaching to occur with Black girls, without the usual culprit of control as domination showing up and preventing the possibility of engaging critical education, which requires us to be at once an expert and a novice.

Therefore, though I believe Black girl dance ciphers are the epitome of Black girl liberation, when it just doesn't happen I am left questioning, what kind of world do we live in when play becomes work? In what way does dancing work to exclude complete participation? Has control showed up in a way that has previously escaped our attention? What kind of experience can I conduct so that there is more than one way to play Black girl celebration?

These unanswered questions reveal a healthy dose of skepticism that often guides my practice. As someone deeply engaged in the political work of organizing Black girls and women for the purpose of articulation, celebration, and learning, doubt endures. As someone who values the very practical organizing efforts of working with young people, I also recognize the desire to recreate activities for purposes of replication. Especially activities that at one time for a particular population produced outcomes that were experienced as “empowering.” But I know better. I no longer assume that because it's programmed, it will work or that it will be meaningful to those girls and adults who are subject to the activity. What I have learned is that I can facilitate activities like Black girl dance ciphers that create the possibility for a SOLHOT utopia, and I am humbled whether or not what occurs matches my sincerest intention. And whether or not what occurs matches my sincerest intention, I learn.

OUR WORDS, OUR VOICE

The same time the private world of young women is becoming public, participation is being offered to young people in their private and free spaces, such as leisure sites. Consequently, there are few free or private spaces left for them to keep to themselves; political and civic duties are brought into private spaces as though this is where they should be enacted, and the realm of the intimate is exposed for public scrutiny.

Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*, p. 126

Quiet as it's kept, young women in this country expect to be ignored. There's an unspoken assumption that we are here only to serve the needs of others. Most young women believe that people don't really want to know what we think.

Goddess and Calderón, *We Got Issues! A Young Woman's Guide to a Bold, Courageous and Empowered Life*, p. 3

Anita Harris and Rha Goddess and JLove Calderón make excellent arguments about the public use of girls' voices and expression. Harris argues that given this incitement to discourse among girls, the public/private split is reconfigured so that the more girls speak, the more they are increasingly exposed to surveillance, thus, reproducing and regulating particular models of successful subjectivities that conceal a genuine public sphere so that the debate about young women's participation is structured around their personal barriers to civic engagement (Harris, 2006). I have seen this first hand through

the performance of “participatory action poetry pimps.” Participatory action poetry pimps are well-meaning adults who usually work with girls or some other marginalized group for so long that they begin to privilege profit, publication, and product over process.

For example, in a public presentation that is advertised as “showcasing girls’ voices” to an audience that presumably wants to hear what girls have to say, these adults will arrive, read one girl’s poem after the other, like hitting play and eject, and never contextualize the girl-made media. The adult presenter in the absence of the girls with whom they work with either desperately believes that girls’ words speak for themselves or that if they give their interpretation it will somehow silence the girls’ voices. If these kinds of presentations were made in spaces where young people were present, then that would be one thing. But in academic spaces, conferences, journals, and scholarly texts chances are the audience by which and for which the art was represented is completely different from the audience that has purchased the book or paid outrageous conference fees. There are different expectations and needs.

In the introduction of Hillary Carlip’s (1995) *Girl Power: Young Women Speak OUT!* she wrote,

Every girl who takes a pen to paper and speaks her word, allowing her emotions to surface, is committing a courageous act of self-empowerment. And in the process, those who read her writing are often empowered as well. (p. 9)

But in what way are readers empowered? Perhaps reading girls’ writings enables the reader to judge the girls’ work as bad, or worse yet the girls as pathological and deviant. In this case, girls’ words could stand alone, but in so doing leaves too much possibility for those who want to hear girls’ voices but had to come to a lecture to do so to avidly misinterpret, judge, and manage their words. As Harris aptly pointed out, if the girls’ voices are not heard in a way that an audience can easily digest (recalling the old and problematic equation that goes something like “weak girl plus arts program equals strong girl with good grades, respectful to parents, obedient, etc.”) girls’ subjectivities are judged as either a success or a failure, not the context in which the work was created.

But then Rha-Goddess and JLove Calderón remind us through their work with “We Got Issues!” that sometimes women lack a will to speak publicly and demand accountability. And I am very familiar with some girls’ attitude that suggests “Yeah, I have something to say and I could write a poem but I don’t want to present it in front of anyone,” not because it’s meant to be private but because—to be overly simplistic—they think they are not important. Girls

will tenuously speak of their experiences, articulate highly complex theories about the workings of their community, make relevant and practical policy recommendations and at the same time believe they are stupid. They can sing and dance line-by-line popular songs such as “Chicken Noodle Soup” (2006) created by Harlem youth artists DJ Webstar featuring Young B, and when we look at the lyrics, print them out, and see how simple it is, they will also remix it, create something catchy and complex and still not determine that their voices are worth hearing. Not insisting on their right to privacy but rather their too familiar experiences with being rendered less than human, too many Black girls do not speak out. The subtle difference between privacy and worthlessness can be felt when a girl is invited to present publicly but with her lowered eyes and head, moving back and forth, communicates more than a “no.”

In SOLHOT, we have it both ways: there are girls who speak, write, and present their work publicly, and girls who speak, write, and want to keep their work to themselves. I can respect both decisions. The hardest part is in distinguishing those who can and just do not want to from those who do but, for one reason or another, have decided that they must continue to wait for permission to speak and be heard.

Also and again and again representation becomes critical. I have seen girls’ work and words presented in ways that I believe solely benefit the adult presenter as in the earlier example used to support Harris’ argument. In spaces where the authors of the work cannot own their work, I do not easily offer girls’ creative expression to the page. I do not presume that their words speak for themselves. Nor do I believe that if I offer my interpretation of their work that my words de-center their insight. I also agree with Pecora and Mazzarella who wrote in the introduction to *Growing Up Girls* (1999) that the opportunity to hear the voices of adolescent girls is unusual in academic literature though important to our understanding. Furthermore, as Gwendolyn Pough (2004, p. 45) wrote, “Black women have historically made use of illocutionary force to have their voices heard and to impact the larger society. What is missing, more often than not, is the recognition.” If this is also the case for Black girls, and I think so, then part of my desire in representing girls’ creative expression in this chapter is to recognize their contributions and work in SOLHOT as significant to an explanation of what SOLHOT is and isn’t, the process, what we produce, and who we are. Some kind of showcase of our words and our voice seems necessary and potentially political. In this chapter, I present creative expression from SOLHOT participants. These creative works are not finished; they are, in the Lauryn Hill sense, an unplugged “sharing.”

You may object.

Through the words of SOLHOT participants you will have some sense, hopefully a greater one, about the context in which the words were produced. To give a sense of the context in which our work is reproduced in SOLHOT, each creative expression is contextualized by my thoughts guided by the following reservation: *I cannot let you take advantage of these girls by listening to them; I have permission to share these writings, but do I have a free conscience to do so?*

Adults working with girls in creative capacities who do feel compelled to share girls' work have not just a responsibility but an obligation to declare how they themselves were changed by the process. When sometimes the girls just wrote what they had to say with no value attached only because I asked them to share and publish their work demonstrates clearly that I have already engaged in the process of interpretation. In offering up girls' poems, rants, and stories as "data" requires a contextualization of their work, in which I too try to bring a theoretical sensitivity to my cultural intuition of interpretation and analysis (Yosso, 2006). At the very least I can tell you explicitly how I was moved and how I heard their words since I am primarily responsible for their representation in this context.

SOLHOT through the Arts

In SOLHOT, we discuss and deconstruct a number of issues relevant to participants' experiences including love, family, school, friends, politics, community, pleasure, sex, violence, sexuality, friends, health, decision making, and drugs. Besides talking, our discussions are almost always mediated through art. The kind of art we create ranges from arts-and-crafts, to making media, to photography projects, to poetry, to role-play and performance. This push toward the arts of all kinds is the result of my interest in working with young people to express themselves in ways that are not always written and would necessitate language acquisition. As an underground artist, I believe in art created for and by the people, especially young people. According to Jeff Chang (2007, p. xi) this value connects me with others in the hip-hop generation who also embrace "a desire to continue to breakdown boundaries between so-called high and low, to bring the street, to make urgent, truth-telling work that reflects the lives, loves, histories, hopes, and fears of the hip-hop generation." No matter how we talk about SOLHOT as a way of interacting with each other that is fully human and just, when we get to create art this message is best demonstrated. Sure we

may provide a prompt for writing but ultimately what one girl chooses to write is her idea. We buy the paints, as many colors as we can find, but what colors the girls use and how she puts them together conveys her ideas about her world independent of our plans.

