BLACK GIRL GAZE: A VISUAL (RE)MEMBERING OF BLACK GIRLHOOD AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

BY

CLAUDINE OLIVIA TAAFFE

DISSELECTION
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Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Ruth Nicole Brown, Chair
Professor James Anderson
Associate Professor Christopher Span
Professor Alejandro Lugo, Arizona State University
ABSTRACT

Despite the academic potential or achievement of Black girls in American schools, they are still thought to be loud, deviant, hypersexual, violent and needing to be saved (Brown, 2009; 2013). The influence of these stereotypes about Black girls coupled with historical inequities in the education of Black students (Chatelain, 2015; Siddle-Walker, 1996; King, 1995; Ladner, 1971) continues to negatively impact their educational experiences and severely limit their pathways to success (Morris, 2007; Evans-Winters, 2005; African American Policy Forum, 2015; National Women’s Law Center, 2014). Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT) is an arts-infused, afterschool space housed within a public middle school that is dedicated to documenting the lived experiences of Black girls for the purpose of collectively producing knowledge that is relevant, Black girl-centered, directed toward policy-makers, researchers and stakeholders in education and speaks back to the stereotypes about Black girls. The overall purpose of this interdisciplinary and qualitative dissertation is to share research based on relevant literature, interviews of the girls in SOLHOT, documentary photographs, reflexive field notes and participant observations for the purpose of simultaneously constructing counter-narratives to the stereotypes about Black girls in education and reimagining narratives about Black girls’ lives that center their lived realities as they see it. In response to the negatively constructed images of Black girls in education (i.e. deviant, loud, hypersexual, violent, needing to be saved), more specifically, the objective of this research is to examine, understand and document the knowledge about the realities of girlhood Black girls collectively (re)member and reconstruct using photography and text.

In SOLHOT, Black girls share their life stories, using a camera as a tool for interrogating notions of power, voice, agency and representation as articulated within the stereotypes of Black
girls in education and use their photographs to document their counter-narratives to those stereotypes and unapologetically share those photos with the world. Few bodies of literature, if any, in Education, African American Studies, or Women’s Studies discuss specifically, the engagement of Black girls and visual methods, thus an important and necessary contribution of this research. The following research questions guide this research project:

1. What negatively constructed images of Black girls as community members and middle school students have SOLHOT participants been forced to consume?

2. How do Black girls see themselves in relationship to school and community? Specifically, what are the counter-narratives that SOLHOT participants construct using photography and text as the primary documentation of such narratives?

3. What influence does the use of visual methods in SOLHOT offer to traditional visual methodology?

Specifically, I argue that an intentional combination of critical/active listening (on the part of the researcher), documentary photography (in the hands of the girls) and the engagement of arts-based activities that focus on the celebration of Black girls’ experiences produces a unique form of visual ethnography that results in the contribution of Black girl-authored visual counter-narratives that stand squarely within a strong legacy of African Americans using photography as a tool for social change within the arts and social movement work.

This research is situated within a theoretical framework influenced by Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory and centered within a non-negotiable premise and intersectional analysis that posits that the lives of Black girls matter. The doing of this project
spanned over the course of one academic year (2008-2009). I worked with six middle school-aged Black girls in a small, campus town in Central Illinois. The girls were selected at the discretion of our school liaison and took place within a pre-determined classroom space during the afterschool hours. Each session with the girls was three hours long and took place once a week during a 6-week period in fall and a 6-week period in the spring. Documentary photographs, semi-structured, individual interviews, activity handouts, and field notes were utilized as units of data and resulted in six hours of interview transcriptions and thirty-six hours of participant observation.

In an intentional attempt to remix traditional visual methods, such as photovoice and documentary photography, the girls involved in SOLHOT purposely value photographic meaning derived from a collective voice rather than an individual one in speaking back to the stereotypes about Black girls. The cacophony of our ethnographic photographs establishes, what we call, a Black Girl Gaze- an emerging concept and our contribution to visual theory as well as a concerted effort of resistance on behalf of Black girls to use photography to document how and what Black girls (re)member about their lives and leverage the sharing of those images to publicly speak back to the stereotypes about Black girls in schools and community. More specifically, the establishment and privileging of a Black Girl Gaze is necessary because it is 1) situated in a relevant moment of time within an increasing digital culture (digital cameras, phone cameras and social media); 2) claims the voice of authority Black girls have in choosing images that portray key aspects of their lives and to deconstruct those images in ways that speak back to stereotypical narratives about how Black girls are expected to behave and about what kind of adult they are expected to aspire to be; and 3) offers counter-narratives about the lives of Black girls and compelling versions of truth in response to the stereotypes perpetuated about them in
education and community. In addition, an extension of this research can result in the creation of a new set of cultural competencies to be utilized by scholars interested in conducting research about/and with Black girls.
DEDICATION

For

My mother, Olivia
My partner, Daz
My dog child, Bella
My abuela, Mamamia
The girls in SOLHOT.

And for Prince, our Purple Rain…

“A strong spirit transcends rules.” - Prince

It's 1:55PM on Thursday, April 21, 2016. Your passing is being confirmed right now. It is a Full Moon today- everything comes to an end. I am an hour away from electrically depositing the final version of my dissertation today. Purple Rain came on the TV in my hotel the night before my dissertation defense. I find it beautifully ironic that you would pass on the day I am depositing the dissertation. Your gift of music and gentleness that was you has impacted so much of who I am and what I believe in about art, giving back, Black girls and breaking the rules. You and I met at Nell's nightclub in NYC in the late-90s. We stood next to each other and talked in the VIP section. You were like powerful softness. You were taken from us too soon. I know so many generations of Black girl/women who also honor the gifts of music and humanity you have gifted us since the 1970s. So, this work is, in part, dedicated to you. I/we (the Black girls and women I co-created this work with) tried to transcend as many rules as we could in the doing of this dissertation. Thank you for loving on us so beautifully with your music and unending love.

Fly away... We love you always.

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To all of the girls in SOLHOT,
I love you all in the deepest and most profound ways. You ALL inspire me and keep me lifted and loved. Thank you for allowing me and a camera into your lives.
Love always,
Miss Candy

To Ashley and Aquila,
You have both shown me how to love Black girls fully and without conditions. You have loved me for all of who I am and I love you both the same. I hope I can make you proud.
Your big sister,
Candy

Dr. James Anderson (Doc),
Each and every single time there wasn’t a way, you carved out a way for me to move forward. I have learned so much from you and will be forever grateful for our conversations, the laughter and the life advice. Thank you for never giving up on me.
Peace,
Taaffe

Dr. Christopher Span,
You were there for me from the beginning to the end. Thank you.
Taaffe

Dr. Alejandro Lugo,
You knew me as a student and activist and scholar… and you never asked me to choose. Thank you for sharing your gift of photography with all of us.
Candy

Dr. Antonia Darder,
We know each other as women, comrades, scholars, teacher/student/teacher, artists and healing healers. You have never told me no. Abrazos siempre.
Candy

And finally, thank you, Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown (Master Teacher),
“Make SOLHOT where you are, own your research, be honest… and bring snacks.” I will always honor your vision of Black girlhood celebration. Thank you for trusting me/us with your call to action.
Candy
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Field Note (October 2008)

Today at the school, the snack was just as unappealing as it usually is every week, so our time in the cafetorium was short. On our walk back to the classroom where we were meeting today, two of the girls got into some loud, play fighting in the hallway. I watched as it happened and didn’t think much of it since it was after the school day and, as all kids do, many of the students would always let out some steam when coming into the hallway. I saw one of the girls fall to the floor rolling in laughter as I continued to walk ahead toward our classroom. At that very moment, I turned around as I heard and saw a White female school administrator sternly walk past me, walk over to the girls and scold them for “fighting” in the hallway. I was dumbfounded because I didn't really think what they’d done was such a big deal- I mean, they were laughing and no one was hurt. I felt bad at that moment, because I wished I had gotten to the girls before the administrator had called them out.

We walked back to our classroom in a kind of paranoid silence, sat back down and were forced to witness the administrator continue her rebuking of the girls while they were seated. This moment was clearly not a part of our agenda for the afternoon- but, in terms of my research, it really was. She chastised their behavior and asked them, “Is that the way young ladies should act in school?”

Absolute silence. You could hear a pin drop in that classroom.

As the girls sat in their chairs remaining silent, I wondered to myself if they were aware of the visible invisibility that was being imposed on them. She continued to demand a response to her question from the girls and some kind of affirmation that she was being heard. She also demanded that the girls apologize. Really? No one was hurt, I thought. I didn’t think it was that serious to elicit all of this punishment.

While she was chastising the girls, she made no notice that we- the other adults in the room- were running a volunteer program in that space. She seemed absolutely clueless (or just didn’t care at all) that perhaps her need to punish the girls was disrupting our plans. I sat in my chair absolutely stunned. And angry.

I had so many questions for that administrator. Do you even notice that you are disrupting OUR space over something that happened in the hallway? Why is it so important that the girls acknowledge that they hear you? Is your chastising of them supposed to be motivational? Did you not even hear the laughter as they were on the ground? Do you not see me sitting here? Am I invisible to you, too? And finally, what really is your idea of what constitutes lady-like behavior,
because, personally, I believe that even ladies should be able to defend themselves, if need be.

I felt so powerless. I didn’t want to do anything to make the situation worse for the girls or to put our intended future work at the school in jeopardy. I figured out then and there that there was going to be a certain amount of shape-shifting necessary for us to remain at the school, while simultaneously resisting to contribute to the ways Black girls are treated and rendered visibly invisible in schools. I sensed then that Black girls at that school had their own stories to tell, if only because there were given spaces intentionally created for them to tell those stories in ways that they could be heard without judgment.

**Theorizing Black Girlhood**

This is a true story. I wrote the field note above during my first semester working with sixth-grade Black\(^1\) girls in a public middle school located in a small, campus town in Central Illinois. The timing of what I witnessed on that day seemed almost scripted, as I had just read an academic article concerning the experiences of Black girls in schools. In the article, the author discusses his research about Black girls in a predominately minority school who performed well academically, but the teachers often questioned the behavior of the girls. Some teachers tried to mold many of the girls into ladies by attempting to curb their behaviors that were perceived as loud and assertive (Morris, 2007). Morris’ work was a documentation\(^2\) of a long-standing expectation that Black girls should act like ladies. Morris (2007) found that, “Teachers did subject Black girls to a particular form of discipline, largely directed at their comportment. This discipline stemmed from perceptions of them as challenging to authority, loud and not lady-like” (p. 501). Almost a decade later, these negative trends in schools still exist (National Women’s Law Center, 2014; African American Policy Forum, 2015). Historically, Black girls (and women) have had their full selves suffocated inside of stereotypes directed at negatively constructing ideas about who they should be and how they should behave. As Patricia Hill

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\(^1\) I choose to use Black over African American to identify the race of the girls because they refer to themselves as

\(^2\) Signithia Fordham (1993) was a pioneer in scholarship written about the stereotypes of Black girls being loud.
Collins (2000) notes, these “controlling images”- that of the jezebel, welfare queen, matriarch and mammy- have served to further subjugate, contain and confine Black women. Black girls in schools are also being forced to consume stereotypical images aimed at negatively constructing who they are supposed to be: overly-sexual beings, loud, resistant to authority and needing to be saved. During the moment the girls were play fighting, given the verbal punishment directed at the girls by the administrator, it is safe to assume that the behavior of the girls was characterized by the administrator as being loud, violent and resistant to authority. I can also safely assume that the girls would characterize their behavior differently. I know this because the girls told me so. That moment in my emerging research career was a sad depiction of the status-quo state of affairs for Black girls in schools. I also realized in that moment that the burden to transform that status-quo status of Black girls in schools would lay on the back of the girls and the adults who loved them.

I was with the girls before we assembled back into the classroom as a group and I never gave a second thought to what I perceived as the girls play fighting. Did I think this way because I knew the girls personally? Was it because I was a Black woman? I wondered in what kind of space would their narratives of what happened be considered the truth of the incident? When we enlist the support of Critical Race Theory (CRT), the stories of the girls are considered valid and necessary. CRT enables a space for Black girls (and activist-researchers) to construct counter-narratives to the stereotypes about how Black girls are expected to behave. I consider their counter-narratives to be acts of resistance, particularly because their very lives and academic success are in jeopardy when Black girls are consistently assaulted upon by negative stereotypes in schools. CRT relies heavily on the experiential and situated knowledge of people of color, in this case, the narratives the girls articulate about what happened in the hallway. Solorzano and
Yosso (2002) insist that, “CRT in education recognizes that the experiential knowledge of students of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in the field of education” (p. 473). In other words, the stories the girls tell about what happened in the hallway- their account of the event- is necessary to have a full understanding of their experiences in school. The problem is there is often no place for the narratives of Black girls to be discussed, documented and disseminated. There was certainly no allowance on that day for their counter-narratives about the “fight” to be shared with the administrator. There was no space for what the girls thought and felt to even matter. The girls knew that. And so did I.

When we think about the power of stereotypes to influence the labels placed on Black girls as being loud, deviant, hypersexual, violent and resistant to authority, we can see the negative constructs the administrator was basing her assumptions upon with regard to how the girls were expected to behave in the hallway. Enlisting this kind of power to influence perceptions of how Black girls are supposed to behave can be a dangerous thing in an educational institution where the expectations of teachers affect the potential of Black girls’ academic success. In addition, there is very little Black girls in schools can leverage in equalizing the expectations teachers and administrations have of them in schools. As cited in the National Women’s Law Center (2014) report on the experiences of Black girls in education:

Thus, too many African American girls are in a no-win situation: they either conform to white, middle class notions of how girls should act and be quiet and passive, which ultimately does not serve girls well in their pursuit of an education; or they speak up and get disciplined for defying those expectations and conforming to educators’ stereotyped expectations for African American girls. (p. 5)

In the work I engage with Black girls, a space is created for them to speak up without being punished and to create artistic currency to be used a tool in their resistance to the stereotypes
about them. In our work together, we create and utilize a cacophony of theories, methodologies and their own lived experiences to create counter-narratives\(^3\) to the myths of a Black girlhood that is considered deficit, deviant and in need of saving.

I consider this research to be a purposeful attempt to broaden the aperture into girlhood studies and education by being intentionally inclusive of a Black girlhood that matters. In this dissertation, I share a visual ethnography co-created with middle school-aged Black girls in an afterschool space called Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT). SOLHOT is a space—both physical and ethereal, where the life experiences of middle school-aged Black girls are shared, documented and disseminated. As a way to investigate their own lives and disrupt the stereotypes about Black girls, girls in SOLHOT use photography and text to create collective meaning about the lived realities of Black girlhood. I consider SOLHOT a research site and more importantly, a site of praxis\(^4\) where I conduct research in both of my roles of Black woman-researcher and Black girl-participant. With regard to the creative works and research that are created and conducted in SOLHOT, ownership is fluid and based upon context. Therefore, throughout the documentation of this research project, it is not my intention to take away from the fact that SOLHOT, as a Black girl-centered space (noun) and artistic work (verb), is a collective process. For this reason, I go between the use of “I” and “we” throughout this dissertation. What is offered to the readers of this dissertation are alternative ways of seeing, thinking about and working with Black girls. At some point, researchers must begin to ask different questions about the lives of Black girls and/or begin directing our questions and concerns toward the institutional systems and norms that remain unchanged at the very same time that Black girls are increasingly and intentionally being disappeared and devalued.

