

Introduction

The vision: Black girlhood is freedom, and Black girls are free. As an organizing construct, Black girlhood makes possible the affirmation of Black girls' lives and, if necessary, their liberation. Black girlhood as a spatial intervention is useful for making our daily lives better and therefore changing the world as we currently know it. Love guides our actions and permeates our beings. For those who do not know love, we create spaces to practice Black girlhood and sense love, to name it, claim it, and share it. What we know, what we say, our process, and what we make is of value, especially if it surfaces in unexpected forms. The space is specific enough that Black girls recognize it as theirs. The making of the space is collective and creative; uncertainty and complexity motivate, and revolutionary action is the goal.

To inspire greater visions of Black girlhood than I could dream of alone, I suggested *Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths*, affectionately known throughout this book by the acronym SOLHOT. SOLHOT is a space to envision Black girlhood critically among and with Black girls, who, it seems to me, are often the people least guaranteed to be centered as valuable in collective work and social movements that they could very well lead and organize. This book is about SOLHOT as a particular methodology of creating spaces to practice and enact a visionary Black girlhood. Whether the vision is simply stated as the celebration of Black girlhood in all of its complexity, or revised and elongated as stated above in the opening paragraph, SOLHOT as utopia, SOLHOT as dismal failure, and SOLHOT as mostly everything in between is about foregrounding complexity in collective and creative work with Black girls and women.

SOLHOT is a small but important work that points to larger realizations about the artistic imaginations of Black girls and women, systemic violence and persistent inequality, and also the possibilities of social change ignited, for example, by a poem written by someone who claims not to be a poet, new organizing principles shaped by skeptics who have been Black women harmed by previous organizations, and, of course, a visionary Black girlhood that means freedom. More often than not, when SOLHOT shows up,

they, we, have never seen anything like it, like us, being ourselves; and what we learn in and out of sacred time, practice, and relationship is that we are certainly worth our own liberation. SOLHOT reveals that our commitment to the practice of Black girlhood is incredibly imperative, and when we own our shine and feel compelled to share it, we feel free and affirmed. SOLHOT as a means of loving Black girls, loving ourselves, and valuing our interdependence embodies the very best principles of organizing, the very best principles of education, and the very best principles of living well.

The following questions guide my vision for Black girlhood as practiced in SOLHOT and also motivated me to write this book: What is necessary to imagine Black girlhood as a space of freedom? What would need to be abolished and created to enact such a vision of Black girlhood? Who would commit to such an idea? How do Black girls experience affirmation, and how does it feel, to them, to be free? How is this vision of Black girlhood useful for Black girls and women? What is so specific about practicing Black girlhood that the process is able to lead to something beyond the world as we currently know it? What does this vision of Black girlhood look like in practice, and what new knowledge emerges that may then be useful for and benefit everyone?

“At the end of the day” may be an overused cliché, except when spoken by a Black girl. In SOLHOT, I have learned that the words “at the end of the day” preface Black girls’ truths, the kind of truth telling Audre Lorde (1984b) insisted is made possible when silence is transformed into language and action. At the end of the day, even as we toddle into another millennium, structural conditions shaped by sociohistorical forces continue to perpetuate injury, hurt, and harm in the lives of Black girls even as they continue to find practical ways to deal, cope, and resist (Ladner, 1995). Ask the beautiful Black girl in Minneapolis whose teacher turned the lie “You will never amount to anything” into a pedagogical practice; remember all of the Black women and girls who died prematurely with the circumstances of their deaths too often unknown and unresolved; know that quite a few girls, too many to be acceptable, are brilliant yet routinely disciplined into taking up less and less space. There are women afraid of working with other women and girls in collective projects because politics, labor, and movement work masquerading as justice have harmed them before. As Liberian peace activist and 2011 Nobel Peace Prize winner Leymeh Gbowee (2012) reminds us, too many African girls throughout the diaspora desire a space to be more than the expectations that others have for them. But for the space of SOLHOT, I

would have to make do with singular celebrity-media-identified moments of Black girl praise, such as Willow Smith’s “Whip My Hair,” the Sesame Street video “I Love My Hair,” and *Black Girls Rock* on BET. Thankfully, Janelle Monae and Issa Rae have influenced the public sphere so that Black girlhood is synonymous with time travel, being awkward, and receiving support from those who desire new images and sounds, presenting the full complexity of Black girlhood and womanhood. At the end of the day, while we have been injured, creating a space to practice visionary Black girlhood makes the creative potential possible.