Through the images created by movement, pictures, and/or text, we learn more about each other, who we are, where we lived, what we experienced, and how to relate—which is all of intentional value in SOLHOT. It also provides a way for Black girls with so much necessary and imposed responsibility to think differently for a while. To imagine. To be poets. Critical educator Maxine Greene (2003, p. 97) wrote,

Poets are exceptional of course; they are not considered educators in the ordinary sense. But they remind us of absence, ambiguity, embodiments of existential possibility. More often than not they do so with passion; and passion has been called the power of possibility.

This artistic and poetic sensibility is important to SOLHOT because the space is set aside to try out different, healthier (meaning self-aware) ways of being and being together with Black girls and women that we rarely experience on the outside.

Art making also challenges the homegirls to listen. Sure, adults who work with young people believe that they are good listeners; however, this is not always the case. In SOLHOT, homegirls are not there to change the girls; we are not there to serve them; we are not there to show them the way (mostly because we don't presume to have it all figured out); we are not there to suggest the right way to be (college-educated we mostly are, but not always, and either way is not a prerequisite). Homegirls are there to listen and to create. What girls come up with challenges our listening skills so that, for example, when the pen makes contact to paper (we do not write with computers), anything we can imagine comes out. We share. We practice listening. From the girls we hear at times curse words (we don't censor our first drafts), experiences of exploits, and injustices gone unchecked alongside described memories of yesterdays and todays that conjure joy, sadness, and peace. Sometimes we hear curse words from the homegirls too because we also do not censor our first drafts. Imagine that! What we hear when we listen to each other shows us important similarities between Black girls and women, and also important differences—some of which have nothing to do with being Black girls and women at all.

By sharing what we create, we have listened to girls whose lived experience is more multifaceted than some of the adults with whom they are working.

We listened and found out that at least one SOLHOT homegirl skipped a grade and is an 18-year-old college student whereas another girl repeated a grade in SOLHOT and at age 17 is working toward high school graduation. With sometimes less than a chronological year separating us, expressing our life experiences through artistic mediums communicates a wisdom that makes age meaningless. Girls bring up experiences and ideas related to sexual orientation, race, class, and gender-issues that at times trigger adult insecurities and challenge those educated in queer theory, critical race theory, Marxism, and feminist theory to find practical words to communicate ideas that are certainly bigger than the geographic borders that separate our small urban rural city from what seems to be the rest of the world. Sometimes the girls' theory is expressed through gesture, and those in college who are trained to not think through the body miss the lesson signified by a move so profound, it could have been "a glance from God" to quote Zora Neale Hurston (2006).

In SOLHOT, it is the arts that allow us to explore the diverse and contentious nature of Black girlhood. Although pleasure and figurative language reign supreme, we do not miss the point that our art making is political, collective, and analytical. Words and images hold the power of life and death, and this is true in SOLHOT.

Ethnographer Paul Willis (2000, p. 11) in his discussion of art in the everyday notes that figurative-metaphoric language is not against reason or nonanalytic but rather metaphoric language is useful to describe things and to articulate an abstract idea by comparing it with something else in the world, something typically concrete. Sometimes the political consciousness that emerges in our social conventions of reading, seeing, and listening to what we create brings us closer together. Our unplugged sharing is what allows us to experience a powerful intimacy that involves risks of revealing ourselves to each other without and with the love and despair of socially constructed categories of difference.

Korina Jocson (2006), scholar and student of the late poet soldier June Jordan, wrote,

For youth whose voices have been largely ignored in an adult-driven world, poetry acts as a site for critical transitions from home to school and the places in between. Poetry offers a place where youth can be themselves and embrace their own experiences. (p. 700)

In her analysis of *Poetry for the People* (P4P) (see Muller, 1995), a poetry workshop turned beloved community turned movement of diverse student poet teachers turned advocate for youth poetry, Jocson documents how P4P methods affirm

students' voices and enhances students' literacy development. Educators in schools and out of schools have found the arts, especially poetry and performance methods, priceless tools to create dialogue and inspire collective action that is youth-accessible.

Young people speak through hip-hop and hip-hop is art (Chang, 2007). Blurring hip-hop, feminism, and art in SOLHOT becomes the means through which our ethnographic imagination is made visible. In the text that follows, I focus on the written expressions of SOLHOT participants, though how I contextualize the words presented is not meant to raise questions of literacy development, to invoke art therapy, or prove the outcomes of programming. My judgment of the merit of the work is seriously biased—I think each work included is Black girl genius created by Black girl genius. Rather, the question I am also seeking to answer in my editorial contextualization is, "where is the love?" (Jordan, 1995, p. 141; emphasis mine). This question, according to Jordan, allows us "to evaluate the potentiality, the life-supportive commitment and possibility of anyone or any thing, and is the decisive question she always finds her self attempting to answer" (ibid.). Witnessing how the context of SOLHOT made it possible for girls to articulate and speak love by sometimes mentioning where it's not most critically answers the question of how SOLHOT works to celebrate Black girlhood in and out of hip-hop through the arts.

Yung (*pronounced Young*) Envy

Yung Envy is a 14-year-old Black girl who tried to convince me that Lil' Wayne is her generation's Tupac! Yung Envy was a writer well before she came to SOLHOT. She was quick to share her work. Now, she comes to SOLHOT with poems in hand. Whenever we organize an event to do public readings, Yung Envy wants to perform first. She texts me to remind me of the events where SOLHOT can represent through poetry and spoken word. For her contribution to this book, she offered what she called a rap, a poem, and free write piece. Yung Envy is SOLHOT, giving love through willing words on page and performance, anytime, anyplace, because the love she gets in return is enough to make her perform and write again and again.

Verse One
(a rap)

6 months in and out of it, it is all wasted
I have no more tears I lost those after these last few times when I saw you didn't shed
a tear,

All my I love you's were worthless because it's like your heart was never here.
 You say you cared but yet you continue to do you while I was left doing us.
 I should have opened my eyes cuz to you I was just a girl you fucked.
 I wish you treated me like your girl, like you never wanted to let me over go to waste,
 you told me to get right but know that I am its like you spit on my face
 You treat me as if I don't matter like I owe you my heart when all I did was try and
 play the wife's part.
 You sleep around and you play with my feelings yet I knew that the stories were true
 yet I always came running, running right back to you.

Chorus

Baby I wanted to be all your own
 I wanted to be, had to be, I gotta be
 I was there standing while you did you
 In the midst of the storm baby when will the sky become blue until then baby
 I'm missing you, I miss you, I miss you

Bridge

The love we had together baby I never doubted it,
 I just had to have it I wanna be,
 Baby I can't stand it baby I hate that you got me missing you I'm missing you.
 See baby, please come back I'm missing you baby, baby, baby.
 Please come back.

Chorus

I wanted to be, you got me boy, please come don't through this away. Yet
 You wanna leave go, but you'll be back I know it, I know. Oh I know.

* * *

Imagine

Imagine a world filled with discrimination and bigotry
 A world that produces a sexual image toward females' image.
 Imagine
 Just imagine a community that hides people's suffering, pain and truth
 Imagine
 A young black girl that wants to be successful and show a positive presence
 Imagine
 A child living in drama, a child who wants her family to love her.
 Imagine
 Just imagine a beautiful person crying because of their broken image
 Imagine a 9 year old who is between her mother's boyfriend's legs.
 Can you imagine?
 A baby being blamed from the loss of her parent's relationship

Just imagine

A girl forced to sleep with her mother's dealer so her mother doesn't get cut off.

Could you imagine?

A teacher whispering in your ear telling you you have no one to believe you.

Just imagine

Imagine it just imagine and when you're done

You will see its not just imagination

It's the world the one that surrounds you and me

Just imagine.

* * *

There comes a time in child's life when their attention span is searching, looking for a
 piece of them, a piece that is called their father. Yet, when he is missing and a mother
 takes hand the child no longer feels like a father's hand is in need.

When the hand is given to the child after the child feels dependent on the mother the
 child must choose to take and forgive or to hurt and run away yet if the child chose to run
 it will only feel as if they are running but only in place.

So as I take the hand and look in the face of the person whose hand I have taken I see it is
 not my father but someone I feel I can trust.

I can hold on to the hand for eternity, it's some one I can count on. So when the child's
 father feels he is ready to fill this other mans shoes and see this place is no longer open:

HE HURTS.

It is a man, a man the child looks up to as a father. A man the child is comfortable with
 calling her father.

His baby girl is now grown up and she doesn't have to look for the time, he is there in her
 mind. For her it will always be too late she has a man she calls father
 and you are just looked at as a wanna be.

