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PRESENT DAY PROPHETS: DEFINING BLACK GIRLHOOD SPIRITUALITY IN SAVING
OUR LIVES HEAR OUR TRUTHS (SOLHOT)

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Present Day Prophets: Defining Black Girlhood Spirituality in Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT) and Beyond is based on nine years of participant observation in the collective, Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT). SOLHOT is a praxis that centers and celebrates Black girlhood through artistic and radical imagination for the purpose of otherworld making. Through the sharing of personal narrative, critically engaging scholarship at the intersection of Black feminism, Womanism, and Black Girlhood Studies, and theorizing from field experiences, this dissertation offers a definition of Black girlhood spirituality that demonstrates the necessity of studying spirituality as a site of inquiry into the knowledge production and experiences of Black girls in community with Black women. I argue that Black girlhood spirituality is a way of knowing how to mobilize ideas to transform circumstance.

Ultimately, I learned that it is our connection to Black girlhood that makes possible our relationship and connection to the metaphysical/divine/invisible realm. My methods included implementing a qualitative thematic and arts based research methodology to analyze our actions, conversations, events, and music which illumined Black girls' prophetic identity and allowed me to hear Black girls differently, consequently, extending the repertoire of Black girlhood sounds.

Ethnographic fieldwork revealed that SOLHOT as a collective transforms our relationship to knowledge which then transforms our relationship to one another by enacting rituals that bring forth the manifestation of Black girlhood spirituality. While spirituality is often taken up as a solitary event, it is only through collectively organizing with Black girlhood at the center that Black girlhood spirituality is able to manifest. Revealed through ethnographic feedback, Black girlhood spirituality points to the ways collectivity activates power in an effort

to challenge institutionalized control and dominance. This power then allows for Black girlhood subjectivity to be theorized as holy as shown through their everyday practices.

Dedication

The labor of this dissertation is in loving memory of...

*My Grandmother, Lurine T. Garner
My Father, Eltorie Garner
My Great Aunt, Evelyne “Big T” Grandy
And
My Chosen Grandfather, Percy Powell*

...who I lost during this journey. Your ancestral support has been invaluable during this process.

We did it.

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*Somebody prayed for me.....
Had me on their mind...
Took the time and prayed for me...
I'm so glad they prayed...
I'm so glad they prayed...
I'm so glad they prayed for me...*

My graduate journey has definitely been a collage of various prayers rendered by me and others on behalf.

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Bandbaes, I know love differently because of us. I love us because it is risky and you know I'm telling you the truth when I say I'll take care of you!! I can't wait until we're legends and we're all rich (s/o The Internet).

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To my forevers, they say iron sharpens iron. We are blades because of one another.

Vanessa, Daarina, Danica, Sesali, Jennifer, Keena, Damillia, Michellay, Tasia, and Tiffany for sure “my friends got my back and that is a fact” Thank you for the laughs, companionship, and for making sure I never went without what I needed.

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I am especially grateful to Dr. Tammy Owens who gave so much to me during this process of the dissertation.

To all the homegirls/boys near and far, we are in this thing. Always remember where we came from and where we're all trying to get to.

In seventh grade Mrs. West introduced me to Alice Walker and named me writer. Thank you.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction..... 1

Chapter Two: Defining Black Girlhood Spirituality..... 20

Chapter Three: Methodology and Methods..... 40

Chapter Four: Present Day Prophets.....68

Chapter Five: We Levitate: The Sounded-Word Aesthetics.....91

Chapter Six: Black Girlhood Spirituality in SOLOHT and Beyond..... 122

Glossary/Conceptual Toolkit for Understanding Black Girlhood Spirituality..... 131

References..... 133

APPENDIX A: Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT) Permission Form..... 142

APPENDIX B: Parental Consent Letter

Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT): Exploring the creative genius of Black girls...144

APPENDIX C: Assent

Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT): Exploring the creative genius of Black girls...147

Chapter One: Introduction

I

Terriana came ready with her story. She set the stage and commanded the attention of all who were present. She began, ponytail to the side held together with hairballs; each detail of the story threaded together and spun like gold. The story she told granted us admission to a rollercoaster ride full of twist and turns--upside down and around and around. In the telling, everything that could go right did and everything that could go left went left. Then, at the very end of her story she looked to a homegirl with those bright eyes of hers and asked, "do you believe me?" The homegirl, without hesitation answered, "Yes I believe you because you said it."

II

Excerpt from field note

Thursday, March 29, 2012

4:00 p.m.

Typed: Thursday, March 29, 2012

Township Recruitment (in the field)

...I circled the next block but ran into [another] Black girl, Jay. I parked my car and got out. It was two of them and the rest of their family. She stepped forward excited for what could be. I invited her to SOLHOT and told her a little bit about what we would be doing. A woman who I presumed was the girl's mother spoke and agreed that she could attend [SOLHOT]. One of the two girls leaves and their mom goes back to doing what she was doing before we pulled up. Jay, who was standing closet to me, never left. She grabbed the flyer and read over it. She had on a black coat and a ponytail that only a black girl could have. You know the one to the side and is held together with a rubber band and large elastic headband. Some hair decided to stick out in the back despite the large elastic. Together but messy. Yeah, one of those types of ponytails.

She giggled and... I wanted to know what was funny. Why was she laughing, I asked. She responded, "Because it's for Black girls. For me?!"

A glance, a giggle, a question answered with a question by Black girls like Terriana and Jay are defining moments that separate believers from unbelievers. These moments determine who is and is not ready to fall in with Black girls. This falling in—in love, in trust, in belief—with one another, is a metaphysical/divine/invisible realm undertaking similar to the homegirls' answer of yes, with no hesitation, and the creation of spaces just for Black girls. In this

dissertation, I explore the metaphysical/divine/invisible realm undertaking of falling in with Black girls.

I have come to understand the intricacies of this falling in with Black girls through my work with Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths, affectionately known as SOLHOT. Envisioned by Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown twelve years ago, SOLHOT is a collective practice that organizes to imagine and create spaces of Black girlhood celebration. In the very literal sense we create physical space for two hours for six weeks in the local schools or libraries. Some may be tempted to think of SOLHOT as an after school program, however, SOLHOT is not an afterschool program. SOLHOT is not a program because it is not dependent on empowering girls. Rather, in SOLHOT the power we possess together is the focus and that power is transformative (Brown, 2009). SOLHOT, as a space of power, is comprised of Black girls and Black women who organize with Black girlhood at the center. In SOLHOT Black girls and women learn from each other and Black women are not the authority. This way of being with Black girls, which does not rely on age as authority, allows for a fluidity between the identity of girl and woman, thus, the space depends on our collective power as girls and women.

In SOLHOT, Black girlhood is used as an organizing construct, which means that Black girlhood is not dependent on biology; rather, we focus on the ways Black girlhood can guide us in creating a free world that we all can live in (Brown, 2009, 2013). Our otherworld making is performed/enacted/created through rituals, artistic engagement, and imagination and is dependent on our ability to rely on each other and our ability to recall what we already know as being very necessary to creating a new world were we all can exist. I began my journey with SOLHOT during the summer of 2008 after my then history professor, Dr. Jessica Millward, recommended I work with Dr. Brown for my summer research with McNair.

Research requires you to ask questions and during my summer with McNair I asked the wrong questions. Like the good student that I believed I was, I came ready with what I presumed were “good” “educational” questions: questions any blooming scholar, who only viewed education as what the classroom could offer, would want to ask about Black girls and Black girlhood. “Good educational” questions that one would ask in order to present their scholarship and interests as “serious,” or so I thought, then. Initially, I wanted to know “what were the effects of hip hop on Black girls?” I am positive I chose this point of inquiry because I wanted to make some argument about how “bad” such music was for young girls; unsurprisingly, the same music I listened to and enjoyed and still do enjoy. I was disciplined through schooling to ask this type of question and to think of myself as not being implicated—myself as being outside yet inside of the very thing I wanted to study. Dr. Brown advised me away from that deficit framing and suggested that I ask more open-ended questions that framed Black girls as knowers, because we are. I had not fallen in with Black girls, but this was not the end for me.

Deficit thinking is a common place to start in the study of Black girlhood because as Aimee Cox (2015) states, Black girls are included in narratives around education and policy, yet, “the stories that attract mainstream attention are those that characterize the lives of Black girls as dysfunctional sites on which reform and improvement strategies should focus” (p. 6). In this way Black girls are in need of fixing and the framing of my initial question desired to fix Black girls. Framing Black girls as the problem in which we fix prevents us from falling in with Black girls. I had not fallen in with Black girls, but this was not the end for me.

Similar to Terriana and Jay’s question posing, in *The Womanist Idea* (2012), Layli Maparyan articulates the falling in with Black girls through asking and posing various questions. The questions Maparyan poses came after her twenty-two year old daughter, Aliyah Phillips,

jumped from the roof of her 14-story building. The official death report said Philips died of suicide, however, Maparyan knew better than to believe to official report and searched for the true answers of why her daughter jumped from her apartment building. These questions offered her peace and deepened her understanding of “the womanist idea” (p. 303). The womanist idea or way of life for women of color, asks us to think of the ways the metaphysical/divine/invisible realm influence our everyday experiences. Using the womanist idea as her lens with which to understand her daughter’s death, Maparyan resolves that the fall in with Black girls means we understand their existence differently. In understanding Black girls’ existence differently Maparyan asks, “What if Jesus came back in the body of a middle class Black girl from urban America? Would we recognize and embrace her? In a world that suppresses young Black girls... could she even recognize herself? ...” (p. 303). Terriana, Jay, and Maparyan’s questions are both preoccupied with how Black girls are seen and how they then see themselves. This is important because it not only stretches our perceptions of Black girlhood, but it also demonstrates how in sync Black girlhood is across generations, time, and space.

To my knowledge Maparyan has never been to SOLHOT, but girls like the ones we meet in SOLHOT are everywhere and often times they are invisible. W.E. B. DuBois (1920) in his short story, “Jesus Christ in Texas,” tells of Jesus’ invisibility because of his Blackness as he travels through Waco, Texas. In DuBois’ telling Jesus is a stranger, yet familiar and it was not until the hanging of an innocent Black man that the glory of the “stranger,” Jesus, was realized. In the short story Jesus was recognized by His believers, including a child, and they desired to keep company with Him. Similarly, the girls in SOLHOT desire to keep company with those who believe them without a shadow of doubt and create spaces that demonstrate unfailing belief in Black girlhood.

So, it makes sense to me that Maparyan would ask the question, “what if Jesus came back in the body of a Black girl?”. Falling in with Black girls requires that we see them in ways that maybe we hadn’t before which allows us to ask different questions about the lived experiences of Black girls. My answers to Terriana, Jay, and Maparyan are all yes, without hesitation. Yes, I believe you. Yes, this is just for you and yes, I would recognize her. This dissertation is, in fact, a big “yes” to Maparyan’s question and I set out to unpack my yes without hesitation by exploring the metaphysical/divine/invisible realm workings in SOLHOT through what I term Black girlhood spirituality.

This dissertation also extends a point of inquiry that Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown articulates in *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip Hop Feminist Pedagogy* (2009). In a section titled, “SOLHOT Is Where Girls Can Learn from Women and Women Can Learn from Girls” Brown writes,

“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 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 space” (p. 72).

Through my dissertation I demonstrate how our sacred Black girlhood space not only recognizes Black girls who come back as Jesus, but recognize the magnitude of the power that manifest when girls learn from women and women learn from girls.

Research Questions

To define the ways that spirituality is enacted through Black girlhood I ask the following questions:

1. What is Black girlhood spirituality and how do Black girls express it?
2. What spiritual practice(s) do Black girls engage in SOLHOT collective spaces?

- a. What do they do and to whom do they speak?
3. How is Black girlhood spirituality felt in SOLHOT collective spaces?
4. How does Black girlhood spirituality allow us to know and understand Black girlhood differently?

Summary of Key Insights

In this dissertation I argue that Black girlhood spirituality is a way of knowing how to mobilize ideas to transform circumstance for the purpose of envisioning power differently and imagines us in the future that Black girls have already created. I demonstrate this argument in two ways. First, Black girlhood spirituality is a process that occurs through collectively organizing with Black girls. Second, the subjectivity of Black girlhood is transformed to reveal how we occupy and maintain the future.

Education often sees spirituality and the secular as disparate concepts, which prohibit seeing our everyday interactions as spiritual. In this way Black girlhood cannot be conceived of as sacred. My work with SOLHOT blurred the concepts of spirituality and secular and inspired a view of Black girlhood as always already being spiritual. In order to fully interpret the experiences of Black girls within the space I had to create a definition for Black girlhood spirituality. This definition allows me to understand Black girlhood as being our direct link to the metaphysical/divine/invisible realm.

Ethnographic fieldwork revealed that SOLHOT as a collective transforms our relationship to knowledge which then transforms our relationship to one another by enacting rituals that bring forth the manifestation of Black girlhood spirituality. Though spirituality is often taken up as a solitary event, it is only through collectively organizing with Black girlhood at the center that Black girlhood spirituality is able to be manifest.

Ethnographic fieldwork also revealed Black girlhood spirituality points to the ways collectivity activates power in an effort to challenge institutionalized control and dominance. This power then allows for Black girlhood subjectivity to be theorized as holy as shown through their everyday practices.

Field Contributions

As an interdisciplinary artist, scholar, and activist my research makes substantial contributions to several fields. This project contributes to the field of education as it reiterates spirituality as a way of knowing that dismantles the disparateness of the secular and sacred. This is significant because it transforms “what counts” as knowledge and allows the subjectivity of Black girlhood to be seen as holy and worthwhile to study further. My project also contributes to education by demonstrating the necessity of womanism as a framework to not only study the experiences of Black girls, but also to challenge knowledge and knowledge production. Expanding what counts as knowledge also challenges standards and makes more legible what students know and the ways in which we access what students know. This is significant because it extends not only what we consider knowledge to be, but what we consider education to be in the field of Education. Education is about more than schooling and what institutions have to offer students. Education is about what students have to offer institutions of schooling with their lived experience and power. Student power is believed to be a lost art; but, present day organizing by students motivated by causes and movements such as Black Lives Matter, Black student enrollment in university settings, gun violence, and fair wages and resources for all are a reminder that the state of higher education is dependent on those who deserve an equitable and suitable education. In this project, I demonstrate the ways that Black girls in community with

Black women echo student power and challenge not only what “counts” as knowledge but challenge hegemonic power within systems of higher education as well.

As a contribution, my dissertation offers a bridge between the fields of Performance Studies and Education. It is important to consider the ways knowledge and knowing are embodied and fully place our bodies on the line for the purpose of pushing the boundaries of education. The best way to do this work is through arts-based research, and this project demonstrates how necessary it is for Education and Performance Studies to draw one from the other. Performance as a political undertaking that allows the field of Education to further explore issues of identity in ways that move us toward a different way of hearing and analyzing Black girls and others. It forces us not to rely on transcription, but to put transcription and lived experiences in conversation with one another to produce a new product. This contribution pushes us beyond linear analyses and creates a conversation with various mediums such as text and images as well as various disciplines.

Additionally, my project contributes to the field of Gender & Women’s Studies through focusing on the experiences of Black girls in contemporary America with a specific focus on their spirituality. Further, my project grows the subfield of Black girlhood as it contributes to the ethnographic accounts that seek to center the experiences of Black girls and the importance of complex and nuanced spaces of Black girlhood that cultivate intergenerational relationships. This is significant because while the field of Black girlhood studies is now growing and no longer emerging, more scholarship is needed that looks at the relationships of Black girls and Black women and the communities they make by being together in practice. My research extends from the poignant point made by my co-authors and I that states “the study of ‘Black girlhood/Black girls’ is and should be a political relationship of being in community with and for Black girls”

(Owens, Callier, Robinson, Garner, 2017, p. 117). My project also extends the literature on Black girlhood by focusing on spirituality which provides a holistic view of Black girls. This also joins in and contributes to conversations that take up a Black feminist and womanist lens on what it means to be human. Further, the theoretical contribution of holy futurity centers Black girlhood in field conversations on layered ideas of pleasure and the division between life and death. Finally, through the argument of this dissertation, I point to the speculative in that future and otherworld making happens in temporal contemporary moments where liberation is expressed; ultimately, the future is now.

Framing Black Girlhood Spirituality

The fall in with Black girls is to enter Black girlhood spirituality. To get to Black girlhood spirituality, we must first assess what we know and how we know it. In SOLHOT we ask, “who raised you and what did they teach you?” My answer: Although not exclusively, my paternal grandmother, Lurine Terrell Garner, known to me as Grandma LuLu, raised me. Two of the many lessons she taught me were that education was the key to success and that a strong spiritual foundation via Christianity would assist and ground me in my pursuit of education. Early on, I understood my grandmother’s teaching to mean that successful matriculation through school systems would lead to me earning the necessary degrees which would be a measure/testament to my success and that my spiritual faith would be grown by consistently attending and being active in the church. Both schooling and church would require discipline, but in the end, if I put forth my best effort, I would be rewarded by the opening of doors that yielded opportunities I had yet to dream of. Grandma Lulu was right and my very simple understanding of her teachings would reveal themselves to be more complex through my organizing with SOLHOT.

The richness of my grandmother's teachings was further revealed through my time spent creating and enacting Black girlhood freedom in community with SOLHOT. With the very clear question, "what do you know and how do you know it" what I thought I knew up until that point was disentangled. For example, I realized that education was not as linear as I perceived it to be nor was it exclusive to institutions such as schools. Linear education had taught me that it was my very singular, very solitary self that made my success possible and that the source of my knowledge was exclusive to what I learned in school. Yet, asking "what do you know and how do you know it" allowed me to point back to the source of my knowledge and in this way created a deviation from the linear which meant what I knew was beyond the institution. Importantly, this pointing back demonstrated the ways we are always building from those who taught us and what they taught us. I was beginning to trust myself enough to fall in with Black girls.

This same undoing that I describe in my own response to the inquiry of "who raised you and what did they teach you" is illuminated by scholar and SOLHOT homegirl Chamara J. Kwakye (2016) in her book chapter titled, "From Vivi with Love: Studying the Great Migration." Using letters written between a focal participant of her research, Vivi, and her grandmother, Nan, Kwakye writes of the ways that Black girls' theorizing and knowledge production are not simply tools for "personal liberation," (p. 109) like I initially thought about Grandma Lulu's instruction. Instead, education was a key strategy of decolonization and political practice. Similar to my own revelations, Vivi vocalizes that the study and application of theory began with those who raised her such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and neighbors. My experience and that of Vivi's echo the work of Barbara Christian (2000) who contended in her essay "Race for Theory," that people of color have "always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic...our theorizing is often in narrative forms in

the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play in language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking” (p. 12). Education for people of color has always been beyond the classroom and ultimately relies on how we make sense of the ways that we have always known what we know. For this reason, what we know is always entangled with how we know it.

This entanglement is what I call the SOLHOT blur, which gives way to Black girlhood spirituality. This blur allowed me to complicate what I knew, for example, how my grandmother's' teachings of education and spirituality were similar or blurred to reveal a new understanding. In an essay titled, “The Blur and Breathe Books,” Fred Moten (2017) defines blur as being a “partition and refusal of partition; a general assertion of inseparability which nevertheless still moves in and as a ubiquitous and continual differentiation.... an alternate process” (p. 246). Thinking with Moten’s ideology of blur means that SOLHOT could never be just absolutes; we are always within the continuum of ideas, church/school or knower/learner or disciplined/undisciplined, for example. For very literal purposes, the continuum is the space that exists between the words or the “/.” What lies in the “/” or blur of these very polarized concepts is an undoing and doing of the ideas and the process of troubling these very ideas.

What you know and how you know it allows you to always point back to the source; but even more than that, once you are clear about your answer to “what do you know and how do you know it”, SOLHOT allows you to trouble that which is known by creating a blur between ideologies positioned as polarized ideas. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty in their introduction to the *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (1997), titled, “Cartographies of Knowledge and Power: Transnational Feminism as Radical Praxis,” discuss divides and how each of our life’s work (especially those of us who make and occupy

space within the academy) should work to dismantle divides between ideas that are thought to be polarized. They write it is necessary to move away from academic/activist divides so that we destabilize binaries and the power inherent in that divide so that we can “recall the genealogy of public intellectuals, radical political education movements, and public scholarship that is anchored in cultures of dissent” (p. 26). Within the context of their article and this quote, Alexander and Mohanty push us to understand that activism and community-based work is the site of knowledge production that will help us to access a more transnational feminist analysis that thinks through the ways that we are affected locally, globally, and regionally by oppressions that are meant to keep us in a settler colonial frame of thinking and understanding. Applying Alexander and Mohanty’s argument to dismantle and blur the academic activist divide that then situates knowledge production within communities allows me to see the ways that Black girls and Black girlhood have more to offer than polarized ideas.

I illustrate this fall in with Black girls and move beyond polarized ideas and what it means for Black girlhood spirituality in the graphic that follows. The SOLOHT blur is the way that I access Black girlhood spirituality. This dissertation spends a substantial amount of time within Black girlhood spirituality to define and characterize it. Finally, in the conclusion of this project I move into a deeper understanding of Black girlhood spirituality through theorizing holy futurity.

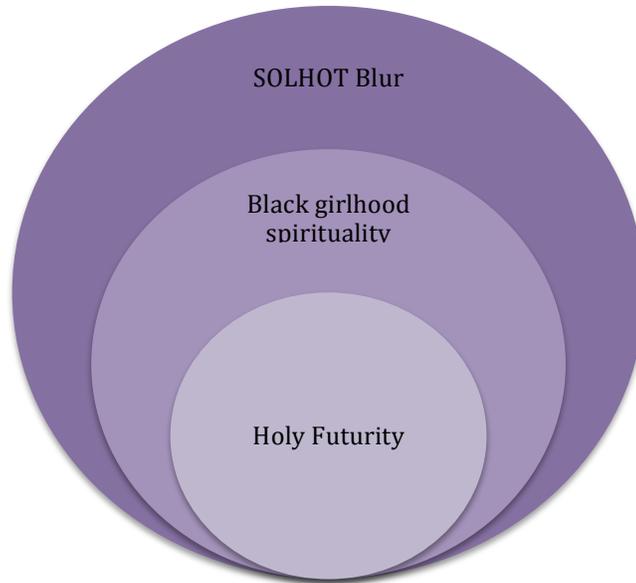


Figure 1. Dimensions of Black Girlhood Spirituality

To further the conversation of blur, I turn to M. Jacqui Alexander (2005) who argues that for too long we have thought of our experiences as being only secular; however, our experiences are more than secular, they are sacred. Thinking of our knowledge beyond secular allows it to be spiritual and seen as body praxis, an example of embodied knowledge. Embodied knowledge allows us to remember the ways our bodies are inscribed with that which we know, which functions as a pathway to knowledge that knits together the mind, body and spirit (p. 298). This embodiment of knowledge as asked through the questions like “what do you know and how do you know it” or “who raised you and what did they teach you” serves to make our lives and experiences sacred and therefore intelligible to ourselves as being spiritual.

Cynthia Dillard (2012), in conversation with M. Jacqui Alexander, terms this disentanglement and intelligibility of ourselves as a spiritual decolonization of ourselves. Relying on Endarkened and Black feminism, Dillard contends that this decolonization happens through (re)membering the things we were seduced to forget. (Re)membering then becomes an act of piece-gathering, of collecting and assembling fragments of a larger whole, of creating and

innovating identity for African people, including African Americans seeing ourselves in the gaze of another and not looking away, but instead looking deeper. Decolonization through (re)membering who we are in relation to one another, in my case who I am in relation to Grandma LuLu, implicates our/my existence as spiritual. Thinking of ourselves in this way allows us to disrupt western thinking, which disrupts the order of heteropatriarchal, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic thinking.

I want to take this intelligibility and consider my own response to the question, “what do you know and how do you know it.” Before SOLHOT, I never considered how intimately Grandma Lulu’s lessons of education and spirituality were entangled and the richness that comes from this knowing. Specifically, I am thinking of how I initially thought of Grandma LuLu’s teachings as being particular to my mastery of education within the classroom and that education and spirituality were disparate. By posing the aforementioned questions, SOLHOT in conversation with Moten (2017), Mohanty & Alexander (1997), and Dillard (2012) allowed me to disentangle my rudimentary views of education by reminding me that the person who raised me was the first theorist I knew and that the classroom could never assess that knowledge. Further, SOLHOT reminded me that this new education and the process of unlearning that which I once knew, was in fact very spiritual. In this way, education and spirituality became entangled. SOLHOT reminded me that while my dominant practice of spirituality was via Christianity, my grandmother engaged in spirituality beyond organized religion through friendships that she cultivated and maintained or cooking for her family and others or the gardening she did each summer.

Through the blur that SOLHOT enacts, I am able to see that Grandma LuLu was pushing me toward imagining how my education was more than what schooling within institutions

offered. While attending church was our most obvious practice, the ways that she created community and family with those who were not tied by familial bloodlines, her care for others, and her care for our physical neighborhood were parts of her spiritual practice. This is the way that Black feminist and womanist have always understood and theorized spirituality.

Understanding spirituality as a point of inquiry that goes beyond institutional affiliations is important and provides an even better context for how I make sense of the ways spirituality is enacted within Black girlhood. The SOLHOT blur is an instrumental lens with which to read this project because it is only through the blur that we are able to get to Black girlhood spirituality, which I define in the next chapter.