\(^3\) Counter-narratives and counter-stories are used interchangeably in this dissertation.
\(^4\) Paulo Freire (2000) defines praxis as theory and practice aimed at systems to be transformed.
The Issue (Because Black Girls Are Not The Problem)

Despite the frantic social media display of Black girl fights and the rising statistics of school suspensions and expulsions, what has been the most telling in my work with Black girls is that they are not the problem and their lives do matter. (Taaffe, Journal Entry, 2008)

While public education in America is typically characterized as a site for academic achievement and citizenship development, education in the United States has also served as a site of oppression and resistance for young people from marginalized communities. A conversation about education in the United States also invokes a long history of discrimination and inequity in the lives of African Americans (Span, 2009; Anderson, 1988; Siddle-Walker, 1996; King, 1995). Despite the academic potential or achievement of Black girls in schools, they are still often thought to be loud, deviant, hypersexual and resistant to authority. Socially constructed stereotypes about Black girls, like these, can feed fears and negative perceptions of Black girls in schools and because of this, Black girls often suffer inequitable consequences for their behavior as compared to their peers, particularly White girls and Black boys. The influence of these stereotypes about Black girls coupled with historical inequities in education for Black students (Brown, 2009, 2013; Chatelain, 2015; Siddle-Walker, 1996; King, 1995; Fordham, 1996) continues to negatively impact their educational experiences and severely limit their pathways to success (National Women’s Law Center, 2014, African American Policy Forum, 2015). Specific to my work, I have observed that teachers and administrators are quick to offer anecdotes about Black girls as problems not because of what they say, but how they say it (Brown, 2009). Of most concern to those of us who work with Black girls in educational spaces is that their contested behavior is perceived as threatening and disruptive. Black girls are often characterized as girls who need to be saved from the consequences of simply being who they are in the moment. Metaphorically speaking, stereotypes about Black girls enter a school building before
their physical bodies do. In this way, stereotypes about Black girls are etched onto their bodies and mentally considered in the allocation of discipline and present within the low academic expectations some teachers have of Black girls.

Purpose

A significant and necessary purpose for this dissertation is to disrupt the conscious disappearing and devaluing of Black girls in schools. More specifically, the objective of this research is to examine, understand and document the ways in which Black girls collectively produce knowledge about the realities of Black girlhood using photography and text. In SOLHOT, Black girls share their life stories, using a camera as a tool for interrogating notions of power, voice and representation as articulated within the stereotypes of Black girls in education. Using photos and text, Black girls in SOLHOT create counter-narratives to the stereotypes that are constructed about them. In SOLHOT, Black girls harness their own power to not only resist the stereotypes about them but to also transform the myth about Black girls needing to be saved by others and reconstruct new narratives about their lives. The dominant narratives about Black girls being sexually deviant, loud and needing to be saved continues to be a negative source of the labels that are metaphorically placed on the physical bodies of Black girls. SOLHOT, as an active and living space, rises up to interrupt and disrupt the process of mislabeling Black girls and, thereby, disrupts the intentional process of endangering the lives of Black girls.

Guiding Questions

In response to the negatively constructed images of Black girls (i.e. deviant, loud, hypersexual, violent, needing to be saved), there are counter-narratives the girls in SOLHOT construct using photos and text. My central argument is that when photography is used as a data collection tool, in the hands of Black girls, what results are counter-narratives to the stereotypical
images of Black girls within education. The following research questions guide this research project:

1. What negatively constructed images of Black girls as community members and middle school students have SOLHOT participants been forced to consume?
2. How do Black girls see themselves in relationship to school and community? Specifically, what are the counter-narratives that SOLHOT participants construct using photography and text as the primary documentation of such narratives?
3. What influence does the use of visual methods in SOLHOT offer to traditional visual methodology?

Specifically, I argue that an intentional combination of critical/active listening (on the part of the researcher), photography (in the hands of the girls) and the engagement of arts-based activities that focus on the celebration (and not investigation) of Black girls’ experiences produces a unique form of visual ethnography that results in the contribution of Black girl-authored counter-narratives that stand squarely within a strong historical legacy of African Americans using photography as a tool for social change within the arts and social movement work. When girls in SOLHOT engage photography in the creation of counter-stories to the stereotypes about them, they inherit that legacy of using photography as a weapon (Parks, 1966) in the social movements for African American freedom. Parks (1966) reminds us that the camera can only be used as a weapon when you have something to say. Black girls in SOLHOT have something to say and within the non-judgmental space of SOLHOT, how they say what they know does not impact the validity of their stories. Their life stories are the starting point for

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5 Celebration vs. investigation was a concept that resulted from the interview experiences with the girls in SOLHOT. More often than not, several of the girls walked into the interview space afraid of (as they stated) feeling investigated when social workers come to their houses to conduct interviews.
their right to claim space and speak back to the stereotypes about them. Wallace and Smith (2014) remind us:

Evidently, however, Douglass [Fredrick] was not Black America's only practical visual theorist. For Sojourner Truth, as well, photography was part of a broader set of self-representational strategies she used to claim an authorized voice and an audience for her work. (p. 21)

Black girls in SOLHOT also claim an authorized voice and the starting point for that claim begins with not apologizing for being all of who they are in this moment and is demonstrated in their courage to unapologetically share their photos with the world.

**Significance**

A significant aspect of this Black-girl centered research is a demonstration of the blurring of boundaries between research and practice, theory and method, and Black girl and woman. In doing this, a new space for researchers is created to rethink the kinds of questions we are asking about, and of, Black girls, as well as, interrogate for ourselves, as researchers, the social change potential embedded in the academic research we engage. In doing the work of SOLHOT, I have learned why we need to change some of the questions we have currently been asking about the academic and life experiences of Black girls. Ultimately, theorizing the practice of celebrating Black girlhood requires paying attention to the drowning affects of speaking in terms of binaries, the celebratory aspects of having positive and non-judgmental relationships with Black girls and the need for envisioning and creating spaces that allow for vulnerability, listening, arts creation and love. Lastly, changing the kinds of questions we ask about the lives of Black girls also assists in creating new spaces of theory-making in which we do not need to center Black girls because there are no centers and no margins in our spaces of Black girl freedom work. We do this because we are not interested in the reproduction of inequitable spaces that currently push Black girls to the margins.
Also, few bodies of literature, if any, in Education, Women’s Studies and African American Studies discuss specifically, the engagement of Black girls and visual methods, thus the significant contribution of this work in SOLHOT. I believe that in many ways, photographs taken by a Black girl is her way of talking back and resisting those stereotypical narratives and images that do not serve her. From the point that she decides what to photograph, takes the photo and then shares that photo, she is creating a space that is momentarily hers- a space in which her gaze is privileged. The creation of this kind of space in a necessary part of survival as echoed by bell hooks (1995) when she says, “By turning her back on those who cannot hear her subjugated knowledge speak, she creates by her own gaze an alternative space where she is both self-defining and self-determining” (p. 94-95). It has been this process of self-determination within a space of Black girls engaging photography that enables the making of a more radical point of entry into academic conversations about arts-based research, education and Black girls. The public sharing of the photos Black girls take positions them as the experts they already are on their lives. The documentation about the process of creating these Black girl-authored counter-narratives leads to the creation of an emerging concept in visual theory tentatively entitled, Black Girl Gaze.

Theoretical Insights

A substantial aspect of the theory-making processes in SOLHOT is based upon a singular and non-negotiable premise, the lives of Black girls matter. Theoretical insights from Critical

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6 “Lives of Black Girls Matter” was shared with me by Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown. With regard to the political economy surrounding Black communities, particularly the premature death and murder of Black boys and men, in this current moment, I consciously am delineating the call that the lives of Black girl matter (or Black girls matter) from the current political project, Black Lives Matter. The timing of this research design, implementation and collection pre-dated the Black Lives Matter political project. At the time of data analysis, is it my belief that the lives of Black girls do matter, but not as a subtext of the Black Lives Matters movement. This is not a result of competing ideologies. This is simply a timing issue in that the work undertaken in SOLHOT has always been anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchy and always urging for a call that to fully understand and work toward spaces of freedom for Black boys/men and Black families, the lives of Black girls/woman must be prioritized.
Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought inform the creation of this Black girl-centered visual ethnography. More specifically, Black Feminist Thought can be used to help situate the lived realities of Black girls within a framework that connects those experiences to the historical experiences of Black women and Critical Race Theory privileges the voices of the girls as valid and necessary in the negotiation of their school and life experiences. I also accept the invitation from Cynthia Dillard (2000) to, “become aware of multiple ways of knowing and doing research available to those serious enough to interrogate the epistemological, political, and ethical level of their work” (p. 663). In my work with Black girls, there are multiple voices and perspectives in the work we do collectively and at all times, I must always be conscious of trying to better understand and negotiate my experiences with the girls as I am a participant as well as an observer. This kind of beautiful tension is one that I must navigate as a researcher who is always committing and re-committing to the celebration of Black girlhood in the ways I experience, document and share the research process.

**Overview of Research and Chapters**

The experiences of the girls I have worked with should not be considered generalizable as that it is not the objective of qualitative research. The experiences of the girls I have worked with should primarily be considered a starting point from which researchers can begin to formulate different questions about Black girlhood, and- as added benefits- this work can be engaged in the creation of a new set of cultural competencies to be utilized by scholars interested in conducting research about/and with Black girls and in the creation of new ways of working with young people in afterschool settings by harnessing the power and potential of photography. I focus my data collection process to the use of participant observation, photovoice (as a entry

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7 I was introduced to an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology (Dillard, 2000) at the beginning of my graduate student career and look to that space of discourse when untangling the tensions of being a Black girl woman participant observer in SOLHOT.
point into utilizing photography with young people) and documentary photography (an extension of the legacy of how photography was historically used as a tool for social change by African Americans), individual interviews and group dialogue (field notes are labeled “journal entries” and are utilized throughout this dissertation in the (re)membering our of group conversations). In this year long focused work on Black girlhood stories and photography, the majority of photos are used as evidence of how Black girls can investigate and create an analysis of their own lived experiences. In SOLHOT, through the use of photography and text, Black girls come to know, perform, and interrogate their reality as they see it, as they frame it and it is their gaze that is privileged. It is my intention to use the text and images created collectively by Black girls to make the stories about Black girls’ lived experiences live beyond the researcher moments that I am afforded and privileged to be a part of.

I argue that when photography is used as a data collection tool and put in the hands of Black girls, what results are necessary counter narratives to the stereotypical images of Black girls within education. More specifically, I strive to enact in my academic work, a commitment to creating alternative spaces for Black girls who are not commonly perceived as intellectuals (Collins, 2000). And although they are not perceived as intellectuals, I believe Black girls inhabit their worlds in such a way that allows them to extract meaning from the more hostile terrain in which they survive that is ignored, silenced or thought to be insignificant (Carroll, 1997). In order to create spaces in which mutual understanding can be achieved between teachers and Black girls, the girls must first be exposed to spaces where they can be vulnerable, understand and interpret the world around them and form their own opinions about their own lives. One of those spaces is SOLHOT.

The next chapter will provide an overview of the relevant literature this dissertation is
grounded within and a brief introduction to SOLHOT, the curator of this research (myself) and the girls. Chapter 3 will present the methodology and research design utilized in the creation of this Black girl-centered visual ethnography. Chapter 4 will introduce the reader to the rationale for the format through which we have chosen to present our data. In chapter 5, we present our collective data (counter-narratives) in the form of a *Photo Essay Remix* that is intended to speak back to the stereotypes about Black girls. Finally, Chapter 6 is a space for researcher reflexivity and includes a discussion (in the form of a performance text) of the implications of this visual ethnography and qualitative research for researchers who are also committed to working with Black girls in educational spaces.
Within this project are fluid boundaries and intersectional spaces that allow me and the girls I work with to bring our whole selves to the process of educational research, while also recognizing the complexities inscribed on our bodies by race, gender, class, and sexuality. We resist these inscriptions by calling each other by our names - those given to us in blood and those we call ourselves (Garner, 2013). In SOLHOT, a space is created and considered sacred for our experiences as Black women and girls to be legitimized and documented, a vehicle for our voices to be heard without judgment and used as a tool to reclaim the traditions of Black women’s activism. In full and unapologetic disclosure, embedded in this inquiry is a political project that recognizes and values Black girls. It is a political project wherein the starting point is our selves. More specifically, our work is not targeted toward only the gaze of others. Andrea Smith (2005) reminds us:

Political projects of transformation necessarily involve a fundamental reconstitution of our selves as well. However, for this process to work, individual transformation must occur concurrently with social and political transformation. That is, the undoing of privilege occurs not by individuals confessing their privileges or trying to think themselves into a new subject position, but through the creation of collective structures that dismantle the systems that enable these privileges. (p. 264)

In the active recognition and dismantling of privileges, we transform any physical space we meet in as Black girls and women to be a home - a place of vulnerability and a collective refusal to be silent or silenced by others. All of this is critical because having a place to call home matters to Black girls. “In other words, survival for Black women is contingent on their ability to find a place to describe their experiences among persons like themselves” (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 13). SOLHOT is a home place (Durham, 2014) for Black girls where they can fully be themselves without punishing consequences and judgments.

The Literature
A plethora of research has been produced about the crisis of girlhood and more recently the need for the “empowerment” of girls. But this research has been criticized for its exclusion of the experiences of girls of color and poor girls (Brown, 2009; Harris, 2004). In research projects with young people, some stories take center stage, while other stories exist on the margins. Those stories situated at center stage, more often than not, become considered “the norm” and other stories that might differ are considered a “departure from the norm”. Thereupon, standards often arise based on this norm, and individual tales that differ, or depart from that norm, are devalued and subordinated (Delgado-Bernal, 2002). In the field of scholarship concerning girls, what creates the story at the center is more often than not, the story of White, middle class girls. As a consequence, within the research about Black girls, their behaviors are compared to the standards created for White girls. Girlhood scholars have also examined how the rejecting of dominant narratives in spaces of education is also a coping strategy and a form of resistance sometimes undertaken by Black girls (Fordham, 1993). Robinson and Ward (1991) agree that Black girls learn to value community in resistance to dominant ideologies of individualism, in that many, who work to succeed in schools, do so with a collective vision of social change. In other words, Black girls better their chances of succeeding academically when they are exposed to collective spaces where the success of Black girls is valued and actively pursued.

The childhoods of Black girls have never been free from racism and sexism (Brown, 2009, 2013; Chatelain, 2015; Ladner, 1971; Jordan, 2000; hooks, 1996). This history and the current moment unleashes a burden onto the backs (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983) of Black girls forcing them to negotiate spoken and unspoken judgments from others that are often hostile to their sense of self. For Black girls, age offers little protection from assault as far too many Black girls inhabit inequitable and hostile environments as a result of the social, political, and
economic location invoked by marginality (Collins, 2000). While I recognize that my work with Black girls is not brand new, this specific work does present itself as an original and necessary visual contribution to educational research given that the odds against Black girls, unfortunately, remain on the rise.