She will always be funny when it comes to you. She will always be a little too busy. For
 him at least, she is no longer available she no longer feels his presence is needed. So
 when he comes around she is in yet she no longer needs that hand. The hand that was
 supposed to support her, the hand that was to guide her down the path of life. She has found a
 hand one that supports her and gives her the breath of air she needs only to fight.

The rap, poem, and prose (rant) piece by Yung Envy is shared with enthusiasm.
 In her first song, the guy who was a couple of years her senior is still very much "lived
 history" as Yung Envy continues to find out about girls who were with him while she
 was. Now, she says she can laugh about it. Her rap was based on Tupac's "Brenda's
 Got a Baby." She sings the chorus in a way that is completely beautiful.

The "Imagine" poem is a mix of truth and fiction. The poem is based on
 research that included reading about girls' stories as presented in the media
 and using her life experience in a way that created a cohesive narrative. The
 inspiration for this poem was Kirk Franklin's song, "Imagine Me."

After reading "Imagine" at a public poetry slam with other SOLHOT participants, Yung Envy said she was nervous about people judging her against the words she created. She wondered whether people would think that everything she wrote about was her personal experience. In SOLHOT it is well understood that what you said, what you do, or what has happened to you will not be held against you. There is no stigma. The girls know that this SOLHOT reality does not, perhaps cannot, carry over into other places. The most we can do in our public sharing is risk the same judgment as the girls, so homegirls share too. Knowing that ultimately we own our experience and the art of writing and revising can sometimes intervene in people's perception of Black girls.

Yung Envy is loved. She lives with two parents, whom she calls mama and daddy and younger siblings. Her biological father lives elsewhere and she visits him often and speaks to him whenever she decides. She met him when she was six years old. To date he admittedly "baby's" her and bears the title "Him Dat Man" in her cell phone address book. Yung Envy told me she read this rant to her father over the phone and he apologized. He wished she did not feel that way, but she does, easily and happily recalling the day she asked her dad (stepfather) if she could call him dad and he (after checking with her mother) agreed.

* * *

Kaila

Many times in SOLHOT we use poetry prompts to support girls who don't think of themselves as poets or writers to create something they too can present. One oft-used prompt is dubbed "magnetic poetry." Magnetic poetry is a copycat version of those store-brought packages of words, related to a theme, ready to be placed on the refrigerator as poetic entertainment while grabbing a drink or storing leftovers. In SOLHOT, a homegirl adult will bring at least three pages of typed words heard and used by SOLHOT participants. In this exercise, we cut out the words, spread them out on a table-top, and individually or collectively choose words to make a poem. Not necessarily complex in style, these poems afford the girls the opportunity to feel accomplished and creative. Kaila, a seventh grader, put together this poem intended to make us laugh, and it worked:

Curvy black girls come to a hip-hop juke party
Sisters fight loud music

More drama
here come Mama screamin' girl get yo' Black
tail out of here now!

* * *

School System

In 1998, the school system of which many SOLHOT girls are a part of was audited because of a lawsuit between the plaintiff class (African American community members) and the defendants (public school system). In an Educational Equity Audit report submitted to the court by two researchers on the appointed monitoring team, they acknowledged that although some things are done well by the district, their findings show

...when disaggregated and viewed under the scrutiny of the educational equity audit disparities began to emerge between African American student populations and other student populations in the district. These differences were pervasive and found in most areas investigated.

Peterkin and Lucey, 1998, p. 15

Citing "unwarranted disparities" as "those disparities resulting from policies, practices, and procedures within the Control of the District" as opposed to inequities, related to parents' lack of formal education and poverty, the courts have found that students of African descent have not received a quality education, and they are continuing to monitor the school system's policies and practices with hopes of closing the "achievement gap" by the year 2009 (ibid.). Less than a year remains, and many would agree that though some improvements have been made, enduring and significant obstacles continue to undermine the success of African American students.

In SOLHOT, we want to hear more stories about what the "school" does to love their students and to celebrate Black girlhood. Taking them at their word, we don't know who the girls are beyond who they show themselves to be, meaning we do not have access to their grades, school reports, or any other institutional evaluations of their lives. Yet, we ask girls who are students in this broken school system to write, often creatively.

We found by trial and error that written literacy skills vary in SOLHOT; therefore we have to constantly become educators and students of each other's

lives. So what if a word meant to be written as “encouraging” is spelled as “incargin”? How do we respond to girls who hate to write but love to create stories, poems, and skits? SOLHOT as an experience is about teaching and learning, and it is not about imitating or reinforcing traditional methods. In SOLHOT, education is privileged while schooling is resisted. We benefit from being educators seasoned with knowledge and experience while guided by heart.

It was my friend and colleague Christina, former teacher and current professor of education, whose wisdom allowed me to think differently about publicly presenting unedited poems. I told her that I wanted readers to get a sense how some of the girls write but feared that readers who did not know and love these girls would only see them as bad students, incapable, or stupid. “These poems say more about the educational system than who the girl is,” she declared. “The question then becomes what happened in her educational experience that limited her ability to put forth her voice in writing?” she concluded.

She is right, I think, so I ask again, where is the love?

I also feared that people who have such a hard time understanding the complexity of Black girlhood will overgeneralize by thinking that all the girls in SOLHOT write poorly, but this is far from the case. Some girls in SOLHOT are nuanced and profound writers, skilled in writing “standard” English and African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Some girls have succeeded in school, in spite of a local context, policies, and interpretation of policies that seem to care little about high achieving African American student performance. Actually, one of the best writers in SOLHOT, a true poet with mad skills, told me I could not include her work. I respected her right to have her work satisfy herself and communicated how grateful I was to her for giving me the opportunity to read it.

But, I don’t know why she won’t share her work. The only explanation she offered to me was, “no,” repeatedly. I cannot discern whether her unwillingness to publicly share her work is because she wants to keep it private or because she does not think her work is worth sharing. Her tough exterior and cool pose mask the intention behind her refusal, so her poems, brilliant and beyond extraordinary, are for now kept private but recognized.

Just Because ...

This poetry prompt is well loved by all in SOLHOT. A gift from a homegirl volunteer, this single prompt is often used as a way we introduce ourselves to each other so as to avoid generalizations based solely on physical appearances.

Just because I’m spoiled
Doesn’t mean I’m a brat
My name is Coco
And I am Black!

Just because I’m Black
Doesn’t mean I’m different
My name is Janae
And I am nice!

Just because I am a 16-year-old teen
Doesn’t mean you can treat me like I’m 2
My name is Loreal
And I am beautiful, responsible, African American 16-year-old young lady

Just because and I am a African American female
Doesn’t mean I will be a statistic
My name is Monique
And I am beautiful.

Just because I’m a slow runner
Doesn’t mean I can’t do anything athletic
My name is _____
And I am beautifulious!

Just because I am a girl
Doesn’t mean I can’t go to college
My name is Shantanece
And I am a star!

Just because I’m a girl
Doesn’t mean I won’t treat you.
My name is Tatiana
And I am Black!

Just because I act
Doesn’t mean I’m slow
My name is Alia

And I am feeling self definition and I’m black even though Coco said I’m white
but I said skip you and I’m proud to be black.

Anonymous

The author of the poem chose to remain anonymous. She did not read this poem in SOLHOT, but when she wanted me to read a few different poems, this one was included “on accident.” Anyway, she told me I could include it as long as I did not provide her name.

Sexuality

My sexuality is not only a question but it's a mystery. Hips, thighs, breast and the feminine touch. Why is that that these beautiful things arouse me. Late night fantasies of her brown body against mine. This isn't right I shouldn't be examining the same gender as me. I want her yet we have the same thing.

In SOLHOT, no one has ever publicly talked with the group about what it means to be queer, lesbian, or curious. Yet, at least once a semester a girl in the group will use poetry to express same-sex desire. Usually, the girls do not want these poems read or shared with anyone else in the group. For me what is significant about this poem is that curiosity is not conflated with confusion. This poet is very clear about her interest in girls. SOLHOT is a liberating space for girls to say things they feel or like but can't say in company of people who will judge them. As I read poems like these, I do not judge the poet, so for example, I do not think the author of this poem for example "should" do anything or "needs" anything by way of intervention. The point is she wrote it, anonymously. And I love her for her courage whether or not how I understood the poem explains how she meant it.

Ruth Nicole

In SOLHOT, I too am a participant. Here's a poem I wrote:

When I'm in this room and I look around what do I see?

I see a whole lotta beautiful spirit

Staring at me.