How Readers Should Read This Dissertation

As a reader you should read this dissertation as an undoing of the many things that kept me from putting these words to page. As I stated earlier in this chapter, I initially began with questions that framed Black girls as the problem or the ones in need of fixing. This happened because I internalized the messages and stereotypes I received about myself. There is a girth of research that discuss stereotypes of Black girls while at the same time dismantles these stereotypes. These stereotypes persist and are addressed in terms of Black girls' experiences in education and literacy (Evans-Winters, 2011; Patton, Crenshaw, & Watson, 2016; Lindsay-Dennis, 2010; Winn, 2010), sexuality (Carney, Hernandez, & Wallace, 2016; Robinson, 2012; Stephen & Phillips, 2003; Townsend, Thomas, Neilands, & Jackson, 2010), and popular culture and media (Durham, 2014; Gaunt, 2015; Noble, 2018; Hernandez, 2014). I am in conversation with many of the aforementioned scholars as the approach they take in their scholarship takes on what Lindsay-Dennis (2015) terms a dual cultural lens, which allows researchers to understand

the experiences of Black girls holistically. Further, many of us are in community with Black girls in a way that takes on this lens.

At the same time, there are many scholars who are growing the field of Black girlhood in ways that only considers the shiny (Jarmon, 2013) and exceptional Black girls. This type of research only provides a lopsided view of Black girls and disappears so many girls. The shiny Black girl narrative reinforces neo-liberal ideas of citizenship that says it is the singular self that makes success or non-success happen. This approach does not provide a critical view of the systems that interlock to create and sustain oppressions. As a writer and researcher, I have chosen to not rely on the shiny Black girl narrative and I have also chosen to not perpetuate or begin at the stereotypes of Black girls. While I do confront these stereotypes, I choose not to begin with them.

It took time to get to this articulation of how I come to the work of my scholarship. More than likely it took the same amount of time that I have grown in SOLHOT. At the age of 19 I had such a strong sense of self and confidence in Black girlhood because of SOLHOT and our collective work. When I say collective I mean it in the Toni Cade Bambara (1996) way. In the short story, “The Education of a Storyteller,” Bambara introduces readers to her Grandma Dorothy. In this story Bambara explains the words of wisdom Grandma Dorothy gave her when she got puffed up with pride in being the only one to know theory. Bambara proclaimed proudly to Grandma Dorothy, “my friends don’t know it; only I know it.” Grandma Dorothy answered, “if your friends don’t know it, you don’t know it. If you don’t know that you don’t know nothing.” Overtime, even while I was growing in SOLHOT, I was also buying into the singular self like Toni Cade Bambara. I wanted to be the expert of Black girls and graduate school made me feel as though I had to be shiny and exceptional so that my peers would take me seriously.

This led to the practice of SOLHOT being dismantled and in order for the practice to be revived I had to rely on and turn back to the collective and be unashamed in centering the collective as my way of knowing. Just as Grandma Dorothy instructs I only know what I know within the collective.

Allowing the collective to guide my knowing means that the presentation of this dissertation also reflects this collective knowing. The data and voices presented within this document are layered and are informed by all of us (girls and women) together. In some instances just girls' voices are highlighted, however, the absence of girls' voices does not mean they are not present. Since SOLHOT is centered on our collective efforts to celebrate Black girlhood freedom, the girls' voices are always present. Our poetry, art, and music are all derived from what we observe, hear, and learn during our time together in SOLHOT. So it may appear that there are not enough of the girls' voice highlighted, but they are here. It is also my choice to not highlight the girls' voices as separate from the collective because that, for me, reinforces shiny Black girls. As a reader, I ask that you read this dissertation in its entirety and see it as another way to view and understand knowledge production and Black girls in community with Black women.

Chapters Overview

In chapter two, "Black Girlhood Spirituality Defined," I trace theories and methodologies of Black feminist thought, womanism, and Black girlhood to define Black girlhood spirituality. Building on feminist and womanist articulations of spirituality as it relates to girlhood, I define Black girlhood spirituality as a conscious acknowledgment of Black girls' relation to the divine/invisible realm as sustaining all existence in the material and supernatural worlds. I conclude this chapter with an example from my ethnographic observations in SOLHOT.

In chapter three, “Methodology and Methods,” I discuss the methodology used to define, collect, and analyze Black girlhood spirituality in SOLHOT. The chapter begins with a discussion of qualitative inquiry, specifically ethnography. Not only do I specify traditional methodology such as ethnography, but also I begin to unravel important ways that SOLHOT became more than just a site. SOLHOT is a way of inquiring into the experiences of Black girls. I detail the specific methods used in this study in the second half of this chapter including a brief discussion of the methods of analysis as a more detailed explanation of specific techniques discussed in chapters 4 and 5.

In chapter four, “Present Day Prophets,” I use Alecia Y. Jackson and Lisa A. Mazzei’s (2012) concept of “plugging in” to analyze the role of Black girlhood prophets and prophecies. Analyzing the role of Black girlhood prophets revealed the ways that they are spokesmen, divine inspiration, and inspired poets. The work of this chapter is important because it demonstrates the ways Black girlhood spirituality envisions power differently through drawing prophecy away from patriarchal conceptions, which is more than likely one of the reasons Black girlhood is not seen as being divine.

In chapter five, “We Levitate: The Sounded-Word Aesthetics” I analyze the music and sounds produced by SOLHOT’s Band, We Levitate, to explore the sounded word aesthetics of Black girlhood spirituality. I contend that the aesthetic makes the spirit felt and moves us to transformation to envision power differently. To locate the sounded-word aesthetics I conducted a thematic analysis and employed arts-based research to create what I call the word or poetry. I conclude this chapter by discussing the ways more interdisciplinary approaches to education can expand the repertoire and how we hear Black girls.

I conclude the dissertation with chapter 6, “Black Girlhood Spirituality in SOLHOT and Beyond,” to articulate what Black girlhood spirituality means beyond the context of SOLHOT. I present my theoretical contribution of “holy futurity” and provide a meditation that reflects on my journey and spiritual practice as a Black girlhood scholar and the ultimate future I imagine through my study of Black girlhood spirituality.

Chapter Two: Defining Black Girlhood Spirituality

Introduction

In this chapter I provide a definition of Black girl spirituality. To do so, I will first engage the theoretical frameworks that undergird this work: Black feminism, womanism, and Black girlhood. I begin by providing an understanding of the major concepts generated from Black feminism and womanism. Next, I offer my definition of Black girlhood spirituality and provide ethnographic examples from SOLHOT to further explore this definition.

Spirituality and Black Girlhood

Black feminism

As previously stated, Black feminism is rooted in the belief that the personal is political. Revealed through the telling of untold stories of the middle passage in her critical and important text *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual politics, Memory, and The Sacred* (2005), and borrowing from the work of Lata Mani (2001), M. Jacqui Alexander (2005), explains that personal is not only political but it is spiritual (p. 7). We get to the personal as political by thinking of our lived experiences as more than just secular, but as spiritual. Therefore, the spiritual exists in the context of our experiences as both social and political.

In *Pedagogies of crossing: meditations on feminism, sexual politics, memory, and the Sacred* (2005), by using the metaphor of the enforced Atlantic Crossing of Africans from the fifteenth century through the twentieth century, Alexander (2005) takes up the influence, operation and effects of gendered and sexualized power as it relates to imperialism. Further, Alexander also uncovers the ways in which this power or imperialism is practiced. Alexander uses different sites as examples of how this hegemony is practiced and analyzes how the state as an institution is able to create and maintain this dominance. To dissect power and its practices

and operations situated in the metaphor of “the Crossings,” Alexander explains the necessity of focusing on the power of those who were disembodied through the Middle passage, which allows readers to meditate on the “limits of secular power and the fact that power is not owned by corporate timekeepers or by the logics of hegemonic materialism” (p. 7). This meditation is a very important contribution to feminist spirituality in that it helps us realize the limits of the secular which then calls us to investigate and rely more on the Sacred. Because *Pedagogies* is written holding and remembering those who died and survived the Atlantic Crossing, spirit is centralized, headed, and respected in its telling.

In chapter six of *Pedagogies*, “Remembering *This Bridge Called My Back*, remembering ourselves,” Alexander explores her journey with feminism and how she was able to see herself and others through the use of text such as *This Bridge Called My Back* and other feminist texts. The text, Alexander argues, was able to help her critically examine her history and home as well as how home shows up and helps with understanding naming such as the term ‘woman of color.’ Alexander demonstrates how power inserts itself in our daily lives and prevents us from seeing/being ourselves or even causing us to impose power and oppression over others such as in relationships between women of color. In order to deconstruct this power, Alexander urges us to become fluent in each other’s histories, resist and unlearn oppression Olympics, and unlearn the impulse to take the mythologies that we know about each other as truth rather than getting to know one another. Doing so requires us to “cultivate a way of knowing in which we direct our social, cultural, psychic, and spiritually marked attention on each other” (p. 269). We must seek each other and continue in the company of one another to create anew and overcome ourselves. Here, it’s a remembering that, as women of color, we are each other and are familiar with each other’s lives and experience. This intentional remembering and memory is sacred in that it also

helps us to remember ourselves and the importance of the work that we do. Relying on the vision that was laid out in *This Bridge Called My Back* helps us to not only acknowledge the importance of our work, but to then practice it. Alexander writes, “[v]ision helps us to remember *why* we do the work. Practice is the *how*; it makes the change and grounds the work. A reversal of the inherited relationship between theory and practice, between how we think and what we do, the heart of engaged action. It is this that engages us at the deepest, most spiritual level of meaning in our lives. It is how we constitute our humanity” (p. 279). Understanding and rethinking of theory as separated and disassociated with practice allows us to be in touch with our whole selves and what that means for our opposition to hegemony.

At the close of chapter six Alexander discusses how we as activists are often reluctant to come out spiritually due to the very narrow and often collapse of spirituality as religion. In doing so, a split develops between mind body and spirit. Interestingly, the Alexander is having this conversation in the context of sex and the spirit. This separation and fragmentation of ourselves creates dualistic and hierarchical thinking, for example male and female, the sacred and secular. To undo this work of colonization, the mind must make room for whole selves and our yearnings to belong, which ultimately boils down to the deep knowing that we are interdependent and that we have a sacred connection to one another. Collectivity. Segregation from one another can never feed the place deep inside of us, which houses the erotic, the soul, and the Divine. For Alexander, the foundational truth of our lives and experiences is that “we are connected to the Divine through our connections to each other” (p. 283). Thus, in order to be connected to the Divine, we must do so not in isolation, but in community with one another, which ultimately nurtures the place of the erotic, which then transforms our relationship to one another.

In *Soul talk: The new spirituality of African American women*, Black feminist, Akasha Hull, defines spirituality as “involv[ing] a conscious relationship with the realm of spirit, with the invisibly permeating, ultimately positive, divine, and evolutionary energies that give rise to and sustain all that exists” (2001, p. 2). Further, she posits that Black women, in addition to more traditional religious practices, incorporate “new age” practices into their spirituality, including the use of tarot cards, chakra work, psychic enhancement, numerology, Eastern philosophies of cosmic connectedness, etc. Hull argues that it is through the acknowledgement and practice of “new age spirituality” that we learn to love our whole-self while considering our relation to the planet, which in turn helps us inhabit and be inhabited by the universe.

For Hull, it is important to reconcile the relationship of the political, spiritual, and creativity because they are often seen as separated from one another or hierarchal. Within *Soul talk* Hull explores the lives of Black women who draw these three dimensions together through their work. Using the work of Toni Cade Bambara, Akasha Hull admits that this “new age technology,” are reiterations of “everybody’s ancient wisdom” (p. 3). Hull argues that we learn to love our whole-self while considering our relation to the planet which in turn helps us inhabit and be inhabited by the universe through the acknowledgement and practice of new age spirituality. Additionally, once Black women begin to use spiritual power as a political force, creativity opens.

Motivated from her own spiritual realizations, Hull set out to tell the story of new age spirituality through interviewing nine women in efforts to pinpoint how we come to know and use new age spirituality. The women chosen were Lucille Clifton, Dolores Kendrick, Sonia Sanchez, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, Michele Gibbs, Masani Alexis DeVeaux, Geraldine McIntosh, and Namonyah Soipan. Hull chose these women because of her relationship to each of

them and her ability to speak candidly with them; she shared a connection to them. From the first five names, it is clear that Black women writers are “spiritual vehicles” who provide access to new age spirituality through their writing.

The interviews are parsed throughout the book’s chapters which reflect the themes of the interviews. While I enjoyed reading about all of the women, I was most excited to read the words of Toni Cade Bambara, Lucille Clifton, Alice Walker, and Sonia Sanchez because I am most familiar with their work and hear their names called in SOLHOT. Because of her familiarity with these women, their conversations were candid and I appreciated that inclusion. Many of their conversations tickled me while allowing me to share in their relationship and allowed me to view them as great aunts.

Lucille Clifton notes in her conversation with Hull that her connection to spirituality was found in her connection to her deceased mother who appeared to her as “spiritual light.” This spiritual light connects to the idea of light as a Divine source that is the root of creativity. Clifton connected to her mother through an Ouija board game she played with her daughters. During their first experience with the Ouija board Clifton’s mother began spelling her name; and, during their second experience with the board told, Clifton not to worry. Clifton was skeptical about what was happening with the board even after her mother continued to appear to her. She admitted that it wasn’t until she *felt* her mother’s spirit that she believed. Here, spirit is a feeling that can be blocked by fear. Spirit and spirituality, once accepted and practiced, act as a way to shift our knowing, which shows up in our art. This shift in knowing is dependent on losing fear, but is not dependent on linear time.

Sonia Sanchez and Dolores Kendrick also had spiritual encounters with their deceased mothers. From this, Hull asserted that the connection between Black women and their deceased

mothers is evidence that new age spirituality is a part of everyone's ancient wisdom and suggested that "looking close to home for expressions of spirituality may result in an expanded awareness of the aspects of the universe with which we can be in loving and helpful union" (p. 71). Mothers are home—whether it is your birth mother or the woman/en who raised you. When thinking of home in the response to spirit being "supernatural", Alice Walker was resistant. For Walker, the supernatural was often tied to the idea that spirit exists in this different realm; whereas for her, spirit exists in the natural state and spirit is home. It is how we continue to exist and not succumb to conditions of servitude and oppression because it "is not your home, and people should stop being so comfortable in it" (p. 83). Our relationship to our mothers is spiritual in that it grounds us in our connection to home, which ultimately affirms us to the universe. Because of this we, the living and the deceased, are spiritual beings and the valence between them is porous.

The resistance of language seemed to continue across some of the interviews. For example, Toni Cade Bambara told Hull that she did not consider herself as a spiritual being as it was not adequate to describe her fully. Bambara expressed that she was trying every day to achieve mind-body-spirit as one, without the hyphens and slashes. While Bambara did relate to the words "spirit" and "spirituality", she did not have the language to accurately describe mind-body-spirit as one. Bambara expressed that it was not small feat for mindbodyspirit to become one as a way of living, but every day she was working to make this her way of life.

When asked where one could learn the types of spiritual knowledge practiced in new age spirituality, Toni Cade Bambara gives her recommendations of Black women who practice them. Above all, Bambara believes that this type of knowledge does not come from reading, rather it comes from being in community with Black folks who practice, for example, "light groups."

Similarly, in thinking about how Black folks have spirituality to power our activism and how spirituality threatens western ways of being, which in turns threatens the status quo, Sonia Sanchez urges us to not hoard our spiritual knowledge. She states, “[P]ower to me, the point of having power, of knowing something is also to empower other people” (p. 90).

Womanism

The term “womanism” first appeared in print in 1979 in Alice Walker’s short story, “Coming Apart”. In 1983 Walker provided the following definition of womanism in her book, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden*:

1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “you acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.
2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?” Ans. “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m

walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

Following this definition, scholars in theology, literature, and history began to explore womanism specific to their disciplines. During this time there was contention regarding womanism as conflation to Black feminism and womanism on its own. It was at the beginning of the 21st century that more works were written articulating womanism as "theory" that stands on its own (Phillips, 2006; Maparyan, 2012). In the *Womanist Reader* womanism is defined as

"a social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring balance between people and the environment/nature and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension" (Phillips, 2006, xx).

This definition builds on the definition provided by Alice Walker and Carol Marsh Lockett (1997). Furthermore, this definition of womanism builds and draws on the articulation of womanism by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1985) and Clenora Hudson Weems (1993) who, along with Walker, are known as originating contributors of the womanist idea. The definition found in the *Womanist Reader* is built from these three "origin mothers".

Womanism is thought to not need a descriptive of "Black" because it is not carving out space in feminism, which is generally known in relationship to white women. Further, the definition of womanism is rooted in Black women and women of color's thoughts and

experiences. While womanism is rooted in the experiences of Black women and women of color, womanism does not privilege gender or sexism; rather, it elevates all sites and forms of oppression. Since womanism seeks to end oppression for all, it makes sense that its definition and origins are rooted in the experiences of Black women and Black womanhood due to the ways that the race, class, and gender matrix has historically operated to make Black women the most oppressed people. Thus, we must end oppression for Black women in order to end oppression for all.

There are 5 overarching characteristics of womanism (Phillips, 2006). These characteristics include anti-oppression where women fight and dismantle oppression individually or in organized collective with others; it is vernacular which identifies womanism in the everyday experiences of women such that it is grassroots and starts where you are; it is non-ideological, meaning womanism is against rigidity and tends to be decentralized; it is communitarian, which considers the state of collective well-being in relation to social change; it is spiritualized, which acknowledges the spiritual realm as being significant to human life and our politics (Phillips, 2006).

Womanists engage in methods that facilitate harmony, balance, and healing in order to create social transformation. These methods include dialogue, arbitrations, mediation, spiritual activities, hospitality, mutual aid and self-help, and mothering. With dialogue, there is a connection between people and individuality, which then permits disagreements and love. Here the kitchen table is used as a metaphor for the relationship of the women and a place where women gather to “agree/disagree, take turns, speak at once, and laugh, shout, complain, or counsel, even to be present in silence” (p. xx). Regarding disagreements, arbitration and mediation are used to maintain relationships and help the disagreeing parties calm down and

return to their positivity. It allows relationships to be talked through in order to restore unity. Spirituality activities, through communication between the material and spiritual realm, help us maintain a harmonious relationship between the environment and spirit. This may include prayer, rituals, meditations, collective visualization, and other means to draw spiritual energy toward social, political, and physical problem solving and healing (p. xxx). Hospitality includes taking good care of guest while mutual aid and self-help include DIY methods and relying on the relationships of people and the wisdom these people teach us through their lives. Experience, self-education, and shared knowledge are methods employed by Black women to demonstrate the underestimated genius among marginalized populations and to serve as a reminder that these populations will not succumb to institutional neglect (p. xxx).

Layli Maparyan (2012) defines spirituality as “an acknowledged relationship with the divine /transpersonal /cosmic /invisible realm” whereas religion is defined as a culturally organized tradition used for understanding spirit and spirituality (p. 5). For many women, the Black Church and other organized religions such as B ‘Hai and Islam have been a starting point or origin for spiritual knowledge and praxis; however, womanists, “as spiritual grazers, see spirit or spirituality everywhere and in everything” (p. 88). Most times religious affiliations and places such as the Black Church become locations in which people find community even at the expense of harm and oppression. However, being in community with those who you love even when harm appears and working through that harm is also spiritual. According to Maparyan, womanist spirituality is eclectic, synthetic, holistic, personal, visionary, and pragmatic. Said differently, womanist spirituality is made up of many parts that are weaved together creatively to create and establish a new whole. Further, it is defined by the person and envisions a reconciling with each

other, nature, and spirit, and goes about this reconciliation by moving energy for the purpose of social change.

While womanism is in conversation with theories such as Black feminism, what “separates womanism from other critical theories and social change modalities” is the focus and theorizing of spirituality (Maparyan, 2012, p. 86). Spirituality is at the core of womanism; and, women’s personal relationship to spirituality is the origin point of womanist logic and praxis (2012, xiv). Maparyan argues, to understand this further the heart of womanism, Luxocracy, must be further explored. Luxocracy means “rule by Light,” where the “Light” comes from within refers to our Innate Divinity (p. 3). On the foundation of Luxocracy rests the understanding that spirituality emanates from Innate Divinity rather than an organized religion (p. 3-4).

Creativity. To spark social change through spirituality, spirituality must be understood as being creative, which leads to wholeness. It is only through wholeness that we are able to enact this social change. In *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African American Women* (2001), Akasha Gloria Hull argues that once Black women begin to use spiritual power as a political force, creativity opens. In “Poetry is Not Luxury (1985),” Audre Lorde states there is a deep dark place within women where spirit grows. The darkness of this place is because it is ancient and hidden. This spirit that is deep, dark, hidden, and ancient brings forth creative power and true knowledge, and action springs from this creativity. Lorde writes,

“For each of us as women, there is a dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises....These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman’s place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep (2007, p. 37).”

Lorde's articulation of spirit as power and creativity within women draws our attention to the generational aspect of spirit while echoing that recognition of the interconnection of these qualities is the only way that we can survive our continued erasure and invisibility to create change.

As it relates to "the creative spirit" and its political nature, June Jordan (2016) writes that this component of spirit is manifested through love (p. 11). Love, Jordan writes, is how we make each other's dreams possible and survive in a world determined to kill us with hatred. Relative to children, Jordan argues that it is children who make this function of love possible. Importantly, it is our loving relationship with children, especially those who are Black and/or female, that allows us to create the social change necessary for our survival.

Toni Cade Bambara's compellingly creative and most complicated work, *The Salt Eaters* (1992), speaks to the risk found in not seeing oneself as spiritual through the creative and our life's work. When we compartmentalize ourselves into different parts, we jeopardize our wellness. *The Salt Eaters* chronicles the healing-breakthrough of Velma Harris that is facilitated by Minnie Ransom. Velma suffers a mental break due to her refusal to see herself as being spiritual through her activism and creativity. Her breakthrough and return to self hinged on the ways that she was able to be whole in all of her identities. Bambara, in thinking with Lorde (2007) and Jordan (2016) here, reverbs the ways that we are unable to experience spiritual depth if we do not acknowledge and claim the ways that we are creative.

Speaking to change as made manifest through creativity, Layli Maparyan (2012) offers the social change modality, Luxocracy. Luxocracy is described as a creative center and specifically means "rule by Light" (3). Maparyan argues that Luxocracy allows us to see what she calls the Innate Divinity in ourselves while recognizing the sacredness of ourselves, others,

and all created things. Using this a center from which we organize and live will eventually cause structural governance to be unnecessary. In this way, Luxocracy self-corrects or realigns the universe.

Black Girlhood and Spirituality. The realignment that Maparyan points us to via Luxocracy is made manifest through the centering of Black girlhood. By centering and using of Black girlhood as a lens we see an application of spirituality that changes the ways that we conceptualize the world. Writers such as Toni Cade Bambara and Alice Walker utilize Black girlhood as an application of spirituality. Said differently, both Bambara and Walker use Black girlhood to conjure spirituality to reveal truths that ultimately get us to freedom. Toni Cade Bambara, when asked if she would consider herself a spiritual being, responded that she would not consider the term “spiritual being” to describe her because it does not adequately describe her. Rather, she does say that she is trying every day to achieve mind-body-spirit as one word. For Bambara, this seems to address some of the things that the term “spiritual being” tends to leave out (Hull 2001). Many of Toni Cade’s writings include Black girl characters “who carried messages about the strength of being black and female that are as solid as armor,” which allowed for Black girls to see themselves in stories and as the hero (Holmes 2014, xix). She accomplishes the articulation of striving for wholeness through Black girlhood because it is the young women, Bambara claims that do the work of establishing new language to get us to peace and freedom (Salaam, 2008); ultimately, what wholeness is about.

In her award-winning text, *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker writes that, for her, the novel is an undoing of religion and a journey back to spirituality. The novel chronicles the life of a teenage Black girl, Celie, who goes through what Alice Walker terms a spiritual transformation of understanding God as “patriarchal male supremacist,” to understanding God to be everything

and everywhere else. The purpose of the story, then, is to show one's journey from being "spiritually captive" to breaking free and finding the Divine within oneself. Through the life of Celie, Walker is able to disentangle spirituality from this mystery figure, which readers see through the use of "Dear God" in many of the letters, to entangle spirituality with the community of those who help us break free from domination, which readers see through Celie's relationship with Shug Avery and Miss Sophia. At this turning point, we see the letters shift from being addressed to "Dear God" to "Dear Celie" or to her sister Nettie. The purpose of this text supports Walker's early poetic definition of womanism, which locates womanist as "lov[ing] spirit." I highlight this point because of the ways that Black girlhood is not always explicitly in conversation with spirituality as Walker and Bambara point out, but also in thinking of the ways that womanist theologians point us to knowing God as elsewhere.

Womanist theologian, Renita Weems, connects spirituality directly to Black girls. In *Showing Mary: How women can share prayers, wisdom, and the blessings of God* (2002), Weems explores the spirituality and spiritual journey of Black girls and women through the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Due to Nazareth's location and an understanding of the people who lived there, in addition to understanding the bible through a Black woman's lens, Mary was and is a Black girl, according to Weems. Weems provides in-depth context that allows readers to consider spiritual journeys by exploring the context of the setting, Mary's secular and spiritual identity, and Mary's relationship to others, namely her cousin Elizabeth. For Weems, Mary's story beautifully communicates that, for Black girls, "spiritual possibilities are never lacking" (p. 34). Further, we are held accountable to our spiritual possibilities through friendships like the one Mary had with her cousin, Elizabeth. This again points back to the community of the SOLHOT blur as well as Black girl magic.

Friendship is paramount in SOLHOT, and, like Toni Cade Bambara's Grandma Dorothy, we know that if our friends don't know it, we don't know it. In SOLHOT, we know collectivity is required for the change that spirituality pushes us towards. While spirituality is a personal journey, the journey is done best taken within community. In order to establish this community, it must first be made. In *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood* (2013), Ruth Nicole Brown writes of homegirls', those of us who labor to make the space of SOLHOT possible, and memories of Black girls and Black girlhood as being sacred and connected to our labor. This highlights the ways that we are interconnected, which opens up our spiritual possibilities as only being accessible when we are in community with one another. Thus, Brown demonstrates the intricacies of togetherness in this work. What I mean here is that our being with one another is not dependent on the physical sharing of space (although this is most desirable), but our being together even in the metaphysical/divine/invisible realm is dependent on how we remember that our togetherness is made possible through insistence on centering Black girlhood and Black girls as freedom. The following possibility emerges from this frame: the way in which we are able to access our labor as sacred is through our labor for Black girlhood, which I believe opens the door to explore the channel of our sacredness as being directly accessible through Black girlhood.