In SOLHOT we have come to know the creative potential of Black girlhood as documented by Toni Cade Bambara. Bambara wrote of Black girls in her short stories and novels as the main protagonists and/or as critical plot co-conspirators. Her Black girl characters were memorable because they triumphed over less than ideal circumstances with resources such as humor, wisdom, and sharp tongues, often unrecognizable as tools that are completely capable of overturning structures, people, and frameworks once thought permanent (Holmes and Wall, 2008). These are the same Black girl resources necessary to make working with Black girls during after-school hours into no happy-go-lucky after-school special. Rather, creating spaces of emancipatory Black girlhood for the purpose of allowing each of us to hold the thought, as instructed by Bambara’s character Minnie Ransom in *The Salt Eaters* (1992), that there is nothing that stands between us and perfect health, and therefore sets us up not so much to achieve freedom, but, as Bambara taught, to practice freedom and thereby improve on use. Avery Gordon (2008, p. 259) wrote that *usable* was a favorite word of Toni Cade Bambara’s, and it is in Bambara’s sense of the word that I offer this book as an examination of particular usable truths about Black girlhood that have emerged because of and through SOLHOT. At end of the day, the creative potential of Black girlhood is a useful framework from which to

1. Articulate visionary Black girlhood as a meaningful practice
2. Showcase Black girl inventiveness of form and content
3. Expand our vision of Black girlhood beyond identity
4. Sense radical courage and interdependence
5. Honor praxis, the analytical insight that comes only by way of consistent action and reflection

This book makes the case for a performative and creative methodology of a visionary Black-girlhood practice that does as SOLHOT suggests—saves our

lives and facilitates the hearing of truths. However, I dismantle neoliberal and elitist normative assumptions typically associated with youth interventionist programming. Black girlhood as an organizing practice of resistance and wellness does not collude with white-supremacist sentimentalities of saving someone presumably less human for the purpose of conquest. SOLHOT, when thoughtfully engaged, has allowed us to save ourselves. The creation, documentation, meditation on, participation in, and analysis of particular SOLHOT practices and our productions all reveal the creative potential of Black girlhood to demonstrate and address the following: how creative work produces knowledge that Black girls are accountable to and relationships that hold them accountable; what is so problematic and patronizing about approaching Black girls as work to be worked over; how Black girlhood is an organizing construct unlike anything else; what is required of those who do the work to create the space; and the various media, artwork, and knowledges, individually and collectively produced, that innovate form and transform use.

Each chapter of this book shows through different archetypal evidence—a theatrical play, memories, photography, narrative, interviews, literary texts, ethnographic field notes, an anti-narrative photo-poem, poetry, and original music analysis of five songs made in SOLHOT—that Black girlhood as an emancipatory space depends on distance and difference to make recognizable the unfathomable truths of another’s complexity. This project builds on women-of-color feminisms, hip-hop feminism, womanism, critical ethnic studies, and scholarship on Black girlhood and critical pedagogy to unearth radical interpretive sensibilities that allow for valuing Black girls even as they may be misunderstood and enacting a practice of Black girlhood contingent on creativity and imagination, collectivity and complexity, and unknowability and productive uncertainty. The aim of this book is to point at the fullness of a visionary Black girlhood embodied in SOLHOT and, as demonstrated through multiple exemplars of Black girl genius, the political necessity of redirecting our attention and effort away from blaming, shaming, and punishing Black girls, toward new articulations of age-old questions, organizing dilemmas, and sacred knowledge.



An interviewer once questioned Lorraine Hansberry, playwright, activist, and writer from Chicago’s South Side, about her play *A Raisin in the Sun*: “Someone comes up to you and says: ‘This is not really a Negro play; why, this could be about anybody! It’s a play about people!’ What is your reaction?”