Girlhood, as a field of study, for too long has been thought to be a homogenous space. The end product of examining girlhood as a homogenous space is that the behaviors of Black girls are labeled as deficient and deviant, thereby divorcing the choices of Black girls from the structural issues of racism, sexism, patriarchy and heterosexism at play in their lives. In the area of critical qualitative inquiry, it is imperative that researchers, who are committed to having their work serve as not only a contribution to academic scholarship, but a contribution to social change work as well, insist on the inclusion of Black girl narratives in the literature about girlhood. The necessary narratives to be included in our conversations about girlhood are the stories concerning the processes by which Black girls come to know, perform, and interrogate their lived realities. While the personal narratives lifted up in this specific space of praxis (SOLHOT) offer a description of the multiple and diverse lenses through which Black girls’ view and attempt to understand the different worlds they inhabit, their narratives also provide researchers an opportunity to deconstruct the deficit-model used to define and structure Black girlhood, a model of inquiry that suggests Black girls are lacking and in need of saving. However, I caution that the voices of the Black girls in this research should not be considered the absolute measure by which scholars should think about all Black girls. The stories shared in SOLHOT and documented in photos are just a mere portion of the complex existence that Black girls have historically performed and deconstructed in a society entrenched in a patriarchal, capitalistic, heterosexist, and racist legacy.
This research stands humbly within a legacy of scholars who have engaged this work and thinking before me. From the archiving of Black girl memoirs during slavery to the Civil Rights Movement (Jacobs, 1987; Moody, 1968) to the dedication of time in documenting Black girl narratives about life and education (Chatelain, 2015; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1976; Ladner, 1971; Grant, 1984), I am aware of the legacy of Black women’s scholarship before this project and it is that legacy that I work hard to honor and contribute to in my role as a researcher. Although one can define Black girlhood as an encapsulated examination of the experiences Black girls have at certain ages, I am using as a foundation in my work with Black girls a more fluid definition of Black girlhood building on the work of Joyce Ladner (1971), who argues that Black girls are faced with opportunities to embody the agency of their fore/mothers/fathers when she says, “These girls have adopted what is probably the same quality of fortitude and resoluteness that enabled their parents, grandparents and other forebears to adapt and overcome the obstacles which beset them” (p. 87). And because I am invested in the disruption of binaries that keep us as researchers suffocated in the production of knowledge that is transformative, I also look to (Ladner, 1971; Brown, 2009; Jordan, 2000; hooks, 1996) who recognize the fluidity that exists along the continuum between Black girlhood and Black womanhood. This fluidity manifests from our experiences as marginalized girls and women. Specifically, Black girls are girls who must act grown and Black women are women who never had the chance to be girls. Remaining committed and cognizant of the fluidity between Black girls’ and Black women’s experiences assists in avoiding the oftentimes breakdown in communications between Black girls and women within spaces of education and community.

**Black Girlhood Scholars**
I ground this research within the scholarship of Black women scholars both present day and historical. In doing this, I demonstrate that this dissertation is a contribution to the work of researchers who are and have been committed to carving new spaces within the academy for research projects that forefront the voices and creative works of Black girls. Joyce Ladner’s (1971) precedent-setting and phenomenal book, *Tomorrow’s Tomorrow: The Black Woman*, set the course for future scholarship dedicated to documenting the struggles and strengths of Black girls and women. Wilma King (2005), author of *African American Childhoods: Historical Perspectives from Slavery to Civil Rights*, Paula Giddings (1984), author of *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* and Linda Grant (1984) author of the article entitled, “Black Females Place In Desegregated Classrooms” created pathways for the charting of Black girls’ experiences from slavery to American classrooms post-Brown and the Civil Rights Movement.

Several of the scholars who contribute to the cannon of Black Girlhood Studies utilize ethnographic approaches in their work. Dierdre Glenn Paul (2003), author of *Talkin’ Back: Raising and Educating Resilient Black Girls* provides an entry point into the discussion of Black girls in schools. Authors and artists who have privileged the task of connecting, negotiating (sometimes refuting) and transforming our historical narratives as Black girls/women are Kyra Gaunt (2006) with *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*, Ruth Nicole Brown (2009), author of *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy*, and Venus Evans-Winter (2005), author of *Teaching Black Girls: Resiliency in Urban Classrooms*. Rebecca Carroll (1997) also highlights young Black girl’s perspectives about their experiences through their own writings. Integral to her work were the discussions of
the intersections of class, race, and power from a Black girl’s perspective, and the ways they speak with- and back to- the discourse of Black womanhood.

The significance of this project is to create an arts-based, interdisciplinary foundation from which to consider Black girls’ experiences in education as they actively resist the stereotypes constructed about them. Also, through this work, I seek to contribute to a growing body of intellectual brilliance about the life experiences of Black girls (Boylorn, 2013; Brown, 2009, 2013; Durham, 2014; Gaunt, 2006; hooks, 2000; Jones, 2010; Love, 2012; Richardson, 2013; Ward, 2000; Winn, 2011). By privileging the narratives of Black girls in the public and academic sphere, it is my hope that SOLHOT will become a part of an emerging movement that seeks to create a visual lens for interrogating and documenting the ways in which the lived realities of Black girlhood are disappeared in educational spaces.

**Afterschool Matters**

In my work as an researcher, I rely primarily on the definition of education as argued by Paulo Freire (2000) in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire urges us to consider learning a process through where knowledge is presented to us, then shaped through understanding, discussion and reflection. Freire argued that education as a practice for freedom must attempt to expand the capacities necessary for human agency and, hence, the possibilities for democracy itself (Freire, 1998). As a result, this expanded and inclusive definition of education requires of us that we not consider educational spaces to only be rooms that are confined within the concrete walls of a school building. If we say the lives of Black girls matter, then the stories about their lives should not be confined within the dangerous context of the education industrial complex. More specifically, the work I engage in with Black girls operates in an "out of school" context

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8 Education Industrial Complex is what schools are typically referred to when discussions about how increasing rates of expulsion are predictors in students making life choices that might land them in prison. Thus, schools to prison pipeline.
but "within a school building" where we collectively deconstruct “school, community and life narratives” that the girls bring to our space. Remaining cognizant of our need to create a non-judgmental space for Black girls inside of a school building serves as our metaphorical disruption of the school to prison pipeline that exists for Black girls.

When I begin to imagine spaces within which to engage transformative and arts-based practices with young people, particularly with Black girls, I give more consideration to the possibilities that exist within out-of-school programs, rather than within the academic school day. Although students spend less time in out-of-school programs as compared to the classroom, afterschool programs offer young people more opportunities for exercising their criticality, creativity, and self-expression. For Black girls and women in SOLHOT, our space, although housed within a school, determines its direction and goals based upon who is in the room. In that way, our space is one of safety, arts creation and talking back to the rest of the world. Activist-scholars Ginwright and Cammarota (2006) describe the process best in their suggestion:

> We suggest a Freirian perspective of young people, one that posits their capacity to produce knowledge to transform their world. In this regard, youth should be recognized as subjects of a knowledge production that underpins their agency for personal and social transformation. (p. xix)

Out-of-school programs that are developed with the goals of creating art, self-expression and collective work in mind also provide opportunities for young people to position themselves within a socio-political, real world context. Freire’s lived experiences formed the foundation of his argument that education was not a neutral practice, despite the kinds of settings it might occur in. Because of education’s non-neutrality, for Freire, teaching (and in SOLHOT, the facilitation that happens between and among Black girls and women) was considered a political

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9 I move between the use of “was” and “is” because several SOLHOT spaces continue to exist since 2006 to the current day and photography with the girls continues to be a integral part of the creative works created within SOLHOT.
act. Pilar O’Cadiz (1998) reminds us, “Either we work to replicate limiting or even oppressive conditions for learners or we create experiences that empower them to fully realize their potential as individuals and to engage in transformative action that promotes social justice and equity” (p. 5). In many of the experiences I have had working with young people, I have learned that to create art with young people is to facilitate a path toward freedom. Ruth Nicole Brown (2013) states it best, “Thankfully, creativity thrives without permission” (p. 13). Also, in the absence of arts-based curricula in schools, working with young people through the use of the creative arts offers more meaningful ways for young people to interact with the world around them (Brown, 2009). For the girls in SOLHOT, their artistic creations consist of their unfiltered life narratives and their photographs. And in the doing of their art, they were not judged by others in the room for what they said, or how they might have said it.

**Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) invites us to engage with young people in a process of counter-storytelling where dominant narratives about them are critically examined as a way to interrupt inequalities that create oppressive conditions in their lives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Delgado-Bernal, 2002; Parker & Lynn, 2002). Counter-storytelling elicits not only the deconstructing of dominant narratives but also the significance and currency involved in the rewriting and documenting of our life experiences. Having spaces to reimagine and rewrite the world around them provides Black girls with the opportunity to be social change agents not only within their own communities, but to also be better advocates for their own selves. Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995), visionaries of CRT in education, argue that the tenants of using CRT in legal studies should also be emphasized in using CRT in education. These themes are: 1) CRT recognizes that racism is pervasive and permanent part of American society; 2) CRT challenges
dominant claims of objectivity, neutrality, colorblindness, and merit; 3) CRT challenges a
historicism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law; 4) CRT insists on
recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color in analyzing law and society; 5)
CRT is interdisciplinary; and 6) CRT works toward eliminating racial oppression as part of the
broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. Critical Race Theory works hand in hand with
Black Feminist Thought in reengaging parts of our histories as Black girls and women that we
have been forced to forget and, in turn, create new narratives in an effort to co-construct a future
for those who will come after us.

Black Feminism

In my work with Black girls, I refer to Black Feminist Thought (BFT) (Collins, 2000), as
BFT is a theoretical framework that supports ethnographic inquiry with its commitment to the
lived realities of Black women at the core of its theory-making. In SOLHOT, we try fearlessly
to resist the negative labels that are inscribed on our physical bodies. We do this because we
believe that Black girls are legitimate producers of knowledge, if only spaces were created with
the goals in mind of documenting the knowledge Black girls (re)member. In doing this, we
create a new site of safety for, not only Black girls, but Black women, as well, and the doing of it
is grounded unapologetically within the legacy of BFT. When Black girls construct new
narratives about their lives, they are also defining and redefining their consciousness and that
consciousness provides a foundation for Black girls’ freedom from suffocating stereotypes.
Collins (2000) describes, “In them [safe spaces] Black women intellectuals could construct new
ideas and experiences that infused daily life with new meaning. These new meanings offered
African American women potentially powerful tools to resist the controlling images of Black
womanhood” (p. 112). The photographs taken by the girls in SOLHOT serve as powerful tools
in speaking back to the oppressive images of Black girls within schools and community and
create concrete spaces for Black women to assist in that kind of freedom work alongside Black
girls.

**Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT)**

Field Note (March 2009)

As I prepare for this afternoon's session with the girls, I find myself thinking back
to a meeting I participated in last week with some concerned Black women in
town. These were women who came together out of their concern about the
Black girls at Small Town High School\(^{10}\). As they described it, "we must do
something about the attitudes, the aggressiveness, and the verbal abuse coming
from Black girls these days".\(^{11}\) Upon hearing their declarations, I imagined a
space in which Black girls were contained within a petri dish and we, as the
grown-ups (the supposed experts) were looking down at the dish wondering how
to mix-up a different and better batch of Black girls at the school.

How disconnected can one be from the lives of young people that such an
arrogance would disguise itself the intention behind creating safe spaces for Black
girls in the school only to really be an effort to change how Black girls behave.
And still, every time I hear these kinds of comments, I find myself shaking in my
seat wondering how can I negotiate respect for my elders, while also advocating
for Black girls? Yet, once the shaking stops I find myself informing these women
that any positive efforts to impact the lives of Black girls has to be a negotiated
process between Black girls and women. I remind them that a negotiated process
between adults and young people is often founded on qualities of patience, trust,
and consistency and that Black girls deserve no less than what adults would offer
to each other. No, working with Black girls is not easy. But just as important,
living as Black women isn’t easy either. I wonder how often these women were
also characterized as being loud and having an attitude?

Exactly.

Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT) is an arts-based, afterschool space in
Central Illinois. SOLHOT is a space for Black girls where they can share the stories of their
lives out loud through group dialogue, writing, photography, dance, song and performance.

SOLHOT operates out of several different spaces- a boys and girls club, library, high school and

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\(^{10}\) A pseudonym is used in place of the real name of the high school.

\(^{11}\) I have paraphrased what the women said in the meeting.
middle school. The SOLHOT site that also doubles as my site of research operates out of a public middle school on a weekly basis, in six-week sessions, twice during the academic year. This space is often referred to as SOLHOT/Sisterhood in official paperwork necessary for the research process. Within this dissertation (and because we do not subscribe to binary thinking in SOLHOT, the research site is referred to as simply, SOLHOT. In SOLHOT our space is sacred. We live in it. We allow ourselves the vulnerability to feel our feelings inside of it. We love each other and we give each other attitude. We always tell the truth. We don’t apologize. We question the rules and we ask the right questions- the questions that matter to us.

SOLHOT is not an in-school or after-school program. It is not a program. However, it is a space of importance to Black girls and the adults who love them. Traditionally, after-school spaces are intentionally constructed to serve as an extension of the school day even though those spaces are disguised as extra-curricular activities. For young people who experience marginalized positions within the school day, after-school spaces ultimately end up being a simple extension of those oppressive states during the school day. The same applies to Black girls. Specific to Black girls, who are also statistically disciplined more severely than their peers, serving punishments in after-school detention or out of school suspensions leaves them with no opportunity to attend after-school spaces that might offer them more critical and creative ways of engaged learning.

SOLHOT, however, is about engaging and being committed to a way of thinking about Black girls and their potential to examine their own lives, contribute to the communities in which they live and be of service to younger Black girls. SOLHOT is a sacred invitation to engage with Black girls in ways that are anti-systems, centered in out of the box thinking, and dependent upon love. SOLHOT is ethereal. And when SOLHOT as a spirit shows up, all things are
possible. Whereas, traditionally afterschool programs have engaged the objectives of providing spaces for young people to strengthen academic skills or be kept safe (from the lack of opportunities outside of schools), these are not the goals in mind when SOLHOT spaces are created inside of school buildings. In the case of Black girls, an open and inviting space is created for them to bring their stresses of the school day. In SOLHOT spaces, art (which has been severely removed from schools) is utilized for the purpose of finding the power inherent in our voices and creating ways to harness that power so that we can be fully ourselves without apology. Is it not the objective in SOLHOT to simply continue the school day for Black girls or to provide them with a safe space to be in during the afterschool hours complete with snacks and busy activities. The kind of space that SOLHOT tries to provoke is in response to the absence of efforts for spaces to be created where the inherent genius of Black girls (Brown, 2013) can be explored, celebrated and documented. In this sense, within SOLHOT spaces is where we continue working within the legacy of Black girls and women determining for themselves what is important about their lives, what needs to be changed and how to incite that change in ways that work in the interest of Black girls and the communities of which they are a part.

History

Field Note (October 2008)

The teaching experiences I had in my past resurrected themselves when I started working with SOLHOT in the fall of 2006. I clearly remember the first session of SOLHOT happening at the Boys and Girls Club. I remember the homegirls and Dr. Brown being on a high after session. I, however, came home and cried.

I couldn’t do it. In a word, I couldn’t handle what I called the noise, the chaos. I’d never worked with Black girls before. I’d never worked in spaces where discipline was looked at with deserving suspicion. I didn’t know about the beauty and courage of loud, Black girls. I was scared out of my mind and didn’t have anywhere to disappear my previous experiences of working with young people in schools with regard to the structure, the hand raising and the power dynamics.
I remember talking with Dr. Brown on that phone that night. I remember so vividly telling her how much I appreciated her invitation to work in a space with Black girls but I had to decline. I told her that I just didn’t think I could do it. I cried. I cried on the phone with her. In my mind I was thinking, what do you mean we don’t tell Black girls to be quiet in SOLHOT? How is it that we all sit and have conversation at the table? And my biggest discomfort? How am I going to dance in front of other people and Black girls?

Dr. Brown calmed me down. She listened to me. She assured me that I could do it. She told me that I’d already done it. She reminded me of the exchange I had had that evening with one of the girls. In the midst of all my fears, my baggage, I hadn’t taken notice of the fact that I was already working with Black girls. I allowed my stuff to overshadow an incredible teachable moment. In retrospect, had I held onto my fears, I would have missed out on the incredible relationships I developed with the girls in SOLHOT. Had I acted on my fears, had I not opened myself up to what I didn’t know and didn’t understand, I would have missed out on the most life-changing moments I have ever had.

I realized tonight how much SOLHOT has changed me and how being of service to Black girls is a necessary part of my Black womanhood. All of this required me giving myself the permission to be free, to move my hips and to not characterize “the noise” as chaos but rather the melodies of Black girls being free.