Black Girlhood Spirituality Defined

Black girlhood spirituality is a conscious acknowledgment of Black girls' relation to the divine/invisible realm as sustaining all existence in the material and supernatural worlds. What I mean by this is that Black girlhood, as a lens, offers a particular understanding of spirituality and spiritual practices. Black girlhood spirituality provides access to spirituality as revealed through creativity and collectivity, which will ultimately allow us to manifest the social change we so

desperately need. Acknowledgement of Black girlhood's relationship to the divine presumes Black girlhood as holy and omniscient and is the way through which the divine/invisible realm can be experienced. I contend that Black girlhood spirituality as a frame allows us to mobilize ideas to transform circumstance for the purpose of envisioning power differently and imagines us in the future that we, Black girls, have already created. Said differently, it is through Black girlhood spirituality that [Black girls] can exist within hegemonic systems and overcome them by imposing the power that exists within. Black girlhood spirituality calls for a radical (re)imagining of Black girlhood that not only speaks to how Black girls survive but to how humanity's survival is dependent on our reverence of Black girls and Black girlhood. Beyond this articulation, Black girlhood spirituality pushes us to understand how Black girls make sense of the world.

How Black girlhood Spirituality Shows Up in SOLHOT

In SOLHOT we show up just as we are. Seeing how we negotiate being in community with one another has always been intriguing to me. Our differences manifest through our beliefs and how we enact those beliefs. SOLHOT is absolutely not about groupthink, rather it is how we can all exist and be together while focusing on celebration and ensuring that we all are free and remain free. The negotiation that we do in SOLHOT is one moment in which I recognize Black girlhood spirituality coming through.

The language that the girls bring with them to SOLHOT is enough to create a new Webster dictionary and usually requires high-level engagement of context clues of homegirls just so that we can keep up with the conversations. Other times we flat out stop and ask what things mean. Their language play mimics that of Toni Cade Bambara, as mentioned earlier. During this particular session of SOLHOT we were discussing the latest terms the girls used to describe each

other. Sitting in a big circle, what ensued was a conversation about “bhaddie/bhaddies” “Goodie/bhaddies” “Goodie/goodies” “Nasty thottie bhaddies,” “Thottiannas,” “Thots,” “Thotish,” and individuals. The definitions and characteristics that the girls provided demonstrated how others viewed them and then how they viewed themselves and each other. During this conversation, the wheels in the girls’ minds turned as they went “in between” these categories and often made concessions about the terms if they got too familiar. On a basic level, the terms could be separated to describe “good” and “bad” girls but as we probed more, the girls complicated the list with examples that showed that these terms existed more so in a blur than in separate qualifying/quantifying terms.

One person began describing a “bhaddie/bhaddie” as someone who was a girl who did things for attention and usually wore leggings and crop tops. One of the other participants, Esha, who also sat in the circle interjected saying, “I wear leggings. My momma lets me dress like that she just says put on jacket.” I had already realized that many of the characteristics the girls were describing were present in our very circle, but I remained silent to see how they would make sense of what they were saying and the implications that it had for us all. Esha continued to interject throughout our conversation with questions about what the descriptions meant for her personally as she was dressed in a way that reflected the terms and for other girls. Esha’s interjections elicited many concessions from the rest of the girls in the group. Initially, I thought that the girls were making distinctions about the types of girls that come to SOLHOT. This line of thinking is a trap that got me caught up in distinctions of “good” vs. “bad” but the use of language and the negotiations made by the participants goes deeper than this.

Black girlhood spirituality is manifested because the girls’ actively negotiate their existence in a way that complicates how we love one another and allow all of us to be present.

The girls seemed unwilling to exclude or target anyone in the room. What I mean by this is that the girls, while getting lost in their vocalizations of descriptions and definitions, did not consider that those same characteristics could be present in the room. However, the girls did not want others present to feel like they were making judgements about the girls who fit these descriptions, especially when there were more people present who initially believed that “leggings and crop tops” could reveal something about a girl’s character. When Esha raised these points, one girl, Valeena, expressed that they were not referring to Esha in their definitions and descriptions, rather they were talking about girls who were not present; plus, it is not what you wear, but how you wear it. It’s not that the girls who fit more “bad” behaviors do not come to SOLHOT, therefore leaving all the “good” girls, it means that we are always actively thinking about how we defy status quo in our everydayness. Esha was firm in pushing us into the future with her resistance. Just because those terms were used before to mean particular things about girls (or even males, as the girls later revealed), Esha challenged these static identities and characteristics particularly when they each wore things that their parents and guardians bought for them.

I would also like to invoke another example that occurred during a somewhat similar conversation, yet builds on this example. During this next example, I would like to point out that many of the same girls were present and it happened around a conversation where many of the terms introduced above were again questioned. This time, the girls explained that terms like “thot” were used by males to insult the girls. Again, we were told that boys could be called this same term, however, it was not an insult to boys. Iyanna responded “yeah you can be a thottie boy,” to which Dariana responded with confusion, “But see I don’t understand though. I don’t understand how dudes gon’ call us thots when we going out with a whole bunch of boys but if

they go out with a lot of girls what they supposed to be called? Cool. But the stupid thing is that impresses them that don't offend them. It impresses them when girls call them thots. They be like yep I sure do get em." As a group we questioned what could or would inflict the same embarrassment or harm for the boys and the girls responded that you had to target their "manhood." Lotus then provided us with her example: "I came up to this one boy and told him I had a slanger. He got mad and said, 'no you don't' and I said, 'yes I do.'" In that moment we all laughed and acknowledged how creative Lotus was.

Black girl slangers that Lotus provides is an example of Black girlhood spirituality because Lotus takes necessary measures to dismantle a symbol of power exclusive to male patriarchy. Lotus' creativity is unmatched as she demonstrates her Black girl brilliance by moving power to herself through her "Black girl slanger." From Lotus' sharing, I think that she really had the young man spinning and wrecking his brain to determine the "truth." More than anything in that moment, Lotus pushed imagination so that even if power returned back to patriarchy after her conversation with the male student, it was unsettled enough that his "slander" could never hold the same power. In this way, we were elevated into the future and closer to the divine in that the divine is freedom and our freedom can only be maintained if we make room for Black girl "slangers," which then unsettles patriarchy in such a way that it cannot return back to its original state. The unsettling of patriarchy is what is needed to maintain the futurity of Black girlhood spirituality.

Conclusion

Black girlhood spirituality allows us to engage Black girlhood and the ways that their experiences teach us how we encounter the divine in our day-to-day experiences and points us to the embodiment of the divine/invisible realm as linked to our knowledge production, our bodies,

and our future. Black girlhood spirituality allows us to reimagine Black girlhood as not being exclusive to binaries, but inclusive of all that lies in between. Particularly, we understand Black girls as knowing something particularly complex about their experiences, which allows them to create the terms and conditions of their lives.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Methods

“Process of inquiry is a highly political endeavor with significant implications for the researcher as well as the individuals and contexts that serve as the focus of study” (Brown & Strega in Brown, Carducci & Kuby (2014) p. 1).

Introduction

This chapter details the methodology and method used in my dissertation research. In the first section, I define qualitative inquiry and ethnography as an approach of qualitative inquiry. Next, I define participation observation as an ethnographic method and the sites in which I collected data. I discuss the participants in the second chapter in addition to what counted as data in this project, and how I collected and analyzed the data. Finally, I discuss the limitations of this study.

Qualitative Inquiry Methodology

Qualitative Inquiry is a methodology with roots that span across disciplines and philosophical foundations and traditions. Most often, the origins of qualitative research are attributed to anthropology, sociology, clinical psychology, and social science fields such as education (Merriam, 2002). There is no definitive way to define qualitative inquiry, but most definitions highlight the research purpose, epistemology, and process of collecting and analyzing data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 2009). I believe Immy Holloway and Stephanie Wheeler’s (2002) definition captures the essence of qualitative inquiry. They define qualitative inquiry as focusing on the way that people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they are. Further, to gain insight into their experiences, researchers may use qualitative approaches to explore behaviors, perspectives, and feelings that lie at the core of their lives (ibid, p. 3). Moreover, qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the multiple interpretations of a particular setting at any given time, which is often thought of as an

interpretive approach to qualitative inquiry. This interpretive approach makes the world in of the participants visible and pliable (Dension & Lincoln, 2005).

Sharan B. Merriam (2002) describes key characteristics of interpretive qualitative research designs in the following ways:

1. Researchers strive to understand the meaning people have constructed about their world and their experiences. This meaning is to understand the nature of the setting and what it means for participants to be in this setting
2. The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis
3. The process of qualitative research is inductive or that the researcher gathers data to build concepts or theories
4. The productive of qualitative research is richly descriptive

(Merriam, 2002, p. 4-5)

An interpretive qualitative researcher's goal is to understand the meaning-making of the participants while showing how parts of the culture work together to inform a particular phenomenon and theorize how it matters within and outside of this particular setting (Feldman, 1995). This approach to qualitative inquiry is also subjective as opposed to objective, which demonstrates the closeness to the study and the multiple realities that are revealed in the study (Denzin, 2009).

Ethnography

Commonly, though not exclusively, ethnography is used to collect qualitative data. Ethnography can be defined as “the observation and documentation of social life in order to render account of a group's culture” (Saldana, 2011, p. 4). In this regard, culture can be defined as knowledge that is learned and shared among a people in regards to the social knowledge that is produced and learned (McCurdy, Spradley, & Shandy, 2005, p. 5). According to Dyson & Genishi (2005) the purpose of conducting ethnographic research is to figure out “what's happening here” and how participants make meaning out of what's happening. Ethnography is dependent on immersion into the field for an extended period of time. This time is typically

documented through participant observation. According to Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte (1999) participation observation is “near-total immersion when ethnographers live in unfamiliar communities where they have little to or no knowledge of local culture and study life in those communities through their own participation as full-time residents and members” (p. 92).

D. Soyini Madison’s (2011) theorizing in *Critical Ethnography: Methods, Ethics, and Performance* is helpful to mention here. In this text, Madison theorizes critical ethnography and the stakes involved in taking this approach in the field. Critical ethnography considers that the conditions for the observed subjects are not what they “*could*” be thus the researcher’s scholarship makes moves to change these conditions for the purpose of freedom and equity. In this way the research “disrupts status quo” and moves us from “what is” and “what could be” (p. 5). Madison continues by articulating that critical ethnographer “contributes to emancipatory knowledge and discourse of social justice and then goes even a step further to consider not only politics, but the politics of our positionality (p. 5-6).

Madison’s work is extremely important and in conversation with scholars such as Yang & Tuck (2012) who critique notions of social justice as ascribing to more colonized notions. I put them in conversation because I, too, am leery of claims of social justice, particularly during the present moment, where social justice has been commodified and taken up in speech only. I agree with the position Madison and Yang & Tuck’s work takes on as it pushes us to move beyond discussions of socially justice realities, and presses us to follow our discussions with actions. These are not just any actions, but actions that move us closer to returning the land back to those who are native to it.

My work in SOLHOT set out to change the conditions of Black girls by changing the conversations around Black girlhood. We see these changes in the world around us. When I

began my journey with SOLHOT in 2008, there was no “Black Girls Rock,” “Black Girls Code,” “Black Girl Magic,” or field of Black girlhood, for that matter. I invoke these moments of popular culture and the academy because they have broadened the platform of Black girlhood; and, I argue that they are able to exist because of our organizing in SOLHOT. Even as this lineage exist for how we inquire into the lives and experiences of Black girls, they are not parallel for the very reason the work of Madison, Yang & Tuck impressed upon us. The movements I named exist because of SOLHOT, but they differ in that movements such as “Black Girls Rock,” “Black Girls Code,” and “Black Girl Magic are commercialized and mono-narrative. What I mean here is that these movements are most interested in shiny Black girls (Jarmon, 2013) or those who are exceptional. The methodological approach I take through my training in SOLHOT seeks to change the social conditions of all Black girls so that we can all exist in freedom and what could [can] be.

Participant Observation

Ethnographers use participant observation as a data collection technique. According to Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte (1999), participation observation is “near-total immersion when ethnographers live in unfamiliar communities where they have little to or no knowledge of local culture and study life in those communities through their own participation as full-time residents and members” (p. 92). Being immersed in the community and attending events allows the researcher to see how similar and/or different they are from the people they are studying. In the ethnography, *The Other Side of Middletown: Exploring Muncie’s African American Community*, the researchers write “As we learn about others, we learn about ourselves; and as we learn about ourselves, we learn about others” (p. 13). While conducting participant observation, you are observing your own participation as much as you are observing others.

Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT). I hope that I have written in such a way that articulates that I would not be in graduate school if it were not for SOLHOT. But, if I have not, I would like to be clear, concise, and direct when I say I would not be in graduate school if it were not for SOLHOT. I am absolutely positive of this. In fact, I only applied to one graduate program. I didn't realize it then, but that's how much I knew that I needed to be here in Champaign learning from the collective under the guidance of the visionary, Ruth Nicole Brown.

When asked what SOLHOT is, I'm often "stumped" on my response because SOLHOT has been so many things to me. Most of all, I am unsure of how to describe SOLHOT in terms that I know others yearn for. Others prefer a more pinned down definition of SOLHOT. They want to know how they can implement or create a space like SOLHOT where they are. It's not that SOLHOT cannot be where they are because it can be wherever people are willing to organize such a space. With a more pinned down description I cannot guarantee that it will look the way they expect it. The nature of how SOLHOT comes together it is determined by those who show up and the gifts and expertise that they bring. So, when pressed for a more "pinned down" or definitive answer of what SOLHOT is I can say that SOLHOT will always be centered around Black girlhood, but I cannot say for sure how that space will look and cater to the needs of those particular to a certain space.

In the following section, I will attempt to provide a "pinned down" description of SOLHOT based on how I have experienced this space and our organizing for almost ten years. I have come to know SOLHOT as a faith-based practice that honors those who we know and love while centering and celebrating Black girlhood. I describe SOLHOT as a faith-based practice because everything that happens when we organize is based on faith. We have our plans, but we are not certain how they will happen both in terms of resources and the actual act. Our ideas in

SOLHOT are large and never planned on a financial budget. Well, there is a budget, but not a budget based on money that we necessarily have already, but money that we will need. So in order to get the monetary resources needed to carry out our work in SOLHOT, Dr. Brown wrote grants and used her research funds. I collaborated with SOLHOT homegirls and our colleagues to write grants. As homegirls we all come out of pocket to cover expenses as well. Accessing the money we received from the institution was done efficiently by the labor of Virginia Swisher, the office manager of Gender and Women's Studies. We received financial support from many resources¹ and oftentimes this created additional work for Virginia. As it relates to financial resources it would be helpful for SOLHOT to have support staff.

We require other resources in SOLHOT as well such as a consistent work/office space for keeping materials and writing. This space could also be used for hosting events, collaborative arts space, studio, and concerts. It would be helpful to have transportation so we could travel with the girls for the field trips they request. Since SOLHOT has been around for 11 years now we could use someone who was solely responsible for archiving our work. We could also use an artist-residency to invite artist to Champaign-Urbana to share their process as well as to produce the art we envision in SOLHOT such as music visuals, documentaries, graphic designs, and photographs. SOLHOT is also growing during a time when social media presence is important so it would be very helpful to have a person who is dedicated to that as well.

One way to manifest this vision for SOLHOT is through institutional support in the form of a cluster hire. The four central organizers of SOLHOT are more than capable of fulfilling

¹ For our analog session we have received generous donations for snack from the Women's Resource Center and the College of Education. For productions such as Black Girl Genius Week we received funding from the School of Art and Design and the College of Fine and Applied Arts, Education Policy Studies Organization and Leadership, Student Cultural Programming Fee, More than Words Graduate Focal Point, Afro, English, Writing Studies, GWS, LGBT Resource Center, YMCA, and Standing With Her.

² Jazzybelle retell/tale is a song by written by scholar-artist and bandmate, Jessica L. Robinson.

tenure-track positions in interdisciplinary fields as well as organizing and running an innovative and collaborative center of research. This would be ideal as we could then be together and afford to bring on support staff and future graduate students who are interested in doing this work.

When we organize the after-school space or what we have come to know as analog SOLHOT, we go into a space with a curriculum. Our curriculum is usually based on activities that we have adopted from the topics that the girls say are important to them, local and global headlines pertaining to Black girls, and expertise that homegirls bring to the space. Much like other practices of faith, we wholeheartedly believe that Black girlhood will make a way and that when we organize around Black girlhood, good will prevail. The space will elevate us all and bring to light that which is important. What's important is that the girl who refuses to participate will return, the girl who has so much to say will say and the girl who has nothing to say will dance it or write it in a poem (Brown, 2009). It is also important that the homegirls who struggle so hard to get SOLHOT will make it and receive exactly what they needed. It is through faith that we become just who we need to be in SOLHOT. Not only is SOLHOT a faith-based practice, but SOLHOT is also the qualitative methodology that I used to inquire about the lives and experiences of Black girls.

SOLHOT is the reason that I pursued graduate studies; thus, SOLHOT is the way that I understand and know how to inquire about Black girls and Black girlhood. Like other methodologies, SOLHOT is concerned and centered around genealogies and origins. As you read in chapter, two parts of our mapping of origins include tracing what you know to those who raised and taught you. As a co-organizer and researcher in SOLHOT, I always map genealogy through the girls' names. Ask any of my other co-organizers and they will tell you that when I see a girl's name, for example, "Alexis", I am likely to ask if their father's name is Alex. This is

a simple example, but usually the names are clearly linked to a parental figure, typically the father. This is important because it acknowledges who they literally originate from and it points to the people and knowledge they always bring with them.

SOLHOT taught me to not start with the phenomena of my interest and to begin with the people. This echoes my bandmate, Dr. B's verse on our song "Take Care," where she says "I remember the day I let go of the idea and held on to people...it's much risky now." This is important because it helped me to learn to just be as researcher. While in SOLHOT, I was one of the organizers of the space, so I actively planned our activities for the day as well as participated in recruiting participants as both homegirls and girls. I was never seen as a researcher who exclusively observed the field and took copious notes. This way of researching in a space always seems to draw a very line, even if very fine, between the researcher and participant. During my time in SOLHOT, I never felt a line that separated my role as a research or participant. The girls' voices are always a priority so their voices should be heard more because of the way we create the space of Black girlhood celebration in SOLHOT. Homegirls may ask clarifying questions to understand the girls' point of view. In SOLHOT, the girls who show up are not concerned with our roles as researchers or our association with the university. The most I have seen the girls engage my role as a researcher was in their reminder to turn the recorder on so that I could "get the things [I] needed for my book." I recall Dr. Brown introducing herself as Dr. Brown. One of the girls took that to mean she was a foot doctor and proceeded to call Dr. Brown that for the rest of our session. This echoes that the girls are not concerned with our titles of Dr. or researcher. They are most concerned with our commitment to creating the space that allows them to celebrate their girlhood.

SOLHOT taught me that revolution and growth happens through it all. Being involved with a collective for almost ten years means that you witness many things. I cannot claim to have witnessed it all because I was not there from the very beginning, but I have been involved to know that with organizing there are high highs and extremely low lows. The extreme lows, at one point, brought on the end of what we knew to be SOLHOT. From my perspective, ego surpassed the importance of celebrating Black girlhood, and being more taken with how I was hurt by others with whom I organized was more of a priority. This and many other factors lead to the end of SOLHOT as we knew it and this moment became known to us as heartbreak.

We Levitate. So what do you do when your heart has been broken? It's not uncommon to turn on your favorite song that reverberates your feelings or a song that helps you get through the heartbreak. This is how We Levitate came about. We Levitate was the sonic vibration that got us to the other side of heartbreak and back to our love for one another. On solhot.com, we write

“Post heartbreak, music moves us through hurt and wisdom, to sing a new Black girl song. This **next level** practice of SOLHOT bumps like afro-futurist Black girl magic because it is both the art and science of **Black girl genius** music making. This SOLHOT way of making music is ultimately about movement (moving ourselves, each other, and you toward greater justice). We are unapologetically using digital wrongly to reimagine the collective, resound complex Black girlhood, remember relationships, and reverberate love for self, each other, and the new worlds we are creating.”

We Levitate is our “multimedia ritual experience of doing SOLHOT” (soundcloud.com/solhot-next-level) and through our music we engage love, heartbreak overcome, and what it means to be

a Black girl from our lived experience and the experiences of Black girlhood as we have come to know them in SOLHOT.

We Levitate is a girl band that consist of four members, Ruth Nicole Brown, Blair Ebony Smith, Jessica L. Robison, and myself and we prefer us. In our forthcoming article titled “Doing Digital Wrongly,” we write that the “us” is our Black girlhood sensibility that says “I love you in a place that says we shouldn’t.” I believe that this sensibility is also felt and shown in our use of ‘bandbae’ rather than bandmate. We prefer bandbae because it describes the love we have for one another as expressed in our relationship to one another and the music/sounds we create. We are homegirls, friends, and lovers. Unfortunately, the space of this chapter is not enough to write how much I love my bandbaes. But, when I say I love them I mean, they mean it, and we know the depths of each other’s love. However the following gets me to a start of expressing my love for the “bandbaes”--Blair, Jessica, and Ruth:

Love is patient and kind.

Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude.

It does not demand its own way.

It is not irritable, and keeps no record of being wronged.

It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out.

Love never gives up, never loses faith is always hopeful and endures through every circumstance (See 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 New Living Translation).

Our loving one another decolonizes our sound (Robinson, 2014) and resists dominant notions that suggest we should not love each other because of basic dichotomies such as teacher/student.

The love we have and express for one another is personal as it political as it is spiritual.

Black Girl Genius Week (BGGW). Black girl genius week is a weeklong campaign of Black girlhood that consist of organized rituals, performances, concerts, teach-ins, dance and writing workshops, studio sessions, skill shares, homegirl kickbacks, and private sessions at the local middle school (Smith, 2017). There have been a total of three BGGWs the first one was held November 3-8 2014, the second February 22-28th 2016, and the third October 21-18, 2016.

I have come to know BGGW as a time for homegirls and others to travel [back] to Champaign and engage in deep meditation on what it means to believe, create, and imagine a Black girlhood currently and even beyond that. BGGW has also been known as the “anti-conference” in that we hope that the environment we create during our time together feels welcoming to all, isn’t a battle of who is the smartest, and is really a hotbed of the most critical, progressive, and engaged community of people. BGGW is the first of this kind of event to come to camps. It is purposefully engaged with the arts and creates a conversation that extends within and beyond disciplines. It truly is the future of what we desire our education to be.

Discussion

Role of the Researcher. In *Critical Ethnographer*, Madison (2005 ed.) writes, “[p]ositionality is vital because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects” (p. 7). This is important because it allows me to check-in with myself as a researcher and considers all the things I carry with me into the space of SOLHOT. Positionality is also taken up as reflexivity, which allows you to explore the relationship between the researcher and the researched (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). Reflexivity is acknowledged as methodological and epistemic; and, in my project, I focus on reflexivity as epistemic. This means that I consider my belief system

and how this in turn helps me to analyze and challenge “metatheoretical assumptions” (ibid, p. 60).

You should know that I am a church girl by now, but, if that was not apparent from the previous chapters of this dissertation, let me go on record by saying in my hearts of hearts I am a church girl. I was raised in the church involved in our church where I sang in the choir, attended Sunday school, was a youth leader, and even received several scholarships. They are my family and many of them are still praying and rooting for this very document which will complete my final degree. To be transparent as a researcher I must say that being a church girl shows up, especially in this project that focuses on spirituality. I found/find myself most familiar and comfortable with a Christian context because it is how I was introduced to spirit and spirituality and it is the faith in which I’ve spent the most time practicing. I think I could have benefitted from immersing myself in other traditions such Judaism or study with a Yoruba Priestess for example, but time was not on my side. I have learned of many traditions and practices that women of color do engage through this research experience, and I do reach within and around my own faith-based practices to breathe life into this idea. This is not a limitation. In fact, I believe that using my personal faith has allowed me to decenter what I have believed as sacred, while centering the secular as sacred.

SOLHOT has exposed me to spirituality both familiar to my Christian roots and that of “new age spirituality.” But, I’ve struggled being comfortable with my identity as a church girl and who I’ve become as a researcher. I struggled with this identity in SOLHOT as well. My struggle to accept and reconcile who I am as a person, believer, and spiritualist is what actually delayed me from arriving at this project. I ran from who I was while trying to find a phenomenon and that led me further from where I needed and wanted to be. It turns out that I was like my cute

puppy, Quincy, who loves to chase his tail. I was running in place and really only faking myself out. My homegirls saw me and told me that what I brought to SOLHOT, my church girl-self, was what was needed in the space.

I knew that what we brought and offered to SOLHOT was enough since I was introduced and began participating and later co-organizing SOLHOT. I applied to this graduate program and this graduate program alone because Dr. Brown suggested that I could stay and continue my work with SOLHOT. Continuing to work with SOLHOT and Dr. Brown was the only reason I stayed. Not only am I loyal, this work was important and necessary and I had so much more to learn. I remember being a first-year graduate student and being stumped when asked what I would research beyond Black girlhood and SOLHOT. The current specifics were still a mystery which, I believe, had a lot to do with my own insecurities and wanting to be someone that I wasn't (or at least trying and failing to be someone else). I'm sure this was exacerbated by my peers who thought (and some still do think) my work was (is) a joke, a hobby, and not "serious" research. I was apparently here in grad school for a good time, which I did have by the way, but my work with SOLHOT has been more than I could have ever imagined.