Hansberry responded:

Well, I hadn't noticed the contradiction because I'd always been under the impression that Negroes are people . . . In other words, I have told people that not only is this a Negro family, specifically and definitely culturally, but it's not even a New York family or a southern Negro family. It is specifically Southside Chicago . . . that kind of care, that kind of attention to detail. In other words, I think people, to the extent we accept them and believe them as who they're supposed to be, to that extent they can become everybody. So I would say it is definitely a Negro play before it is anything else . . . (1969, p. 114)

Black girlhood as practiced in *Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths* is specific—it is very much about who we are and how we do it. All of us together in this very specific group of individuals are not all Black girls. Some of us are diasporically oriented and always foreground a homeland to intentionally decenter the United States as superpower or natural. We are also male. Sexuality is always of concern, particularly since so many in SOLHOT are attempting to know and claim all aspects of who they are. The collective work that is SOLHOT specifically exists in the Midwest of the United States. However, we carry SOLHOT with us wherever we go. We are all subject to compulsory schooling; many of us have continued on beyond our family's expectations, while some of us have been pushed out of school by the system itself. Two of us are white, one older and one younger. Christianity, Islam, and Ifa are specifically referenced spiritual practices in SOLHOT. We were once divided by ideology: there was the sex-positive crew and those that advocated abstinence only. Even as we do SOLHOT, some of us are against “females,” and others are women-identified. We all enjoy food, snacks, and beverages when we gather. We use our cell phones even when having a face-to-face conversation, and many of us prefer to keep our coats on, even while indoors. Some of us drive to SOLHOT, some walk, others are dropped off, and some take the bus. Importantly, some of us are painfully shy, and others are proudly loud. I'm counting on the insight shared by Lorraine Hansberry that specificity can lead to a more general understanding of the human condition.

How SOLHOT happens, as the practice-based research site on which the evidence of this study is based, makes possible the exploration of highly complex entanglements of identity, power, and representations among Black women and girls, who range in age between eleven and fifty-five, in a particular community of practice. SOLHOT actively promotes self- and collective

expression through culturally relevant activities that address the issues deemed important to participants. SOLHOT takes place in public schools and in community-based institutions. The process of SOLHOT is about a way of thinking about the world that foregrounds the full humanity of Black girlhood, rather than colluding with institutions, interpersonal interactions, and larger social and political systems that thrive on neglecting Black girls and depend on their disposability. In this way, SOLHOT transcends both the parameters of its physical location in a midwestern United States college town and the individuals who gather during a specific time and place in the name of SOLHOT. SOLHOT enables a critique of the social conditions that influence the most intimate aspects of Black girls' lives and relies on specificity to enable comparative understandings.

Drawing on the insight of Anita Harris (2003), who cautions that visibility for visibility's sake sometimes results in increased control and punishment of girls' bodies and interiorities, the public work we engage in SOLHOT is intentionally critical and unpredictable, and it varies from weekly sessions with the girls, to theatrical performances, photography exhibits, poetry, classes, conference presentations, and more. The more private conversations and decisions that circulate through texts, glances, side conversations, social media, and *sista* circles encourage us to promote a relational understanding of Black girlhood as the foundation for the public work we do. In this way, to introduce this book, for example, with profiles of individual Black girls would not be SOLHOT, as SOLHOT privileges a collective story about how we are together that is at all times negotiated. Sometimes positive, sometimes deviant, but mostly meaningful, the relationships created in SOLHOT because of SOLHOT may be thought of as its number-one production. SOLHOT enables the kinds of relationships that bring people together in ways that produce feelings of belonging—often referred to as *community*. In SOLHOT, we discuss diverse expressions of Black girlhood, critique the issues that are important to us, and create art that keeps Black girls' lived experiences at its center, even as some of us do not identify as Black girls. For this reason, throughout this book you will notice that it is Black women, Black girls, and beyond whose stories make up this account and refute static and fixed assumptions of Black girlhood. But the problem of standard English remains, and therefore, to be consistent with the language used in SOLHOT, in this book I refer to *the girls* to signify those who assume and expect SOLHOT to permanently exist with or without their contributing efforts. I refer to *the homegirls* to mean those who consciously labor to meet the girls' expectations. I use these categories of distinction throughout the book, forgoing the usual fictionalized profiles

of individual people. However, when particularities of the girls and homegirls were critical, I used pseudonyms, with the exception of those whose artistry informed my argument and those who gave me permission to credit them by name.