SOLHOT was the manifestation of a vision of Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown, who in 2006 put a call out to other women of color to join her in working with Black girls at the local boys and girls club. I have included the field note above as a part of the archive contained within this visual ethnography as it reminds me of the necessity to recognize not only the genius in Black girls, but also the inherent genius within your self upon the start of working with Black girls. I argue that it is this fluid willingness among Black girls and women in SOLHOT that contributes to the learning and unlearning that occurs in our space. In creating the space of SOLHOT, there was an intentional erasure of such altruistic concepts as, volunteering, mentoring and empowering Black girls. The women who heeded the call from Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown were called homegirls, not volunteers. The creation of SOLHOT did not have a budget at its disposal so our expenses related to things such as snacks, disposable cameras and journals were out of pocket. While there was a referral of girls to the space from within the club, Dr. Brown also led local
community organizing efforts to let the families around the club know about SOLHOT.

SOLHOT happened at the club during the afterschool hours for a year and a half before an additional site was started at a local public middle school. Although photography has always been an integral part of what happens in SOLHOT since the start, the public middle school is where this specific dissertation takes root.

**Setting**

The dissertation is grounded within the lived realities of Black girls living in a small, Central Illinois campus town. The population of the city is approximately 35,000 and much of the culture in this small city is severely influenced by the major university located within it. The racial divides in the city are sharp, historical and grounded very much in the narratives of African Americans who came north from the South on their way to Chicago and stopped in this Central Illinois town. The school system is small, therefore, the schools- on the surface- seem well racially integrated. The racial make-up of the teachers and administrators, however, are made of more White people, than staff of color. In terms of class dynamics, African American and Latino students in this city have access to far fewer resources than White students.

**Relationships**

If we are truly committed to creating a better world for Black girls, it’s not about condoning each and every one of their decisions. This current space of “Black girl daily death” is not about the individual acts of Black girls or the collective interactions between adults and Black girls. To remain afraid of Black girls, to prejudge what they say before they say it and when they do speak to us, to characterize what they’ve said as a violent assault upon us, doing all of these things keeps us complicit in the daily death of Black girls. (Journal Entry, 2009)

The womanhood of SOLHOT women is not dependent on the girls being “good” and the girlhood of the girls in SOLHOT is not dependent on the women being “all knowing” adults. An intention behind the work in SOLHOT is to bring positive visibility for Black girls in spaces
where they are made invisible by a devaluing of their knowledge and presence. In the creation of our counter-narratives, we intentionally place value on a collective voice rather than an individual voice when meaning is ascribed to our photographs and other artistic creations (of which there are many). As we collectively (re)member our lives, we become whole as bell hooks (1995) suggests:

> The word remember (re-member) evokes the coming together of severed parts, fragments becoming a whole. Photography has been, and is, central to that aspect of decolonization that calls us back to the past and offers a way to reclaim and renew life-affirming bonds. Using images, we connect ourselves to a recuperative, redemptive memory that enables us to construct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonizing eye. (p. 64)

Because the decolonization of the stereotypes about Black girls is vital to our survival, we unapologetically share our photography and counter-narratives with the world. Our survival relies on our assertion that Black girls are not the problem. It is my hope that this work “repositions” the damaging gaze that is focused upon Black girls, as suggested by Carrie Mae Weems (2013):

> At the end of the day, it has a great deal to do with the breadth of the humanity of African Americans who are usually stereotyped and narrowly defined and often viewed as a social problem. The work has to do with an attempt to reposition and reimagine the possibility of women and the possibility of people of color, and to that extent it has to do with what I always call unrequited love. (p. 2)

Embedded in our photographs are labor, theory, vulnerability and love. Always love— even in our speaking back to the adults in our lives who might not have the self-interests of Black girls in mind when examining our artistic creations. And we recognize and argue for the necessity of love in the doing of Black feminist work. Black girl-centered photography encourages a love that is rooted and recognized as a unique hallmark of Black Feminist Thought. I was reminded that to do the work of Black feminism is to do the labor of loving ourselves as we are exactly in
the moment. Above all else, our photos serve to encapsulate the love we have for each other during our celebrations of Black girlhood.

**Pedagogy**

There is a beautiful and radical pedagogy uniquely embedded in the ways that Black girls and women in SOLHOT remember what they were forced to forget and expected to change. Within that sacred task of (re)membering are the spiritual truths that we have inherited from the Black girls and women who did this work before us. However, there is a unique newness enmeshed in our pedagogy, in our naming of new methodologies and theories that have at their core the need for collective work, owning our shine in humble ways and never disappearing again those who are forcibly missing from our conversations and libations.

In SOLHOT, Black girls work in partnership with mostly college-aged women in the engagement of an arts-based curriculum centered in themes that the girls deem most important. The women involved in the program, utilizing a critical pedagogical approach, facilitate the activities for, and with the girls. Giroux and Simon (1989) describe for educators the details of utilizing a critical pedagogy:

> When one practices [critical] pedagogy, one acts with the intent of creating experiences that will organize and disorganize a variety of understandings of our natural and social world in particular ways. Pedagogy is a concept that draws attention to the processes through which knowledge is produced. (p. 40)

The use of a critical pedagogy assists in the manifestation of SOLHOT’s goals which are: 1) to recognize and deconstruct the societally-imposed power dynamics between Black girls and Black women; 2) commit to a teaching process where a fluidity of teaching and learning occurs among the girls and women; and 3) create and document counter-narratives in response to the deficit-based research about the lived experiences of Black girls with the priority in mind of freeing ourselves first, the world second.
The intention embedded in the relationships found within SOLHOT is to document the process of Black girls witnessing the stories created about them, and for the girls to author their own stories as their way of speaking back. SOLHOT is a space where the conditions under which Black girls try to survive can be questioned, and where new possibilities can be imagined (Freire, 2000, McLaren, 2009). Once the meta-narratives about Black girls are documented, those stories become deconstructed, reimagined with Black girls at the center of the narrative (as opposed to the margins) or existing within a new space that is without a center or margins and disseminated through writing, photography, performance, and dance. Whereas there is an importance placed on the dissemination of those reconstructed narratives within the general public (more specifically, among the key people and institutions in the lives of Black girls), our creations are for us first. We do this because we acknowledge the level of deconditioning that is necessary for ourselves. And in no way do we claim that the removal of those imposed-upon, stereotypes marked on our bodies to be a neat and organized process. It’s ugly, chaotic and loud, yet, necessary, liberating and possible. Critical pedagogy enables us to ask how and why knowledge is constructed and why some knowledge is given more currency over other types of knowledge and in whose interests that type of prioritizing serves (McLaren, 2009). Because Black girls are not heard above and outside the loudness of their voices, their cultural mannerisms or their silence, their truths are normally ignored and/or dismissed. We embrace fully that our absolute silence will not save us (Lorde, 2007). There is a kind of doing and undoing in the space of SOLHOT that encourages Black girls to act boldly with no fear of repercussions for being loud in their articulation of what is most important to them.

For the women involved in SOLHOT, there is specific attention placed on facilitating a process of understanding what it means to be a Black girl living under particular societal forces.
To that end, in every session, there is a priority placed on having discussions that move in the direction of topics that the girls deem the most relevant and important to them in that moment. In facilitated interactions, the girls are exposed to dynamic discussions with Black women about the ways in which our experiences intersect or differ, regardless of our differences in age and life position (Brown, 2009) and the women in SOLHOT are afforded an opportunity to learn and understand what it means to be a Black girl living in a predominantly White, campus-based and conservative community.

In SOLHOT, there is an explicit move away from the traditional mentoring type of programs available for young women of color. Rather than the women assuming the role of “mentor” to the girls, the goal is to create a space whereby both the girls and women feel loved, safe, listened to and supported for who they are in SOLHOT, as well as in the other communities of which they are a part (Brown, 2009). Too often, it is within those traditional mentoring programs that barriers are constructed that prevent the acknowledgment of Black girls as legitimate producers of knowledge- a knowledge that plays a special part in the reclaiming of traditional Black women’s activism and an activism committed to the work of articulating the ways in which race, gender, class and sexuality intersect and at times, keep us invisible. In contrast to the mentoring model, the women in SOLHOT are not presumed to know everything and the girls in SOLHOT are not presumed to know nothing. In the space of SOLHOT, our ways of being in the world are articulated, interrogated, and reimagined collectively.

In SOLHOT, Black girls and women work together getting to know each other and ourselves, valuing where we come from and affirming who we are in the present moment. We exchange stories about what it means to be a daughter, a friend, a cousin, a mother, and a student- all the while remaining whole as Black girls becoming Black women and as Black
women (re)membering what it means to be a Black girl. Of use to this process of becoming a Black woman and of (re)membering our Black girlhood is our use of photos. From the beginning of SOLHOT, images of Black girls and women were always in our midst through photos, magazine ads and the visual imagery in our minds. We interrogate these images when deconstructing notions of beauty, hair, body image, intelligence and Black girl games within our history and in current day. Almost every week, girls and women in SOLHOT are constructing collages of these images and adding to them the text that transforms the photos from stand-alone, still images to active and radical calls for the lives of Black girls to be seen and valued.

My work with middle school-aged Black girls is not about empowering them or motivating them to attend college. It is not research primarily concerned with the attitudes or narratives of teachers and administrators. This work is not about discovering solutions for the “problem with Black girls”. The objective of this research effort is to create (examine and document) a space for Black girls to tell their side of the story about their experiences in school, family and community. This dissertation is a story about how and why the use of photography in our space is crucial to creating stories to counter the negative images of Black girls in the minds of the stakeholders/gatekeepers in their lives. This work examines the extent of dialogical transformation that occurs when photography is included in a space of Black girl dialogue for the purpose of crafting counter-stories that speak back to the negative images of Black girls in education. This work is ultimately a call to action for the lives of Black girls to matter. In the context of the current work occurring on a policy realm regarding the academic experiences of Black girls (African American Policy Forum, 2015), this work is situated within the documented experiential knowledge of what Black girls know, how they know it and moves the conversation to the next phase of what Black girls can do with what they know. For the girls in SOLHOT,
their museum exhibit and the creation of Black Girl Gaze were what resulted from what they did with what they know.

**The Curator**

In my shifting roles of visual activist/facilitator/curator/researcher in this political project, just like the girls, I am also changed. How I came to the use of photography as a method within this research was birthed in two major ways. First, I used the activity of taking photos of the girls in SOLHOT as a way to excuse myself from dancing in public. And second, simply put, I am the daughter of a photographer.

I am the child of a photographer but I do not aspire to be a photographer. I do not know the technical skills behind photography. What I do know, by way of Black girls, is the power of photography. I have been fortunate to experience that power with Black girls. For us, photography is a language, a way to communicate with others and to establish a Black Girl Gaze. (Taaffe, Journal Entry, 2009)

My father is a lifelong photographer. That’s how he met my mom - taking photos of her. I am the first-born and my brother was born next. When we look through the boxes of photos my mom keeps in her hope chest, it’s clear to ascertain at what point my father left us. There are so many photos of me from birth to age three and then a decreasing number of photos of my brother from birth to age one. That’s clearly the point at which my father left us. I grew up hating to be photographed and never really understanding why. Now, as an adult, I imagine that the feeling of abandonment was expressing itself as outward indifference toward the art of photography. And yet when I think about the girls in SOLHOT, I think in images - the pictures I’ve taken of them, the photos they have taken of me and the photos they have taken on their own. I think about those momentary spaces that belong only to them, to only their gaze. It has served as beautiful tension rubbing up against my indifference about photography rooted in my childhood.
It’s incredible how life moments can become full circle. I took photos in SOLHOT in an attempt to avoid dancing in front of the girls, because I was unsure of how much Black girl rhythm I had. In our first year of working with Black girls and photography at the middle school, I reconnected with my father concerning the photos I was taking in SOLHOT with the girls. I contacted him to get advice on purchasing digital cameras for our work. On one of my trips home to NYC, my father gave me one of his very expensive 35MM SLR cameras to use with the girls. He was overjoyed that I was taking to this photography hobby of his. I always made it clear that I wasn’t interested in the mechanics of photography, only in its potential for provoking disruptions to the discourse that was suppressing the genius of Black girls. This wasn’t news to my father (or any member of my family, for that matter) as I have always been involved in some kind of social justice work since my first year of college. Although I had hoped that my social justice work would make my family proud, it instead always made them worry about my safety - both physically and emotionally.

At any rate, more than twenty years after undergrad, my father seem to accept my feelings about only using photography as a tool of social justice and he wanted play a role in any way possible in my work to incorporate photography into my work with Black girls. It was an expensive camera and, in full disclosure, I was concerned about bringing it into a space with young people. That fear readily disappeared (and I felt “checked”) when the girls would take the camera from me and take amazing photos. That camera was never dropped! When I curated the exhibit of our photos for our museum installation, he was over the top joyful. The email he sent to me before the museum exhibit served as the intersection of my work with Black girls, the healed space between me and my father and the harnessed power of photography.
Hi Baby,
I LOVE the photos you choose, all the hard work that you're putting in now is going to be all worth it, when you see the faces of all the people that's going to be viewing the exhibit.
I SO PROUD of you, and so happy that you are loving photography, that has been a apart of my entire life.
I fixed the colors on these photos for you.
Good Luck on the Exhibit, I know it's going to be GREAT!

I Love You,
Dad

Figure 1: Email from my father before the SOLHOT museum exhibit.

Next, fast-forward from the SOLHOT museum exhibit in the spring of 2009, to my brother’s wedding six months later. During the wedding reception, there was a PowerPoint presentation that was playing on a loop with photos of my brother and his wife, respectively, as children. At some point, my father came to sit next to me while these slides with photos were playing. He was very quiet while he was sitting at the table, so I asked him if he was okay. With tears swelling up in his eyes (I had never seen my father cry before that point), he tells me how guilty he feels when looking at those photos of my brother as a child knowing he didn’t take them (this reminding him at what point he left us). For more than forty years, I had never let go of the anger I had built up toward my father and his abandonment of us, yet in that moment, I let go of it all. That moment was a pretty incredible and indirect gift from the work I did with Black girls. I was also reminded after my interaction with my father about the absolute power of photos- the powerful kind of (re)membering that can occur when we engage with photography and allow it to serve as a mechanism for communication. The broken relationship between my
father and I was made whole that day and the point at which that long journey toward wholeness began was with my decision to take photos of the girls in SOLHOT as a way to get out of dancing. As Heidy Bach (1998) states, “For me, photography is a site of vulnerability for the photographer, for those photographed and for those who look at the photographs” (p. 29).

Photography in SOLHOT has been about (re)membering, (re)connecting, and (re)constructing the stories about Black girls and my relationship with my father. That is all good news.

The Girls

The girls I worked with were all 6th graders during the year of my research. They were recommended to SOLHOT by the social worker at the school, who also served as our liaison. Previous to the official start of my research, the social worker had (and continued to has) positive relationships with all of the girls and their families.

Kita

“I see myself as either a pediatrician, a doctor or a lawyer.”

Kita lives with her brothers and her grandmother. Her grandmother works a full-time job at Walmart in order to care for her grandchildren. During our times together in SOLHOT, Kita always seemed to not have good control over herself, meaning that she was always talking and/or moving around the space. In contrast, however, when I would often drive Kita home from our sessions, she was so grounded, thoughtful and curious. I once ran into Kita’s grandmother while I was shopping at Walmart. She told me how concerned she was about Kita’s future. I was so fortunate to assure her that Kita was incredibly wise and intelligent and that it was all our responsibilities to ensure that the gatekeepers at Kita’s school were encouraged to recognize that. Kita always had something useful to say, if only the adults in her life were willing to listen.

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12 Each girl was given a pseudonym as identifier in this dissertation.
13 The quote associated with each girl is an excerpt from her individual interview.
Ana

“I would like to live in Atlanta and be a doctor or gospel singer.”