My time in SOLHOT has been beyond me as a researcher. While it has been a research site for me, it is much more than that. SOLHOT is a spiritual practice and journey that has allowed me, in the company of and co-organizing of others, to create the space for Black girlhood for Black girls in Champaign County. The 3-5 p.m. space is for the girls, it is what they have come to know and expect to happen even after they have left (Brown, 2013). Because they know and cherish the 3-5 p.m. space this dissertation is not for them. Do not get me wrong, I am grateful for them because without the girls this journey could not have happened. But, I know that I have done the part that they have come to know and expect. This dissertation is a practice

for me to see how I can capture the spiritual ecstasy and silence of this journey in such a limited space. Well, at least begin to capture it.

I have been here for almost ten years with SOLHOT. I am both ethnographer and homegirl. My time in SOLHOT is documented through field notes, performances, emails, songs, hugs, laughter, tears, and heartbreak. All of these things are very real. My time in SOLHOT is documented by snack, smack downs, endings, beginnings, girls who I've met that are now mothers, intimate stories that we've shared, plants we've watered, incense we've burned, the relationships that we've built beyond being me researcher and them participant. My memory and the very real shift that has occurred in me is my documentation.

The girls have come to know me as Porshé, Ms. Porshé, or maybe they don't even know my name at all. I have met at least 100 girls, at least. I do not remember all of their names. I try, but I also don't believe that that makes me a "real" ethnographer. It does not mean that they did not come to SOLHOT and share their silence, a song, dance, or poem. It does not mean I was not there. In fact, I remember what they shared most of the time and some of it I still have. The archive is both physical and metaphysical.

I did not continue my time in SOLHOT with the phenomena of spirituality in mind. To my knowledge (or denial), spirituality wasn't my focus until after my preliminary exam. I continued SOLHOT because I wanted to get the praxis "down pat." I succeeded and I failed. My biggest success was what I learned in the failure. Failure taught me that I had to reconcile with myself in order to heal myself and the practice of SOLHOT to do this very sacred work of SOLHOT. So, that's what I did because I wanted to be a better homegirl and researcher. This reconciliation allowed me to not only reconcile with myself, but to realize the true spiritual

nature of SOLHOT. I knew that what I really was interested in, spirituality, could be found in this space.

This healing is what SOLHOT calls for in our practices and this healing is narrated through our stories. The only way to create the space of Black girlhood is to confront the very things you once denied as being the very thing that is worthwhile. The story of SOLHOT could only be told utilizing qualitative methodology. It is not because there are not numbers in SOLHOT; there are plenty of numbers in SOLHOT. However, the most meaningful information is the numbers as told through the story. The story as told by us in SOLHOT is how we know who was there and what was so great about our time there.

The writing of these stories is important as well. After struggling to arrive at idea of this dissertation, I struggled with the writing. Maybe “struggle” isn’t even a sufficient word. It was a fight to get the words on the page. The opponent of this fight was myself. I wrote this piece after my preliminary exam:

****This is a random conversation with myself so it may be rambled. Hopefully you can make sense of it****

“Is there any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: And the prayer of faith shall raise him up; and if he has committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. Confess your faults to one another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed...”

James 5:14-16a

“Stop running

From the beautiful queen that you can be becoming.

If you try to be someone or something that hasn’t been predestined for you

Then the world will miss out on all the things you contribute”

Work That, SOLHOT Mixtape: Volume II, written by Taylor Moore

Last week after my prelim the conversation with advisers, friends, and colleagues, We Levitate, charged me to go and figure out why there is a present disconnect in my work. The day of my prelim I did not feel the usual jitters I feel when I present. I felt indifferent and I was worried that I wasn’t worried. Not because I felt I had it together either. I just felt indifferent. I had already

made plans to make it through Monday and to cry and be under the covers on Tuesday. After the conversation that we had after my prelim it was easy to keep that appointment to sulk.

I was so sad and I thought maybe it was because I missed my Dad, and yes that probably had a little something to do with it, but I knew that even if I just cried if I wanted to finish what I set out to do I had to be honest and take account of all my baggage that I was secretly, obviously not so secret, hoarding. Also, the morning of my prelim Aerian, who had never met my father, text me “Hey Porshé! This might sound crazy but I had a dream where I was at your house and your parents were there. Your dad asked me to take some pictures of your and him then later on in the dream asked me to show him the pics.” I knew this was his way of telling me that I was ok. I wish I had considered more in that moment about what it could have meant, but I’m glad to hear it differently as I write this spew.

The very first thing I realized is that the conversation after my prelim sounded similar to the conversation that my grandfather and Lavette (on my grandfather’s behalf) had with me in March 2010. I knew that graduation was approaching fast and that since I was starting EPOL directly after graduation I wanted to kick it during the summer and not be forced to work. They only needed to extend their financial support until August and then I would “grow-up.” I expressed this to them and told them how I needed a break and I deserved it too. I knew my grandfather could not tell me no so I waited for his agreement during this conversation. I was wrong. For the first time that I could remember my grandfather with the support of Lavette told me no, he could not support me during the summer because if they did this I would never grow up. They had did the job thus far and were confident that I could support myself. I was so sad and devastated. Ego bruised. How could they be so confident in me when I wasn’t?

Fast forward to this moment, and I am hearing this same speech from Dr. Brown with the support of Blair and Jessica. That despite my fear I have to grow up and be the theorist and expert that yall know me to be even if my confidence was on shaky and sinking ground. I do not want to be doing this dance of uncertainty forever so I continued to go deeper.

In addition, that anxiousness I felt when graduation approached as an Undergrad, I experienced at the beginning of this fall semester. Randomly one night I remembered that I would soon be dissertating and on the job market and I was feeling every bit unprepared. After a slight bit of panic I reached out to some of my homegirls and asked them to pray for and with me. I fasted that week and prayed that I would have what was for me. My spirit settled.

On Tuesday I sulked and my spirits were low. Halfway through the day I thought to myself, okay now that you have taken a moment to be sad and even considered dropping out of the program. How could I take responsibility for why I was even here feeling this way? I was determined to get over this. I couldn’t come this far and quit because my feelings were hurt. I had a plan. I would go through my baggage and unpack it, considering all the possibilities. Then, I would get into what the scholar homegirls who I love dearly had already wrote to find the not so hidden answers and communication that I needed.

After I went through my baggage and consider everything that could possibly be or not I knew that I had to do as James instructed the believers in the verse quoted above, seek out the elders

and have them anoint and pray over you. I had to have conversations with yall in order to be healed.

The My Sister, Sandy talk was very timely as I moved from woe is me to what am I gonna do and how am I going to do it. I watched as Sandra Cooper talked about her sister Sandra “Sandy” “Auntie Dee Dee” Bland. She talked about her sister Sandra in a way that would keep her sister’s legacy and story alive. She’s from the church and she ain’t try to hide that either. That night I dreamed of Sandra Bland. Her spirit was clear as day. We talked like homegirls. She was letting me know I had this. That we use story as a way to invoke the spirit and the sacred.

Ok, ok.

Next I considered maybe I really don’t believe in this work of SOLHOT and I’ve just been masquerading around. I considered it, but in my heart I didn’t think or know that to be true. This work and the people I’ve met have saved my life and kept me even when I didn’t know it. I did believe, however, that I have not pushed myself to truly articulate my work and role in the space. I didn’t think of myself as a theorist. I told myself to defer to all the other homegirls to know it and say it much better. At least that’s what I thought despite Jessica’s constant reminder “you have everything you need.”

During my conversation with homegirl and cultural writer Sesali, she asked, “What is your role in SOLHOT?”

So I initially I didn’t answer her question because at this point I’m still making stuff up and running from the answers. Jessica has been asking where is “grandma lulu in this?” Well I can tell you Jessica that she always said “I’d lose my head if it wasn’t on my shoulders.” She was right. And this time right in a way I hadn’t heard her before. In this moment I was really trying to lose my head as if it wasn’t on my shoulders. You cannot run from what’s predestined for you. So eventually I answered Sesali’s question and said you know yall call me the grandma and apart of being a grandma is that I’m going to pray and tell you the truth. Bingo. I play a spiritual role in SOLHOT. I’ve been running from this in SOLHOT and my everyday life. Running and going nowhere as Sesali put it. This running ain’t just started either. This goes back to my teens.

“Stop running

From the beautiful queen that you can be becoming.

If you try to be someone or something that hasn’t been predestined for you

Then the world will miss out on all the things you contribute”

(Work That, SOLOHT Mixtape: Volume II, written by Taylor Moore)

I’d been trying so hard not to be the “church girl” because I didn’t want to be her. I didn’t want to be the person who reminded folks of harm inflicted, or I didn’t want folks to be offended by my presence or think I was going to push my beliefs on them, or think that I would judge them. And maybe I was all those things, but SOLHOT and my homegirls helped me overcome, (un)learn, and rethink some of those things. Then I wondered if this made me a bad Christian since I did agree that some of those things were fucked up. This made me interrogate my faith in a way that was very helpful. SOLHOT took me to the next level. To know my faith for myself. “Like Porshé that’s what we need you for. The space needs that. We don’t expect you to be anything but that.” Even if you try to hide your light people can see it in you.

Robinson (unpublished) talks about her fear of performing in front of her peers during her pro-seminar and uses hooks (2002) to describe this feeling. That same quote and feeling resonated with me. “many of our students come to our classrooms believing that real brilliance is revealed by the will to disconnect and disassociate. They see this state as crucial to the maintenance of objectivism. They fear wholeness will lead to them to be considered less “brilliant” (p. 180). I agree. As much as I would like to disagree because I know that SOLHOT has shown and taught me otherwise sometimes the violence of schooling and the academy is internalized and we don’t even know it. I subconsciously internalized that shit. And this spew is very much dedicated to ridding myself of that feeling. “Who are you a student of?” I hear that much better now. As Brown (2013) states is “the traditional scientific stuff is safe...undoing the discipline was spiritual” (Brown, p. 34). I needed to do this spiritual work.

Confess your faults to one another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed...

I have been running and I don’t even like to run. Apart of that running causes you to look over the brilliance you yourself hold and those around you hold too. This realization hurt because that wasn’t my intent. Similar to Jazzybelle retell/tale² this process would be my redemption and as Sesali put it to not get caught up in the lies I been telling. To be healed.

I called on homegirl scholar Chamara too because again I knew I could rely on everybody to “get me right together” in love. Plus I’m slow sometimes (as in taking a long time to process) so hearing it differently helps me. I hoped that she would pray me up outta of whatever was holding me back.

At this point during the week I knew that every time I’ve heard a story in SOLHOT I have been compelled to write. Most of my responses have come in the form of poetry or lyrics. Most times I cry when I’m writing because I feel it. Similar to the Holy Spirit in my faith, the spirit isn’t something you see it’s something you feel. I have to feel it in order of believe this. I know this because last year I reread and performed something I wrote at NWSA and I was not feeling it. That wasn’t it.

I say to Chamara, I am interested in how the girls stories are used to invoke the spirit and sacred. Stories helps us bring those who are present or absent with us. We do see this in movements like Black lives matters, where stories are told posthumously, but what if we did what my grandma suggested and gave folks, in my case Black girls, their flowers while they are still here to smell them?

Chamara reminds me that in a Baptist church testimony is a story of oppression, resistance, and victory. I also know that women dominate Black churches in terms of attendance, but are

² Jazzybelle retell/tale is a song by written by scholar-artist and bandmate, Jessica L. Robinson. In a forthcoming article theorizing Jazzybelle retell/tale titled, A Jazzy Belle ReTell: Betrayals of Black Girlhood, Method, & Southernness written by Jessica Robinson, Ruth Nicole Brown, Porshé R. Garner and Blair Smith, we articulate the retell as a “counter story to *Outkast*’s original song Jazzybelle (1996) that offered us a creative and powerful way of assembling and speaking back to music we listen to and love.”

discouraged and shunned from leading. She goes on to tell me to recall that Black girls died in the church bombing and it was only then that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was able to be passed.

Stop running...

This work, as dirty as it may be, (SOLHOT Mixtape: Volume II, Dirty Work, Durrell Callier) has been saving my life even if I have been running in place. I can think of so many instances of where this work was speaking to me. The spirit gives you what you need before you know you need it. SOLHOT gave me what I needed for such a moment as last week...

I sung those lyrics to the girl in the chair on “Work That” It’s my turn to sit in the middle now, just like we did during our SOLHOT Mixtape Performance during April 2010.

Let em get mad

They gon hate anyway don’t you get that

Doesn’t matter if you go along with their plan

They’ll never be happy because they’re not happy with themselves

(Work That, SOLOHT Mixtape: Volume II, written by Taylor Moore)

“I know what I know. I know what I know” (We Levitate Presents: Black Girl Genius Week, Black Girl Genius)

Black girl genius week... I was prepared for my father’s transition during our sessions together (reminder of death as being victory and not defeat), The gospel songs that were song and I sung, I wrote about what Black girls know based on my friends and childhood, Us on the tracks, Finney on the track, Nikky Finney and Malayah, We cried, We prayed, I literally saw Jessica levitate. The levitation is only made possible through the spirit. I thought maybe my eyes were mistaken in that moment, but you can’t “unsee” once you’ve seen.

I’ve kept Chelsea and Taylor Check in story with me because now I realize they operationalized story to discern who was and was not SOLHOT.

Operationalized=usable. Story is usable to investigate and think through how Black girls know and use spirit and spirituality.

Know and remember...always

I said “Not asking you to love us, but it’s absolutely a requirement” Why was I looking for permission now, then?

Spirit resonates in all of our work so my work is an extension that will look specifically at how Black girl stories can be used to theorize spirituality and how this then connects Black girls and women. This in turn will open up a larger discussion around Black girlhood and spirituality.

In Chapter 2 of Hear Our Truths Ruth Nicole Brown (2013) outlines how Black women remember Black girls through memory. “Homegirls must remember all the ways they are not alone but connected to others, ancestors, kinfolk, spirits, and communities whose honor it is of their to recall, respect, and remember as part of the work of doing SOLHOT. To home girls is

commit to a very sincere practice of remembering Black girlhood as a way to honor someone else, remembered whole” (p. 47).

Jessica uses the spirit of Kasandra Perkins to reappear disappeared Black girls and women.

“To say Kasi’s name and to write with her in mind is to let her spirit use you. It is to resist imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal order. It is to push back on the ideologies that insist that she does not matter. It is to make it happen now because the stakes are too high to wait.”

“To say her name is imperative. To tell the story is imperative”

Sesali Bowen (2015) writes about “the holy trinity”-using using artist such as Bey, Minaj, and Rhi Rhi

Through life histories Chamara J. Kwakye has brought Vivi and Dr. Theresa to us

Blair Smith (2015) building on (Brown, 2013) states, “Love for home is important to our understandings of Black girlhood in educational discourse and practice, a discourse that often portrays Black girls’ as at-risk, where “home” is an issue to be fixed and/or changed.” More often than not we learn spirit and spirituality at home first.

I first knew spirit because my grandmother prayed for me. The church raised me. SOLHOT challenged me and gave a fresher perspective to (un)learn. It gave me space to really know those prayers and to filter what the church had given me. I am a student of each of you and I want my work to genuinely reflect all of my teachers.

This is my project.

Education of a storyteller as an example of not only what is a story, but how to theorize using story. You gotta feel it!

Using stories to theorize spirituality.

Stories are important to spirituality. Black women writers have used spirit

Alice Walker-Color Purple

Toni Cade-The salt eaters

Zora Neale Hurston-Their eyes were watching God

Toni Morrison- Beloved

Womanism is the framework

How do black girls experience and express spirituality through stories?

In what ways does spirituality connect Black girls and women?

What does Black girlhood spirituality look like?

How is spirituality used as an organizing tool for Black girlhood celebration?

I did not want to do this work because I knew it would require all of me. I know that this come to Jesus moment is only the tip of iceberg as I move forward with this work. There is tons more of reading to get lost in. There is more sitting with all that I know to be done. I was afraid. Spirit is no playing matter. I can no longer fight it. It’s better to embrace the fall rather than fight it. Plus

I have so many people waiting and ready to catch me if need be. Boo tells me to do my best work. Thank you all for holding me accountable. I know this is probably not news to you all. Thank you for letting me get here. Thank you for lighting the fire when I needed to get here sooner. Thank you for being the best teachers. Thank you for your forgiveness. Thank you SOLHOT for teaching me

Every moment of last week was leading me to where I needed to be. Reminding and reaffirming what I needed to know and hear.

I include this writing at length because it was this piece of writing that revived me and brought me to this project. I thought that this writing would get me well on my way in the writing process, but I still stalled. I continued to fight with myself because I felt the ideas had to be presented in a particular way. I got caught up in the form, which hindered me from reaching the idea. I did not trust myself and, in qualitative research, you have to trust yourself. You have to trust yourself in order to be in the moment of what you saw and trust that what you saw can be understood in such a way that it is connected to something else. The something else or phenomena should drive your desire to write and make the writing irresistible. It doesn't mean the writing will not be hard, but the desire to write this very important thing will be the driving force that keeps you coming back to it. For me, getting to the idea of this project was just as important as getting the written account down. It was important because it reflects the community that names me (Bambara, 1984, p. 41) and attempting to write how I perceived my writing "needed to be" only drew me further away from that community, SOLHOT. After literally being on the floor two times and giving a few people a fright, I am more than pleased to say I believe I got to my voice.

Method

Research Design

Participants. SOLHOT is self-selecting. Girls may elect to be a part of SOLHOT by filling out the permission slip (Appendix A). At any time, if they are not interested in attending,

they may choose not to come. This process of self-selecting was true for all of the sites with the exception of Yellow Middle school. We worked closely with the sixth-grade counselor at Yellow Middle School, and she selected the girls who participated in SOLHOT. We typically collaborate with and follow those selected girls through their eighth-grade year. The girls are usually students in middle school or high school and range between the ages of 11-18. We also have adult participants who are often affiliated with the University, or Champaign community at large through their artistry. These participants are usually called homegirls. During my time with SOLHOT, we have held the 2-hour sessions with the girls in spaces such as the local library, a church, two middle schools, and two high schools.

Methodological Tools

I used the structure of SOLHOT to determine what I considered data in this dissertation project, meaning that I followed the structure of the SOLHOT sessions as well as the music of SOLHOT. In what follows, I describe the specific rituals we engage while together and our music making process.

Check-In. Check-in is a ritual we use to start our session and welcome us into the space. It was initiated by a homegirl as a way to allow those present to provide personal narratives of what has transpired since we last met or simply the details of our day (Garner, 2012). To begin, someone says “check-in,” shares with the group, and concludes by saying “check-in.” Ending by saying “check-in” lets the next person know that it is their time to go. Sometimes a person’s check-in may spark the group to ask more questions or launch us into different conversations related or unrelated to the initial “check-in.” Ultimately, “check-in” allow us to decompress and really take a moment to ask one another, “How are you?”

Just Because. Just because is another a ritual used to begin our sessions. It allows us to name who we are and speak back to those things and forces that do not know our names.

Typically, just because are sentence stems pre-printed on paper and resemble the example below.

JUST BECAUSE I _____
DOESN'T MEAN I _____
MY NAME IS _____
AND I AM _____

Similar to “check-in”, just because responses ranges from figurative to literal tellings and can range from how our day has been to responding to others characterizing us as “ghetto,” “loud,” and “dumb.”

Know and Remember. Know and remember is the ritual we use to close each session.

We intentionally pause during this ritual to remember those ancestors who have passed on before us. In addition to naming someone who has passed on, sometimes the names of those who are still alive are called during this ritual, as well as ideas and affirmations. To perform this ritual at the close of our session, we stand in a circle and one girl explains to others the process of know and remember. Everyone is informed that this is a sacred time in SOLHOT and we should try to respect and listen to each person as they declare who they want to be known and remembered. While this explanation is being given, a candle is lit in and placed in the center of the circle. Each person in the circle goes up to the candle, one at a time, and lights the incense while saying what they want to be known and to be remembered. After each girl takes one (sometimes two times) turn, the incense and candle are extinguished.

Studio. Studio is a “key collective imagining concept that can happen anywhere we are” (Smith, 2018, p. 65). In the simplest terms, studio is our process of creating music and sounds. These sessions are hosted by We Levitate and have become a way for us to not only create our own music and sounds, but to collaborate with other artist. While studio does happen anywhere

we are, a primary location has been Dr. Brown's basement office in GWS, which we named the purple curtain studio. It was given this name in tribute to a purple curtain that was gifted by homegirl Chamara (who was moving) that we use to trap the sound. Studio sessions have lasted anywhere from 2-5 hours and everyone who shows up are asked to contribute. This contribution may look like singing, breathing, talking, laughter, or sometimes even refusal.

Data Collection

I used qualitative methods of observation to define and interpret how spirituality manifests in SOLHOT. I collaborated with the girls directly for at least 118 hours of (2 hour sessions for 6 weeks with 1-5 day session and 1- 4 day session). The best estimate of my time with SOLHOT would be 420 hours, which includes the sessions with girls, two classes specifically for those organizing with SOLHOT, homegirl orientations and sister circles, a performance, BGGW (the planning and actual week). For sure, the quantitative measure of my time feels inadequate to the qualitative measure of my time in SOLHOT. I documented my time in the field by writing field notes, using photography, and collecting artifacts. My time in SOLHOT evolved from being just a "participant" to co-organizer. When I started SOLHOT as a McNair scholar, I felt like more of a participant and I was unsure if my time with SOLHOT would continue beyond that summer. I came to think of myself more as a co-organizer after I was sure I would continue in SOLHOT. During the first two years of my graduate studies, I was the lead organizer at one of the rural Central, IL high school sites, which provided me with insight to the inner workings of school districts and collaboration with community influences such as Regina Crider. Mrs. Crider recommended that we start SOLHOT at this particular high school and graciously introduced us to the superintendent at the time. My roles in SOLHOT

morphed over time, and I learned more about what it means to be a part of a community and what it means to be an organizer.

Data Analysis

I rely on different qualitative methods in each chapter of my dissertation to present and analyze the data. In this section, I provide a brief overview of those methods. In the chapters that follow, I provide the particulars of the method used; and, in this chapter I explain how each tool contributes to my practice of ethnography.

I analyzed the prophets and prophecies of Black girlhood spirituality in chapter four. Rather than thematically cataloguing the data I've collected since being in SOLHOT, I sat with the moments and data points that have continued to resonate with me. The data analyzed mirrors the structure of SOLHOT, for example, the introduction, large group activity, and know and remember. By sitting with the data, I realized that I could go deeper into my thinking about these points to discover what things were underlying.

The text *Thinking With Theory in Qualitative Research* by Alecia Y. Jackson and Lisa A. Mazzei (2012) was extremely insightful while the analyzing the data points in chapter four. The authors, feeling that their qualitative coding was insufficient, came to the concept of “plugging in.” Jackson and Mazzei borrowed the term from Deleuze & Guattari (1997) and put forth plugging in as a process of making and unmaking to arrange, organize, and fit things together. They argue that thinking with theory in analysis transforms the data while using the data to push theory to its limit. For this project, this meant taking the theory of prophet and prophecies and pushing it to the limit to undo a gendered theoretical understanding while transforming the data. This transformation helped me to stop relying on basic understandings of theory and gave me a fresh understanding of our ways of being and doing in SOLHOT.

In chapter five, I went to the music created by We Levitate to compile a text, or bible of sorts, from the music in what we termed “the sounded-word aesthetics.” I knew that an aesthetic was important to this project as it would reveal how spirit is felt and moves. This analysis call on the use of arts-based research method of poetry. Arts-based methods are an extension of qualitative research and much like thinking with theory; arts-based methods unsettle qualitative inquiry by challenging what is seen as research and knowledge (Leavy, 2009). To create the poetry or sounded-word aesthetics, I utilized a thematic approach. I transcribed the songs and coded them for themes. From a closer coding, I arrived at the four sounded-word aesthetics and created the poetry from the data within the codes and from what I was inspired to write as inspired by the codes.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this dissertation is the timing in which I came to the realization of spirituality. Had I been willing to fall in with Black girlhood and Black girls sooner, I would have resonated with spirituality sooner and been able to study and spend more time with different faiths. I could have studied under the Black feminists and womanists whom I have referenced in this work such as Layli Maparyan, M. Jacqui Alexander, and/or Akasha Gloria Hull. This would have complimented the work performed in this dissertation by taking me even deeper into the depths of the metaphysical/divine/invisible realm to further characterize how it manifests in SOLHOT. I plan to engage different faiths and scholarly contributions of Black women and girls to further understand the ways that Black girlhood engages spirit in my future work.

I would also point to time in terms of the working conditions in which this dissertation was produced. I continued my graduate education so that I could do SOLHOT. To do so, I often

maintained 2-3 positions on campus so that I could afford my monthly expenses which often resulted in SOLOHT getting the last of me. After working and maintaining jobs that required me to be present in an office setting for twenty hours a week and taking twelve hours in coursework, I had little to give SOLHOT. I often wonder how much better my ideas and organizing could have been if I did not have to do so much. The academy requires a lot of time; but, in the future, I hope to work in conditions that value my academic interest enough to provide adequate compensation and time away so that I can give to my research first.