This book represents two years of data collection and a total of five years of working with Black girls in SOLHOT (2005–9), though I rely on the sum total of my experiences doing work with girls. According to Locke and Golden-Biddle (1994), post-positivist ethnographic studies that develop and convey authenticity, plausibility, and criticality as dimensions of convincing are key methodological assessments. Documentation of meeting these criteria—through prolonged participant observation, intensive relationship building with research participants and institutional gatekeepers, and my personal experiences as a Black woman traversing community and campus boundaries—becomes a specific type of index from which I build my ethnographic narrative. That my insider status in SOLHOT permeates all aspects of data collection, analysis, presentation, and writing is not so much unusual as it is intimate. I am the ethnographer, whose fieldnotes are documented; I am the SOLHOT visionary often mentioned and referenced by others; I am the artist who offers new poems based on the creative works made by girls and homegirls in SOLHOT; I am the theorist who analyzed our practices; and I am the researcher who is speaking to and building on the ideas of those who have helped me come to understand something more about Black girlhood.

Given current constraints on knowledge production as it relates to contemporary public-university life, to implement SOLHOT as a sustainable collective practice, create original art, transform academic scholarship by advocating for a more nuanced understanding of Black girlhood, and perform with SOLHOT participants to create dialogue about Black girls' issues in the communities they are most accountable to is a summertime privilege that too often feels like the dead of winter. It used to be plenty significant to do and write about any one of these things. It takes a certain skill set to pull off a SOLHOT session that everyone enjoys, and a different set of skills to write an academic paper about what we did that is personally and professionally satisfying. To create art requires certain resources and willfulness; to then publicly perform as a collective ensemble about the work we do in SOLHOT requires yet different gifts and talents. Certainly the idea of SOLHOT is highly improbable considering that university life is increasingly bureaucratic, privatized, and oriented toward the corporate. But SOLHOT as practiced, the process and productions of our labor as documented in this book, proves that we are more than possible, that Black girls are beyond what

we now know and should never be underestimated. This is both a cautionary statement and testament to generations and generations of Black girls and women-of-color scholars to come.

If you are privileged to be in consistent relationship with Black girls and research on Black girlhood, then you will be immediately dissatisfied by literature that frames being Black and female as the problem. Academic research that defines Black girlhood as absence, or Black girls as always sexually immoral, a sum of bad choices, or as perpetual servants of other's happiness persists even in its incredulousness. Overly distant research accounts seem contrived and unbelievable. If you so happen to be, or have been, or still consider yourself to be a Black girl, looking for something recognizable, or at least an entrance into conversations that Black girls themselves have brought to your attention, you will probably become so dissatisfied by most of what you read, only one choice will seem worthwhile (though daunting): Write the story yourself. Writing the story is not as risky, I suppose, as doing so within current academic confines, which you will ultimately have to disrupt or transgress.

My first book, *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy* (Brown, 2009), detailed the political context and my personal motivations for collaborating with Black girls in community spaces in *Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths*, which at that time was exceptionally experimental. Writing within and against girls' studies and hip-hop feminism, I critiqued commonly sensed academic assumptions about programming Black girls for the purpose of controlling their bodies and producing white middle-class girl subjectivities, I documented why a space like SOLHOT was needed for Black girls and how it could engender disordered radicalness even as it was organized. In that book I described SOLHOT in very practical terms, giving the reader a sense of the content of SOLHOT (for example, what we do in the weekly sessions with the girls) and its promise. I knew then that what I developed and called hip-hop feminist pedagogy served as a necessary intervention to teach and learn through media, particularly hip hop as influenced by Black girls, because the girls I initially met in SOLHOT did not know life without it.

This book continues to theorize Black girlhood through representations, memories, and lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female, while also playing with experimental interpretive methods. However, because Black girlhood rests sometimes so easily on the slippery slope of identity politics that now unfashionably conjures liberal rhetoric of a multiculturalism misunderstood, even I sometimes surprise myself with an insistence on using language so often misappropriated.