Ana is a Black girl who is interested in hair and nails and singing. She has a beautiful voice and loves Gospel music. Each time I encountered Ana, she always had a smile on her face. Unfortunately, she was often accused by a few teachers at the school of dressing in a manner that was too sexual for school. I never looked at Ana in that way. For me, it was always a simple issue of size - that often times, Ana’s clothes fit a big snug. And, as someone who grew up in a working-class family, I knew that this kind of issue existed for us because we worn our clothes out until the absolute last moment of a right fit. This is a perfect example of my insider/outsider status.

Ash

“I only want something or someone to live for.”

Ash came from a family with five brothers and just herself. Her father had passed away and her mother provided for everyone. Ash’s grandmother also lived with them. Ash was considered by some teachers to be pretty hot-tempered but during our SOLHOT sessions, Ash proved to be quite a leader, a mentor to other girls and an amazing photographer. As many times as Ash was suspended from school, she still managed to have high academic grades in school.

Kay

“I try my best to be good as much as I can.”

Kay was a tall Black girl and always pretty stylish. She was an only child and came from a single-mother family. She was typically outgoing around friends but could be pretty quiet in one-on-one situations. I always found Kay to be remorseful and internalizing the characteristics
teachers and administrators made of her. She always had this goal in mind of trying to be a good girl. I, of course, felt she already was.

**Miyah**

“Black girls are treated differently.”

Miyah was an only child and her mother owed a hair salon. In comparison to the other girls in SOLHOT, this characterized her as being a bit better off financially speaking. Unfortunately, due to the unequal financial make-up of the African American community in this town, this wasn’t saying much. Miyah tended to be out-going most of the time and an amazing photographer in her own right.

**Reka**

“E-Boogie. Yeah. Dancing makes me forget all of it.”

Reka was pretty quiet in one-on-one situations and always had a hesitancy to write. In the group settings, she was always vocal and was a lover of dance and movement. Reka also turned out to be an amazing photographer and was the one girl in SOLHOT who had control of the camera my father had given me the most.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

I am a doctoral student and in the beginning stages of writing my dissertation. My job is to write a dissertation. My work is with Black girls and photography. I do this work as an activist-scholar. All of this happens in a space called, SOLHOT. (Taaffe, Journal Entry, 2009)

The overall goal of this interdisciplinary and arts-based dissertation is to share research based on relevant literature, interviews of the girls in SOLHOT, documentary photographs, reflexive field notes and participant observations for the purpose of constructing and disseminating counter-narratives to the stereotypes about Black girls in education. It is also an academic goal to engage in documenting a more complex and ethnographic understanding of Black girls’ educational experiences, while simultaneously attending to the challenges involved in interdisciplinary, arts-based research under the disciplinary gaze of the academy. Black girl scholars have found ethnography to be an ideal way to learn about Black girls’ embodied realities (Fordham, 1993; Grant, 1984). A primary method of ethnographic work is continued observation through participation in the culture being researched (Ellis, 2004). Therefore, ethnography is a qualitative approach that permits researchers to explain and interpret shared and learned patterns of values, activities, and language of the population being engaged (Creswell, 2007). I was fortunate to be exposed to a rich space of ethnographic work concerning the lived realities of marginalized, young people of color during graduate school. Heeding the calls to justice and self-determination for young people, I look to the works of scholars such as, Angela Valenzuela, author of Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring, Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, author of School Kids/Street Kids: Identity Development in Latino Students, Marie “Keta” Miranda, author of Homegirls in the Public Sphere, Julie Bettie, author of Women Without Class: Girls, Race and Identity, Anita Harris, editor of All About the Girl: Culture, Power,
and Identity, and Lorena Garcia, author of *Respect Yourself, Protect Yourself: Latina Girls and Sexual Identity*. Recognizing the gifts of those ethnographers who came before me in documenting the lived realities of young women of color, I am fortunate to be able to integrate visual methods within the ethnographic work contained within this dissertation. The engagement of visual methods by Black girls is a field rich of transformative potential thereby freeing them from the imposed construction of their narratives by others. I believe that in many ways photographs taken by a Black girl is her way of talking back with a potential for being heard above her so-called “loudness”.

**Qualitative Inquiry**

Qualitative inquiry is an often-utilized methodology when working with young people and other marginalized groups, yet it often remains nested in debates concerning its validity and potential for offering a scientific basis for truth. Qualitative inquiry aims to provide a theory of knowledge and the interpretive framework that guide a particular research project finds its tradition in anthropology and sociology. The more traditional characteristics of qualitative inquiry are that the research has a natural setting, is descriptive, the researcher is more concerned with process as opposed to outcomes and the overall meaning of the research is of great concern to those involved in the research process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The use of qualitative inquiry allows the researcher to have a more intimate relationship within the setting of the research site and with the research participants. It is important that the methods engaged in using qualitative inquiry are methods whose logic is embedded in the overall methodology of the work being engaged with participants. Consciously ensuring that qualitative methods allow for participation on the part of the community a researcher is working with, also calls for clearly
identified participatory research methods. In our work in SOLHOT, photography allows for the active participation and agency of the girls during the research process.

**Visual Methods**

Visual methods have historically been used as a research tool within the field of qualitative inquiry. Overall, there are two dominant intentions behind the use of visual methods. One, with regard to the creation of images by the researcher for the purpose of documentation and/or two, the collection of images for the purpose of analysis (Banks, 2007; Pink, 2007; Collier, 1986). These two uses are not separate from each other and often work in conjunction with a researcher’s attempt to extract meaning about the lives of the participants they are researching. In either case, photos are often used to derive meaning, whether that meaning results from the use of photographs in interviews (photo elicitation) or the creation and use of images for participants to better elaborate on their lived lives (documentary photography).

The use of photography for the investigation of social phenomenon dates back to the 1930’s (Banks, 2007) and as early as photography has been used in social science research, there has been, and continues to be issues concerning representation (the concerns apparent in the decision of what and who to photograph), the negative impact on the researcher-participant relationship in taking photos in a voyeuristic manner and the multiple interpretations that can exist surrounding one photo. Harper (1998) reminds us of the words of Howard Becker (1974) who argued, “Photographs, often thought of as “truth,” are more precisely reflections of the photographer’s point of view, biases, and knowledge (or lack of knowledge)” (p. 71). Black girls in SOLHOT speak back to this argument by occupying the role of photographer themselves, thereby, claiming their voice as a visual method for constructing documentary images about the lives of Black girls.
Black Girls and the Visual

Initially, I was hesitant to use photography as a data collection tool in SOLHOT. Photography itself seemed disruptive to the systematic methods of data collection and analysis I was taught in my methodology courses. What I ultimately realized in my work with Black girls is that whatever method we utilize, in our talking back to the constructed stereotypes about Black girls there is inherent disruption and we consciously choose disruption knowing intimately that there are no concessions made to silent voices in oppressive and marginalized spaces in education. I am encouraged by other artist researchers in the engagement of this work within academic research. Levy (2009) states, “Arts-based practices have been developed for all research phases: data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation” (p. 12). As I write my dissertation I also realize that the photographs are OUR data, OUR evidence that WE are here. However, Douglass Harper (1998) reminds us of the warning from Howard Becker (1974), who cautions that photographs are often thought of as truth, though they are more precisely reflections of the photographer’s point of view, biases, and knowledge (or lack of knowledge). If the research design is one in which deficit-based assumptions exist about the youth involved in the project, this warning rings true. If a researcher enters a space already holding negative ideas concerning the potential of the youth involved to construct critical opinions of the world in which they inhabit, then that same researcher might attach little worthwhile meaning to the photographs taken by young people. This is a risk I was aware of before the beginning of my research and one that I continue to actively be conscious of in reading the photographs taken by the girls in SOLHOT. It is my intention and hope that, as the messenger of the stories Black girls share with me, I am delivering their messages in an authentic and unbiased fashion.
Photography as a research method is not new. Having Black girls behind the camera, how we go about the use of photography as a method in SOLHOT, and the process through which knowledge is constructed from our photos IS new, matters and in these perilous times, is so necessary. The use of photography on slave plantations was primarily concerned with experiment and propaganda, all directed at "proving" the inhumanity of Black people. When photography is in the hands of Black girls, it is about more than simply "taking back" the historic and archaic uses of the camera in the lives of Black people. It is also not about simply shifting the gaze of Black girls to the center from the margins. In SOLHOT, there is a Black Girl Gaze that is an integral part to our reimagining of freedom, a space where Black girls are not interested in the reproduction of inequalities, such as a center and margins.

Of use to the process of being a Black girl and of Black women (re)membering our girlhood in SOLHOT is our photography. In our collective space, we are constantly negotiating and resisting narratives for the dual purpose of survival and integrity. Using photography (and other artistic modes of expression) is a strategy we engage for making sense of the world around us. Irma McClaurin (2001) encourages the work we do when she says, “Such strategies must produce or accommodate self-expression, cultural translation, representation, and activism” (p. 55). In SOLHOT, we craft an exploration of our lives in our exchange of stories about what it means to be a daughter, a friend, a cousin, a mother, and a student, all the while remaining whole as Black girls becoming Black women and as Black women (re)membering what it means to be a Black girl. Every week, girls and women in SOLHOT are taking photos, constructing collages of images and adding to them the necessary text that transforms the stereotypes about Black girls, the messages that are socially constructed with negative assumptions about Black girls.
While we must continue to negotiate the dilemma of the gaze of those who view the photos taken by the girls and the negative constructs about Black girlhood viewers might bring to the photos, I believe that in many ways, a photograph taken by a Black girl is her way of talking back to those negative constructs in the absence of her physical presence. Photography is one way that allows her to be heard above the so-called “loudness” many people so often see in her and refer to as evidence for many of the stereotypes about Black girls. Black girl-created and curated photography is Black girls’ ways to transcend not only stereotypes but physical presence and boundaries, as well.

**Photovoice**

The use of photography as a method in SOLHOT is qualitative at its core, and an arts-based critical inquiry, specifically. A point of entry into using photograph with young people is photovoice. Photovoice is a more recent process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through taking photographs and using those photographs to tell a story. Photovoice has three main goals: (1) to enable people to record and reflect their community’s strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers (Wang, 2006). Our work employs the use of photovoice as a starting point in our creation of a visual ethnography about Black girls. With the rise in use of digital cameras (and disposable cameras as well), qualitative researchers are witnessing an emergence of using photovoice as a tool in the creation of visual ethnographies. It entrusts the cameras in the hands of research participants to enable them to act as recorders, and potential catalysts for change in their own communities (Wang and Burris, 1997). Whereas visual ethnography alludes to the kind of research being undertaken and the method of data collection and analysis, photovoice gives rise to the purpose
of the method. In other words, the use of photovoice as a method serves as the foundation of a research project to be political in nature, to have a social justice intent and to have stories be documented and constructed by the very people not just living the stories but also negotiating the realities of those lived experiences particularly within marginalized communities.

Photovoice allows for research participants to enact and demonstrate an enormous amount of agency in being the creators of the images and not only the subjects. Photovoice serves as an appropriate site of entry for working with Black girls as the method allows for Black girls to determine what issues about their lives are to be examined and the ways in which those issues are discussed. While the goal of reaching policymakers concerning the issues of the communities in which Black girls live, in SOLHOT the first priority is placed on how the girls see themselves and this disrupts traditional approaches to the use of photovoice. Moreover, as a tool for civic engagement, photovoice is often cited as a method for empowering youth to become more invested in the communities in which they live. In SOLHOT, we are focused first on the ways others view Black girls. In SOLHOT, Black girls acknowledge their investment in the communities (an investment that is not present within the stereotypes about Black girls) in which they live and use photography to demonstrate that commitment to the rest of the world.

In SOLHOT, it is the combination of critical group dialogue, individual interviews, check-in activities known as “Just Because”¹⁴ and participation observation that extends the intent of a traditional photovoice method to work on the behalf of Black girls. The co-constructed meaning of photographs taken by the girls and myself (as an insider/outsider) adds a unique construct to photovoice that places it directly in the path of traditional Black women’s self-determination work. The most significant juncture at which the use of photovoice as a

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¹⁴ This is a check-in activity that we engage at the start of time together when we note on a piece of paper that contains the prompts: Just because I ______, Does not mean I ______. My name is ______. And I ______.
method and the photography utilized in SOLHOT part ways is at the point of deciding what the focus of the visual work will be. In SOLHOT, the issues we are most concerned with are the issues that are of most concern to Black girls. Advocating for themselves and in that advocating, resisting and talking back to the myths about Black girls in schools situates the work in SOLHOT within the historical legacy of using photography for the purpose of resistance and social movement work toward securing freedom in the African American community.

**Research Design**

SOLHOT was founded in 2006 (and still operates to the present day). In fall of 2007, SOLHOT’s visionary, Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown was contacted by the social worker at a local public middle school for SOLHOT’s support in working with Black girls at the school who were facing a high rate of suspensions and expulsions at the school. A pilot program was started at the school in the spring of 2008 (culminating in a Black girl-curated photography exhibit at the school). IRB-approved research at the school began in the fall of 2008 and carried on for the entire academic year.

The project setting:

- Local, public middle school
- 6 girls (sixth grade girls selected at the discretion of the social worker/school liaison)
- Full academic year (6 weeks in the fall, 6 weeks in the spring)
- Took place in a selected classroom during afterschool hours
- Each session was 3 hours long, once a week for 6 weeks
- Documentary photos, semi-structured interviews, activity handouts, and field notes used as units of “data”
The girls with whom I co-created this visual ethnography were six graders. Each girl was given a disposable camera to take home in order to capture images (both of people and symbols) that represented home, love, beauty, community and what it looks like to be a Black girl growing up in a small, campus town in Central Illinois. Hundreds of photographs were taken with digital cameras during our SOLHOT sessions at the school and disposable cameras when the girls were not in school. At the end of the of each school year, a public exhibit was created for the girls to share their counter-stories to the stereotypes about Black girls, their thoughts about being a Black girl and their recommendations to the adults who guide their lives about how to better support Black girls. When references to the work done “in SOLHOT” is made throughout this dissertation, I am speaking specifically to the work that was undertaken by myself (as doctoral student and facilitator), my advisor, Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown (as researcher and facilitator) and the six girls at this public middle school site of SOLHOT. There were other SOLHOT sites in operation at the same time as this research work documents and the work (and facilitators) at those sites varied but also occurred with the same inherent values about Black girls engaged across all SOLHOT sites.

The girls in SOLHOT worked with digital cameras during our time together at the school and documented those people, places and things about school that bring Black girls joy, pain or need to be changed. The cameras are always present in our space. They are an integral part of our investigation into what we know, what we don’t know and how we know what we know about ourselves and the world around us. We came together each week to discuss the photos we have taken and create narratives for the photos using our own words. Alongside documenting what we see going on around us, we had very honest conversations about how we would like things to change for the better. We discussed the changes we are willing to make as Black girls
and make suggestions about how people in decision-making positions can do things differently to assist in the academic and social success of Black girls at the school. Our photos and our words show the outside world what we believe in and embody what we would like to change so that the lives of Black girls can be better understood and honored.

As with any research method, there do exist potentials and limitations of using visual methods with young people. In working with youth populations, working with visual images requires attention to issues of consent, funding (as digital cameras remain expensive to buy in bulk) and boundaries of space (the inability of young people to take digital cameras home with them). However, some issues of funding can be attended to with limited purchases of disposable cameras that the youth can take photographers outside of the school setting (this kind of activity, of course, speaking to the linkages that must be made between the lives of Black girls in family and community and their lives in schools). Also, there is a potential for an increase in youth engagement with the visual method resulting from the current interest young people have in using camera phones to take photos (i.e. selfies, group shots, etc.). Particularly with Black girls, there is an interest in what could be considered a “powder room portrait” where Black girls enjoy taking photos of themselves in bathroom mirrors. A major difference is the agency gained by Black girls in their practice of taking the photo themselves. In SOLHOT, our first priority is placed on the stories attached to the photos we take, and this is yet another disruption to traditional photovoice method. We are committed to articulating out loud that we see how you see us and we affirm our power in countering negative stories constructed about Black girls. In SOLHOT, Black girls often feel as though they are being investigated by the outside world (by social workers, teachers, administrators, etc.). Through our disruptive way of using photovoice,
we investigate our own lives and find ways to present back to the outside world positive and true representations of what we already know and learn about the lives of Black girls.