The secondary limitation of this dissertation is the format. I have collected dozens of pictures, poems, and original artwork by the participants throughout my years in SOLHOT, but this format made reproducing and including this work. We also create music in SOLHOT, yet I did not include links to the songs because they do not resonate in the word document or pdf format. I believe that the best context to include them would have been more performative and layered in nature to observe the interactions of the various mediums. While I wrote the scripture that you will find in chapter 5, I have only performed them/read them/sang them twice; and, perhaps, performing the scripture could have offered another layer to the analysis. Maybe if there were video links embedded in this project, you could have heard me sing or say the analysis and engaged the text and scholarship even further.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I outlined the methodology and method used in this dissertation project. My nine-year ethnographic field experience allowed me to complicate and tease out nuances of ethnography, specifically participant observation. During the process of collection and analysis, I found the actual writing process to be necessary in constructing a definition of Black girlhood spirituality. I concluded this chapter discussing the limitations of this research as they relate to

time and format. In the future, more research should be conducted that further explores various faith practices as well as format usage as it relates to research that centers Black girlhood.

Chapter Four: Present Day Prophets

“The world isn’t ready
for little black girls who have showed up
to save the world.

Such possibility strains the credulity
of the current self-deconstituting civilization

...

Who wants to wait around for a self-deconstituting humanity
evolving towards its own collective Christhood
to catch up with a little black girl
who’s already there?”

Maparyan, 2012, p. 309

Introduction

The opening quote is taken from one of the last chapters of *The Womanist Idea* by Layli Maparyan. The chapter, “Witness to a Testimony: Womanist Reflections on the Life and Loss of a Daughter,” is the first chapter of the book’s section titled, Beyond Womanism. In this particular chapter, Maparyan poses questions regarding the official report of her daughter’s death. Aaliya Phillips was twenty-two when she jumped off the roof of her Los Angeles apartment. Knowing that there had to be a narrative beyond this official report, this chapter is Maparyan piecing together the last moments of her daughter’s life. Specifically, the above quote is taken from a poem that Maparyan writes that raises the questions of what really happened and why. I include this epigraph because I believe it gets to the core reason of why we should turn to Black girlhood to understand prophets and prophecies. It gets to the heart of Black girlhood prophets because, as Maparyan states, Black girls are already there as in a future beyond our self-destructing civilization. This point motions toward the prophet and reflects back to Black girlhood spirituality, which understands Black girlhood as a knowing that mobilizes us to the future. The prophet and prophecies is how we get to that already created future.

In this analytic chapter, I examine the role of Black girlhood prophets and prophecies. Black girlhood prophets, I argue, are one of the spiritual practices of Black girlhood spirituality. Merriam Webster defines “prophet” in the following ways:

1: one who utters divinely inspired revelations: such as *often capitalized*: the writer of one of the prophetic books of the Bible *capitalized*: one regarded by a group of followers as the final authoritative revealer of God's will Muhammad, the *Prophet* of Allah 2: one gifted with more than ordinary spiritual and moral insight; especially: an inspired poet 3: one who foretells future events: predictor 4: an effective or leading spokesman for a cause, doctrine, or group 5. *Christian Science*: a spiritual seer b: disappearance of material sense before the conscious facts of spiritual Truth.

Three of these definitions stood out to me and struck me as related to the data points I had been resonating with and mulling over for a year. These were an effective or leading spokesman for a cause, doctrine, or group, one who utters divinely inspired revelations, and inspired poet. I designated these definitions of prophet as being significant and returned to the data to map the ways these definitions manifest in Black girlhood prophets to reveal our spokesman, divine inspiration, and inspired poets.

Womanist Context and Black Feminist Context

I was introduced to the work of womanist theologian Renita Weems during my search to articulate Black girlhood spirituality. That was a game changer. I introduced her work in chapter two, but I return to it in this analytical chapter as her work, in addition to Layli Maparyan’s (2012), led me to Black girlhood prophets. In *Showing Mary: How Women Can Share Prayers, Wisdom, and the Blessings of God*, Weems uses the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, to demonstrate the ways that Black girlhood has always been full of spiritual possibilities. The

spiritual possibilities that Weems points to include prophecy which, I argue, is a practice of Black girlhood spirituality.

Weems sets the stage in *Showing Mary* by providing context for who Mary was, arguing that Mary is a Black girl from a working-class background. Her argument is significant for this project because it further illuminates Black girlhood spirituality. Situating Mary as working-class points to her everydayness as it relates to her relationship to the divine. There was nothing spectacular about Mary's lived experience, and, when thinking about how integral her Son is to humanity, it would seem that she was not spectacular enough. Yet, she was chosen to bring forth a child that would, as detailed in the Christian faith, save the world. A Savior was born and Mary was entrusted to carry the world's future. It is recorded in the bible that an angel came to Mary and prophesied to her that she would be pregnant and it would be risky given that she was engaged and the father of the child would not be the man she was engaged to. In this way Mary, a Black girl, becomes the starting point for prophecy, as it was her body and life given in servitude to the prophecy and future of the world. It is for this reason that I point to the women and girls I have met in SOLHOT as also being the entry point to prophecy. Mary is not recognized as a prophet. In fact, there are only six women who are given the title of prophet/prophetess in the bible and they are usually overshadowed by more popular male prophets such as John the Baptist and Jeremiah.

In "Miracles and Gifts: A Womanist Reading of John 14: 12-14 and Ephesians 4:11-16" (2016), Layli Maparyan offers a womanist reading of the biblical text John 14: 12-14 and Ephesians 4:11-16. Maparyan explains that, in the text found in John, Jesus gives his believers the power to perform miracles if you go deep enough into the teachings (p. 334). Fully exploring how to do miracles, Layli argues, that learning to do miracles moves us from education as

information and knowledge to wisdom which “comes from extracting insight from lived experience rather than book knowledge alone” (p. 334). Maparyan goes on to articulate that, by studying how to perform miracles, we access the step beyond wisdom, illumination. Illumination occurs when “we extend beyond the bounds of everyday, material reality, into the unseen realms that surround, infuse, and produce material reality” (ibid). These steps are important because everyone has access to them if they do the work and are dedicated to the practice. In the second part of this essay, Maparyan draws the connection of our power to do miracles to the second verse found in Ephesians.

Ephesians 4:11-16 outlines the gifts available to use and describes the prophet as an important gift. Maparyan defines the prophet as “a person who delivers messages from God to humanity, who mediates communication between God and humans, and who may serve as an inspired teacher based on what is received from God” (p. 336). The verse outlines other gifts as well and argues that we should use them to grow so that we are no longer children. Maparyan argues that this is similar to Walker’s (1984) declaration that womanists are “Responsible. In charge. Serious... Always wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered ‘good’ for one.” Importantly, Maparyan argues that gifts such as prophets and prophecy untangle us from systems of dehumanizing oppression. Maparyan’s arguments highlight our ability to access spiritual gifts such as prophecy in order to draw us away from oppression. Further, those who study are able to perform these gifts. The people that I highlight in the sections that follow have studied and are able to access their spiritual gift of prophet/prophecy.

Weems and Maparyan are not alone in thinking about Blackness and prophet and prophecies. In her text *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics of the Hood* (2004), Imani Perry performs a critical analysis of the art, politics, and culture of hip hop lyrics and music as

revealed by the words and gestures of rappers or “prophets of the hood.” This work conceptualizes prophets through the male dominated field of hip hop. Perry motions to the double entendre of the term prophet in that it can be heard as the work constructed by the spiritual truth-telling of prophets and also the ways in which hip hop is often used for profits in capitalist exploitations. In her description of prophets of the hood, Perry points to the New Testament verse that states, “A prophet is honored everywhere, but his hometown and among family.” Not only is this context helpful in thinking through hip hop’s prophets, but Black girlhood prophets as well in that they are not honored period.

We usually don’t recognize the prophets, especially when they inhabit bodies marked as youthful, Black, and female (Brown, 2009, p.1). Therefore, in this chapter of my dissertation, I spend time honoring Black girlhood prophets as making Black girlhood spirituality felt. Said differently, I believe it is worthwhile to intentionally turn to Black girlhood to focus on the ways that Black girls are in relationship to the divine. It demonstrates the argument of Black girlhood spirituality by drawing prophecy away from patriarchal conceptions, which is more than likely, one of the reasons that we cannot recognize Black girlhood as being divine.

Black Girlhood Prophets as the Leaders/Spokesmen: “She is Not SOLHOT”

prophet

Noun | proph.ət | \prā-fət\

3: an effective or leading spokesman for a cause, doctrine, or group

Long before spirituality was the point of inquiry for my scholarship, I heard the following story:

“Well for two weeks I was incarcerated in JDC with a whole bunch of fat people with braids. You gon’ eat your cornbread? Naw for real I wasn’t going to say that um...”

Stacey began, her voice trailing off Jordan interrupted, and *“I was going to say I got incarcerated for arson.” “Deadly! Deadly arson!”* Stacey added.

Stacey continued, *“I was lighting trees on fire and I was throwing...well really this isn’t arson, I was throwing the rocks in people’s windows.”* Now that the story was off and on its way to a place and destination only they knew, Jordan proceeds, *“I was going to say that we- me and friends, brought some Hennessy and then we put a match inside the bottle to see what it was going to do. Was it going to blow up? And then we accidentally sat one [bottle of Hennessy with lit match in it] too close to my friend’s house and then it like, it like burned the curtains off the wall.”* Pausing to check-in with one another and with slight laughter Stacey brought the audience to our final destination, *“and then I was going to go along with the story and see how many mean faces she was going to do until we said naw we was just playing.”*

It reads just as dramatic as it did the day I first heard it. I kept this story with me, thinking I would use it to demonstrate the power of storytelling. Now I know that it has stayed with me all this time because it makes for a compelling analytic to demonstrate the spiritual practice of the prophet. The prophecy of this check-in as told by Stacey and Jordan positioned them as the leaders/spokesmen of SOLHOT as they prophesied about who was and was not SOLHOT.

The background of this story provides the context to why Jordan and Stacey told this story. During our time together that summer, Stacey and Jordan felt that the SOLHOT they had come to know had been threatened by the homegirl they referenced in the story who, to Stacey and Jordan, preferred a Black girlhood that did not include them. In conversation after the story was told, Jordan proclaimed, “She is not SOLHOT!” Prior to this moment I ruminated on the story as being some answer to a larger good. After sitting with this story and thinking about what it could tell me about the Black girlhood spirituality practice of prophecy, I concluded that this

story was somewhat like a parable of sorts that was followed by the very clear prophecy, “she is not SOLHOT.”

I hold both the prophecy delivered through the story and the more explicit articulation of the prophecy delivered in conversation after the story to be key in understanding how Stacey and Jordan operationalize the leadership/spokesmen definition of prophet. The use of story is a favorable method for people of color to theorize. In “Race for Theory”, by Barbara Christian (2000), an essay that served as a critique that challenged cultural critic readings, Christian articulates that people of color have always theorized in forms that were different than Western thought. She states that the ways of theorizing favored by people of color include “the stories we create, riddles and proverbs, and play in language” (p. 12). In this way, the prophecy “she is not SOLHOT” was first given and theorized through the story Stacey and Jordan offered. While this way of theorizing is preferred by people of color, it is not engaged without a risk.

Black feminist, bell hooks, is useful when thinking of the risk associated with speaking out for Black girls. In her monograph, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (2015), bell hooks articulates the risks she encountered as a young girl for using her voice. hooks writes, talking back, speaking to an authority figure as an equal and speaking when one was not spoken to, was a courageous act (p. 5). This talking back was a sign of disrespect, and, as hooks writes in both *Talking Back* and her girlhood memoir, *Bone Black*, this disrespect was seen as being too spirited and was in need of breaking; they needed to break her spirit.

We are not in the business of breaking Black girls’ spirits in SOLHOT. In fact, we encourage the girls we work with to share their opinions even if it is unfavorable and not in line with the majority. In this way, it would be safe to say that Stacey and Jordan were full of the spirit and they saw the homegirls’ criticism as attempting to break the spirit they were so full of.

While Jordan and Stacey were potentially taking a risk by telling the homegirl that she was not SOLHOT, they knew that they were in a place that allowed them to “talk back” to the this particular homegirl and the power she wished to have over them or any homegirl they saw as being a threat to the space. Articulating the ways in which she opposed her parents attempts to break her spirit, bell hooks goes on to write in *Talking Back* that she developed the writing alias “bell hooks” because it allowed her to distance herself from the criticism she often felt when she spoke out and against authority. It was her alias that allowed her to use and develop her voice as a writer. While Stacey and Jordan were very outspoken girls, the story acted in the same for them. The story allowed them to demonstrate the ways that their experience harmed and helped them to develop and deliver the prophecy “she is not SOLHOT.”

The approach that Stacey and Jordan took to deliver their prophecy was risky, too, because Black girls are not believed when they decide to speak truth to power. We witnessed just how risky storytelling is for Black girls when Rachel Jeantel took the stand to testify about the last phone conversation she had with her friend, Trayvon Martin during the summer of 2013. Using the work of Holland (2015) as a frame, Jennifer Nash (2016) writes of Rachel Jeantel as “raising the dead” in her witnessed testimony in the trial against her friend’s murder. Nash writes of Jeantel’s risk as a “willingness to be subject of juridical violence for the sake of making [Trayvon] Martin’s voice audible” (p. 755). Popular media, Black and white alike, criticized Rachel Jeantel for having a “black-cent” and being illiterate and brutally ignorant (Nash quoting Joanna Spilbor in Wemple 2013, p. 755). Yet, Jeantel persisted in making her friend’s voice audible.

Regina Bradley (2013) also writes of Rachel Jeantel’s courage to take the stand despite the risk and analyzes Jeantel’s performance as sonic ratchetness, which she defines as “a means

of navigating sliding representations within American popular culture.” This ratchetness, Bradley argues, “pointed out and disrupted America’s racialized and gendered listening practices.” Bradley further argue that Jeantel’s performance of ratchetness during her testimony was an “antithetical response to (hetero) normative politics of respectability currently in place in the black (diasporic) community.” Bradley’s argument is important, and I use her argument to take up space to further understand Jordan and Stacey’s prophecy.

What prompted Bradley’s analysis was Jeantel’s question, “are you listening,” to the defense attorney during her testimony. Rachel Jeantel’s question and Bradley’s analysis of the sonic resonance of that question reminds me of the opening quote of this chapter where Maparyan ask who’s willing to wait around for a little Black girl who is already there? It reminds me of this quote because Stacey, Jordan, and Jeantel are already there as Maparyan poses in her question in the opening epigraph, and their responses show just that. In thinking with both Bradley and Maparyan, Jordan and Stacey’s responses show that they are in the future because they challenge those dominant paradigms used as a lens to see them.

It was important for Stacey and Jordan to theorize their prophecy through a dramatic story because it provided a reflection to the homegirl of how they experienced her judgement of them during our six weeks together. They prepared the story outside of SOLHOT and then stood up on the raised dais to deliver or perform its prophecy. Stacey and Jordan had to perform their prophecy in similar ways that Ruth Nicole Brown (2013) theorizes in *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*. Brown argues that she could not address the complexities of Black girlhood using traditional research methods; it was performance that allowed her to undo the discipline of graduate studies and demystify the need for permission which returned her back to the methods she always knew, poetry (p. 25). I argue that, similar to Brown, Stacey and

Jordan used the performance of their prophecy to undo the discipline that that particular homegirl wanted to enact over them. A few sessions prior to the delivery of this prophecy, the homegirl led sessions on hair and hair politics and argued that we should all prefer the natural state of our hair. Stacey and Jordan disagreed on this notion of Black girlhood. During our short time together, they also spoke of things that were important to them such as their romantic loves and those who they would fight because they were “beastly.” I note these conversations by Stacey and Jordan because while I saw them as typical middle school conversations reflective of how they were trying on identities and developing mentally, physically, socially, spiritually and emotionally. These types of conversations can be used to sexualize and criminalize Black girls. The homegirl was wrong in her assertions about Stacey and Jordan, and they let her know just that and prophesied based on their readings of her.

The other homegirls were not called out by Stacey and Jordan, but this does not mean we were or are exempt. I recall the struggles I experienced with asking the right question in chapter one. In conversation with ideas I presented in chapter one, homegirl and scholar, Chamara J. Kwakye writes in the introduction to the SOLHOT edition of the *Departures of Critical Qualitative Research* (2017), “it is difficult to unlearn how we have been taught to hate ourselves and each other. That our knee jerk when we are scared is to silence someone else, our knee jerk when someone else is free in their bodies or with their talent is to shame.” We must be willing to do the work of moving past our knee jerk responses in order to join Black girls like Stacey and Jordan on the other side. The other side is what Black girlhood spirituality calls for. In this example of Stacey and Jordan, Black girlhood spirituality is enacted through the practice of prophecy. The prophecy, “she is not SOLHOT” positions Black girlhood as “an effective or leading spokesman for [SOLHOT]” and kept (keeps) us grounded and centered to SOLHOT’s

purpose and what we know Black girlhood to be. Black girlhood as we know it to be in SOLHOT is freedom and not an expectation of a particular performance.

Black Girlhood Prophets as Divine Inspiration: My Sister, Sandy as Homegirl

prophet

Noun | proph.ət | \prā-fət\

2: one who utters divinely inspired revelations: such as

Poet Langston Hughes asked a poignant question in the poem *Harlem* (1990) when he asked, what happens to a dream deferred? In *Harlem*, Langston provides six scenarios of what could happen to that dream. I know firsthand what happens to that dream deferred or what can potentially happen. It can begin to fester, spoil, or even get lost in smoke, fog, and haze. To recover the dream or stop it from leaving completely calls for exorcism of whatever is holding the dream captive. In my case, the exorcism called for help from the other side or, what Sharon Holland (2000) terms, a “raising of the dead.” Moreover, the exorcism I needed to revive an almost dream deferred called for a reliance on a practice I was very familiar with, the SOLHOT practice of homegirl-ing. The practice of homegirl-ing, Brown (2013) argues, “is what sets SOLHOT apart from traditional mentoring programs and youth cultural work” (p. 48). To homegirl is to labor to create the practice of SOLHOT. Doing this labor requires the ritual of remembering. As homegirls, we must remember that we are not alone and who walks with us; we must remember “Black girlhood as a way to honor oneself and to practice the selflessness necessary to honor someone else, remembered whole” (ibid, p. 47). Most of all, homegirling and the labor it requires allows us in SOLHOT to question and explain the ways we often resist and collude with capitalist exploitation. I would need to return to homegirling and the labor it requires to realize my dream and to keep it from being deferred. In this section, I analyze the role of Black girlhood prophet as one who utters divinely inspired revelations that exorcised and revived me from an almost dream deferred through the sacred practice of homegirl-ing.

I defended my preliminary exam on October 5, 2015 I defended my preliminary exam and realized that my dream was compromised. I did not experience the joy that I thought I would have experience having accomplished a major goal toward the completion of this degree. I felt vulnerable and transparent, my committee even saw right through me. They charged me, especially my advisor, to get to the crux of what I really wanted to talk about. What I heard was that I had not found my niche--my argument was basically a re-iteration of what other women of color feminists had already said. It seemed that I did not have a phenomenon or not one that I truly wanted to write about. Members of my committee charged me to “send a note when I found it” and that “it’s okay to agree or disagree with your advisor” and “to really distinguish myself and say something very important about Black girlhood and SOLHOT that was specific to my interest.” While my committee may not remember this, it stuck with me. After the preliminary exam, my advisor, who was more than likely acting in the role of homegirl at the time, said she did not know what was going on with me, but, if she were me, she would do some rituals to get over it, fast. I was translucent, clear as day, to them and I had no clue how I got this point.

The next day, October 6, 2015, the dream in me would be revived and not deferred. That Tuesday I attended the event “My Sister, Sandy” hosted by the Bruce D. Nesbitt Cultural House (The Black House) in collaboration with other organizations. This event was promoted as an educational forum that would remember the life and legacy of Sandra Bland through a conversation with her sister, Mrs. Sharon Cooper. Sandra Bland had died almost three months prior to the event in a suicide hanging while being detained in a Waller County, Texas jail after a routine traffic stop. It was a processing event for all of us in attendance, including Bland’s family. Her death did not make sense to us all. The official reports said suicide, but, similar to Maparyan, Bland’s family was unwilling to believe the official reports of Bland’s death--it

simply did not add up. Bland was visiting Texas ahead of starting a new position at her alma mater, Prairie View A & M University. She was vocal on social media platforms as an advocate against police brutality and injustice. We all seemed to be looking for the real report of Bland's death. I remember sitting in the audience shocked as I was reminded that Bland's death was a suicide and not a murder as I had filed it away in my brain to be. The room for this event was packed, and the grief we all felt was thick. We grieved not only for Sandra Bland, but for all of the Black lives lost that summer of 2015.

The summer of Bland's death was overwhelmingly traumatic for Black lives. We experienced the shooting massacre that claimed the lives of nine parishioners at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, the assaulting of a young Black girl in McKinney, Texas by an officer as she attended a pool party with friends, and the death of Sandra Bland that summer. We were weary of the system of white supremacy that seemed even more determined to claim the lives and existences of Black people. So, as we sat and listened to Mrs. Cooper talk about "Auntie Dee Dee" and what Sandra Bland meant to her and her family, we mourned all of those lives. I left the event heavier than I came in. I was still reeling and sulking from my prelim exam. This event added to that mood as I realized "I was never meant to survive." I mourned for Bland's family as they would not share their family's favorite holiday, Christmas, with "Sandy," and that I felt suffocated in ways that I had yet to figure out.

After the event, I went to bed and Sandra Bland met me in my dreams. She and I had never met before; yet, her spirit was clear as day. We talked like homegirls. Sandra let me know I had this. After that dream, I felt revived and I believed what Sandra Bland told me. I spent the rest of that week connecting with other homegirls that I knew through my work with SOLHOT and asking them what they knew my role in SOLHOT to be. I was faced with a hard truth: that

the very thing I was running from, my “church girl-ness”, was exactly what was needed in SOLHOT. In fact, that’s what they knew me to bring; and, my pretending that spirituality was not a major part of who I am and the essence of my work was as productive as a dog chasing its tail. From the one-on-one conversations I had with homegirls, I wrote the best thing I wrote in months, which I included in chapter 3 of this document. I was divinely inspired for the better; my dream was uncompromised and saved.

Returning to the spiritual nature of homegirling is helpful in further contextualizing this analysis of Black girlhood prophets as divine inspiration. In chapter two of *Hear Our Truths*, “Black Women Remember Black Girls: A Collective Memory,” Brown (2013) theorizes the practice of homegirling in SOLHOT. Using the work of M. Jacqui Alexander (2005), Brown constructs a collective and creative memory to show how homegirls go about the sacred work of remembering and making time to make a Black girlhood that can be celebrated. This labor, Brown writes, requires that homegirls “bring their full selves and deploy resources they may not even know they possessed until they were told they did” (p. 53). This was exactly the case with me and my compromised dream. I thought that I could compartmentalize some parts of myself and not bring my whole self to SOLHOT. This is an interesting point because homegirls stated that I did bring my whole church girl self to SOLHOT; but, for some reason, I was unwilling to bring that self into my academic writings of SOLHOT. The homegirls reminded me that my unwillingness could be traced to mistrust. I did not trust myself, what I knew, or the process that I had come to know SOLHOT to be (Brown, 2013, p. 53). What I had to do was unlearn and ask questions in the presence of them and know they would be willing to guide me to the truth.

Sometime we believe we know best, but spirit will not let us go until we know what they know; this was the experience of M. Jacqui Alexander (2005). In “ Pedagogies of the Sacred:

Making the Invisible Tangible,” Alexander articulates a moment when she experienced writer’s block while attempting to write about African cosmologies and modes of healing through secondary source discourse analysis of captive, “Thisbe.” Alexander struggles to the point of not writing until she accessed (through mediation and study) the spirit of “Thisbe” who revealed her name as Kitsimba and not the plantation name, “Thisbe.” Alexander articulates Kitsimba revealing herself to her as body praxis and knowing who walks with you and writes, “[k]nowing who walks with you, then, becomes a spiritual injunctive to activate a conscious relationship with the spiritual energies with whom one is accompanied, and who make it possible, in the words of Audre Lorde, ‘to do the work we came here to do’.” To do the work I came to do I, like Alexander, had to meditate and realize who walked/walks with me.

Sandra Bland was not a homegirl that I knew per se, but I think her spirit set out to save me. Here, I want to bring the work of Sharon Holland (2000) into the conversation of homegirling. The valence between life and death is a thin one. Holland writes of “raising the dead” as a response to Toni Morrison’s use of miscegenation to describe the fears of revising the literary canon to one that highlights the important impact of African American literature on modernity (p. 2). In this way, raising the dead is a task both to “hear the dead speak in fiction and to discover in culture and its intellectual property opportunities for not only uncovering silences but also transforming inarticulate places into conversational territories” (p. 3-4). Holland returns to Morrison’s use of miscegenation and contends that it not only speaks to the way in which African American literature cannot be segregated from the canon, but also speaks to how there is no segregation between the living and the dead. That the line separating the two is finite and that the most valuable and teachable information that we need to live lies on the “non-living” or more spirit side of this line. Furthering this argument, Holland quotes the work of Michael Taussig

(1992) which states, “the space of death is important in the creation of meaning and consciousness...” Holland’s use of “raising the dead” is important here when thinking of Black girlhood prophets as divine inspiration, especially as it relates to my relationship with my homegirl, Sandy.

At the time of my visit with Sandra Bland, I believed her presence was comforting me in regards to what I then thought was my project, Black girlhood stories and spirituality. That project fit Holland’s outline of the task of “raising the dead” as it relates to fiction, but it also fits my project in its current iteration as focusing exclusively on spirituality. Recall Holland’s contention for “raising the dead” not only includes hearing the dead in fiction, but also thinking through the intellectual work in “transforming inarticulate places into conversational territories” (p. 3). My encounter with Sandra Bland in my dream allowed Bland to be raised which then allowed the valence between life and death to be porous which then allowed my relationship to myself and the act of homegirling to be transformed. Earlier in this section, I described my feelings of disconnect toward my intellectual work on SOLHOT, but it was my encounter with Bland that reconnected me to the practice of homegirling. I believe I had become disconnected because of my own desire to build a particular canon that segregated those who I knew from what the degree required. What I mean by this is that I felt I had to write and articulate our work in a way that read “academic” which I decided was disconnected from what I already knew and those I knew it from. Bland appearing in my dream drew me back to what I knew and “transformed inarticulate places.” For me, the inarticulate place that needed to be transformed was the practice of homegirling, and, as Brown (2013) states, it would take me being told spirituality was also a place that needed to be transformed through how I came to SOLHOT as a homegirl.