Black girls so beautiful

Don't no one dare

Compromise us

Don't no one try to come at us wrong,

Cuz we can freeze you with our stare

We got black women powers at

age 12 beware!

We created the world and all therein

When we feelin' ourselves

I think we fly

flyin high as we want to be.

Especially when we don't let any one tell

us who we be.

So Latanya don't be

afraid to shake yo' batty!

Alia I see you wild and oh so free

Sista girl I love your sweet spirit

You're okay just as you are

Jazzy girl I think you know the secrets

to the world,

in your quietness is grace.

How amazing.

I'm so very excited about who we are and women we will be

Yung Envy I need you to sing a song for me.

When I performed this poem out loud in front of those in SOLHOT, I was quite literally asking Yung Envy to sing a song but I did not know what song she would choose to sing. I just love her voice. The tears immediately welled up, when she began to sing "Don't Take it Personal" by Monica (1995). The subsequent sentimentality flowed effortlessly from me to her and everyone else present because I knew that it was highly unlikely that Yung Envy was born when Monica's song came out. Yung Envy was 14 years old at the time, and after counting backward and doing the math I realize she was actually 2 years old and I was 15 years old when Monica's album *Miss Thang* debuted, and "Don't Take It Personal" was a lead single. Wanting Monica's trendy "Halle Berry" haircut and getting caught up taking sides in the manufactured Monica versus Brandy battle, I was now on Monica's team. This song was a personal mantra for me for as long as it stayed number one because Monica seemed to personify Black girl teenage angst with some sense of agency. But why, I wanted to know while Yung Envy sang in SOLHOT, did she sing this particular song by Monica? Did she know, not know, or have an inkling that this song was also important to me?

Memory doesn't always mean looking back from the point of the adult. So much of the literature about adults working with young people as mentors, teachers, or researchers focus on troubling adult memories, with the worry that those who had tortured childhoods will try and put all their stuff on the young people with whom they work. But in this moment, Yung Envy spoke to me through song, "Don't take it personal" to remember and recenter myself as a girl to connect with her own experiences as a girl. It's not just about me as the adult learning how Yung Envy and her friends do the "two step," "forties," and "sixties," but it is also about the ways they reach back beyond time to say "I'm here with you now"—to level the playing field and power dynamics of our relationship. It is an ahistorical collapse of time that I think speaks to the metaphysical dynamic of SOLHOT and how connections are made across differences and because of similarities (e.g., loving the same music). Notably, it was the poem that enabled this ritual of acceptance.

The poem I wrote was not good: actually it was pretty bad. Nonetheless, the sharing of this poem made possible an unpredictable point of connection between Yung Envy and me and those who similarly felt moved and loved.

Letters To Ourselves

All of My Dreams

Well now,

So many things would be different. I was 24 ten years ago. So worried about what others thought. I was in a dead end job, wanting to go back to school, but so unmotivated and scared to try. Not thinking I was smart enough to make it happen. I would have trusted myself more, valued my opinion more, treasured my body more. Said, "no, I don't agree with you" more. Dancing kept me sane, connected my spirit to my feet, and made me happy. I should have treated it (dance) more lovingly. When he needed to leave, I would have let him go telling him "I mean what I say—my virtue is nonnegotiable." And I would have cried, but not begged in his absence. I would have cherished my mother more, making it my mission to help her realize her dreams deferred.

Nita

Dear Sheena (21 years old),

I am in between proud of myself because sometimes I do things that I know I shouldn't be doing. Like going with this boy. I have moved on. Not worried about any boys. But worrying about school, My grades are in between A's and D's. I'm trying to pull it up. But I really will focus on what my dream is. Also, I'm a black girl, but not really close to a black woman.

Love, Sheena (11 years old)

I remember that day in SOLHOT history when one courageous and beautiful woman turned out an otherwise bland and perhaps overly used writing prompt: "Homegirls, write a letter to your ten year younger self, & girls, write a letter to your ten year older self." For those of us listening, we were brought to tears. Heart beating and holding still, there are words spoken that changed lives for the better and for always. I'm convinced that what made Nita's letter a bit different than others read that night was that she was not afraid to share her experiences as fully lived. Also, because Nita is a dancer she is so in tune with her body that speaking her words off the page was like

Katherine Dunham's technique, culturally moving and grounded in the root of all things human.

Sheena's letter doesn't say explicitly what her dream is but everyone in SOLHOT knows that it is singing. Sheena can out-sing us all. It is her singing voice that articulates who she is and what she has to say more than the letter she wrote in response to the prompt. Many of the homegirls reminisced about their own singing voices that they silenced as adult women because they did not feel confident in their talent. After reading her letter, Sheena asked those homegirls who said they would have sang to sing more. Her letter was a bridge providing a foundation from which to jump right in and interrogate the fears and regrets of women, some of whom were three times her senior. Homegirls to whom this request was made still refused to sing. I asked Sheena whether she would sing to encourage those of us who have forgotten how and she did.

To date, this exercise, more than any other in SOLHOT, was the most like therapy. We sat face to face, read letters to each other, and then "acted out" in some way what was written in the letter. We asked questions and made demands of each other. We cried. The girls used the homegirls in the space to picture themselves ten years older (although many of us were much older) and many of the homegirls looked in the faces, actions, and expressions of the girls to remind us most of who we once were. Forward thinking and looking back were easily acceptable metaphors to think about change in our admittance of wanting to be better people. And just to bring the experience back to SOLHOT, eschewing the therapy session that we declared over even though we weren't conscious of its start, a few homegirls made it our mission to acknowledge out loud and to everyone that we are just fine as we are.

Girls' Voices: How Much Is Too Much?

Once upon a SOLHOT time, it all seemed to go wrong. Everyone seems to have had their own plans, with little to zero convergence on any one issue. Too many of us insisted that the girls were "not paying attention" when their conversations diverged from "the agenda." At one point or another homegirls felt disrespected and unheard. Basically, SOLHOT was becoming too much like our everyday. Our posse and productions were less than compelling. Most critically, girls' and women's voices were questioned in such a way that seemed to suggest, according to some, that we should really just be quiet, speak differently, or quit.

Cutting it dangerously close to Harris' insight, namely that publicly speaking and engaged girls are supervised and encouraged to produce "certain" subjectivities as "successful," I felt as if I was walking through the eye of a needle in a clown suit. How could we pull this back to center, to SOLHOT? Why do we need them to "act right"—and what does "acting right" mean in the first place? Who is not "acting right"—the homegirls or the girls? When I focused on what wasn't working I had to admit that there did not seem to be anything cold, dope, phat, hype, hot, or tight going on by the way of spoken words.

During this time, I asked my colleague Dana Edell to visit. Dana and I are recent and fast friends; her commitment to working with girls mirrors my own in really unbelievable ways, in spite of our very valuable differences.

Dana is cofounder of viBe Theater Experience, a nonprofit performing-arts education organization that provides a safe, creative space for underserved young women to share their stories and use their voices to build and transform themselves and their community (<http://www.vibetheater.org/2/10/08>). Based in New York City (SOLHOT is so not NYC but very Midwest) viBe works with girls who are multiracial and multiethnic. viBe is a legitimate not-for-profit, and SOLHOT is a collective cipher with no formal organizational structure. viBe is well established. SOLHOT is just getting started. Though Dana is White, born and raised on the East Coast and I am Black, born and raised in the Midwest, we both represent all that it means to do critically engaged work with girls of color, and since I believe fiercely in coalitions, I casually invited Dana to help a *sista* out.

I confided to Dana that this time in SOLHOT was not going as well as others. Immediately calmed by her "some times it's just like that" response, I use the guise of a formal interview to ask her about voice and expression. During the "bad" times, it wasn't that we weren't creating art—it's just that a lot of what was also happening was so borderline girl management with a hip-hop soundtrack that I unconsciously went underground. I didn't know it then, but at the same time we were doing SOLHOT, I was studying and soaking up everything about the intersections between girls, programming, hip-hop, art, education, local and transnational formations, and youth. My ongoing mediation surfaced in my questions to Dana. When working with girls and women of color in all of our complexity, is there anything such as too much, I wanted to know? Surely, doing this work a lot longer than I was, I asked Dana about how she and Chandra Thomas (viBe cofounder) negotiated what could be described as the limits of girls' voices.

Maybe more than anyone I know, Dana believes in the power of girl's voices. For real, for real. I did come to think differently about what was going on in SOLHOT through the retelling of a few as Dana would write, "viBrant" lessons.