Specific to this research project, I rely on an analysis (reading) of ten photos taken in SOLHOT, individual interviews of the girls, a reflexive analysis of the SOLHOT museum-based photography exhibit (artist statement) and my field notes. The counter-narratives of the girls in SOLHOT are constructed collectively among all of us (the girls, myself and Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown) and presented back to the world in the form of a photo essay (re)mix. The presentation of the data in this way exemplifies our commitment to rearranging the broken parts of selves through the (re)membering of our lives as Black girls and women. In response to the negatively constructed images of Black girls (i.e. deviant, loud, hypersexual, violent, needing to be saved), there are counter-narratives the girls in SOLHOT construct using photography and text. My central argument is that when photography is used as a data collection tool, in the hands of Black girls, what results are counter-narratives to the stereotypical images of Black girls within education. The following research questions were used to guide this research and the units of data analyzed are listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What negatively constructed images of Black girls as community members and middle school students have SOLHOT participants been forced to consume?</td>
<td>Semi-structured, individual interviews, Handouts, Group dialogue, Field notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do Black girls see themselves in relationship to school and community? Specifically, what are the counter-narratives that SOLHOT participants construct using photography and text as the primary documentation of such narratives?</td>
<td>Photos, Handouts, Group dialogue, Field notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What influence does the use of visual methods in SOLHOT offer to traditional visual methodology?</td>
<td>Photos, Field notes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Research questions and units of data
Specifically, I argue that an intentional combination of critical/active listening (on the part of the researcher), photography (in the hands of the girls) and the engagement of arts-based activities that focus on the celebration (and not investigation)\textsuperscript{15} of Black girls’ experiences produces a unique form of visual ethnography that results in the contribution of Black girl-authored counter-narratives that stand squarely within a strong history and legacy of African Americans using photography as a tool for social change work.

The girls involved in SOLHOT meet afterschool in the school building once a week. We share food and create a “kitchen table” kind of Black girl wisdom that emerges from the sharing of our thoughts about our day, our week and our lives. The use of digital photography in SOLHOT was an extension of the photographs that I was taking in SOLHOT from the very beginning. Because of the commitment to create a space where Black girls had the opportunity to use photographs in their constructing of narratives about their lives, we integrated the use of photovoice as a method for the work we were doing. The use of photovoice as a method resulted from an on-going conversation/debate/push-pull about photography serving as an accepted form of data collection with educational research. The conversation was years in the making and necessitated motivation and encouragement on the part of my advisor and vulnerability and trust on my part to consider photographs as data. The organic emergence of photography in SOLHOT began with my taking photos of the girls dancing.

Our photos intentionally document how we think the world sees us in contrast to how we see ourselves. We share our narratives unapologetically with the world and if there is but one thing we are sure of, we are sure that in every space in which we stand- at any given moment- is the space in which we are the most proud of being a Black girl! Inherent to the photographs

\textsuperscript{15} Celebration vs. investigation was a concept that resulted from the interview experiences with the girls in SOLHOT. More often than not, several of the girls walked into the interview space afraid of (as they stated) feeling investigated when social workers come to their houses to conduct interviews.
created in SOLHOT is a call for imagining a new world, for creating freedom dreams, while also recognizing the inspirational caution spoken by activist-scholar Andrea Smith (2005):

From our position of growing up in a patriarchal, colonial, and white supremacist world, we cannot fully imagine how a world that is not based on structures of oppression might operate. Nevertheless, we can be part of a collective, creative process that can bring us closer to a society not based on domination. (p. 191)

I believe that the ability to imagine is freeing, necessary, and needs to be considered a political project when spaces with Black girls are engaged because of the few resources that are invested in their academic and social success. We constantly own the process of using photographs as our messaging tool to the world. And I, as an activist researcher, am always living within the tensions attached to my choice to rely on the transformative power of images to serve as evidence that the lives of Black girls matter.

In SOLHOT, our use of photography enhances our collective voice. Different from documentary photography, in SOLHOT our voice is fluid and less static than it might be in stand-alone photos. As well, the use of photography allows us to produce meaning and ask and answer questions about our lives. This is different from photo elicitation where the asking of questions and the production of meaning is solely in the hands of the researcher. How photography is engaged in SOLHOT interrupts the binary of how photographs are typically used in qualitative research: photos that research participants have taken and photos that are taken by the researcher. When sorting through the photos taken in SOLHOT, individual ownership is either not remembered or not purposely noted, thus, demonstrating our commitment to a collective Black girl voice in SOLHOT.

In the mapping of this work, the figure below best demonstrates the multi-directional movements of the work in SOLHOT and the creation of a Black Girl Gaze. We consider Black
Girl Gaze our knowledge production and contribution to the current scholarship about the use of visual methods and visual theory when working with young people.

Figure 2. Pictorial of our Black Girl Gaze concept- our contribution to visual theory.

An unyielding assumption in this work is that what weighs more in our minds is that the lives of Black girls matter. In SOLHOT, we intentionally blur the lines that are suffocated inside that binary, a binary that could also be considered an us/them, the researcher/the researched. It is our intent to have Black girls’ narratives- documented in photos and text- outweigh the impact of the negative stereotypes about Black girls. Key to this process is the fluid teaching and learning process between Black girl photographers and Black women curators/facilitators. We regard not only our photographic process but our photos as well, as evidence for how academic research can be used as a tool in the work for social change. In a substantial way, we consider the public display of Black girls’ photographs (in our case, the museum-based exhibit) as not only
community education about the lives of Black girls but as a community organizing effort as well-in that our work reaches many community members who may not have set foot in a museum was it not for a Black girl-centered exhibit.
CHAPTER 4
DATA (BLACK GIRL STORYTELLING)

Definition of CACOPHONY: harsh or discordant sound: dissonance 2; specifically; harshness in the sound of words or phrases.\(^\text{16}\)

If I had to choose one word that I learned during my graduate career that has become my favorite word, it would be cacophony. My advisor, Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown, taught the term cacophony to me when we teamed up to present a performance text at an academic conference about the complex and celebratory aspects of working with Black girls. I love the idea of dissonance. I love the idea of harsh sound as it perfectly describes how what Black girls say is heard and I love how they sound when they say what they say! The idea of dissonance makes sense to me when thinking about the perils lashed against Black girls because, truthfully, where is the creativity, resistance or truth-telling when we resist in a linear way against the non-linear nature of disempowerment, disappearing, and devaluing of Black girls? We have to unapologetically engage spaces of academic research in multiple and non-linear ways given the multiple voices and perspectives that are inherent in the practice of Black girl work.

The dissonance, or cacophony, of this dissertation includes some linear and traditional ways of presenting scholarship. Embedded within the linear moments (academic text) of presenting my work, I have included photos for the purpose of their images to be in conversation with my words in academic text and field notes simultaneously. My hope is that the reader will complete the reading of this dissertation sensing who the girls are and the kinds of freedoms they are determined to fight for, despite how stereotypes might depict them as simply passive consumers and not knowledge producers. I am also including excerpts of my field notes/journal writings. I consider these excerpts “one minute free/writes”.

There is loudness inherent in this dissertation. This loudness results from an unwavering commitment to the fight for making the lives of Black girls matter. And because Black women travel a fluid journey from their Black girlhood to their Black womanhood, I can bet that my loudness within this dissertation will also be considered defensiveness, “giving attitude” and “being loud”. Taking note of the loudness in my voice is the result of my always being on guard- an internalization of the constant denigration of being Black and being female, particularly within the academy. The tone of my writer’s voice is not directed toward the readers of this work who are in full support of Black girls’ freedom. Although in large part, this work forces me to be humble, there is also an inherent spirit that challenges me to own my gifts and greatness in the same way that I challenge the girls to own their gifts and greatness. It is a difficult process that does require an enormous amount of trust and vulnerability when we are in each other’s space. This kind of vulnerability between writer and reader, between Black girls and women and the knowledge that is produced brands this work as critical, significant and necessary.

In the language of the academy, this work is an ethnography- a visual ethnography to be specific. In a much broader and critical sense, however, this work is an explicit political project. And at the center of this political project, is a conscious championing for the voices of Black girls to be heard without judgment, a Black woman-plea for the lives of Black girls to matter and a reminder and insistence that we, as activist researchers, begin to recognize and advance the theory-making abilities of Black girls, particularly, through their use of visual methods in the telling of the stories about their lives that they deem critical for the adults in their lives to know. In constructing spaces in which Black girls can create, we simultaneously create spaces where Black girls can engage in community building and in that community building they became
social change agents and active in assisting to create a world that sees Black girls the worthy community members they already are.

All that said, let’s begin.

Celebration, Not Investigation

The stereotyping of Black girls suffocates the genius of Black girls (Brown, 2013) that is their birthright. In an attempt to create a disruption to these kinds of practices, Black girl-centered spaces are encouraged to engage in work where the genius of Black girls is showcased and not suppressed (Brown, 2013). In creating spaces where Black girls can fully be themselves without apology and fear of punishment, Black girls shift from being only consumers of knowledge to the creators of knowledge, a knowledge that explicitly posits that their lives matter, in all of its complexity (Brown, 2009). We cannot claim the need for safe spaces for Black girls and then render them invisible. In that moment of visible invisibility, Black girls have every right to opt out and create alternative vehicles for their voices to be heard. SOLHOT is one such vehicle.

I was just as nervous before the interviews as I’m sure the girls were. Each one would walk into the room we were in for interviewing lacking the enormous smiles (and Black girl attitudes) they would normally bring to SOLHOT. This morning, she walked into the room, sat in her chair real nervous-like and said: “Am I being investigated?” My heart broke wide open because I knew what that meant. I remember when I was growing up and how quickly our same smiles would escape our faces when we found out the social workers were coming to our home in the projects to investigate us. (Journal Entry, 2009)

The presentation of the data and data analysis in this dissertation is multi-layered and intentionally messy. At the center of this work are the voices of the girls in SOLHOT. The demonstration of the girls’ voices takes on several different forms- from photos, to interview excerpts and to my (re)membering of their stories via field notes. Alongside their voices, is my voice. The shifting from researcher voice to Black girl voice is fluid, without constraint and
challenges the reader to engage the data outside of the box of disciplined academic reading (Lather & Smithies, 1997). Operating within a Black Girl Gaze also enables Black girls and women to claim a fluidity in naming ourselves, while also recognizing the power inherent in naming (LaDuke, 2005). The intermingling of our voices and the intersectionality of our life experiences as Black girls and women creates the collective meaning that we ascribe to our photographs. Our hope is to be heard above the gaze of the viewer.

The idea to demonstrate the findings of this research within the format of a photo essay (although, “remixed” given the collective authorship of the photos) is inspired by the work of two artist-activist-scholars. In the introduction of his visual work, Alejandro Lugo (2008) states, “The [photo] essay constitutes an attempt to let certain images challenge and speak to the viewer through her or his own assumptions about the U.S.-Mexican Border. I produced these photos through my own personal and academic gaze in order to articulate a call- a call to accept the cruz, or viacrucis, to actively fight against social injustice whenever they exist” (p. 2). When Carrie Mae Weems was interviewed about her photo essay, From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried”, which I characterize as a counter-narrative to the use of photography during slavery to justify the institution, Weems (2014) stated, “The work is both an indictment of photography as enslavement, and a homage to long-dead sitters, transplanted Africans, who, under unknowable duress, gave their bodies and faces to the artist, to us, and to history” (The New York Times, 23 January 2014).

The photos were primarily chosen by me to be put on exhibit in a SOLHOT installation at the Krannert Art Museum on the campus of the University of Illinois in 2009. The evening before the official opening of the exhibit, we had a private screening of the photos with the girls in SOLHOT. The underlying purpose of the private screening was to get an okay from the girls
to use the photos that were taken by them and the photos that were taken of them. In that sense, these photos were chosen collectively. There are a few photos in the visual text that were not a part of the museum exhibit, however, when the photos were taken they were also viewed immediately on the digital cameras used to take the photo. The girls would normally offer their yay or nay in those moments.

Finally, the text attached to each photo is of my creation. I chose to create captions for the photos that spoke to different moments in SOLHOT and having those moments recreated as visual and living text here is my attempt at Black girl time travel. Most significant are the majority of photos that have captions poised to speak back directly to the different stereotypes about Black girls. I leave it up to the reader (audience) to determine how each caption is in conversation with each photo. It might seem counter to the participatory nature of working with young people for me (the “researcher”) to create the captions for photos taken by the girls (a strong departure from ideas put forth in the photovoice method where young people caption their own photos). However, in this research work I claim- just as the girls do- my own authorized voice as an insider/outsider, a Black girl/woman, and someone who was there with the girls when the photos were taken, maintained on-going relationships outside of “formal” research space. Doing this is also in line with an observation entitled, “looking at looking”, made by Claudia Mitchell (2011). Mitchell was giving a name to the work of Mary Celeste Kearney, who studied the images of Malia Obama taking photographs. Kearney (2011) noted that “there are many meanings that can be this phenomenon, including a consideration of the significance of the idea of a Black girl being seen in a position of agency in making the images (and not just being the object within images)” (p. 156). My choice to photos taken in SOLHOT positioned in
conversation with text from the girls (via interviews) and my field notes is a conscious choice on my part to engage a Black Girl Gaze in creating the demonstration of our research findings.

I offer the presentation of our evidence (photos chosen collectively by the girls and myself in SOLHOT) coupled with excerpts from individual interviews and researcher journal entries in a visual text entitled: “Black Girl Gaze: A Talk Back to the Stereotypes”. The cacophony of our ethnographic photographs establishes a Black Girl Gaze - a concerted effort of resistance to use photography to document how Black girls (re)member their lives and leverage the sharing of the images created to publicly speak back to the stereotypes about Black girls. More specifically, the privileging of a Black Girl Gaze is necessary because it is 1) situated in a relevant moment of time within an increasing digital culture (digital cameras, phone cameras and social media); 2) claims the voice of authority Black girls have in choosing images that portray key aspects of their lives to and deconstruct those images in ways that speak back to stereotypical narratives about who Black girls are expected to be; and 3) offers counter-narratives about the lives of Black girls and compelling versions of truth in response to the stereotypes perpetuated about them in education. In addition, an extension of this research will result in the creation of a new set of cultural competencies to be utilized by scholars interested in conducting research about/and with Black girls.
“Presenting the work you engage on Black girlhood is not about simply presenting the stories of the girls first and then, your story second. It’s about all the stories being in conversation with each other” (Brown, 2009).

A Photo Essay (Re)mix
Black Girl Gaze: A Talk Back to the Stereotypes
Curator: Claudine Candy Taaffe
Photo Credits: SOLHOT

In a Black girl-centered space called Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT), Black girls share their life stories, using a camera as a tool for interrogating notions of power, voice and representation as articulated within the stereotypes of Black girls in education. In SOLHOT, Black girls and women explore how photography can be used to document the counter-narratives of Black girls, where we intentionally value meaning derived from a collective voice rather than an individual one. The cacophony of our ethnographic photographs establishes a Black Girl Gaze- a concerted effort on the part of Black girls to use photography to document their lived experiences in effort to dispel and speak back to the stereotypes about Black girls and the myth that Black girls are in need of saving.

The photos included as a part of this photo essay were chosen/curated by myself and mostly, taken by the girls in SOLHOT. In some instances, there is no clear authorship of a photograph and the not knowing of that information is intentional. The meaning ascribed to the photos taken by Black girls in SOLHOT is created collectively. We do this in a conscious attempt to create a new space for engaging visual methods in academic research where the gaze that is prioritized is not that of the only the researcher and/or only the research participants.
Figure 3. In SOLHOT, we use what we have to create what we need.