The divine inspiration of Black girlhood prophets is one that indeed prepares and foretells the future and, in doing so, draws you closer to what you know in a new and better way. I also believe that the divine inspiration and prophecy of homegirling anticipates what will be needed which is why we may not know what we bring until a homegirl has told us. This is what Sandra Bland, who came to me in a dream when I was in despair, did for me. She told me it would be alright and she was right. I had this. I just had to bring my full self and do what I came here to do. I had to check-in with homegirls and they, like Sandy, told me that my spiritual self was/is what is needed in SOLHOT and the field of Black girlhood. They reiterated that it is spirituality that connects me to the practice of Black girlhood. In this way, the porous relationship between life and death and my connection to homegirls inspired me in ways that led me to a voice that needed to be heard and more importantly listened to. It was this connection that stopped a dream deferred.

Black Girlhood Prophets as Gifted: ‘We Gon’ Meet in the Middle’

prophet

Noun| proph.ət | \prā-fət\

3: one gifted with more than ordinary spiritual and moral insight; *especially*: an inspired poet

We Gon Meet In The Middle

By Andreah, Tasia, and Paris

We gon meet in the middle

To talk and see each other

We gon meet in the middle

Cuz it’s been so long

So we can take a splash in a swimming pool

We gon meet in the middle

To swing in the park at least 100 times

We gon meet in the middle

To eat hot fries, grapes, lemons, limes, ice cream, and snow cones

We gon meet in the middle

To bring back memories

We gon meet in the middle

To overcome our fears

We gon meet in the middle

To party and go to the mall

We create lots of poetry in SOLHOT. Whether it is from our prompted poetry through our ritual “Just Because” that asks that we complete the following statements: Just because I..., doesn’t mean I..., my name is..., and I am... or through our ciphers. In our Black girl ciphers, we deliver “barz” that speak to our feelings about school being jail or how much we love our daddies. Sometimes, we have very specific plans for the day that ask us to write poems based on specific topics such as dreams or modeled after published poetry such as “Hey Black Child.” The poem that opens this section was generated from the latter. During a SOLHOT session, we were asked to write a poem modeled from the poem “Hey Black Child” but as Hey Black Girl. I worked with Andrae, Tasia, and Paris and together we began creating a poem “Hey Black Girl.” In a field note from that session I wrote the following:

I initially asked if they wanted to do hey black child and they agreed. We started off slow and were unable to come up with the words we wanted to use and the verses we wanted to create. Then Tasia picked up [a] book and started to read a poem by Langston Hughes about dreams. I asked the girls if they had dreams. Paris said she had crazy dreams many of which she didn’t want to share...then Tasia started sharing her dream. Tasia tells us

that she is excited about her dreams because she has been dreaming about her summer plans to visit her old friends from second grade. She says she has friends in New York and California and they are going to “meet in the middle” which would be Chicago.

Tasia’s dream inspired our poem. From there, I asked the girls in my group what do they love most about being with their friends and they delivered with the activities that make their summers summer and the treats they loved as well. We decided on repetition of the hook and our poem was created. Our medium of poetry was important as well as the content of our chosen poem in conceptualizing the role of Black girlhood prophet as inspired poet.

Webster’s defining a prophet as an inspired poet struck me as interesting because poetry is so important to Black girlhood. In an essay titled “The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America or Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley” by June Jordan (2002), Jordan uses the life of Phillis Wheatley to point to the importance of Black girlhood and its relationship to poetry. Jordan writes of the contradiction of Phillis’ lived circumstance and chosen profession of poet and notes that Wheatley was the first Black person and second woman published in America. Wheatley was sold as a slave at the tender age of seven (bondage), yet, she chose poetry and according to Jordan poets are free. Jordan writes, “A poet writes of her own people, her own history, her own vision, her own room, her own house where she sits at her own table quietly placing one word after another word until she builds a line and a movement and an image and a meaning that somersaults all of these into the singing, the absolutely individual voice of the poet: at liberty. A poet is a somebody free. A poet it someone at home” (p. 175). It is important to recall Brown (2013) here as she states that the vision of Black girlhood is, “Black girls are free and Black girlhood is freedom” (p. 1). Thinking with both Jordan and Brown, Phillis Wheatley was not only already free despite slavery, but her chosen profession as poet

further freed her and gave her the outlet to express the freedom she already knew because of the freedom she possessed through Black girlhood.

Jordan's essay about Phillis Wheatley is important because it illuminates Wheatley's training and education as being white and English whereas her poetry allowed Wheatley to redefine herself beyond the terms of slavery. The example Jordan provides is one of Wheatley's poems that states "Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain, May be refin'd and join the angelic train" (p. 178). In this excerpt, Wheatley likens herself from a slave to angel of God. This was very bold and it was poetry that allowed Wheatley to persist for freedom and exist beyond the limited term of slave that whiteness desired to define her as.

The uses of poetry are limitless, and, just like Wheatley's use of poetry pointed to a self beyond limitation and to one that aligned her more with the divine, so does Audre Lorde in her essay, "Poetry is Not a Luxury" (2007). Recall that I signaled to Lorde in chapter two and I return to Lorde to further tease out the importance of the inspired poet of Black girlhood prophets. Lorde articulates that poetry for women is a source of power that holds true knowledge and lasting action (p. 37). Lorde goes on to state that poetry, for women is a vital necessity for our survival and existence that "forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action" (p. 37). This language turned ideas turned action becomes a sanctuary for the most radical and daring ideas (p. 37).

The idea that poetry then reveals the most radical and daring idea is important as I turn to the content of Tasia, Andreah, and Paris' poem. "We Gon' Meet in the Middle" is about play and leisure sparked from excitement from about a future vacation. Play, leisure, and vacation are all the things that growing children and adults are excited about. However, Black girls are rarely

given space to be children and play. For Black girls, play and leisure are radical, daring, and revolutionary ideas. Ruth Nicole Brown (2013), Kyra Gaunt (2006), and Camille Brown (2017) each take up play and its significance to Black girlhood and how our playful nature is the revolution.

In her chapter, “When Black Girls Look at You: An Anti-Narrative Photo-Poem”, Ruth Nicole Brown (2013) opens with a field note from SOLHOT where she recounts the experience and response to Black girls playing. After declining the school provided snack, the girls were headed back to the room in their school where SOLHOT was held. They greeted their friends, laughed, giggled, and pushed each other in play in the hallway on the way back to our room. When they made it back to the room, the girls were interrupted by a white woman who chastised them for playing in the hallway and told them that they should not be loud, that they should act more like young ladies. The woman asks for an apology for the girls’ bad behavior. Brown situates this field note within the hypervisibility/invisibility of Black girlhood and creates what she calls an “anti-narrative poem” to further her analysis. While Brown doesn’t linger on the play of Black girls in this field note, it is helpful to situate the risk that Black girls are willing to take when they play.

Play is risky for Black girls because we are seen as bad or misbehaving when we play. We are not given the space to engage our imaginations by simply being together, especially not within the confines of a school building where SOLHOT takes place. But, poetry helps us persist, as Jordan and Brown tell us. The poem by Andreah, Tasia, and Paris takes us directly to play and laughter “because it's been so long.” Then they begin pointing out that meeting in the middle to see each other creates memories and helps them to overcome fears all while doing the things they love to do like play in parks and eat spicy foods. Meeting in the middle is all about

letting Black girls be without surveillance and chastisement. We only have to look at the headlines to see that the existence of Black girls and women is always a risk, especially when play is involved. In August 2015, ten Black women were kicked off of a Napa Valley Train for laughing. Their incident was resolved in court with 11 million dollar suit ruled in their favor. Justice for the girls in SOLHOT comes from having a space that values the magnitude of their laughter and their poetry that tells about this revolution.

Scholar Kyra Gaunt (2006) and artist Camille Brown (2017) also write about Black girl play. Gaunt, in her game changing text, *Games that Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double Dutch to Hip Hop*, traces the ways that Black girls' playing hand games embody black music making that has been especially integral to genres such as hip hop. Black male artists not only dominate in hip hop, but they profit from Black girls' play. It is only when our play is made into a commodity that is packaged and sold back to us that our play is acceptable. Camille Brown, dancer and choreographer, explores play in her staged production of *Black GIRL: Linguistic Play*. According to the U C Berkeley Cal Performance website (2017), in this production Brown draws on girlhood games to tell a story of Black female empowerment. Brown was motivated to choreograph and produce such a show because she believed media lacks this perspective of Black girls' lived experience. Similar to Gaunt, Brown uses hand games and double dutch, but focuses on the movement of such play to emphasize the importance of play and dance.

These conceptualizations of play are all important to Black girlhood prophets and their role as inspired poets. "We Gon' Meet in the Middle's" insistence on play foreshadows/calls on the need for Black girls to just be in the presence of one another. Their poem points to the revolution of Black girls being together doing the things they want to do. I believe that's when

we are our best. When we get the opportunity to be with those who love and know us best and don't judge us based on who we are or who we have yet become. The poetry then draws us beyond what we can see in the present moment and allows us to resist and persist on freedom.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued that Black girlhood prophets and prophecies are integral to Black girlhood spirituality in that they mobilize to speak back to oppressive powers that try to control our beings. To demonstrate the role of the prophet, I traced prophecy as derived from Black girls and Black girlhood through the story of Mary and analyzed data points from my time in the field by plugging them into the three definitions of the word prophet. Thus, I illustrate the role of Black girlhood prophets and prophecies as being the spokesperson, divine inspiration, and inspired poet.

Chapter Five: We Levitate: The Sounded-Word Aesthetics

“The poets by which I mean all artist are finally the only people who know the truth about us...because only an artist can tell, and only artists have told since we have heard of man, what it is like for anyone who gets to this planet to survive it. What it is like to die, or to have somebody die; what it is like to be glad. Hymns don’t do this, churches really cannot do it. The trouble is that although the artist can do it, the price that he has to pay himself and that you, the audience, must also pay, is a willingness to give up everything... You can only have it by letting it go”

-James Baldwin (1962) “The Artist’s Struggle for Integrity”

Introduction

When I first heard the opening epigraph by James Baldwin, my reaction was an audible “whew.” It is heavy and pushes the artist in their creative process and embodiment of their art. I love that the artist and the poet are synonymous and situated as knowing about our society in a way that will lead us to liberation. This is a scary concept for me because, as we know from the previous chapters of this dissertation, I struggled with letting go. However, I heard this quote from Baldwin as more than a charge for the artist, but a confirmation. I had already begun drafting this chapter when I heard this quote during the lecture of one of my many jobs, teaching Education 201, and it further confirmed to me that I was on the right track with this chapter. The hymn cannot liberate us exclusively on its own; however, a more layered analysis expressed through art produces something else that will lead us to freedom.

In this chapter, I analyze the music and sounds of SOLHOT’s *We Levitate* to explore the sounded-word aesthetics of Black girlhood spirituality. The sounded-word aesthetics of Black girlhood spirituality are Black Girl Covenant, Fire Commandments, Worship: Em[body]ment of Freedom, and Levitation Revelation. I contend that these aesthetics make Black girlhood spirituality felt and demonstrate another way that ideas are mobilized toward transformation for the purpose of envisioning power differently and imagines us in the future.

The sounded-word aesthetics are crafted through “the word” found within our sounds, which make tangible Black girlhood spirituality. In *Pedagogies of Crossing*, specifically the

chapter “Pedagogies of the Sacred: Making the Invisible Tangible,” M. Jacqui Alexander draws the connection between words and aesthetic. Alexander examines how “spiritual practitioners employ metaphysical systems to provide the moorings for their meanings and understandings of self” which helps shift the knowing of ourselves to a sacred understanding (p. 295). Here, Alexander makes a case for how we go about seeing our daily incidents outside of our practiced African based spiritual practices. But, when we turn to our inherited spiritual practices, we come to know that spirit is found everywhere mystics inhabit, in the erotic, imaginative, and creative. Alexander states that “there is no dimension of the Sacred that does not yearn for the making of beauty, an outer social aesthetic of expression whether in written or spoken word, the rhythm of the drum, the fashioning of an altar, or any of the visual arts. The Sacred is inconceivable without the aesthetic” (p. 323). I draw the same conclusions of Black girlhood spirituality; that is it is made tangible through our aesthetics. With a thematic analysis of We Levitate’s music, I craft the sounded-word aesthetics based on “the word” found within our sounds. I contend that it is “the word” as located within the sound that demonstrates the ways that Black girlhood manifest and causes the spirit to move.

Sounded-Word Aesthetics

Guided by our practices in SOLHOT, my experience in the church, and my relationship with We Levitate, I was led to the power of “the word” and its relationship to the song. As a Christian, the Bible is meant to give you “the word” of God through the scriptures. It is through “the word” or the scriptures that we learn His instruction for our lives and the historical mapping and account of the promises and fulfillment of God’s word. It is through the Bible that we learn how to conjure and manifest the spirit in our everyday lives. The Bible, and its scriptures, however, are not the most accessible texts. I have tried to read “the word” from cover to cover in

the past, but it just did not work out for me. What began as the best written reality show full of scandal soon ended as a lullaby for me. Since my earlier attempts to read the Bible, technology has made it easier to read with the invention of the Bible app. The Bible app allows you to search keywords for specific scriptures or you can follow different plans that provide devotionals to compliment the scriptures. Feeling depressed? There's a plan for that. Afraid and full of doubt? There's a plan for that too. I have completed many plans to encourage me on this very rugged terrain during the course of writing this dissertation.

The app has been extremely helpful in providing access to the scriptures; however, before the app, I had access to and knew the scriptures through song. Many of my favorite gospel songs are based on biblical scripture; for example, Kurt Carr & the Kurt Carr singer's song "I Am the One" based on the biblical text Luke 17:11. Songs gave me access, well before the app, to the scriptures that, in the past, I often struggled to comprehend. It was the song that showed me how to navigate the bible and allowed the scriptures that I heard to live and stay in and with me. The scriptures were important to me because I wanted to have an understanding on my own about the faith-based practice of Christianity. This meant that my relationship with the divine would be strengthened through my practice of reading the scripture. I wanted to join the conversation, and the only way I could do that was to know for myself what the scriptures said since it was the guide for this particular spiritual practice. Further, the scriptures essentially hold instruction on how to manifest spirit in this realm in an effort to achieve life and not death in the afterlife. When thinking about We Levitate's music, I began to think that it is our sound and song that hold the sounded-word aesthetics that we need to manifest and live in us so that we may access and maintain the future life that Black girlhood spirituality points us to. Thinking about We Levitate's music as an aesthetic, this chapter meditates on the following questions: What does

Black girlhood spirituality sound like as “the word” and how does that word point to/offer and aesthetic?

To uncover and analyze the sounded-word aesthetics, I first provide context that magnifies my motivation for looking to the music to craft the sounded word. This context grounds the connection I seek to make through the sound and the word, the connection being that the song moves and invokes spirit that is demonstrated through “the word.” Next, I provide the sounded-word aesthetics which I have separated into four sections. Each aesthetic includes the text that I crafted and a theorizing of what “the word” means for Black girlhood spirituality as a site of knowledge and inquiry. Through this analysis I demonstrate that “the word” reveals how Black girls knowing as stated in the argument is shown through their practices.

In addition to making Black girlhood spirituality tangible, the “sounded-word aesthetics” provides another way through which we hear Black girls. It is important to note that in crafting the scriptures from the lyrics, I am not trying to lessen the power of the song because it is powerful on its own. I am trying to think of the multiple uses of the words found in the songs which point us to a text of sorts. I am relying heavily on my own experiences, knowing that I would often find the word of the bible through song. In this way, it is a reverse mapping of the song to see where the song is derived from. The word, however, is not the definitive way of knowing. Thus, it is complementary to the song and organizes SOLHOT in a way that allows us to trouble ideas of the archive/repertoire and helps us always make the repertoire present. Ruth Nicole Brown (2013) offers “the creative potential” as a way to trouble the distinctions of the repertoire and archive through Black girl sound. Drawing on Diana Taylor (2003) who states that the repertoire, “as enactments of embodied memories, is usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge and subsequently less valued than the archive,” (2003, p. 20), Brown

contends that we must resist “archiving the ways Black girls sound as loud or quiet, as the most important things about them instead embrace and begin to name a wider repertoire of how Black girls sound as a potentially creative source of knowledge...” (2013, p. 188). Building from Brown’s call for more nuanced ways of hearing Black girls, I offer that the sounded aesthetics, as seen through the scriptures, add to the repertoire of Black girlhood which makes visible spirit and how Black girls make sense of the world and structures that seek to co-opt and disenfranchise us. An arts-based method was necessary for this analysis because, as Baldwin states in the opening epigraph, the artists, specifically the poets, are the ones who know the truth about us and humanity. He states that the hymns do not do it, and the only way for the artist to do it is by letting go. I had to let go in order to hear us differently. From this letting go, I was able to craft the sounded-word aesthetics.

Black Feminist Context

The works of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Angela Davis are useful in providing context for what I term a (re)tracing of the sound for “the word”. I think of my analysis as a (re)tracing because the word is thought to have come first and then the song. “In the beginning the Word already existed...” John 1:1a, but through this analysis I am tracing the word or scripture through the song, where *We Levitate*’s sound came first. This could be seen as rumination on which came first, the chicken or the egg; however, what is most important within this context is to show the relationship between the word or scripture and sound. Toni Cade Bambara (1993), in conversation with Proverbs 15:1-2, 4, 7 and 18:21, aids me in setting up the significance of our words even as they appear through song. Bambara states, “Words are to be taken seriously. Words set things in motion. I’ve seen them doing it. Words set up atmospheres, electrical fields, charges. I’ve felt them doing it. Words conjure. I try not to be careless about

what I utter, write, sing. I'm careful about what I give voice to" (p. 325). In this quote, the power of words to create transformation is significant and supports my instinct that "the word" is a manifestation of the transformation that Black girlhood spirituality, as a way of knowing, calls for as expressed through the songs/sounds/lyrics of *We Levitate*.

While John 1:1a professes that words were the beginning, Toni Morrison in *Beloved* contends that, before words, there was sound. Morrison writes, "In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like" (2004, p. 305). This is an interesting turn that differs but is important in this tracing of words to the sound and back again because it also demonstrates the relationship of the word to sound while alluding to the possibilities of sound. Morrison's framing of the sound points to the manifestation of spirit and its power through song. Let me explain: Morrison's Pulitzer Prize novel, *Beloved*, is about the haunting of a family by a daughter, Beloved, who is killed by her mother, Sethe, so that they would not be taken back into slavery. The spirit of the deceased child returns in the flesh and is sustained by the energy and attention of her mother, Sethe, who works to please the child as to be redeemed for murdering her. Working for redemption, Sethe, becomes drained by the all-consuming spirit of her deceased daughter until the spirit is exorcised by a group of women within her community. It is during the exorcism that the women use both words and song to drive out the spirit. When their words failed to conjure a spirit that would drive out Beloved, the community women began to sing; and, it was with the song that Beloved left the home. The community women's response was an enactment of the African proverb, "The spirit will not descend without the song" as quoted by Leroi Jones and demonstrated the spiritual power of the song. The song is powerful on its own, yet the word/scripture persist.

In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (1999), Angela Davis recounts Bessie Smith lightheartedly defining the content of the blues as the scripture and the presentation of the blues as the sermon (p. 129). Davis frames Smith's stance as challenging and contesting the most powerful institution, the African American church, and disrupting binary constructions of the church and the blues, the sacred and secular. Disrupting the binary construction of the sacred and secular allowed the Blues women to challenge the hierarchy of the church and turn to the blues as an aesthetic that represented their "cultural integrity" (ibid, p. 121). The Blues was highly influenced by the church which was evident in the music produced by artists such as Rainey and Ethel Waters; however, Black women artist struggled with seeing themselves within the Blues and church. For example, Davis documents that once "Ma" Rainey and Ethel Waters retired and committed themselves to their faith, they refused to sing the blues again. It seemed that the artists believed they could no longer be a part of the thing and space they once loved to maintain their relationship with the divine and invisible realm. This was a pivot back toward the sacred and secular divide, yet Smith's premonition still stands and is worth further investigation.

This chapter takes seriously the definition of the blues as scripture as articulated by Bessie Smith and puts forth that We Levitate's music, as being influenced by Blues women and other Black women artist with and without form (Weems, 2000), also contains the scripture. In this tradition, the sounded-word aesthetics as found in We Levitate's music allows for a dismantling of the sacred secular which is important to the movement toward the future for which Black girlhood spirituality calls. Our scriptures demonstrate the necessity of occupying and being informed by multiple spaces and disciplines, as this shows how interwoven the secular and sacred are and that one cannot exist without the other.

Method

To craft the scriptures through the song, I transcribed 26 of the 30 songs included in our discography. Two of the remaining songs were transcribed by other members in We Levitate and the other two songs were transcribed by Michellay Wells, a SOLHOT homegirl. Once the songs were transcribed, I coded them thematically which produced 14 codes. Then, I separated the data into the following aesthetics: Black Girl Covenant, Fire Commandments, Worship: Em[body]ment of Freedom, and Levitation Revelation. Rather than crafting the scriptures based solely on the verbatim lyrics of our songs, I meditated on the words and what they meant for the four analytics. I listened to our songs and songs of other Black girl artists who I believe we are in conversation with such as Noname and Jamila Woods. I prayed and called on spirit to guide me. I also relied on my ancestors to make sense of our sound in relationship to covenant, commandment, worship, and revelation. From there, I crafted scriptures which include verbatim lyrics and lyrics that I interpreted. This felt like the best approach as a researcher because it allowed me to look across the songs and to hear what we are saying in layered and nuanced ways. I begin with Black Girl Covenant, which I believe sets the stage for providing the know-how of mobilization and transformation as brought forth through Black girlhood spirituality.

This method is directly in line with arts-based research in the ways that music and poetry are utilized as data and analysis. Patricia Leavy (2008) defines arts-based research as “a set of emergent tools that adapt the tenets of the creative arts in order to address social research questions in holistic and engaged ways in which theory and practice are intertwined” (xi). Through methods such as arts-based research, researchers are able to employ creative pathways to create knowledge that spans across disciplines and theoretical perspectives. One way of going about this critically creative method is music. Leavy writes of music as being used as data

because it is a cultural text that provides context to the culture in which the music was produced. Regarding music Leavy writes “[m]usic based methods can help researchers access, illuminate, describe, and explain that which is often rendered invisible by traditional research practices” (ibid, p. 101). Poetry is also a strategy used as an alternative way to present data. According to Leavy, poetry evokes an emotional response which makes it felt. Therefore, the sounded-word aesthetics had to be presented in this way if they were to make Black girlhood spirituality felt. The scriptures I wrote are poetry and the way that I went about developing this poetry is most aligned with interpretative poetry, which merges the participants’ words with the researcher's perspective, and poetic transcription which is derived from grounded theory (Leavy, 2009). Here, the researcher studies the transcription and is observant of themes and recurring language and selected words and phrases become the basis for the poem. In the following sections, I present the poetry or sounded-word aesthetics through the scriptures I developed through We Levitate’s music that make Black girlhood spirituality felt.

Black Girl Covenant

We, daughters risen and reconstructed from the Dust, being led by one sunflower, two marigolds, a gust of wind and brave birds, declare our love is a haven with which we transform ourselves and each other.

Gazing into each other's eyes we reflect what we see, beauty, of the most complex caliber.

We, Black eyed Susans and Shakira's, are not afraid to say I love in this present moment, not because our love is so perfect, but because the choice, our choice, was crystal clear. Clarity.

This love is certain and free, not some ole’ washed up I can give a shit about your truth type love. But a love that has been signed and sealed by these voices, these bodies, and hearts of gold that don't mind getting dirty from sowing seeds.

We, Jazzybelles, create a transference to drum us deeper and closer to the rainbow. For the rainbow represents the promise. We are not afraid and the rainbow is enough because we are not a people who prefer only yellows and greens, but stand face to face looking eye to eye

knowing that rainbows are only complete with red and blue, too. That our deal with one another can only be manifest with our mixed messages in tow.

With one hand closed, we give what we know away without expectation of return. We stand with one hand open in servitude to one another where we can be seen and survived by our necessity to be levitated by each other. We stand in full disgrace with one hand open so that mommas can eat with both hands and so that we can take care of each other in moments of grief and despair. We posture ourselves with one hand open and raised to the sky so that our backbones slip while we testify about how we made it over, broke silence, and rose to reclaim our bodies and names.

We engage therefore to listen with our hearts and hands, to not be in conflict with one another but to meditate on and honor our difference. And even in the struggling and trying we take no victim stances, but come closer and lean in to overstand and innerstand each other. Who told you we were enemies? This is our love letter to each other as we work to make I a we.

And when we leave from face to face, heart to heart company or if we never get to experience face to face, heart to heart with each other, we vow, promise, and keep covenant to find/create/invite/ and co-create spaces that honor elongated glances like this, full of the love of this present moment, 2 generations removed, and 2 generations to come.

In the simplest understanding covenants are agreements or contracts between two people or parties; it is the promise you make to those you love as you look in their eyes and croon “and as it unfolds I got you I promise, I promise I’m on it.” Breaking down Black girl covenants, award winning poet, Nikky Finney in the introduction of *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip Hop Feminist Pedagogy* (2009) articulates the covenant as the “pinky swear” which allows us to keep true to our Black Girl selves. She explains that the covenant is: a deal, movement, compass, the answers that black girls know, home, and new language (p. xiii). Finney’s explanation of covenant as a compass is important because it means that our agreement or contract between each other is guided and directed.