My continued use of *Black girlhood*, especially when coupled with *celebration*, may signal to some that I too am complicit in this misappropriation. However, what these terms mean and how they circulate in SOLHOT, I am aware, differs from how the most critically astute reader may assume. Black girlhood as a discursive category is boundless and should not be thought of in this book as a reductionist category of a fixed identity. In the same way that Susan Driver (2008, p. 2) maintains that the designation of queer youth is not meant to entrench a new label, so too do I deploy Black girlhood as a political articulation that intentionally points to Black girls, even as I mean for Black girlhood to direct our attention beyond those who identify and are identified as Black girls.

Explicitly organizing on behalf of Black girlhood and Black girls ensures that those who identify and are identified as Black girls know that the space is for them, which is important since many youth spaces do not mean well for girls, and many groups for girls do not intentionally or unintentionally engage girls of color. Moreover, the use of Black girlhood does not mean that for those who show up, race and gender are the most important or only significant categories of identity and difference. Simultaneously, the vision of Black girlhood as freedom is useful for providing direction and intent, so that in the practice of doing SOLHOT we do not forget that the more quotidian elements of Black girlhood and Black womanhood under current dominant and domineering structural formations would have us assemble only to take each other out. Importantly, this analysis as lived out and written about is meant to coalesce with studies related to critical transnationalism, abolitionist paradigms, queer-of-color critique, Afrocentric and diaspora orientations of Blackness, queer youth studies, and postcolonial politics and thought. Inherently interdisciplinary, this book intervenes in multiple and contested genealogies of feminism, girls' studies, cultural politics, and studies of performance, theater, and drama with the hope of making Black girlhood academically relevant on its own terms. The academic contribution of this book fully intends to transform the academy by insisting on Black girls' studies as critical to disrupting the disciplines, starting with gender and women's studies, African American and diaspora studies, performance studies, and education, and to positively influence stakeholders in service-provider positions that affect young people. My hope is that these movements, people in positions of power, and academic schemas so too intentionally remember Black girls by advancing analytics that increase our interdependence and thereby intensify opportunities for those similarly positioned to live more freely, with greater justice.



The suggestion of SOLHOT, its implementation, its consistent practice, and its possibility are indebted to many scholarly traditions, and not least among them are the ideas, essays, poetry, scholarship, and theories advanced by women-of-color artist/scholars. My hope is that this book contributes to an intellectual-activist-artist tradition pioneered by Black feminist, women-of-color, Afrocentric, and queer radical thinkers that is sometimes celebrated but is not always recognized as *real* scholarship. I use “real” to connote authenticity because I am suggesting, not unlike many before me, that there is a mythical standard of authentic scholarship that anyone unapologetically creative does not meet, with the possible exception of those credentialed in a legitimate and hard science, *legitimate* and *hard* being similarly problematic and laden with value. In any case, it has become more and more important for me to specifically acknowledge the contributions of Black feminists, womanists, women of color, and those who call themselves by different names but whose art, words, published works, and actions have illumined a path that directs the work of SOLHOT and also informs the meaning and nonsense I attribute to the analysis presented in this book. I am able to think through our practice and write academically about it as a way to continue the legacy of women-of-color feminists, poets, dramatists, and essayists whose polemics were wise and scholarly, concerned with our collective survival and self-expression.

As a Black woman scholar, writing from the location of the academy, I find it inspiring and somewhat problematic that I have intimately personalized what other scholars recognize and call academic literatures. Consider the first example that comes to mind: June Jordan’s *Poetry for the People* (Jordan and Mueller, 1995) motivated me to be right where I am in the academy and organize with others to write poems, perform, and co-create ideas that would then give rise to new dreams of Black girlhood. The way Jordan put words together in the form of poetry and essay catapults me always from the paralysis so often promoted in contemporary university life, to do SOLHOT, to act with others in order to collectively envision a Black girlhood that is accountable to my singular self and beyond. When I recite, for example, “Poem About My Rights,” I really get into it, and if it’s not the sound of my own voice that conjures change, then it is Jordan’s voice that I hear holding me, though I have never met her. Furthermore, when I say I do SOLHOT and it is not new, I acknowledge that Jordan gave me a blueprint and that her prolific publication record traverses multiple academic literatures, including and extending be-