Curator Statement
SOLHOT Photo Exhibit
February 2009

I believe that Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT) is a verb, an adjective, a noun, a call to action, and an experience that surpasses every binary ever created about Black girls and women. In SOLHOT we are always negotiating back and forth between being Black girls and being Black women depending on the moment at hand. When you truly "get it" about SOLHOT, you keep coming back in whatever ways you know how. And because there is no space in SOLHOT to lean back and serve only as a witness, when someone doesn't "get it" about SOLHOT, the girls will let them know - all the while still offering their love to Black women freely.

I am beyond humbled by what Black girls have taught me about surviving and thriving and in the ways they have taught me. They have shown me how to keep love at the center of the survival of self when others who are not interested in your life story stack the odds against you. In giving themselves the permission to be free, they have also given me the permission to be free. In having no fear to grab hold of a camera, they have strengthened my courage to document in words what we do and how we do it. They have taught me a language through which to connect not only with them but to also re-connect with my father.
Only in my work with the girls have I come to understand how important it is to own this gift of photography, recognize its potential to disrupt paradigms and binaries, trust in it and share it freely. Since this recognition, I find my photography of, and with Black girls to be about finding freedom, to serve as our way to let the world know we are here and we are looking at you looking at us.

When asked about the choices I make when I take photographs in SOLHOT my answer is always very simple and short – I take photos of Black girls and women as my way of saying, I see you and I believe in your beauty, your brilliance and your right to be here in all the ways you know how. I have come to realize that when Black girls take photos, it is their way of contributing to the production of knowledge concerning the real questions that should be asked of Black girls. In many ways, they become the creator of the methodology and no longer the object of it.

Taking photos in SOLHOT has been my way to dance, to be loud, to sing, to be beautiful, to be bold, to be courageous and to be right here. It is my hope that through our collective photography the girls can see the reflections of just how incredibly beautiful and strong they are. I will be forever grateful for their permission to have me to share in their world. They have given me a gift that is truly beyond measure!

At the end of our academic year together, we premiered a SOLHOT photo exhibit at the Krannert Art Museum on the University of Illinois campus. The artist statement above accompanied the photos collectively taken in SOLHOT. The shadow photo to the side of the exhibit statement was taken by two of the girls in SOLHOT. It was appropriate to have their photo set alongside the exhibit statement (created by myself and my advisor, Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown) as the stories the girls tell are always in conversation with the stories we, as Black women, tell and/or are silenced to not speak out loud. The exhibit also served as an extension of the communities Black girls create in that the opening night of the exhibit included many of the girls’ friends and families coming to the museum for the first time in all their years of living in the community surrounding the university.
In SOLHOT, when the girls dance I dance, too—well, sometimes. I was afraid to dance. But I kept coming back because I wanted to be there—right there—being free with the girls. So, I began to take photos of us dancing. The girls came to know me as Candy, the girl with the camera. It was just that simple. And I’m nervous for so many reasons. It’s crazy to have my photos on those white walls in the museum… photos that were just meant to be “pinky swear secrets” between the girls and me. Folks have begun coming to the exhibit this week and it’s at trip to see them looking at the photos. They will ask a question about a photo and I want to look over my shoulder trying to find the person who will answer it. And then there’s just me standing there—having to think about where the girls were in the moment that I clicked the camera.

Figure 4. I began taking photos of us dancing.
Figure 5. Black girls dance too sexually.

Do Black girls still dance too sexually when they are dancing with an adult? If Black girls are teaching an adult to dance, are Black girls afforded the credit of being knowledge producers and teachers? Why or Why not? Note: We have all of our clothes on.
“But some of the teachers just don’t understand me. Like I always say to Miss Webster or Miss Kirkland, that they don’t understand me or I don’t understand them and we don’t understand each other and I get sent to refocus or they call Miss Webster to talk to me and I get angry with what she say and I either go to refocus or have to spend my lunch in Refocus or I get sent home” (Interview Excerpt, 2009).

Taking this photo was a part of our scavenger hunts activity that we do with the girls in our in-school time. The prompt was for the girls to photograph what about the school makes them sad or mad. Takita asked to be photographed in front of the “No Talking in Refocus” sign. Refocus was something constantly brought up in SOLHOT. Refocus was what teachers and administrators called in school and afterschool dentention. The girls called Refocus the place they were throw away to, a place to hold them. I call Refocus “the hole” because that’s where Black girls are disappeared to.
Figure 7. Black girls are fast.

This photo was taken by one of the girls during a break time. The girls were racing each other in the parking lot of the school. After looking at the photo on our digital camera once break time was over, one of the girls remarked that Black girls are fast. I asked the girls if they felt others thought Black girls were fast in other ways. They immediately sensed the kind of stereotype I was referring to— that Black girls have sex early and often- and responded to me with a resounding, NO! We decided to use the photograph in our exhibit because we felt it communicated perfectly a wonderful play on the stereotype that Black girls are supposed to be “fast”.
Figure 8. The collective work we do is not brand new but it is ours.

The photo was taken by Miyah (pseudonym). This photo was in answer to a prompt given to the girls in SOLHOT requesting that they photograph things that they believe represent their life as a Black girl. Miyah’s mother is a hair stylist and owns her own hair salon. What is so gripping and speaks loudly to my argument that the work of SOLHOT exists within the legacy of Black women’s self-determination work is how Miyah’s body is situated in the photo, in the shadow of the hot combs. As a student of Black history, I think back to the stories about Madame CJ Walker and her visionary contributions to the development of hair products for Black women, particularly after the invention of the hot comb. It is in the center of that history that Miyah and her mother stand. That legacy of Black women’s self-determination is what’s brought forward with Miyah’s photograph.
“Well, the teachers always call me big mouth. I say I got a big mouth ‘cause I tell everything. And, in the fifth grade I had a racist teacher. Like, she made us watch this movie about pregnancy. She had all the other girls, one group of girls was like a group of Black girls and the other, a group of White girls. She had us [the Black girls] watch the pregnancy movie and they [the White girls] watched something else” (Interview Excerpt, 2009).
Figure 10. You are not my mama!

During one of our meals together, Ash (pseudonym) retold a story about how she was stopped by a teacher in the hallway and asked for a hallway permission pass. She wasn’t given one by the teacher whose class she was in and relayed that information to the teacher in the hallway. The teacher in the hallway didn’t believe her and called her liar, while simultaneously threatening to send her to Refocus (detention) for not having the pass and lying about it. The teacher communicated all of this to Shay in a loud voice—yelling at her to the point that others in the hallway took notice. Shay decided she wasn’t going to subject herself to the teacher’s unfounded outbursts and yelled back, “You are not my mama!” That response from Shay cemented her participation in Refocus afterschool that day and included a three-suspension from
school. Examining Shay’s response from a historical, cultural and political standpoint, her response to the teachers makes sense to me. When attacked, we resist. When boundaries are crossed (no one but our mamas can go off on us like that), we draw a line in the sand. What accused of lying (not being genuine, being deviant), we immediately recognize the legacy of Black girl/woman stereotypes etched on our bodies.
Figure 11. Everywhere I stand I am proud to be a Black girl.

A popular photography activity we do with the girls is called a Photo Scavenger Hunt. Given the limitations we have of not having digital cameras for the girls to take home, we use the digital cameras we do have on hand, pair up and complete scavenger hunts around the school building. On this particular day, I was paired up with Kay. Our first prompt was to take a photo of a place in the school building where you feel most proud of being a Black girl. I take full accountability for my researcher/adult bias when I assumed that Kay would probably take a photo of the bathroom or the office of the social worker (with whom we co-organize our space). Kay, without missing a beat, turned to me, handed me the digital camera and said: Miss Candy, please take a photo of me standing right here! I asked her, Why this space? She responded, take the photo because every space in the school is where I feel the most proud of being a Black girl. Researcher/adult: Checked. Kay: Win.
Figure 12. This is the us, the them, our power. Black Girl Gaze.

The significant contributions of this Black-girl centered, political project are a demonstration of the blurring of boundaries between research and practice, theory and method, professor and student, and girl and woman and a new visual concept in visual methods that enables activist researchers to see Black girls, via a Black Girl Gaze. The cacophony of our ethnographic photographs establishes a Black Girl Gaze- a concerted effort of resistance to use photography to document how Black girls (re)member their lives and leverage the sharing of the images created to publicly speak back to the stereotypes about Black girls. More specifically, the privileging of a Black Girl Gaze is necessary because it is 1) situated in a relevant moment of time within an increasing digital culture (digital cameras, phone cameras and social media); 2) claims the voice of authority Black girls have in choosing images that portray key aspects of their lives to and deconstruct those images in ways that speak back to stereotypical narratives about who Black girls are expected to be; and 3) offers counter-narratives about the lives of
Black girls and compelling versions of truth in response to the stereotypes perpetuated about them in education.

**Future Research**

In the creation of this visual ethnography, a space for activists and scholars is created to rethink the kinds of questions we are asking about Black girls. In doing the work of SOLHOT, I have learned why we need to change some of the questions we are currently asking about the academic and life experiences of Black girls. Ultimately, theorizing the practice of Black girlhood requires paying attention to the drowning affects of binaries, the celebratory affects of positive relationships and creating spaces of freedom where Black girls’ speak for themselves. What will always surface in doing this work, in these ways, are the stories we remain committed to about each other, about Black girls and about ourselves. We heed the loving suggestion of M. Jacqui Alexander (2005) when she suggests:

> In order to become women of color [added: black girl women], we would need to become fluent in each other’s histories, to resist and unlearn an impulse that allows mythologies about each other to replace knowing about one another. We would need to cultivate a way of knowing in which we direct our social, cultural, psychic, and spiritually marked attention on each other. We cannot afford to cease yearning for each other’s company. (p. 269)

In SOLHOT, we will always find safety, challenge, love and truth telling in the gaze of Black girls and women.

The culminating phase of the work I co-created with the girls was a museum-based photography exhibit. An extension of this research would the consideration of photography exhibits as performance, particularly when exhibits are co-curated with young people (in the tradition of participatory action research). This kind of research would occur at a crucial moment in time given the current debates and discussions about the potential, limitations and, unfortunately, dangers facing African American girls. An extension of this research could also
result in serving as a significant contribution to educational research in terms of 1) introducing new cultural competencies to be considered when utilizing evaluative frameworks in working with Black girls; 2) re-affirming the importance of working with African American youth in a holistic manner that prioritizes not just academic performance, but also home and community, as well as, social networks, peer relationships, safe social media spaces and civic engagement; and 3) the critical need for incorporating mediums beyond text and oral (such as visual arts, performance, etc.) when creating environments where Black girls are engaged. By grounding my research of/and with African American girls within their lived experiences, the research findings demonstrate how Black girls must be central to national and local educational discourse about the experiences of marginalized students in schools. The overall goal of this research is to provoke new questions and methodologies (particularly, visual methods) that not only, centralize African American girlhood within educational policy but to also influence a general public discourse by providing a new frame of reference African American girls, specifically, making clear the argument that their lives do matter.

My efforts at building a Black girl-centered theoretical framework and methodology reflect a long tradition of the interdisciplinary, qualitative, and intersectional approaches honed in Black feminist scholarship. More than anything else, I understand that my work with Black girls is not “brand new”. I am aware of the legacy of Black women’s ways of being before me and it is that legacy that I honor in my scholarship. What I attempt in my work is to create a starting point for an ongoing engagement with the literature on Black girlhood, critical qualitative methods in education and the continuing legacy of using photography within African American struggles for equity and equality.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

Within academic spaces, I am an Afro Latina activist scholar hungry for opportunities to challenge and (re)imagine status quo theoretical frameworks, while simultaneously manifesting spaces of praxis. That means I exist without hyphens. So, here I am, ready to testify. Right here. Out loud. (Taaffe, Journal Entry, 2008)

This is who I am. I believe contradictions show us where we hurt as well as the ways through which we can learn to love and be free. I believe in the power of young people and the courage of the most marginalized among us. I believe in communicating in all of the ways necessary in order to connect with others in a genuine spirit of humanity. Having the goals of re-imagination and praxis in mind, I enter academic conversations about Black girls in a Black feminist spirit that allows for the consideration of the personal and the political (Hanisch, 1971). As an activist researcher, I believe that how I choose to engage educational research can either label my work as status quo co-conspirator with educational policies that do not work in the interest of marginalized students or transform the research into a tool to engage fully with the complexities involved in reigniting the seeds of social change within the process of conducting ethnographic research within marginalized communities.

Researcher Reflexivity

I continually affirm for myself that I can only make sense of the tensions as participant and observer embedded within my role in the process of conducting educational research as long as I, and those with whom I work, can be touched to the core of our beings so that we actually bleed out our truths, rather than be suffocated by our own truths. Choosing to be reflexive while I conduct research assists in resisting the suffocation that results from interacting vulnerably with
the research. It is reflexivity that Laurel Richardson (1997) urges researchers to take seriously when she states, “Reflexivity, I believe, will help us shape ‘better’ ethnographies and better lives for ourselves and for those who teach us about their lives” (p. 107). Reflexivity assists me in making sense of the tensions involved with, not only, being a participant and observer in my work with Black girls, but also being researcher and facilitator at the research site. Reflexivity remains in large part a crucial and necessary part of my process in writing to know. It also helps me in negotiating my ambivalence about publicly using our photos as data. My ambivalence stems from my feelings of protection over the girls’ photos toward the gaze of others who are not invested in their lives of Black girls or do not understand the realities Black girls must navigate. Reflexivity allows me to create a space to gather up and simultaneously let go of critical gazes that do not serve us. The notion of reflexivity implies a shift in people’s understanding of the data and its collection toward something that is accomplished through internal dialogue and a constant scrutiny of ‘what I know’ and ‘how I know it’ (Hertz, 1997). Choosing to remain reflexive allows me to stay in a state of learning and unlearning through my interactions with Black girls and their stories and this, I believe, is the hallmark of an ethnographer.

As a doctoral student navigating ethnographic spaces, I have felt pressure to extract meaning, produce knowledge, share insight, and all the while, remain sane. That pressure manifests itself as a circular process I find myself entangled in while I endlessly search for that specific book that contains within it similar reflections about the work I believe needs to be accomplished in order to create safer spaces for Black girls. In the spirit of Audre Lorde (1984), at the risk of having what I speak be misunderstood or bruised, my doctoral process is an attempt to write that book about Black girls and they ways through which they find freedom is the midst
of a daily death. Also recognizing the complexity involved in such a task, Alice Walker (1983), echoes:

In my own work I write not only what I want to read- understanding fully and indelibly that if I don’t do it no one else is so vitally interested, or capable of doing it to my satisfaction- I write all the things I should have been able to read. (p. 13)

Within the academy, I consider it my responsibility (and a privilege) to facilitate a visual and Black girl-centered political project for the purpose of creating counter-narratives to the stereotypes that are constructed about Black girls. I bring my voice into the space of SOLHOT through my role of participant observer. However, because of my status of being an insider/outsider my observations are rarely objective. I, as an activist-researcher and Black/Brown woman/girl, am always interrogating the constructs about the images of Black girls that I myself bring to the table in my work. Similar to Deborah Willis (2009), an African American female photographer, who also admits, “In my own photography and writings, I’ve struggled with the continuing challenges surrounding visual images of Black people” (p. xiii), I am in a perpetual state of unlearning, (re)learning, sharing, listening and questioning. Insomuch as this work is not about me, my voice is never far from speaking alongside the voices of the girls in SOLHOT. As the girls take photos, I photograph them taking photos. As they bring their opinions to the lens of a camera, so do I. In very much in the same way that Black women theorists rely heavily on the (re)remembering of their own Black girlhoods in the articulation of their Black womanhood, we also see that same transparency at work in SOLHOT. I will not argue that our voices are one in the same but I will say that the uniqueness, celebratory nature and transformative aspects of SOLHOT allow for the voices of the girls and my voice to be interconnected and necessary in the establishment of a Black Girl Gaze, necessary in the creation of counter-narratives to the stereotypes about Black girls.
I believe that only by being vulnerable in telling and sharing our stories, and reflecting on those stories, can we identify, and hopefully resist and transcend, the social constructions that keep us suffocated in our own truth. And in that resistance and transcendence, by freeing ourselves, we can move closer to actually experiencing freedom as individuals, who are a part of a larger collective that the academy must remain accountable to. While sharing the stories of Black girls publicly, I sometimes enlist the use of poetry to discuss all that it means to co-create knowledge with Black girls. To illustrate the depth of the many stories Black girls share with me in SOLHOT, in my poetry, I invite the listener to bear witness to the actual moments I engage with Black girls. In the creation of a spoken word piece, a poem, or what authors of qualitative methods call “performance texts”, I am performing my research questions, the research design, and sharing findings as co-created by myself and the girls- always partial, completely subjective, and above all else, imaginative. These performance texts serve as background to the photographs Black girls take in SOLHOT.