Dana: I'm not advocating that you should be able to say anything in the world that you want to say whenever you want to say it and that that is a healthy world. I think there are things that you *do* keep in your "inside voice." There are ... we all have deep-seeded prejudices that we don't even know we have and that can be really destructive. We're saying to a girl: "you can say whatever you want onstage." And maybe she's saying she wants to get up on stage and say how much she hates gay people and that's happened before. You know, we've had that kind of tension in rehearsal where I feel like I always say we don't censor anything. And then a girl will write a piece and then I'm like, "oh shit you can't say that! That's really that's going to offend ... owww" and so that becomes an interesting moment in rehearsal where I have to talk with the girl a lot—"what does it mean for you to say this?" and "I'm going to be honest with you, as an audience member this is what I feel when you say these things um, imagine people in the audience. There will be gay people in the audience. How do you feel to know that you are saying this knowing that they're listening and that they're there to support you? That's why they're coming to the show and that's why it is important for you to say this. Where is this coming from?" So those kinds of issues do come up. We also have girls who want to do like a stripper dance. That happens a lot because they want to dance. They want to sing. They want to be sexy. That's sort of what it means to be a 16-year-old in many ways. They're exploring their bodies changing. They like that it's changing. They don't like that it's changing. They're proud of themselves. We do a lot of like trying to empower them to have the confidence and self-esteem that they are beautiful who they are and sometimes that can backfire on stage and the line between making sure that it's not exploitative and it's not like they're not buying into this whole media culture of like—"girls are these sexy playthings." But that's like that because so many of them grew up like that, watching music videos, watching movies and reading magazines. These images are exciting. That's the kind of girl they want to be.

So here's a story. We had a girl, Kiara, in one of our first shows who literally choreographed a chair dance. One thing that we do in every show—is "two minutes in the spotlight." For the rest of the show, the girls are collaborating and they're making the show together. And we want to make sure that every individual girl has two minutes of the show that is just hers. Where she doesn't have to collaborate with anybody. She gets to decide 100 percent what she wants to do. Nobody can tell her where to move. Nobody else can tell her what to do or what character to play. She directs it.

So Kiara was like, "for my two minutes I'm going to do a dance." And we were like, "okay, yeah, do a dance. Let's see the dance." It's like a week before the show and she comes to rehearsal and she's like, "okay I need a chair." And she proceeds to do like a stripper chair dance. And she worked hard like watching music videos and copying what they do, what she sees everyday and in so many ways I can't shut her down. It's

so—it breaks my heart how much I understand that that's where that's coming from. And she was like 14 or 15. She was young and I don't think she really understood what that dance meant and so I asked her, "why do you want to do this dance?" and she said, "I want to be sexy." And I was like "okay." That's right. That's your answer. I can't argue with that. And so I was like, "what does sexy mean to you?" And she's like, "you know I think this is a sexy dance and I want the audience to think I'm sexy." And I was like, "oh fuck. Is that what we're doing?" And in some ways it is. We're providing the space and they can say whatever they want and they can do whatever they want. So then I need to be responsible for when things come up. I can—and I don't want to—be the grown up in the room who, like every other grown up in her life, is telling her, "you can't do that. You're not old enough to do that." And so I remember what we-- me and Chandra—(my partner we run all of our rehearsals together) we talked about that dance *a lot*. Chandra was like, "what do we do about Kiara's stripper dance?" And we talked about it. We talked to her about it. We talked about music choice (it was some horrible song that I can't remember now). And she did end up changing it a bit. I still feel like being in the audience at that performance I felt like I had failed her. It was a moment that I think about a lot.

Ruth Nicole: Why do you think that, that you failed her?

Dana: Because I felt like what we let her do was objectify herself. And I don't think—I don't want to be condescending to her, but I also don't want—I don't think she really understood what that meant at that age, at that moment in her life. That she just didn't get that she, being sexy in that way, was not necessarily her version of sexy—it's a version of sexy that is derogatory and objectifying and insulting and violent and all of these things that she just didn't get. And I can't expect her to understand the whole weight and history of all of that as a 14-year-old in that moment. It was a jarring moment for me as I questioned what my role actually was. Cause I feel like if they're not going to learn it from us, where is she going to learn it? And if she's not going to learn it at 14, is she going to learn it the hard way? Is she going to do something that she believes sexy is and she really wants to be sexy in that way—then does she want boys to like her for that? I worry about situations she could get herself into in the future. So, yeah. I don't—it was an unresolved moment and I think we did as much as we were capable of doing in the moment. But since then I think I've shifted the way we present "two minutes." I think it's more about being responsible for what you're doing and what you're saying. We try to encourage girls to use that time and space to really communicate to the audience something that they believe is important for the audience to understand about who they are and how they see their world. I think that's a huge lesson that girls have to learn. Yes, you can say whatever you want but you do need to be aware of the consequences and sometimes you can say, "cool—if that's what's going to happen, great. I'm ready for it!" Or you need to say, "wow. I'm not prepared for those consequences right now."

After Dana left I was clearer about my purpose for creating SOLHOT. I was able to forgive myself for thinking that our "harder" times represented failure.

It certainly did not. I needed that time to go down exactly like it did. That time forced me to think deeply and name in greater detail my dream for SOLHOT.

I have come to accept and explain SOLHOT as a process-dependent space for Black girls and women to articulate, through the arts, who we are and want to be. Art just does not mean poetry or prompts, it also means "happenings" and those performative moments of Black girl culture that intentionally break rules of patriarchal middle-class White public space civility to get a point across. These "unresolved moments" in SOLHOT are a kind of performance that enacts the border between appreciating who girls and homegirls are and "letting them objectify themselves." These are the cultural productions that do not appear on stage in SOLHOT. It is the most private moments in the public space of SOLHOT that hold the greatest transformative power for us all. Making these moments public is risky business and also an invitation to dialogue.

Conclusion: Back to the Middle

In SOLHOT we create art. Our intentionally creative expressions and our unintentional moments of disruption all work to perform what we have to say using our words, voice, and bodies. Given that there are so many different ways of being and speaking from the position of Black girlhood, in SOLHOT we wear out any way possible of bringing what we believe and what we live to each other and sometimes to the people.

Given that voice and listening are so widely celebrated among not-for-profit and for-profit organizations, foundations, and scholarships seeking to produce "empowered" girls, we must continue to think critically about the consequences both from the prospective of the girls as Dana Edell builds into the viBe theatre process, the theoretical premise of Anita Harris' scholarship that questions how power shapes girls' public discourse, and of course from the standpoint of Black girls and women working together to value what is spoken, performed, silenced, and too often unrecognized. SOLHOT is all about the messy in-between—yes you can, no you don't have to, and please think about doing it again—that we have ciphered off into different projects with explicit aims. For example, in the SOLHOT performance group, we know that we will have an audience, and in the SOLHOT drop-in group, we believe we can share this with each other or not.

This new structure to SOLHOT, however, does not change the power dynamics that define the incitement to discourse whereby speaking youth voices

are increasingly monitored and judged. It only gives the process a more explicit purpose in theory. In practice, we have girls who sign up for both projects not completely decided that what they have to say they want to share.

My instinct is to encourage girls in their unplugged sharing in public venues. My instinct is also to create or recreate these public sharings in ways that reveal as much of the process as the end product. Somehow. For those of us in SOLHOT, we live in a place that can be bitter cold to the bone, unrelenting gray skies lasting too long, our gendered Black poor and working-class selves rarely reflected back to us as human, with choices of entertainment consisting of big box store or big box store. This is the geographic landscape in which our will, the kind we too often submit to someone else, is diminished. So this Black girl speaking voice thing, the idea that Black girls as creators and creative should be publicly put to test, that listening to Black girls is paramount, that we value being out and loud and louder from open field to open field, is encouraged not out of vanity or vogue but out of wretched necessity.

Elliott Lib. Charleston, W. Va.

· CONCLUSION ·

TOWARD A CRITICAL HIP-HOP FEMINIST PEDAGOGY

If India.Arie told her mother and boyfriend to hold tight because she was going to meet her sister, homegirls, and sista friends, and along with her guitar and angels, there would be many girls and young women bringing their songs, attitude, issues, and ways of being in the world, all trying to find the joy inside themselves and celebrate the women they are and have become, that would be SOLHOT. The “private party” moment would become a house party open to anyone who could relate to the rhythm of being a Black girl child turned woman either by choice or by force. Surely, we’d ask India.Arie to sing “Video”; Yung Envy would turn it out her rendition of Monica’s “Don’t Take It Personal”; Sheena would start to beatbox; and before you know it, we’re doing the Batty dance to a blues, rap, house remix. Our poems would give name to our very justified reasons for feeling pity; loving ourselves and each other would remain the challenge after we left the space.