What lies at the crux of our covenant and guides us is love. Love, as Black feminists and womanists have been telling us, is too often undertheorized and not nearly talked about enough. It is a wonder, in times like these, that love is not all we can talk about to save ourselves from our current reality. It seems that love is a major component, if not thee component, of the music

and the word brought forth in our music. In a forthcoming article titled “Doing Digital Wrongly,” co-authored by We Levitate Band members, Ruth Nicole Brown, Blair Ebony Smith, Jessica L. Robinson, and Porshé R. Garner, we write that it was our love that is amplified through our sound and that the love through our sound guided us beyond and through our heartbreak. Our love is what allows us to love each other in places that we should not, such as the corporatized university or the art/music industry that prefers a more commodified Black girlhood—love that can be sold rather than the love that can be given.

Love is no longer something we can assume is present nor is it something we can skim over as if June Jordan’s (2002) question, “where is the love?,” is rhetorical. Where is the love? It is right here—in this community created by Black girls and women in celebration of Black girls and it is “growing stronger and growing stronger” (p. 274). Jordan argues that it is love “that will carry action into positive places” (p. 269). It is love as an action or mobilization that allows for and causes movement of transformation into positive places or what we in SOLHOT recognize as future building and placement.

Taking Jordan’s important question one step further, We Levitate’s music asks, “who are you loving for?” Because it cannot be exclusively yourself, although self-love allows us to be well enough to love each other. Jennifer Nash (2013) echoes this by saying that a love politic helps us to “transcend the self and move beyond the limitations of selfhood”. Nash, in her brilliant work, points us to self-love being the absolute; and, I think somewhere in our move beyond identity politics, we turned to self-care and that is not quite it either. In many ways self-care focuses on our wounds and damage that cycles us back into identity politics and oppression olympics. In fact, according to We Levitate “self-care is overrated and we need another collective care... [as in] homegirls who will love you religiously.” The transcendence that Nash

points us to happens when you learn to love yourself in community with other Black girls and women and not waiting until you have it all together to then come back to the very thing you denied while in distress and conflict.

Layli Maparyan (2012) points to the power of love and states, “love at its best, for me, is reverence: a recognition of sacredness and an associated feeling of awe” (p. 285). The reverence that love gives echoes Black girlhood spirituality in that it refrains Black girls’ relationship to the divine. Maparyan also states that you have to live love as a lifestyle; and, in thinking about love as a refrain of the divine, Black girlhood spirituality is a lifestyle and lens through which we can view Black girls. In this way, the covenant is an expression of our dedication to love as a lifestyle and makes felt this way of knowing in Black girlhood spirituality.

The covenant makes visible and mobilizes our love as a light and guide for our path to the future, and it is only when we have love that we will be able enter into the future that Black girls have created. To be mobilized means there is movement and this movement takes us past feelings of “this place is not like this place”, for example, and calls for us to not only share love amongst ourselves. We must seek love for each other and home found within the community of Black girls and Black women every time we go to new places. The last stanza of the covenant may be familiar to some as it is modeled after a portion of the covenant that many Baptist churches across the country follow that states, “and when we remove from this place we will as soon as possible unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant...” This is also important for the covenant found within We Levitate’s music because it means that the covenant does not end and begin with our music. All those who enter into covenant with Black girls will do the work of using love as our guide to cultivate relationships beyond specific times and spaces.

Fire Commandments

Black girls we takin' over your body
Engulfed and consumed

Unravel the truths of whatever they sell
Do not buy it
To do this
Work
Dirty
Or ever.

Be you, that shit is more than ok

June Jordan
Jill
Yessica
Leslie
Dr. B
Sarah Grace
Tru Pretty Black
Waters over hills
Queen

Do not miss me
Do not miss us

Burn it down and build it up
We do the most

But

Do

Not

Miss

us

Kasey Perkins
Parris
Tee-Tee
Baby Dee
TCB

Asha
Mimi
Hadiya

Quantum Physics it's almost one in the same

Lovers of heteropatriarchy and hotep flows
Are not alone.
They are joined by educators and administrators
too concerned with thick thighs
And hair wraps

Now you can
M-I-S-S-M-E

They will keep coming for you
But rock your ponytails to the
Side and back
Natural and flat ironed
Defy and unravel their truths with your
geometric braids and Bundled 22s

They just might
M-I-S-S-M-E

Be the heavy hitta
Adorned in reds and golds

Be petty, stay ready
Speak up, hurt feelings
Tell
Your
Truth

But always
M-I-S-S-M-E

With that whoopty whoop
And caged humans

Remember
Do what you like
When you want
And do seek deals that increase your profit
for labor
Not in vain

Text back
Throw it back

But know and remember that they can
And they will

M-I-S-S-M-E

And

Y-O-U

In addition to love, the word also tells of fire. Once we have love to guide our paths and mobilize us into the future, we need fire to keep us on our path and to sustain us within the future. Fire, in the literal sense, functions in many ways such as to destroy/burn, refine, and purify/cure; the same element that can wreak havoc on everything in its path can also produce a glistening stone such as the diamond that some kill to have, literally. Similar to covenant it is our being together that allows fire to reach its fullest potential. I mean, fire is always reaching for the next thing to grab so that it can spread and burn in satisfaction of its power. In community with one another, we create a fire that both refines us and destroys the matter in our paths so that we mobilize and transform to place us in the future.

In SOLHOT, we use literal fire to hold people and ideas close to us; we use fire to remember. This example of our use of fire is to remember what refines us. Standing in a circle we pass fire from one to the other for the purpose of calling the names of those we have lost, yet, we have not forgotten (Brown, 2013). In our circle, with fire as our nucleus, we call the names of those who are living, yet their presence should be known among us. The fire is the release and it seals everything said in the circle in the flicker of its flame and in the smoke that rises between us after the fire is extinguished. Although fire is dangerous and probably illegal in most s/places we occupy, we are unafraid of the power of fire; we welcome it and are enchanted by its power

to make us whole. We are only able to be whole when we remember all of the fragments of ourselves. These fragments consist of people who we have lost. Our refinement or beauty lies in us being made whole through remembering those whose lives makes our time together possible.

To further theorize fire, I consider the 16th street church bombing where explosion and fire claimed the lives of 14-year-old Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley and Carole Robertson and 11-year-old Denise McNair, commonly known as the four little girls. Devastation. Yet, their lives were not claimed in vain. In this instance, the fire and the death of the four little girls was able to refine the law and policy through the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The commemoration of their legacies will forever be marked as transforming the state of history that would benefit generations and generation to come. In this way, our use of fire in SOLHOT is to ensure that Addie, Cynthia, Carole, and Denise's legacy is forever remembered and to reinforce their death as something we cannot risk forgetting. We use fire to put us even further in the future so that we do not have to sacrifice the lives of more Black girls. This is accomplished through We Levitate's figurative use of fire.

We Levitate's figurative use of fire is, in many ways, connected to our literal use of fire in SOLHOT. Unfortunately, like the four little girls, many of the people who we wish to be known and remembered have been taken from us. Taken not because of old age, but their deaths are premature; and, the culprit of their deaths are hegemonic systems that perpetrate violence against us and those we love. While we "call the names of those we want you to know and to remember" we remember that "some of us did not die" (Jordan, 2002) and, because we are alive, we set out to address these hegemonic systems that are dead-set on killing us. Some of us did not die and it is fire that is helping us "get on with [our living]" (Jordan, 2002, p. 14).

We Levitate's figurative use of fire is also risky, yet we engage because it is a life or death situation. Our use of fire in SOLHOT is in conversation with the Sangtin Writers/Richa Nagar's, *Playing with fire: Feminist thought and activism through seven lives in India* (2006). In this seminal text on organizing, creating, knowledge production, and theorizing as a collective through the struggles of social, economic, religious, and caste hierarchies and privilege, Nagar expresses that the collective, through their activism and the telling and analyzing of their stories, the collective's border crossing and breaking of silence is their play with fire. While it is risky, they embrace the risk because it is through the telling of their stories that they would be able to intervene on the politics of knowledge production and complicate the "women's empowerment" work of non-governmental organizations. Fire can be unpredictable, but this fire that the Sangtin Writers and I speak of is familiar and its patterns have been learned because we "live in a society whose chains burn us and ignite us to smash them" (2006, p. 3). Richa Nagar goes on to write that "only by suffering under the weight of those chains are we able to imagine new possibilities that allow us to chart the directions of our upcoming battles" (2006, p. 3). The fire commandments permit us to break free from the chains, and the direction we chart is well into the future, beyond this temporal moment and the next. Further, similar to our use of fire in SOLHOT, the Sangtin writers were refined by their play with fire through the process of crafting a book that focused on their experiences in that it caused them to listen and to know each other differently. In the fire commandments, we know each other differently because of what we are willing to put on the line for one another. The miss me's are a good example of this.

Miss Me is We Levitate's anthem. The original version and the remiXX are the driving force of the fire commandments. "The law" or commandments were throughout our music, yet these two songs are exclusive to the law of Black girlhood. In our forthcoming article, "Doing

Digital Wrongly,” we write about “Miss Me” and “Miss Me Remixx” as the promise of being misunderstood but determined to persist. We write “‘Miss Me’ names the conditions doing us in with the righteous anger so often misunderstood when expressed via Black woman and girlhood sensibilities” (Brown et al). In this particular article, we describe the anger found in the Miss Me’s as a method. Extending our scholarship, the miss me’s here make this anger felt through the commandments and detail our intolerance for violence that Black girls and women encounter by simply being. “Miss Me” is a chorus that, once explained, audiences feel ready to participate and share the things they are unwilling to deal with. From our performance of “Miss Me”, I have seen audiences commune and get to know each other in ways they maybe had not considered before. People feel supported because they realize they are not alone in their frustrations.

Not only does fire help us to know each other differently, it helps us in thinking about the world differently. James Baldwin uses the refrain from the song “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time” based on Genesis 9:11 and 2 Peter 3:10 to urge Americans to go beyond their limited approaches of hate and Christianity so that we can reach a world anew. In thinking of fire as being the next to destroy the world, We Levitate’s music acts on this knowing. Baldwin states, “people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger” (1993, p. 9) in a letter to his nephew. Our sound reverbs our commitment to a better tomorrow and the fire commandments demonstrate our commitment to the danger. The scripture is bold in calling out the institutions and ideologies that seek to destroy us. So, rather than letting these things destroy us, we call them out in an effort to “burn it down, then build it up” and “grow it all from there.”

Rather than waiting for the fire next time, the fire invoked through our sound as told through the scripture destroys those things that will ultimately cause the world to end. Thus, the

fire commandments provide warnings that should be heeded by all so that we can live a full life in the future. It is not just about people, but through the commandments we address institutions as to ripple a larger impact, a forest fire, if you will. As Baldwin expresses, our commandments force “our brothers [and institutions] to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it” (Baldwin, 1993, p. 10).

Those of us who are disadvantaged by institutions such as the corporatized university, public schools, religion, etc. may resonate with the commandments and may think of a few more that should be included. In instances such as this, I invoke the Black tradition of call and response and invite you to add to the commandments as you finish reading this section. Feel free to write them below:

Worship: Em[body]ment of Freedom

I began with the scripture in the previous sections, however, I begin this section with analysis, thinking of worship in terms of Black girl pleasure. According to the dictionary definition, worship is defined as the feeling or expression of reverence and adoration for a deity. Khaila Williams (2013), in “Engaging Womanist Spirituality in African American Worship,” argues that African American women’s worship shapes their identity and ways of being in the world (p. 100). Williams explains that there are four sites of worship for African American women: memory, space, body, and God-image. Thinking with Williams (2013) in relation to Black girlhood spirituality, it is important and necessary to further investigate the ways that Black girls show their adoration for the divine/invisible realm. I argue this adoration or worship is expressed through Black girls’ pleasure.

Williams articulates the body as a site of worship for Black women because it allows us to reclaim our bodies from the heritage of pain and trauma that is often associated with our

bodies. Williams is not alone in her assertion of that the Black female body is often associated with pain. Hortense Spillers' essay, *Interstices: A Small Drama of Words* (1984), discusses the bodies of Black women and the lasting effects slavery has had on our bodies. Spillers writes, the enslavement of Black women "relegated them to the marketplace of the flesh, an act of commodifying to thoroughgoing that the daughters labor even now under the outcome" (2000, p. 199). Continuing, Spillers articulates, "Black American women in the public/critical discourse of feminist thought have no acknowledged sexuality because they enter the historical stage from quite another angle of entrance from that of Anglo-American women" (2000, p. 201). Black women were reduced to flesh and the ways that our flesh could be beneficial to others which makes our sexuality as an identity or action mute. Not only this, but Spillers remarks that our daughters, Black girls, still (even now) exist under this conception of the Black woman's body.

Living under these conditions means that our bodies are often associated with not only capital gain, but trauma. The instincts of many is to start with trauma when thinking of the Black female body. But, this is not the Black girls' instinct. I am taken back to a time during one of our SOLHOT sessions. On the first day of our sessions, it is customary for us to ask the girls what they would like to focus on during our time together. That semester one girl raised her hand and asked "I want to know what is an orgasm and how do I get one." The homegirls were shook. We had never experienced this type of question before and a few of us, despite our initial shock, tried to answer in a way that was honest and age appropriate. I recall someone drew a figure on the board that located the site of pleasure on the body through the clitoris. I remember the conversation mentioning friction and that orgasm could be a solitary act. Luckily, we were at the end of the session and we promised to come back the next week prepared to answer their questions about pleasure. Once we recovered from our shock, we got to work to plan for our next

session. What came from our planning was an activity that asked the girls to name their vaginas, describe, and draw pictures that reflected the ideas and adjectives they associated with their vaginas. We also purchased handheld mirrors as gifts to give to the girls who showed up. We encouraged each girl to get comfortable with their bodies and to do so naming their vagina and taking a mirror to look at it would help them get comfortable with themselves. This activity and conversation framed Black girls bodies not in trauma, but in pleasure. It may not have been the answer some of the girls were looking for as there were girls who showed embarrassment in their smiles and shy looks or felt uncomfortable doing the activity altogether because they were told by mothers and other adults not to discuss such matters. As homegirls we decided that we were most comfortable helping the girls understand pleasure as being directly associated with being comfortable with and knowing their own bodies. Pleasure should always be grounded in how well they know their bodies and who they do or do not decide to share this pleasure with. Reclaiming our bodies from trauma allows us to re-imagine, or in the case of our participants, always imagine our bodies as sacred.

History scholar of Black girlhood, LaKisha Michelle Simmons (2015), writes about Black girlhood pleasure in, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans*. In this important text, Simmons focuses on the Black girls living in New Orleans from 1930-1954; and, one chapter focuses on Black girl pleasure in relation to the pleasure cultures they created. Simmons writes that this aspect of her research was difficult to pin-down as finding pleasure in archival research is difficult given the limitation of the archives. Thus, similar to SOLHOT scholarship, she had to approach pleasure differently, with particular attention to the repertoire as articulated by Performance Studies scholar Diana Taylor. The girls that she studied engaged in pleasure cultures, in part, through a make-believe land which allowed

Black girls to create “new worlds and landscapes” (p. 174) through their romance writing and make-believe play. Make believe land included an event that the girls participated in at their local YMCA and Mardi gras. Simmons concluded that the pleasure cultures that the girls participated in allowed them to build better intimate relationships with each other through friendship and also intimate romantic relationships with lovers.

In conversation with Simmons, in SOLHOT, our pleasure is also derived from knowing ourselves intimately (as I described above) and the intimacies we create through our friendships and lovers. Pleasure can be heard throughout our tracks, and we even have a track titled “Pleasure.” We also have a track titled “church” that directly centers worship from pleasing our bodies. These two were important in crafting the word found below and it pushed me to think of the ways pleasure and intimacy could be heard across all of our tracks. What I found was that our pleasure is complex and detailed in how we wish to be handled and cared for and that our pleasure is derived from being near each other so that we can co-create new worlds and realities for ourselves. Most of all, our pleasure is derived from the ways we first know ourselves. This allows us to think of pleasure as sacred which provides a more nuanced understanding of sexuality and spirituality that scholars such as Jillian Hernandez (2014) call for of spirituality theorist.

Beloved and divine, Black Brown intimacies
Rising to (y)our sacral
Because (y)our body is a temple
And Our bodies
Haven’t been worshipping
Trained to be
In the service of others

Untrained you must
Be
To worship

To worship you must
Reclaim the mirror
Look into it and
Realize that it's yours
Always.
Tonight the mirror is not your mother's
Admire and reminisce
Hands on hips
Conjuring Zora, Ida B, Aunties momma and nem
Melanin, Kinky hair, and painted nails
Smooth
Rituals to your soul
Black and brown intimate
As your hands fall
Seasalt-soft around our necks
Embodied freedom
Like church
Washed in water
Buckling up to enjoy this ride back to
You
A little bumpy
Leaned
And
Dropped low

But first show where you're wounded
Smoke a bowl
And love for you
For us
Let us breathe there together
Ours
Flipped and remixed
Feel yourself
Imagine you are one with blue skies
And the ocean
Feel it in your chest
Ancestral gushy
Wushy
That thing

That we know
They won't talk about
Won't be misunderstood
You are beautiful and so fly
Feel it all
Don't be absent
From your body
Tithe properly
The first ten percent
Before taxes

Release
From the heart, first.
Own ya shine. Own ya mind
Divine countenance
Flooding and wading
And sweet like Osun
Be selective in their request
Specific in your own request
Recycle some of your bags
And claim your manish,
Androgynous,
Womanish
Black girl ways.
Let your spirit feast
Like a soul sprung
Certified heathen.
Perfect atmosphere
For pleasure
Feel it, for your great grandmother
And let your intention be to
Free yourself, first
Gently
Ride the waves
Breathe in to get high
On your own scent
Let your love cover and anchor you
So that
You and your being
And your joy and feeling

Is a reminder to the oppressors
That you are still here
And that you don't want to be them,
Ever.

Levitation Revelations

This levitation is for Baby momma-bombshells, goody goodies and baddie baddies.
It is a collective act to break free of the chains and slay.
To float above the clouds and create a whipple levitation; power.
Inhale the breeze as the wind in your wave goes under your wings that are all out, now.
Creative potential demonstrates that this is possible.
Whipple levitation, it's about power to inhale deeply this new church.
Way of life, being and living in action.
To sound alarms and ring bells that put us in other other moons.
Attitudes like "no" as we are high and elevated.
Black girl formation not holding back, not one part.
Our hands, our work, our art, our hearts.
No apprehensions.
Not afraid of no Black girl title, with legs half lotus
Ponytails to the side and back
And we levitate
Levitation where we live and exist
Here.
Grins that liberate us
Back to the heaven, haven
We
She
Her
Us
Them
Created.
Free to be, Black girls in love and lust
Who trust in God and gods
And themselves
And love them fiercely.
Black girls getting in the way
Showing up is a must to be
Free
Freedom
Taken

Flying since we free from the weight of
The dirt and death
Immortal
Seen on our own terms
Gon' in the winds
Catch us
In the orgasmic, Blacktastic, lip smacking
Oya winds.

The Levitation Revelations bring forth the necessity of not only imagining the future, but fully living in the future that Black girls have created and already exist in. In thinking with this aspect of Black girlhood spirituality, Levitation Revelations presses us to push into the future so as to not settle and to always be forward thinking. Spirituality helps us prepare and engage this forward thinking. The preparation that we do when we engage in spiritual practices is done to make life better on this side of our existence with the goal of making it to “the other side”. The other side could be known to some as heaven and, to others, ancestry. We pray and meditate, sing and dance, light incense and carry crystal(s) to sustain us, here. We engage in these different practices to keep us from being drowned by our realities and to give us hope for life in and beyond our current one.

The Revelations are not about what we already know in terms of temporal realities, rather, what we know to be true about the other side. To survive our current state of being, we must imagine ourselves beyond this moment. Imagining oneself beyond the current moment takes a particular set of skills. The Levitation Revelations is the imagining, creation, and actual being in the place/space beyond this moment. They give people hope, but the brilliance in the levitation revelations is that it's not only hope, it is not only imagination, it is not only preparation, but it is execution. Within the Levitation Revelations, with Black girlhood spirituality as the frame, we know that the future is right now.

Levitation Revelations are in conversation with Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* because of the ability to dare, believe, create, and sustain future within the temporal moment. Originally published in 1993, *Parable of the Sower* is set in the now not so distant 2020s and chronicles the life Lauren Oya Olimina who lives in a gated community in a fictional city south of Los Angeles. Lauren begins to develop a belief system that she names Earthseed and gains followers as she travels north to flee the violence and death of her neighborhood and community once her gated community is compromised. Earthseed's main belief is that God is change, and humanity will only be able to survive by accepting this change. Lauren also believes that Earthseed is the preparation needed to travel beyond Earth, which is the destiny of mankind. This text is significant because it points readers to the ways that the future is right now, which is not usually considered. In Butler's text, the characters ruminate on the possibility that the current state of the world will eventually turn itself around. This rumination mostly keeps them stagnant until they realize that the future is not only right now, but it is the one that they create.

Cultural writer and scholar Renina Jarmon (2013) often tweets with the tagline "we are out of time." I take this to mean two different things: one, that we no longer have time meaning time as currency is no more and, two, we currently exist outside of the realm of time similar to the phrase "outer space". The Levitation Revelations consider both meanings and focus on the fact that we are out of time so let us just do what we want to do and what we were placed here to do. It can work or it cannot work, but the only way to know for sure is to do it. Anything is better than the current disaster of present day. This is what the characters in Butler's novel decided to do-- to create time within the moment of being out of time.

To hold the future in the current temporal moment, the characters in Butler's novel are constantly faced with loss and despair. Just as much as the Levitation Revelations are about how

we live so that we can access to the future, it is also about the living that we do in our present moment. Here, I turn to radical imagination and celebration as articulated by artist scholars, Melanie Cervantes, Angela Davis, Fred Moten, and Blair E. Smith. In a conversation titled “Abolition and the Radical Imagination” with Melanie Cervantes, Angela Davis, Fred Moten and moderated by Robin G. Kelley, Moten defines the radical imagination as having two components. The first component of the radical imagination is that it “helps us to see that which doesn’t exist and is also equally important in helping us to see what does exist.” Moten states that the radical imagination helps us to focus not only on those things that dehumanize us (violence and oppression), but how we survive these things. Ultimately, for Moten survival is dependent on the relationship of poetry and art that goes between critique and analysis and celebration. Finally, Moten points to the Black aesthetic tradition as one that combines loss and tragedy with the immediate desire to celebrate. For the Levitation Revelations his definition means that our existence in the future is dependent on our celebration in the present.

The Levitation Revelations follow in the tradition of artist scholars Ruth Nicole Brown (2009) and Blair E. Smith (2018) who discuss celebration and the ways that we in SOLHOT take up celebration within the context of Black girlhood. Smith (2018) roots celebration in the space and places we occupy, but, most importantly, locates and theorizes celebration within the collective and our ability, desire, and need to be near and with one another. To map this celebration, Smith uses soundbites from the “Abolition and the Radical Imagination” talk to compose a Black feminist beat which We Levitate recorded, “Here to celebrate (We Levitate Special).” This song was featured on Blair Smith’s ep, *Don’t Ever Forget It* (2016). Smith’s theorization of celebration is key for the Levitation Revelations because it redirects us to the present of our being together, which is the very thing that will get us to the future and sustain us

there. Both Cervantes and Moten resonate with the radical imagination. Cervantes asserts that getting together with people she loved to create art helped her resist and stay free, and Moten asserts that maybe being together is the thing those organizing for justice are seeking, in the end. The present conditions are not ideal. In fact, two years before we recorded “Here to Celebrate (We Levitate Special)” like the characters in Butler’s novel, *We Levitate* experienced loss. Blair lost her mother and I lost my father--both to cancer. It was also during this time that life was given through the birth of a baby girl.

The cliché saying goes that the revolution will not be televised. This is true, but what underlies the Levitation Revelation is that there would be no need for a televised capturing because we would all be able to say that we are/were there, together. This turn toward the collective as being the purpose of our organizing and how we access the future and maintain our existence there is not only revolutionary but is Levitation Revelations.

Discussion

I want to return to the statement I made in the introduction of this chapter where I write, “It is important to note that in crafting the scriptures from the lyrics, I am not trying to lessen the power of the song because it is powerful on its own. I am trying to think of the multiple uses of the words found in the songs which point us to a text of sorts. Here, I theorize this claim by pointing to Ruth Nicole Brown’s (2013) use of Diana Taylor’s (2003) work to argue for the ways in which my analytical approach extends how we hear and understand Black girls. Diana Taylor argues that the repertoire is important as it requires us to be fully present and fully reliant on who was there and that the being there is part of knowledge transmission. I also argue that this chapter to exist due to the interdependent relationship of both the performance and the writing.

Extending the work of Brown (2013) and Taylor (2003), my analysis presented here, in this project, in conjunction with my transmission of knowledge of being there, in SOLHOT and We Levitate, disrupts static interpretation and “transforms meaning” (2003, p. 20). The transformation of meaning only happens through the reliance of the repertoire and not exclusively relying on the archive. I am able to hear Black girls’ voices differently in this project because I am able to trace traditions and influence as well as rely on alternative historical perspectives as I take in what it means for Black girls to be in loving relationships with each other, to be angry and use that anger to lay down the law, to be sexual and desirable with themselves and others, and for them to be striving for an after after life. This tracing and knowing relies on a lens not often utilized in Education and Performance studies.