In the performance text that follows, I reflect upon the ways that qualitative inquiry has influenced how I think about my work with Black girls and I argue that although qualitative inquiry has allowed me an entry into a space of meaningful conversations with Black girls by way of visual ethnography, it is also that same space with Black girls that has encouraged me to re-imagine my thinking about the endless possibilities for Black girls to become producers of knowledge in their use of visual methods. The long-term goal of documenting this work with Black girls was to produce a name for the unique and creative ways that we [Black girls and Black women] make visual methods work for us in the telling of our stories within the academy. Given that the examination of Black girls utilizing visual research strategies is potentially breaking new methodological ground within qualitative inquiry and is on-going, I present this
research with an intention of “writing to know”. In this performance text, I am using my poetic voice interspersed within a traditional academic tone to help guide the reader in the understanding of the ways of working with Black girls and photography being presented in this dissertation. I do this in agreement with Richardson (2000) who says that since “writing is a vital element of the research process, the more creative the writing, the more possibility to discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it” (p. 923). In taking this liberty, I realize that I am in agreement with a prevailing thought within the academy that the engagement of poetry is a “risky business” (Cahmann, 2003), and that is a risk I am willing to take. My thinking about this work with Black girls manifests itself as poetic verses as it allows me to see best what I know, what I need to know and what I might be able to share. Cahmann (2003) concurs when she says, “Writing poetry and poetically-inspired field notes allowed me to be honest with the limitations and assumptions in my own understanding in ways that might never have been questioned otherwise” (p. 34). My hope is that the intentions within my work come across to the reader so that the incredible insight that Black girls have to offer to the world about qualitative educational research can be recognized.

There is a vulnerability that is engaged when a researcher enlists the use of poetry in the writing up of the data analysis. Sometimes, the engagement of vulnerability does result in a more intimate relationship between the writer and reader. I remain steadfast in my commitment to Ruth Behar’s (1996) assertion that, “When you write vulnerably, others respond vulnerably. A different set of problems and predicaments arise that would never surface in response to more detached writing” (p. 16). These poetic texts are my stories through which I hope to convey my understanding (analysis) of the stories Black girls share with me. And although my stories invite the reader to simply bear witness to an actual moment in time within SOLHOT, the stories
themselves should also be considered an extraordinary disruption to the binary of static and fluid that can exist with educational research. The performance of these stories allows for the collective creation of meaning and identity between the writer and reader. As argued by Gloria Anzaldúa (1999):

My stories are ‘acts’ encapsulated in time, ‘enacted’ every time they are spoken aloud or read silently. I like to think of them as performances and not as inert and ‘dead’ objects (as the aesthetics of Western culture think of art works). Instead, the work has an identity; it is a ‘who’ or a ‘what’ and contains the presences of persons, that is, incarnations of gods or ancestors or natural or cosmic powers. The work manifests the same needs as a person, it needs to be ‘fed,’ la tengo que bañar y vestir. (p. 89)

More often than not, the inscription of spoken word on my tongue is the only language supporting the lens through which I experience research within the academy. I have come to embrace the use of poetic text to assist me in speaking out loud, creating sense of boundaries in my lived experience that are never straight and at the end of the day, these methods help me survive. Laurel Richardson (1997) argues, “Lived experience is lived in a body, and poetic representation can touch us where we live, in our bodies” (p.143). In addition to the small comfort I experience in using poetry as my point of entry into academic conversations, I also acknowledge the skill that is necessary to communicate in this way within academic writing. I hang on to the words of Ruth Behar (1996) when she argues, “Writing vulnerably takes as much skill, nuance, and willingness to follow through on all the ramifications of a complicated idea as does writing invulnerably and distantly” (p. 13). In the midst of my inner dialogue concerning qualitative inquiry, photography and working with Black girls, I created the following performance text:

qualitative inquiry

allows me to know you by

---

17 Spanish translation of “it has to be fed and clothed”.
your name
and not a number
or pseudonym
ethnography
invites me into your daily
documentary photography
assists in the (re)remembering
of my moments with you
photovoice
shifts the camera from my hand
to yours
BUT
SOLHOT takes all that
to a cliff
squashing all binaries into
the ancestral red dirt of the
Black women
who did all this
before me
before us
she sayin' for real this time,
just because!
ain't no issues to be documented here
for policy makers to ignore
    beneath a mask of examination

i AM the issue

   me

my name

my blackness

my hair

my hips

my words

my breasts

and the pitch of my voice

your interview
    still felt like
    investigation
    but you
    felt like celebration

your documented photo
    caught my bad side

and the voice captured
    in photo captions
    was not HOW I said it, it was WHAT I said

SO

the time has come
to name names

to give life

to this method and rhyme

this Black girl's life story

is about to rock another

methodological moment

milestone

new theory

because grandma was the first

theorist

stay tuned.

This performance text is a “tale from the field”, spoken aloud in an effort to bear witness, to declare unapologetically that I was there with the girls and I am committed to bringing this work back to not only the academy but to them, as well. I take my cue from bell hooks (1994), who encourages us when she affirms that there is value in the talking out of ideas. My poetry is my talking out of the stories I am told from Black girls. Sharing these texts within the academy is my way of untangling the theory and practice in ways that can be appreciated and understood by, not only other scholars, but by the girls and the stakeholders in their lives, as well. I believe in these everyday ways of being in academic spaces. I consider the exchanging of life stories between Black women and girls to be an indigenous method for creating knowledge. Valuing the inherent artistic ways of sharing those stories is my way of keeping that indigenous method sacred. Being committed to these ways of constructing and disseminating knowledge is my attempt to make this work matter, to declare unapologetically that Black girls matter.
When I began writing this dissertation, I remember how inspired I was by the dissertation co-created between Hilary Hughes (2014) and the girls she worked with on creating a magazine to serve as the documentation of their research. Her truth telling struck a chord within me:

I am experiencing a very different relationship with writing than I ever have before. How the hell am I supposed to present this magazine as an evocative and animating text. Quite frankly doing this shit makes me doubt myself as a researcher and writer. I should have just written the damned traditional dissertation. So much easier. (p. 251)

Using visual methods and co-constructing knowledge with young people offers the researcher a tremendous opportunity to do things different. The flip side of having that wonderful opportunity is the need to reimagine and create the multiple ways of communicating that knowledge within the academy in both traditional and non-traditional ways.

One necessity of choosing a non-traditional way of presenting the stories of the girls in SOLHOT is that I had to be willing to risk being messy on paper. Being messy feels comfortable to me, because the thoughts in my head and the work I have done with Black girls has been messy on purpose, out of order (both literally and metaphorically), and not in appropriate sequence. However, choosing to be intentionally messy in this dissertation should not indicate that this work is not “worthy” or that it is lacking “intellectual merit”. My choosing to be intentionally messy in the communication and documentation of this work is a reminder of how hard, necessary, possible and complex the work of celebrating Black girlhood truly is (Brown, 2009). This dissertation is my homage to all of the Black girls who have chosen metaphorical and literal suicide when their own words were not enough. This dissertation is my prayer for all Black girls who do not know, and do not believe, that the ways in which they see the world and make sense of their world, is simultaneously an act of theory making AND an act of resistance.
I own the messiness inherent in this work and I make a request of the reader to work just a bit harder to engage with this work. Owning it, however, is solely my responsibility and in no way should my confession of this accountability take away from the vulnerability the girls exercised in choosing to share parts of their lives with me, with the reader. The trust the girls placed in me made my “fieldwork” experience richer and more intimate and for that, I am forever grateful. I accept that the aspects of this confessional tale that matter most are the ones related to the process of writing up those research experiences (Van Maanen, 1988). They entrusted me with their words, their photos, their dances, and their drawings. And yes, there is the institutional trust of the girls signing assent forms and media release forms in order for me to be able to tell their stories without fear of legal repercussions. That was taken care of. What I am talking about specifically is their articulated and embodied trust in me to carry their stories into spaces where they will not be physically present. Instead, their presence in those spaces will be metaphorically on my tongue, on paper, in PowerPoint slides, and embedded within the photos we have chosen to use. The messiness in this dissertation in inherent in my conscious choice to not decide if a) I will choose the photos to share with the world or if b) the girls will choose the photos I share with the world. Me: Them. Binary. I am anti/binaries. That said the photos in this dissertation belong to us and were chosen collectively. The text attached to the photos is of my choosing and some of the text are their words verbatim. Currently, however, I am the one with the privilege to share this work inside of the academy. Because of the privilege I have to share this work in academic spaces, I take full responsibility for the reactions to it, the interactions with it and the questions about it.
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Hughes, H.E. & Vagle, M.D. (2014). Disrupting the dissertation, phenomenologically speaking:


APPENDIX A
IRB LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research
Institutional Review Board
528 East Green Street
Suite 203
Champaign, IL 61820

May 30, 2008

Ruth Brown
Educational Policy Studies
360 Education Bldg.
M/C 708

RE: Sisterhood/Solhot: Using Photography to Create Community Collaboration and Change
IRB Protocol Number: 08443

Dear Ruth:

Your response to stipulations for the project entitled Sisterhood/Solhot: Using Photography to Create Community Collaboration and Change has satisfactorily addressed the concerns of the UIUC Institutional Review Board (IRB) and you are now free to proceed with the human subjects protocol. The UIUC IRB approved, by expedited review, the protocol as described in your IRB-1 application with stipulated changes. The expiration date for this protocol, UIUC number 08443, is 05/05/2009. The risk designation applied to your project is no more than minimal risk. Certification of approval is available upon request.

Copies of the enclosed date-stamped consent forms must be used in obtaining informed consent. If there is a need to revise or alter the consent forms, please submit the revised forms for IRB review, approval, and date-stamping prior to use.

Under applicable regulations, no changes to procedures involving human subjects may be made without prior IRB review and approval. The regulations also require that you promptly notify the IRB of any problems involving human subjects, including unanticipated side effects, adverse reactions, and any injuries or complications that arise during the project.

If you have any questions about the IRB process, or if you need assistance at any time, please feel free to contact me or the IRB Office, or visit our Web site at http://www.irb.uiuc.edu.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Sue Keen, Director, Institutional Review Board

Enclosures

c: Claudine Olivia Taaffe

telephone 217-333-2670 • fax 217-333-0405 • email IRB@uiuc.edu
“SOLHOT/SISTERHOOD: USING PHOTOGRAPHY TO CREATE COMMUNITY, COLLABORATION, AND CHANGE” (IRB PROJECT TITLE)

Hi! My name is Dr. Brown/ Miss Candy and I am here from the University of Illinois to interview you for the research portion of SOLHOT/Sisterhood. I am going to ask you some questions about yourself, your school, and about your participation in SOLHOT/Sisterhood. Remember, your participation is voluntary. That means you do not have to participate if you don’t want to. If you do not want to answer a question you can say “pass” and we will move on to the next question. This interview should take about one hour. If you need to take a break, please let me know and we will stop. I will also use a tape recorder to record our conversation. At the end of this interview this tape will be kept confidential, stored in my university office under lock and key. I also want to remind you that this interview is confidential. Meaning, no one will be able to connect your responses to these questions to you. In order for this interview to be confidential I will use a pseudonym instead of your real name. A pseudonym is a made-up name that you can choose. What would you like your pseudonym to be? Make sure that it is a name that no one will associate with your real name.

Pseudonym__________________

Okay, let’s get started!

Student Background

1. How old are you?
2. How would you describe yourself?
3. Who are the most important people to you?
4. What do you like to do?
5. How do you see yourself in the future?

School

1. Describe what a typical day is like for you from the time you wake up until the time you go to bed.
2. How do you like school?
3. Tell me about a time you had a really good time at school.
4. Tell me about a time you had a bad day at school.
5. What would you say is the hardest thing about being a Black girl at your school?
6. If something bad happened to you at school, what would you do? Who would you tell? Where would you go?
7. What are the top three issues facing Black students, girls, black girls at your school?
8. Describe a time you had to go to refocus? What happened? Did it happen again?
9. What do you think is expected of you as a student?
10. What do you want to do with your education?
11. What recommendations would you make to the school to make it a better place for students like you?

SOLHOT/Sisterhood

1. How would you describe Sisterhood/Solhot to someone who has never been?
2. What did you like about Sisterhood/Solhot?
3. What did you dislike about Sisterhood/Solhot?
4. What recommendations would you make to make Sisterhood/Solhot a better program for students like you?
5. Tell me about a time you had a really good time at Sisterhood/Solhot.
6. Tell me about a time you had a bad time in Sisterhood/Solhot.

7. Do you think Sisterhood/Solhot should be available to anyone who wanted to participate? Why or Why not?

Is there anything else you would like to add about you, your school, or about Sisterhood/Solhot that you think I should know about?

Thank you! We appreciate your time!
APPENDIX C
SOLHOT/SISTERHOOD CURRICULUM EXCERPT

Introduction:

Discussion of theme: Dreaming Our Word, Documenting Our Realities

Just Because: Exercise to introduce ourselves

Fun Facts: Provide contact information

Group talk: What is SOLHOT/Sisterhood?

Introduce our photovoice project:

- The point is to talk back to stereotypes about Black girls through photographs and the written word for the purpose of creating a public presentation that lets everyone know who we are and how they can best support us. We will deal specifically with how black girls are viewed/treated in these specific areas: school, home, community, media, and friendship.
- Each time we meet, we will discuss Black girls’ current realities in each of the areas and propose how things should be according to us.
- The muse for this project is the photo book, I DREAM A WORLD. It is our hope that we will work together this semester to produce a photo exhibit of the reality we are living and the imagined world we are dreaming as black girls and women.

Miss Candy and Dr. Brown will share an example of a photo of themselves in relation to one of the areas as well as write a caption to demonstrate how we will begin this project.

How this will work (our format):

Format will be to take photos of themselves (or others) and structures that relate to each of the areas and write their story (captions). We will, as a group, will pick which ones we want to display. We will also collaboratively give the public some idea of how black girls experience home, family, media, community, school etc. (our realities) and also some ideas of how black girls can be better supported in each of these spaces/areas of our lives (Dream A World).

Take home assignment:

Girls take photos of themselves in relation to friends and family. Disposable cameras are due back before the holiday break. When they turn in their cameras, they will pick up another one with a special holiday break photo assignments (i.e. traditions and celebrations, who or what is important to you in your family).

Tentative timeline:

Week One: Introduction, Getting to know each other, Project Presentation, Examples,

Week Two: Storyboard (What are the issues? Symbolism, Representation, Consent)
Week Three:  Using the camera
Week Four:  Issue oriented session (What issues are important to us as Black girls?)
Week Five:  Choosing photos and writing narratives
Week Six:  Choosing photos and writing narratives
Week Seven:  Community photo exhibit (spring semester)