The idea of SOLHOT is to create a space where it doesn’t matter if mama, boyfriend, girlfriend, and grandma are trippin’: you have somewhere to go and not be alone in asking the questions we need to ask and doing the work that it takes to create the kind of change we want to see. The challenge may be to understand how beautiful we are; it may be talking with others to find out whether that personal problem is personal or shared by almost everyone in the group, and it may mean taking up more space in the school and community

so that Black women and girls do not have to apologize and feel bad for being who they are. It may mean liking the idea of SOLHOT and not incorporating but demanding SOLHOT love for Black girls and women in relationships, at church, in the coffee shop, and on the street. You would have known SOLHOT occurred because the space would be different; it would have smelled like Nag Champa and/or Sandalwood, because our ancestors and living legends would have been remembered there.

In this book, I have documented my personal and political motivations for creating a space called SOLHOT for and by Black girls and women to celebrate who we are in all of our complexity. Inherently process-oriented, in SOLHOT we talk, create, discuss, question, tell stories, and dance about what it means to a be Black girl dedicated to rehearsing different ways of being and moving through the world. Sometimes SOLHOT culminates into a great public display of creative expression; sometimes we intervene in local poetry slams, lectures, and community 'zines; and sometimes we keep what we make to ourselves, for our own enjoyment and pleasure (so nobody can steal it!). SOLHOT is about what the homegirls and the girls who come to participate decide it is going to be about.

In the first chapter, I discussed how power works in and outside of SOLHOT and how SOLHOT, among other things, makes the idea of one "program" solving the problems that young people face absurd. In chapter two, I offered a theoretical explanation of how spaces dedicated to girls and discourses of girlhood do not automatically or substantially address issues relevant to young Black girls. I make the point that "narrative discrepancies" exist when there is a theory/practice mismatch. Chapter three provided an overview of SOLHOT, as a fragmented coming together and falling apart practice of organizing under a construct of Black girlhood celebration. In chapter four, I provided a micro-analysis of how dance functions in SOLHOT as a mediator of building relationships between SOLHOT participants, and how dance exemplifies what it means for SOLHOT as a practice to be grounded in African American girlhood and hip-hop. Chapter five both offered and problematized "girls' voices" from SOLHOT. Among a collection of narratives, poems, rants, and songs created by SOLHOT participants, I offer a detailed contextualization of the process in which participants' expression was created.

Homegirl volunteers come to SOLHOT to make a difference in the life of one girl, and in SOLHOT we bust their do-gooder bubble and say, "save yourself!" Girls, middle-school and high-school students, come to SOLHOT

to write a rhyme, resist direction, and to tell us what happened. Homegirl volunteers and girls want to be in SOLHOT and yet do not know how to be present at the same time. Among us all is the silent recognition that this thing called Black girlhood, if it is about any such things as freedom, fun, and laughter, is only so because we decidedly created the space out of our stressed, overcommitted, Black womanhood-in-training socialization—to be new.

In SOLHOT, our girlhood celebration is mediated by hip-hop that does not exist separately from feminism. So much of SOLHOT is about asking, "What do you call that dance?" when in the center of our cipher I'm representing with a remixed version of the crip walk while you are walking it out. Even when we don't know we are speaking through hip-hop or claim not to be into "that music" anymore, the feminine expression of hip-hop emerges through so-called neo-soul analogies and girls' handclapping rhymes. SOLHOT participants all grew up with some connection or disconnection to hip-hop in a way that defines part of who we are or were as girls, which I believe makes it possible for tacitly agreed-on values. For example, our mobile cipher (being here and there), our resistance to being completely organized, and our commitment to freestyle are positively valued. In SOLHOT, we have this "space" we go to make sense of what we are doing, hearing, seeing, and being in the world. Many times our experiences and first insights are drawn directly from the culture in which we live, part of it hip-hop.

In SOLHOT, our girlhood celebration is also mediated by feminism that does not seem significant without hip-hop. The idea that gender- and race-specific spaces for Black girls is a welcomed intervention to the otherwise and sometimes unintentional gendered social activities of middle-school, high-school, and college-age students is not only reflective of a Black feminist commitment to organizing on our own behalf (see Combahee River Collective) but is also a political action that is whispered as necessary through the words and sounds of contemporary Black female artists. The logic of many "middle" children of the hip-hop generation is plainly articulated by Felicia Pride (2007), "If we are hip-hop and hip-hop is messed up, perhaps we need to get ourselves together." Girls of color desire spaces to figure out the "balancing act" between "how to individuate and stay connected" (Ward and Veloria, 2006) and many argue that participation in these kind of programs are crucial to educationally resilient African American girls (Evans-Winters, 2005). But not just any space will do; certainly, not a can-do kind of liberal project of girl management.

"SOLHOT is a space" we have come to offer as an adequate and insider response to a stranger of SOLHOT when asked by them what we are up to. According to John Jackson, Jr. (2005), "Spaces can be real and imagined, spaces can tell stories or unfold histories, spaces to be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice." SOLHOT is some space to claim that is ours, as Black girls. SOLHOT participants have explicitly made the case while policing identity politics borders that they, as Black girls, don't want to be exclusionary but valued. When they get to this exclusionary space, they want to bring in all of who they are as thinking and expressive girls and women who share a similar historical position in the world and have grown up their entire lives with the music, values, ideas, culture of hip-hop and feminism. In this space that is decidedly ours, we perform resistances, our politics, and our dreams. Our performances echo lyrics of rhymes passed, relying on current technologies of producing and disseminating messages to infectious beats. We have so much style!

Are You So Serious?

Hip-hop feminist pedagogy holds the possibility of turning the private party into something bigger, explicitly political and educational. Hip-hop feminist pedagogy recognizes and validates the everyday work many young women of color are doing to create social change that falls outside of mainstream hip-hop, commodified feminism, traditional organizing, and formal education. In this book, I offer the example of SOLHOT as one kind of practice that is situated in hip-hop feminist pedagogy. Hip-hop feminist pedagogy best describes the enacted and embodied principles of how we come together and what we believe in which allow SOLHOT to exist and grow as meaningful public work. Coming together to enact a hip-hop feminist pedagogy, no matter the form, leaves us less alone and less pitiful. I am so serious.

Hip-hop feminist pedagogy thrives on unlikely teachable moments that allow us to collectively process performance events that reveal what is at stake in growing up as Black girls and women who are often objects of desire and scorn. As we walk from our office to the car door, from class to our locker, or travel from the Midwest to West Africa and vice versa, Black women and girls have found it routine to wonder whether the way other people see us in that moment has anything to do with what they were watching, listening, or dancing to the second before. Thanks to mainstream hip-hop, the language, signs, and

aesthetics girls and young women currently use to ask very old questions and to critique assumed normal standards of social inequality requires a pedagogy of hip-hop feminism that, among other things, works as a method of translation.

Unlike gender- and race-specific programs and cultural activities with the aim of producing an event, hip-hop feminist pedagogy as a process is not about coming together or organizing for a grand performance. Rather, it is about creating spaces so that the critique, rehearsal, participation, and engagement in the everyday performance of being young Black girls may be played out and played back for the benefit of praxis, reflection, and intervention. Like the work of Augusto Boal (1993), the idea is to shrink the superficial lines of separation between actors and spectators. The concert-going experience of Amel Larrieux (2004) would serve as another likely analogy. Larrieux, as a singer, collaborates with her audiences in a most profound way, creating an intimacy that grows when roles are not simply reversed but explicitly transformed in the direction of equality that feels just.

In this everyday/nightness approach to hip-hop feminist pedagogy, we build always on the most unlikely teachable moments. Consider this example that makes clear (at least to me) the purpose of hip-hop feminist pedagogy. In the middle of an Illinois February (freezing cold, being the point) evening, wearing a short-sleeved turtleneck, booty-tight daisy dukes, and stilettos, there was this young Black woman garnering much attention in a restaurant transformed by a deejay spinning hip-hop into a lounge party set for "grown folk." I'm hanging out with a few friends, some of us SOLHOT homegirls, some not, when our laughter was interrupted by the impromptu happening—the trendy-dressed woman gave her man a lap dance, for all to see.

I am not passing judgment.

So let's just say it was me. And if I was this girl, I am well aware that while everyone else is socializing, they can't help but to have their eyes on me. I'm working it out; I encourage myself. As I'm sexually seducing "my man," I got Snoop singing "Sexual Seduction" in the background as my soundtrack. I might say to myself that he made that song just to back me up!