Being in conversation with scholars such as Ruth Nicole Brown (2013) and Diana Taylor (2003) allows me to have a Performance Studies conversation which has proved useful to me as an interdisciplinary scholar trained in Education. Performance Studies has much to offer the field of Education as it allows scholars to consider the ways that education is often an embodied experience. This causes us, as educators and students, to focus on the ways that we show up and are present. We might be moved to ask ourselves when we show up, are we present? In what ways are our bodies on the line we when show up to be present? This is particularly true when engaging conversations of spirituality, demonstrating that this is an important site of learning. Spirituality is felt and it must be analyzed by relying on many disciplines, theories, and scholars. Performance Studies allows scholars of education to reach across and through different canons while simultaneously co-creating canons or abandoning them altogether. This allows for a more anti-disciplined field which is extremely helpful for the future of education. It also allows students to know that they encounter spaces of education all the time in their everyday practices

and allows them to grow the embodied knowledge that they already have. We, as educators also learn to engage embodied knowledge in our classrooms and everyday occurrences and we master the showing up and being present. This mastery requires more than having the “right” answer or rote learning; this mastery requires that we get know ourselves and those around us.

Spirit moves and is felt by those in relationship with the divine and invisible realm; therefore, engaging the repertoire is critical in exploring this movement and what Black girls know about it. The repertoire reiterates what Black girls know and what we know in community with each other while providing me with a lens to hear the girls differently and to, then, articulate how this difference makes plain the aesthetic of Black girlhood spirituality. We know what we want and need, we know love, we know pleasure of the best kind, we know levitation.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued that Black girlhood spirituality utilizes sound-word aesthetics that mobilize ideas toward transformation for the purpose of envisioning power differently and also imagines us in the future. The sounded-word aesthetics include Black Girl Covenant, Fire Commandments, Worship: Em[body]ment of Freedom, and Levitation Revelation. The sounded-word aesthetics demonstrate how our love mobilizes and transforms us, explicates our anger as law and transforms our relationship to power, centers Black girl pleasure as reverence, and reminds us that our being together is what will ultimately get us to the future and maintain our existence there. My analysis allows Black girls to be heard differently by centering the embodied knowledge made present through Black girlhood spirituality. This analysis extends scholarship in Performance Studies and shows the ways the field of Performance Studies is useful in extending how we think about education and learning.

Chapter Six: Black Girlhood Spirituality in SOLOHT and Beyond

Introduction

In *Present Day Prophets*, I defined Black girlhood spirituality as a conscious acknowledgment of Black girls' relation to the metaphysical/divine/invisible realm as sustaining all existence in the material and supernatural worlds. I argued that Black girlhood spirituality is a way of knowing how to mobilize ideas to transform circumstance for the purpose of envisioning power differently and imagines us in the future that Black girls have already created. Through my analysis, I found that the mobilization of Black girlhood spirituality is situated within the spiritual practice of Black girlhood prophet and prophecies, which allows us to see the divinity of Black girlhood demonstrated through leadership, spirit mediation, and poetry. Further, it is our sound, or music in relationship to poetry, that makes Black girlhood spirituality tangible and felt. Not only are we able to see Black girlhood as divine, but the aesthetic of Black girlhood spirituality allows us to hear and catalogue Black girls differently and beyond binary categorizations.

Black girlhood mobilizes us to an already created future(s) because Black girls “been knowing.” Adding to the many gifts I have received from my advisor is her great niece, Malayah. Malayah and I met when she was 5 years old; she is now thirteen. Malayah is the child that is preceded by a cautionary tale. The cautionary tale is to advise those that have the pleasure of meeting Malayah that she is fully herself at all times, which may cause discomfort because Malayah calls others out just as they are. This can be terrifying if you do not know who you are. Malayah speaks her mind and some may even characterize her as acting “grown” or “womanish.” She is absolutely honest and an expert of all things. Malayah is wholeheartedly a wonderful child; and, from our first meeting, she has clung to me in ways that I could not



PirateJenny
@knowandremember

Malayah says she loves @truprettyblack like she loves God. "and you can tell her that too".

6/6/14, 11:35 PM

Figure 2. Original Tweet

initially understand. I didn't think I was the cool or liberatory friend of her beloved "Auntie 'Cole," so I was confused as to why Malayah always sought me out or wanted to hang out with me when she would

visit. Three years ago, I finally saw what Malayah has always known. The tweet above helped me to understand why Malayah loves me so much—she always saw the divinity in me, even when I didn't see it in myself. From this realization, I realized that only those who are in deep connection with the metaphysical/divine/invisible realm are able to see that in others. This is why Malayah loves me like she loves God. Malayah's love was strong enough to wait until I saw the very thing she saw in me. Black girlhood spirituality is strong and deep enough for Black girls to wait until we all get there.

During my dissertation process, specifically, when I was in the throes of writing, I became a doula. Becoming a doula happened the only way that it could have happen, the SOLHOT way. By this I mean the pregnant mother, Isis, saw a mother in me and chose me to be her doula. I am not trained as a doula, but Isis believed I was more than capable of helping her bring forth the life of her baby. It is not a coincidence that a Black woman chose me to be her doula and gave birth to a Black girl whom she named Xena. This experience of witnessing how the gift of life pushes the mother to the boundary of life and death only to transport her back to our temporal existence elevated my understanding of Black girlhood spirituality. It was such a precious moment that showed me how much the future is now. Xena, a beautiful Black baby girl, chose me before I knew who she was. It is the SOLHOT way that Isis saw me and named me doula and then I started calling myself that to the point that I believe it. It is through SOLHOT

that I have been named doula again and will support Jessica in growing and delivering her baby in September 2018.

Ultimately, this dissertation project and my continued organizing with Black girls has allowed me to see the ways that Black girlhood spirituality manifests in spaces beyond SOLHOT. In the section that follows, I think beyond SOLHOT to the ways that Black girlhood spirituality is engaged by other artist to move us beyond the temporal moment and deeper into the spiritual practices of Black girls. I term this “holy futurity”, the theoretical contribution of *Present Day Prophets*.

Holy Futurity

Black Girlhood Spirituality as Holy/holiness

Black girlhood spirituality allows us to see Black girls as holy, which takes us further and more intentionally into the fall in with Black girls. When I say holy, I mean holy in the way that writers Toni Morrison (2004), Sesali Bowen (2015), who is also a SOLHOT homegirl, and independent recording artist Jamila Woods (2016) make use of the term. In Morrison’s *Beloved*, the character Baby Suggs is given the “small caress” of holy after her name (p. 102). In the text, this small caress was used to signify the cultural “heart-work” that Baby Suggs gave once liberated from the domination and captivity of slavery. She gave her heart through her “unchurched” preaching of the gospel, where she did not criticize people and damn them to hell, rather through her heart-work she told those who would listen that their grace was dependent on the grace that they could imagine; if they could not see grace then then they would not have it (p. 103).

Cultural writer and SOLHOT homegirl Sesali Bowen unpacks the term “holy” or “holiness” through her explanation of the popular culture reference of R&B artists Rihanna,

Beyoncé, and Nicki Minaj as the holy trinity in her feministing.com article, “The Holy Trinity Explained.” Bowen brilliantly articulates the roles that each of the three women holds in the trinity and premises her analysis by stating that, in order to recognize the holiness of carefree, renegade, powerhouse Black girls, “oppressive expectations and restrictions on the agency, legacy, bodies, and lives of Black girls and women in mainstream media must be released.” In this way, similar to Morrison’s *Baby Suggs*, the holiness of Black women and girls is dependent on their freedom. Specifically, Bowen’s important text points to holiness as being present, unquestionable mythics, messaging that demonstrates the power of Black girl brilliance that defies status quo, carefreeness, and leading. Importantly, the articulations of holy/holiness offered by Toni Morrison and Sesali Bowen make central the everydayness of Black girls as expressed through their love and art.

Whereas Morrison’s *Baby Suggs* envisions her sharing of love through the “unpreached” gospel with others as holy, Jamila Woods in her song titled *Holy* (2016) focuses on love as an act meant to inspire self-care where one sees the self as possessing the love needed to face and take on each day. Holiness, then, is sensed through being enough without the need of a lover for completion. The self-care that Woods points to does not seem to be done within community, which could get messy when thinking about the neoliberal understand of self-care being paramount to the collective. Alternatively, it seems as though Woods is thinking through Black girlhood as always already being enough. In thinking with SOLHOT and the ways that our labor is sacred as it relates to centering Black girlhood freedom, it is only possible to do self-care in community with others.

Black girlhood spirituality as holy (re)orientates us to Black girls and Black girlhood in a way that sees Black girlhood as, to insert a Black girl colloquialism, been knowing. The

articulation of Black girls as “been knowing” differs from dominant narratives of Black girls as not knowing or their knowing as being “unintelligent” or “illegible” to neoliberal ideals of citizenship (Cox, 2016). This unintelligence or illegibility is typically taken up and amplified through the criminalization of Black girls. Recently, the criminalization of Black girls has been documented in the 2015 report *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected* by Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, Priscilla Ocen, and Jyoti Nanda and the monograph *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* (2015) by Monique W. Morris. In both the report and the monograph, authors argue that Black girls spend more time out of school for disciplinary reasons than in school due to criminalization and over-policing, which indicates that institutions such as schools are not interested in Black girls and what they know as being contributive to the classroom space. Holiness (re)orientates society beyond the criminalization of Black girls to direct us to the ways in which Black girls contribute to classroom spaces and beyond.

Black Girlhood Spirituality Points Us to Futurity

To contextualize what I mean when I say future in relationship to Black girlhood spirituality, I look to the works of Kiese Laymon, Renina Jarmon, and Nikky Finney. In Kiese Laymon’s *Long Division* (2013), future is discussed in relation to suspension in and out of time which allows for people and things to be seen and unseen; disappeared. Set in 2013 and 1985 in Jackson and Melehatchie, Mississippi, the novel’s two protagonists, both named Citoyen “City” Coldson, travel through time by literary works, the reading of the book *Long Division* within the novel *Long Division* and literally through a time portal in the book within the book *Long Division*. From this text readers see that the future and our suspension in and out of time relies on our ability to reconcile and make sense of the past while at the same time being concerned

with what will come after us. Essentially, from the reading of the text, we exist both in and out of time, suspended between them because of our relationship to both the past and present.

Renina Jarmon, cultural writer and scholar, shares concerns of futurity in her book, *Black Girls Are From the Future: Essays on Race, Digital Creativity and Pop Culture* (2013). For Jarmon, time travel, as utilized by Black women artist, is a way for them to “find a way to bend time and space in a social ecosystem that is rooted in not recognizing how race and sex shape, constrain and construct the lived experiences of Black women, girls, and Black boys for that matter” (p. 79). It is Black girls’ manipulation of time that allows them to exist in a life that is free. This freedom allows us to imagine our bodies outside of the realm of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, islamophobia, body politics, and ableism. Jarmon says that Black women artist are invested in narratives of time travel because they allow us imagine Black girls as people who, for example, “change their circumstances by moving through time and space” (p. 81). Time travel is used by Black women and girls as a tool to resist and to create spaces of resistance.

Resistance through futurity is exactly what Brittany Ann “Bree” Newsome accomplished, as told by award winning poet and SOLHOT homegirl, Nikky Finney. This telling is my favorite telling, not only because of how beautifully Finney spins her words together, like only a poet can, but because it drives home futurity and its manifestation of spirit. At the end of her 2015 Cole Lecture delivered at Vanderbilt Divinity School, Finney invokes Bree Newsome’s removal of the confederate flag from in front of the South Carolina state house grounds in direct action to the assassination of nine parishioners at the church known as Mother Emanuel in Charleston, South Carolina to discuss urgent futurity. Newsome’s feat, Nikky Finney contends, was supported by the ancestors, whose lives and memory are disrespected by the symbol, and by the

Black women who were thankful that Bree saw fit to complete such a task. Finney likens the flag pole and its elevation to Calvary, as in the Cavalry that Christ died on, which Christians liken to deliverance and salvation. Calvary, in this way, is removed from people; yet, Nikky Finney claims that Bree, in her gravity defying feet, found Calvary as “a place [not] somewhere over there and [as] a place of reality inside of her own self.” Her actions were a refusal because the flag, Bree claimed, could not hang one more day. Bree, Finney exclaims, did what many of us refused to do. Nikky Finney closes with this quote, “Whenever we step forward to be larger than our fears, freer than our unjust laws, and more loving than polite and mannerable, then a brand new galaxy has been discovered and it is the first one that has everything each of us needs to live.” In this way, futurity found within Black girlhood spirituality elevates us to a new beginning that challenges dominant paradigms. Even as the flag was returned back to its original state, its removal moved us into a new realm of being that is brought on through Black girlhood.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs is also thinking about futurity and conceptualizes it as being “after the end of the world” in her book *M Archive* (2018). In *M Archive* Gumbs in is deep conversation with M. Jacqui Alexander and from her conversation with Alexander’s texts Gumbs crafts a brilliantly complex book that takes place after the world as we know it has ended. Gumbs grapples and makes use of the speculative to “write in collaboration with survivors who [bear] witness to the realities we are making possible or impossible with our present apocalypse” (p. xi). Time in *M Archive* seems to be obsolete as it is set at the end of time and time is kept by “where we are rooted” (p. 36). Further, in this text elements such as dirt and ocean tell the story of how we got to the moment after the end and what we make of time as being over. Said differently, Gumbs is interested in what we will travel with and what we will hold on to outside of temporal notions of time. In dialogue with Gumbs’ *M Archive* Black girlhood and holy

futurity are able to be taken up in ways that considers the elements of Black girlhood that gets us to the future and maintains us there. Gumbs' work further allows me to consider Black girlhood origins, listening to those origins, and tracing those origins to the past and beyond the present.

All of these articulations of holiness and futurity help to imagine and theorize the future that Black girls have already created. These understandings also help to better understand the everydayness of Black girls as divine. Ultimately, holy futurity is important because it allows us to create landscapes within the future that allows us all to live our best lives.

Conclusion: Meditations on Black Girlhood Spirituality

During the summer of 2012 while traveling to meet my birth mother, Sandersil Irons, for the first time, I wrote the following prayer for SOLHOT. This prayer was written while sitting on the shoreline.

My Prayer for SOLHOT

Spirit Guide and spirit lead us to do the work we have chosen to do.
Reaffirm our gifts and abilities. Help us to respect and appreciate our gifts and voice.
Teach us to trust ourselves and one another. Heal us where we have been broken. Break us so that we can be better
Build us so that we can be better together, whole, confident, strong, talented, broken, but not weary in our well doing.
Humble us and teach us respect.
Love us and teach us love
Bridge us all together at the shoreline. Black girls and women, and their allies so that everyone will know how beautiful and powerful we are.
Teach us those same truths about ourselves.
Allow us to trust the same spirits and god(s) who led our ancestors
Allow us the ability to know these truths
Walk with us every day.
Talk with and through us every day,
especially when the tides are high and wages are low
These things I pray Amen/Ashe

As a conclusion to my dissertation I want to offer another prayer for SOLHOT and beyond:

Thank you Spirit for your guidance thus far.

Thank you for the high waves and troubled waters that took some
But left us here to be heart to heart.
Thank you for your grace and mercy that brought us back and to the place that named us.
Thank you for traveling grace and mercy as we sought freedom.
We are in gratitude and awe that we are not what we were and we have still yet to reach our
potential.
Instill in us a new passion that illuminates so deeply within us that others see it.
Give us new dreams so big that they scare us.
We engage in this faith work so that momma's can eat with both hands and so that we can all eat
until our bellies are full.
As we operate within systems of oppression be the constant reminder that we are nothing like our
oppressors. WE ARE FREE.
Give us dreams beyond freedom and let our focus be love and care.
Multiply and elevate our love for ourselves, each other, and those who love us back.
Help us to use our gifts and talents for good and not evil.
Be the reminder to always share that which we know, freely.
In you, remind us that we have nothing to lose as we fall deeper into our dreams.
Levitation/Ashe/Amen.

Glossary/Conceptual Toolkit for Understanding Black Girlhood Spirituality

- Black girlhood:** Organizing framework that is not dependent on biological girls rather this framework uses the representations and memories of the lived experiences of those who are marked youthful, Black, and female (Brown, 2009, p. 1).
- Black girlhood prophets:** those who possess the gift of telling the future through being the spokesperson, divine inspiration, and or poet.
- Black girlhood spirituality:** our conscious acknowledgment of Black girls' relation to the divine/invisible realm as sustaining all existence in the material and supernatural worlds. What I mean by this is that Black girlhood, as a lens, offers a particular understanding of spirituality and spiritual practices.
- Collectivity/Collective:** Used in the Toni Cade Bambara (2005) way to denote knowledge created, shared, and dispersed between those in which you create and build community.
- Faith:** Used to signal institutionalized religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, B 'Hai, Islam, etc.
- Holy Futurity:** reorientation back to the ways that Black girls know a lot of things that understand their subjectivity as divine and full of the power need to create a world free from hegemony.
- SOLHOT:** A space that organizes with Black girlhood at the center in youth serving spaces. Typically for 2 hours for 6 week cycles. This space does not set out to empower girls rather power is created through the participation of girls and women; a method in which to engage Black girls and Black women in other-world making.
- SOLHOT Blur:** Lens used to see and understand knowledge as being both educational and spiritual; allows you to unlearn what was previously known.
- Sounded-Word Aesthetics:** “the word” as located within the sound that demonstrates the ways that Black girlhood manifest and causes the spirit to move.

Spirituality: Technology that makes the metaphysical/divine/invisible realm felt through methods such as prayer, meditation, song, dance, lighting of incense, ancestral communication, etc.

Womanism: a social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring balance between people and the environment/nature and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension (Phillips, 2006, xx).

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APPENDIX A

Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT)

Permission Form

Dear Parent and/or Guardian:

Your daughter has been invited to participate in Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT), a program designed to celebrate Black girlhood, discuss issues that are important to their lives, and use the arts and performance as a tool of self-expression and collective empowerment. We will meet at Franklin Middle School on the following days from 3pm-5pm:

SESSION DATES INSERT

Participation in SOLHOT is entirely voluntary. Your child may participate in one or all of the week's event. There is NO COST for your child to participate.

To participate, please ask your child to bring one copy of this completed form to Mrs. Saunders. If you have any questions about SOLHOT, please feel free to contact me either by mail, e-mail, or telephone.

Sincerely,

Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown

i.am.solhot@gmail.com

217-333-2900

Consent Statement

I have read and understand the description of Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT).

____ I give permission for my child to participate in SOLHOT.

____ I do not give permission for my child to participate in SOLHOT.

Parent/Guardian printed name

Date

Parent/Guardian signature

Student printed name

Date

Student signature

PHOTO PERMISSION and RELEASE

I give permission for my child to be photographed during scheduled SOLHOT sessions for the purpose of program activities involving media production as created by SOLHOT participants (including my daughter) and for the sake of SOLHOT's publicity.

_____ YES _____ NO

Parent/Guardian printed name

Date

Parent/Guardian signature

Student printed name

Date

Student signature

I give permission for my child's image to be used for the purpose of a public presentation about SOLHOT that may occur at the school, and at conferences and workshops within the greater Champaign-Urbana community and beyond.

Parent/Guardian printed name

Date

Parent/Guardian signature

Student printed name

Date

Student signature

APPENDIX B

Parental Consent Letter

Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT): Exploring the creative genius of Black girls

Dear Parent:

My name is Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown and I am a professor from the Department of Educational Policy Studies and Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Illinois. Your daughter has been invited to participate in SOLHOT, a program designed for African American girls to create music, photographs and stories about their experiences living in Urbana-Champaign and going to middle school. At the end of this project, your child will have the opportunity to be a part of a public exhibit to showcase their work.

In addition to participating in the program there is also research portion that we would like to include your daughter in. The research part of SOLHOT will involve observations of the program participants and teaching them how to use photography, poetry, dance, and performance to show what is important to them about their lives and education. Research will take place at each SOLHOT session that meets at your daughter's school. The general purpose of this study will be to provide convincing evidence to help professors, teachers, and cultural workers make better sense of how Black girls' identity and culture matter in school settings so that they are best supported in their academic goals.

It is our hope that results from this research will be shared in academic presentations and publications. We would be happy to provide you with a summary of the research, if requested. Student related projects may also appear on exhibit at your daughter's school and may later be turned into various formats, including a book manuscript and doctoral dissertation.

Participation of your child in this program and the research portion is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw your child from the program and/or research portion at any time. Leaving the research portion will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which your child is entitled to as a middle school student. The decision for your child to participate, decline or withdraw from participation in the program or research portion will also have no effect on your child's grades or your/their current or future relations with Franklin Middle School or the University of Illinois. You may choose for your child to participate, decline, or withdraw from participation in the SOLHOT program and/or in the research portion of SOLHOT at any time. If you choose to not let your child participate in the research portion of SOLHOT they may still participate in the regular program sessions. Your child's responses will not be recorded or documented. To withdraw your child from any part of SOLHOT, simply contact Dr. Ruth Nicole

Brown or Porshé Garner or Jessica Robinson or Blair Smith using the contact information presented below.

In the research portion we will not reveal personally identifiable information about your child in any publications based on this research with exception of those appearing in photographs. It should be noted that images in photos may be individually identifiable. Pseudonyms will be used to replace real names and every effort will be made to protect their confidentiality. Your child's actions or the things they say may be presented publicly without specific reference to them, reference only by pseudonym, or combined anonymously with the actions and words of other participants.

Your child's participation in this project should not involve risks beyond those of ordinary life. Your child will participate in a pizza party for their participation in SOLHOT. There is no direct benefit to you and/or your child from being in the research portion. However, your child's participation may help others in the future as a result of knowledge gained from the research. It is hoped that by participating in this research project you and your child will be contributing to the knowledge on African American girlhood, and how to create spaces for celebration and support in school settings that speak to the specific needs of Black girls.

In the space at the bottom of this letter, please indicate whether you do or do not want your child to participate in this project. Ask your child to bring one copy of this completed form to Porshé Garner. The second copy is to keep for your records. If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact us either by mail, e-mail, or telephone.
Sincerely,

Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown
Responsible Principle Investigator
rnbrown@illinois.edu
217-240-3370

Porshé Garner
Research Assistant
pgarne3@illinois.edu
217-240-3370

Jessica Robinson
Research Assistant
jrobins5@illinois.edu
217-240-3370

Blair E. Smith
besmit03@syr.edu
Research Assistant
217-240-3370

Consent Statement

I have read and understand the description of this research project, including information about the risks and benefits of my child’s voluntary participation.

I give permission for my child to participate in SOLHOT and the research project.

I give permission for my child to participate in SOLHOT and not the research project.

Signature

Date

Print Name

I consent to my child being audio taped and photographed during scheduled SOLHOT sessions for the purposes of research and program activities involving media production as created by SOLHOT participants (including my daughter).

_____ YES _____ NO

Signature

Date

Print Name

I also consent to the use of my child’s image for the purpose of a public that may occur at the school, and at conferences and workshops within the greater Champaign-Urbana community and beyond.

_____ YES _____ NO

Signature

Date

Print Name

If you have any questions about your daughter’s rights as a participant in this study or any concerns or complaints, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 (collect calls will be accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant) or via email at irb@illinois.edu

APPENDIX C

Assent

Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT): Exploring the creative genius of Black girls

Hi! We are here from the University of Illinois to do a program called SOLHOT that is designed for African American girls to create visual and performance art productions and stories about their experiences living in Urbana-Champaign and going to middle school. At the end of this program, you will have the opportunity be a part of a public visual art production exhibit to showcase your work.

Your participation in this program is voluntary-this means that you can decide whether or not you want to participate. If you want to stop doing the program at any time, you can stop. In addition to participating in the program there is also research portion that we would like you to participate in. In the research portion we will take notes during our SOLHOT sessions and use the things you create in the session such as poems, stories, and music. The information we collect and the photographs we take will be kept in a locked file cabinet and only people who work with SOLHOT will be able to look at them.

We expect to share what we learn in an academic conference, book, and dissertation. We would be happy to provide you with a summary of the research, if requested. Also, your projects may also appear on exhibit at Franklin Middle School.

If you choose to participate in the research portion, we will not reveal any information about you that someone who knows you will be able to recognize in any publications based on this research unless you want to appear in photographs. If you appear in a photo someone may be able to identify you as a participant in SOLHOT.

In the case of observations, no records will be created or kept that could link you to your name. Your actions or the things you say may be presented but we will use a pseudonym, a name you may make up instead of your real name, to insure that the research is confidential.

Your participation in the program and research portion of SOLHOT should not involve risks beyond those of ordinary life. You will be given a pizza party for your participation in the research portion. We hope that by participating in SOLHOT and the research portion we will learn more about being a African American girl and how to create spaces for celebration and support that address what kinds of support Black girls need in schools to be more successful.

In the space at the bottom of this letter, please indicate whether you do or do not want to participate in SOLHOT and/or the research portion. You will be given a copy of this form to

keep. If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact us either by mail, e-mail, or telephone.

Sincerely,

Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown
Responsible Principle Investigator
rnbrown@illinois.edu
217-240-3370

Porshé Garner
Research Assistant
pgarne3@illinois.edu
217-240-3370

Jessica Robinson
Research Assistant
jrobins5@illinois.edu
217-240-3370

Blair E. Smith
besmit03@syr.edu
Research Assistant
217-240-3370

Assent Statement

I have read and understand the description of this research project. I give permission to participate in this research project.

____ Yes, I want to participate in SOLHOT and the research portion. ____ I wish to only participate in SOLHOT session and not the research portion.

Signature

Date

Print Name

I give permission to be photographed and audio recorded during scheduled SOLHOT sessions.

_____ YES _____ NO

Signature

Date

Print Name

I give my permission to have my photos displayed at conferences, workshops, community events, etc.

_____ YES _____ NO

Signature

Date

Print Name

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant please contact Bureau of Educational Research, 217-333-3023, or the Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 or irb@uiuc.edu.