But even as I'm feeling good about the way I move, or about "my man's" casual approval, or looks of admiration from women and men on the set of my video, I have to be honest: everything is not all good. I also notice, though I hoped not everyone else does, that my dancing was not enough to make him stay. I could not tell this story without also mentioning that after all the dancing (public work) I did, "my man" sat me down by my homely looking friend (in comparison) when he felt like it. I fear that he secretly hollered from across the

room to someone else, not me. But just to change his mind about anything he might want to do with someone else, every time he comes back I start dancing all over again, pleasing him with more than a smile. Because if I just grind harder and drop it hotter, more effortlessly, I think I can make him stay.

But this wasn't me, although it could have been maybe ten years ago (or why am I frontin'—it could have been me now for real). I'm trippin'. In any case, it was not me that night. And my SOLHOT homegirls and I noticed how the lap dance recipient turned the young woman on and off without her consent.

Hip-hop feminist pedagogy is not about vilifying the girl who did the dance, or the recipient, or the audience for watching her performance, but about creating a space for her to be beautiful, and not just because of how she can dance for someone else. But the movement and gestures performed for self-fulfillment are also applauded and thought valuable. Hip-hop feminist pedagogy allows those expected to dance to put some words together to name what it means that strip club behavior, norms, and sensibilities extend beyond the strip club into our daily life as Black women and girls (Sharply-Whiting, 2007), and some of us do not want to dance. For anyone. At all. The magic of hip-hop feminist pedagogy is creating a collective space to name what it means that the recipient's and audience's borderline appreciation felt more like objectification because, while we were watching this sister's public show of Black feminine prowess, I also saw her thinking and being strategic—what was that about?

According to Mark Anthony Neale,

Hip Hop has created a space—for bad or worse—where Black women can actually see that they are desired for what they look like in a society that has always tossed Black women aside for this ideal of white beauty. For many young Black girls, this is the space where I can be desired, where the gaze is on me, and I can feel pretty and beautiful. How many other spaces are there in society for Black women [and girls] to have that desire directed toward them?

Morgan and Neal, 2007, p. 240

Hip-hop feminist pedagogy creates “the space” to talk about our experiences playing the role as sexual seducer with Snoop as *our* background singer and us the star of the show. In our conversation, we keep it really real and also acknowledge that all his leaving, coming, and going at whim, while propped up pretty, working hard, then forced to await his return, can really play itself out. And really, do we even like him? We have to ask ourselves. There are many spaces that enact what I am calling a hip-hop feminist pedagogy that make these kind conversations explicit, deconstruct the gaze, and express girls' desire and desirability.

Hip-hop feminist pedagogy makes it completely fair to say that some part of our daily reality, particularly as Black and brown girls and women of color, is like navigating a popular mainstream video. I did not have to sign up or willingly decide to be the next “video vixen”; I was just kicking it with my girls when I realized I could not escape the world as a video shoot. More often than not, the video I'm living in is more like Nelly's infamous Tip Drill than an India.Arie song. Now, I wonder what the world would be like if there were more life-affirming images for me and my girls to run into and to play out on a daily basis. I could possibly think “sexy” and not feel automatically trained to sexually seduce, but to entertain romance as Goapele sang, “unconditionalness, sweetness uncompromised.” Now, that's exciting! But I digress. If all the world (or part of it) is a video shoot as we know most videos to be now sexist, homophobic, materialistic, misogynist, let's talk about it with each other and learn something from the way in which we intentionally choose to play and/or not to play. Let's create the videos (world) we want to see. Let's examine the seemingly singular and seductive role that seems to celebrate Black girls and women for what they look like and what they can do. In the context of hip-hop feminist pedagogy, we know that if we become the decision makers and own the space on our own behalf, we could decide, and do, to turn the celebration into something that loves Black women and girls, as complex and whole human beings! Joan Morgan wrote,

I think that women also have to get very serious about the modes of power that we *do* have and the spaces that we *do* control. I always say feminism is a noun, but it's really a verb, like you gotta *do* something, you know what I mean?

Morgan and Neal, 2007, p. 244

SOLHOT is what I am doing to mean something serious about hip-hop feminist pedagogy. We are not only creating seriously new ways of thinking and being Black girls and women who love hip-hop and feminism, but, admittedly, we are also negotiating and resisting the unique challenges and complex legacies of mainstream hip-hop as detrimental and loving, feminism as equal worth and stereotypical, and education as a banking system and libratory praxis.

Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy Defined

Hip-hop feminist pedagogy is a space created to employ ways of being, knowing, and questions that are unique (though not exclusive to) our generation's

experiences about what it means to be and grow in-between the intersections of race, class, gender, age, and sexuality as mediated by hip-hop, feminism, and education. In the listed tenets of hip-hop feminist pedagogy presented below and previously described in greater detail throughout this book, I provide an overarching summary to express yet another way of naming the work so many of us are doing in communities where we live and work for the goal of being Black girls and women but beautiful.

1. *Hip-hop feminist pedagogy is the gendered (feminine) and racialized (Blackness) work of bringing young people together, to create dialogue, art, and social change using a strategic mix of political organizing fundamentals, cultural practices, and education.*

In this work, we resist all that it means to be and grow up marginalized by race, class, gender, sexuality, age, and hip-hop. In this global explanation, do not miss the singular point—this work of teaching and learning about our culture in “community spaces” is often understood to be the job of women of color that we are supposed to perform for free. Though everyone loves the event, hip-hop feminist pedagogy requires an understanding of the value in attending to the details, and, in so doing, recognizing the transformatory possibilities of the smallest action.

2. *Hip-hop feminist pedagogy invokes and articulates meanings of a youthful politics from an intersectional standpoint that decenters and destabilizes masculine and patriarchal origin narratives of hip-hop.*

Hip-hop feminism celebrates hip-hop in the time before the men came (Cleage, 2004) and resists telling the oft-quoted origin narrative in a way that leaves women and girls outside of hip-hop. Hip-hop feminist pedagogy allows us to reclaim our double Dutch rhymes and create new ones like we do in SOLHOT. Hip-hop’s feminine voice can take the form of street cheers as the preeminent site of battle, letting expressive contributions and ways of story telling, singing, dancing, and signifying as a Black girl again be seen as a genre of freestyle in which girls and women have long since dominated. Undoubtedly, hip-hop loves and appreciates Black women’s and girls’ bodies to the point of no return; hip-hop feminism brings that love and attention back from the perils of objectification and scorn to say “if it is about love, then I should feel lovely.” Loving Black women and girls is a humanizing discourse, and a hip-hop feminist pedagogy finds numerous ways to demonstrate how.

3. *Hip-hop feminist pedagogy creates the space for insight to be collectively shared and distributed, for new (other) knowledge to be produced, valuing and caring for each person who shows up.*

Hip-hop feminist pedagogy is an every-woman and all-girl show so that there are as many narratives of what is created and produced as there are participants in the process to retell the story.

4. *Hip-hop feminist pedagogy is structurally oppositional.*

This work often exists outside of formal organization and resources, and therefore some of what it takes to enact a hip-hop feminist pedagogy is knowing the rules and intentionally working outside of them, seeking to transform them. This allows the work we do, for example, to not look to outsiders like hip-hop feminist pedagogy, but, to insiders, the ways of processing and producing could not happen without a connection, a relationship to each of these critical mediators. The terms hip-hop, feminist, pedagogy each transform and limit each other and how we enact hip-hop feminism in the spaces we claim is inherently critical drawing on the intersections in and out of our voiced and silenced actions.

5. *Hip-hop feminist pedagogy is political because power dynamics shape the need for it, and power over dynamics (specifically) is resisted in the doing.*

This making of the political differs from traditional avenues of democratic participation, for example, those that offer little real possibility for youth marginalized by race, gender, class, and sexuality to be formally included. Therefore, cultural critique and art making are equally valid ways of demonstrating leadership as are traditionally defined roles defined in terms of rank and hierarchal positions.

Borders and Boundaries

In SOLHOT, what we do is always determined by the will of the group; how we do whatever we decide is guided by a hip-hop feminist pedagogy. Therefore, in the past we have created publicly performed role-plays, scenes, poetry, photography projects, videos, presentations, newspaper editorials, and the like. We have also met regularly and consistently, refusing to broadcast our publicly private parties. While not product-oriented; there is something created of value that cannot necessarily be packaged, sold, or commodified. Yes, love, friendship, trust, creativity, “mentors,” fictive kin relationships, passion, and fun are some of the “intangible” products of doing this kind of work and, while enough, that is not all.

Paulo Friere (2000) taught us that literacy means not only knowing how to write and read following a set of grammatical rules, but knowing how to read the way power and powerlessness operate in our daily lives. As a method of critical

pedagogy, hip-hop feminist pedagogy as practiced in SOLHOT creates a kind of literacy that allows us to understand what this work means in a particular space, working under certain constructs, with particular individuals. In thinking about hip-hop feminism beyond SOLHOT, it is useful to “undo” some of the tenets in my own definition for the purpose of the possibility of transcending SOLHOT as currently practiced. This undoing of what has been done is necessary because there is no way I want to suggest that hip-hop feminist pedagogy looks only one kind of way or means a particular kind of space. This book is not meant to be prescriptive, and just in case too much of what I relayed sounds tight enough to pick up and package for a girl’s group in your neighborhood, I find it necessary to trouble the borders and question the boundaries.

In SOLHOT, our hip-hop feminist pedagogy organizes under a Black girlhood construct, and though fictive, it is useful. The girls know that anyone can come to SOLHOT; however die-hards insist that SOLHOT is a space for Black girls, just us. We need someplace to go that is just ours. In this SOLHOT geography, our circle has room to expand, but right now participants have decided to close rank. Hip-hop feminist pedagogy works the metaphorical border of wanting to get out of the box while simultaneously enforcing borders of Black girlhood, although it does not have to. In SOLHOT, Black girlhood is not essentialized and it’s about interrogating what we mean—and although insisting on a space by us, for us, the “us” holding it all together is probably less about Black girlhood than about something else.

And even in this “authentically” constructed Black girls’ space, the girls would acknowledge that people bring themselves as self-identified biracial, mixed-raced, Jamaican, American Indian, Ghanaian, and white. Age does not define girlhood, as we are younger and older. We are mothers and daughters, sometimes both. Some of us in SOLHOT have left SOLHOT and taken it with us. Most recently, we have people coming to this place because of SOLHOT.

The geographic locale of SOLHOT is bound by historical patterns of intense housing segregation; in this small urban city, there is still what is considered the “Black” side of town. Located in a place with a university nearby also means that there is a border separating “town” and “gown.” In the public school system, there are federally documented and monitored “unwarranted disparities” in educational outcomes for students of African descent. To the north, south, west, and east of this place is nothing, or what we Midwesterners appreciate as horizontal fields doing life, in and out of harvest time. Though the girls and

adults with whom I socialize readily admit, “there is nothing to do,” we hold out on possibility. Not all of us, but most of us, were born in Illinois. The girls with whom I work more easily traverse borders between that school or this school, public school and alternative school, one twin city or the other more than physically traveling outside of the state and country. The imagination of a lot of the girls with whom we work is extra-local; dreams are of going to the community college nearby. The fear of traveling, in particular taking a plane, has a life so large it is passed down from generation to generation. We are here because the city is dangerous; they tell us in the same breath in which they talk to us about the presence of gangs, drug use, drug abuse, selling drugs, and death in their neighborhood.

And yet, the girls with whom I work want to get out and have home be someplace else. They are transnationally oriented. Ever intrigued by the home-girl from NYC, LA, or representing Virginia, they call them to ask, “why would you want to come here?” as they imagine that they live “there” too. Of the girls with whom I work, the most instantaneous, accessible, and favorite place to get away is myspace.com. On myspace and in SOLHOT, girls represent more than where they live, where their people are from (down south), their constructed crew or posse, complete with a language all their own. Many girls and homegirls also strongly disidentify with this place as “home.” Home is constantly recreated, and for some it’s the space out of which SOLHOT operates; for a few, home is also SOLHOT.

In a study that analyzed gender-specific programming at a Boys and Girls Club of America, the report found,

The fact that three fourths of youth reported that their club served as a second home is a testament to the important place of the club in their lives. The primary reason that the club was experienced as a second home was the quality of relationships at the club, rather than the physical characteristics of the site.

Hirsch and Deutsch, 2005, p. 132

So perhaps the most imperative transnational tension is living in this place where, for all kinds of political and social reasons, Black girls of all ages feel stuck yet willingly come together and close ranks for Black girls to celebrate themselves among themselves. To build relationships that defy the “norm.” The irony is of course that while this is all decided, the homes we have created through relationships with each other are not always homey or safe. Closing ranks means that sometimes we are home-sick and home-less at home, creating moments between whole and harm.

Hip-hop feminist pedagogy as currently practiced in SOLHOT is an out-of-school space that is inherently educational. However, though SOLHOT's success is often lauded in community spaces, critics raise an eyebrow at the utility of a kind of hip-hop feminist pedagogy like SOLHOT within an in-school space. Given that the public school system is not educating all students in the same way, many somehow desire that hip-hop feminist pedagogy could invade the girls' classrooms so that they could have a better chance of learning and being valued.

The "but it's not in school" argument against hip-hop feminist pedagogy does not take anything away from its contribution to the lives of the participants who make it happen, or to the community out of which the work operates. It is significant that hip-hop feminist pedagogy can happen in a school setting, and I believe we need to hear more about those engaging the school system not just in terms of using "hip-hop" as a "tool" to educate but using hip-hop feminist pedagogy that requires a brave commitment and dedication to an entirely "different" approach to school norms in general, "behavior management" in particular. However, the way in which hip-hop feminist pedagogy traverses the borders and boundaries of school and community to create literary skills that are recognized by the individuals involved as important in their daily lives is much more interesting than assigning value about the setting where hip-hop feminist pedagogy is enacted.

In her three-year ethnographic study of transnational funds of knowledge and literacy practices among second-generation Latina youth, Patricia Sánchez concluded,

It is also important to acknowledge that while the three youth and I met in an out-of-school context to carry out this work, we relied on school-based literacies to successfully carry out the project. However, this was not at the sacrifice of the translational literacy practices they had developed at home, including their bilingual language practices and the way in which their families employ narratives ... Through participatory research, the youth also learned an entirely different set of literacy skills that are too often underdeveloped in schools.

Sánchez, 2007, p. 279

Hip-hop feminist pedagogy also relies on school-based practices that assume formal written literacy skills (somewhat) but does not reinforce or believe in school-based behavioral norms (for sure). That girl in SOLHOT who questions everything is beloved; if you ask her about school, on the other hand, her expertise in critical thinking is not always welcomed.

SOLHOT is about excavating where Blackness, femaleness, and youth intersect to create knowledge that may take the form of a single gesture, an unrecognized or punished signification of breaking the rules in a school context. It's about being hip-hop to those who most identify hip-hop with the top ten selling rap artists more than the tunes that uplift the homegirls who easily share love for Chris Brown and Mehell Ndegeocello. Hip-hop is more than music; in SOLHOT it is also about dancing, moving, being, and creating together and alone. It's living and breathing our feminism, including invoking the word, in the same institutional spaces that seem to thrive on patriarchal leadership, and a hip-hop feminist pedagogy that feels both too much and too little like school for critics on both sides.

Hip-hop feminist pedagogy is all about working the borders and boundaries of hip-hop, feminism, and education. The moments when this work seems most useful, sacred, and successful is when you don't quite know how something happened, but it all came together or fell apart. Hip-hop feminist pedagogy can mean working with Black girls to value who we are and what we can be, based on our own terms, negotiating our language, attitudes, and experiences. Explicitly cultural, political, and educational, the work we are doing borrows from a variety of sources to continually go beyond what is expected, what everyone thought could not be done; hip-hop feminist pedagogy is the process through which it came to pass. The goal of hip-hop feminist pedagogy is to create as open a space as possible, as free as possible, using whatever it needs to make that space meaningful to those who attend and those who want to be down.

And What I Wanna Say ...

A hip-hop feminist/pedagogy of working/recruiting the children/kickin' it with the youth/listening to Amel Larrieux/loving Donnie/checking the local hip-hop station only to see what the girls are talking about/negotiating partnerships with dominant patriarchal, racist, classist, homophobic institutions/writing grants/using her own money for funding/meeting and organizing some progressive and patronizing school officials/creating new ways of decolonizing do-gooder volunteerism/thanking and forgetting to thank those women who just get it/writing/rhyming/resisting local politics and provincialism/being relevant and familiar enough to be trusted (maybe)/playing too loud/challenging expertise/insisting against suicide of any kind/invoking the words and

wisdom of June Jordan, and Alice Walker, alongside Invisibile, Erykah Badu, Nikky Finney, and Las Krudas, alongside Jasmine, Lil' mama, and Keisha/subverting teacher-student binaries/challenging hip-hop inclusion and exclusion/complicating practices and theories of power and privilege/using identity and individuality to a certain degree/going beyond it to create some kind of always troubled "we"—this is hip-hop feminist pedagogy.

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