yond women-of-color feminisms, critical landscape and architecture, literary theory, politics and political education, and theories of childhood and youth culture. When I reference June Jordan, I am calling on diverse and extensive subject areas, currently called *transnationalism*, *diaspora*, *intersectionality* and *assemblages*, *critical disability*, *ethnic and gender and women's studies*, *Afrofuturism*, *queer theory*, and beyond. June Jordan has been there and done that. Sometimes the academy overthinks itself. For the sake of those who want to know the literatures I address, or what literatures I am speaking to, against, and within, I would reply: I am a student of June Jordan and many others, whom I emphasize and call by name throughout this book to build on their ideas, awesome works, and critical insights. I do not claim to get it as right as they have, but I do mean for you to know that their works have inspired my own. It is the conversations they initiated, building on conversations started before they arrived, that inform my inquiry and practice.

The creative is often lost to critics who dismiss arts methodologies as nonsystematic, feel-good fluff, having no substance. The creative, as epistemology, theory, method, analysis, and praxis, fuels the imaginative capacities needed to generate ideas, provide radical explanation, and forgo academic trends. To let go of the false divide between creative expression and theoretical analysis, and to hold on to the lessons of artist/scholars who fiercely assert that their work is theory or not theory, means to embrace the creative as an avenue to the unknown, to assert a kind of listening that demands particularity, and to always maintain a willingness to be surprised. Creative engagement means coming to terms with artistic genres as productive of (at least) knowledge that can do well what positivist approaches cannot do—embrace collectivity, dwell unapologetically in uncertainty so that it becomes productive, question even as it claims to know, and move people to act, inspired by a feeling, or lack of options, or to invite a Black-feminist poetic and communitarian politic centered in Black women's and girls' creativity renowned for generations and generations.

The process of writing this book has been enriched by the joys and tensions involved in theorizing, practicing, art making, organizing, and performing, and more theorizing, practicing, art making, organizing, and performing. I am a poet, and I often rely on poetry and poetic analysis in this book. I am a playwright, and I often rely on theater and dramatic techniques and assumptions in this book. I am an artist, and I advance poetry, photography, narrative, and music found in this book as theory and not theory. I am an organizer who loves working with people. I am a theorist, and so is my mother. I am a performer who has been trained informally by way of family

functions, Black vernacular, “the church,” and grassroots theater collectives. I am a practitioner of Black girlhood because of SOLHOT.

Creativity fuels the back, forth, and between, to enable this retelling. The need to call attention to creativity as a mode of knowledge production genuinely engaged in and perfected by many of women-of-color feminists-artists-scholars-activists-warriors-mothers is because while we love to cite them, we are also in a moment when they too are discredited, and by extension their tools and their literature—which are vital to do revolutionary work and research that means something beyond personal gain—are ignored. In this book, I have intentionally called on and relied on the wisdom, methodology, and literatures of creative women-of-color feminists-artists-scholars-activists and womanists by name to give attention to the necessity of creativity and creative engagement. Creativity as source, life force, and methodology fortifies women-of-color feminisms, particularly the works of artists-scholars-activists. Yet, in a university context that depends increasingly on capitalist formations of knowledge production as income revenue, beware the student who has studied their works and dissected their methodology with the intent of using it, practically and theoretically. Though programs and departments of study have been built on and because of their ideas . . . I wonder if they would they be able to grow their work, to nurture their bodies, to strengthen their hearts . . . in rooms named after them, in classes dedicated to them, and in departments that could no longer exist without them or their progenies. The need to call attention to creativity as a mode of knowledge production genuinely engaged in and perfected by many women of color feminists-artists-scholars is also a call to create and to encourage creativity.

It is typically and wrongly assumed that if you are a woman scholar and writing on gender, then all is well in a little academic corner of the institution dedicated to feminism. If in fact you are a woman of color who engages the creative as means to make art, your labor may be wrongly reduced to leisure and does not count, not because it is actually uncountable, but because the work is (or worse yet, you are) deemed unproductive. The too-often-unstated reality is that creative women-of-color scholars are rarely perceived as producers of knowledge in the academy, even in disciplines built on and indebted to the creativity of women of color. Through the naming of various departments and assigning of titles and appointments with too little regard for those who aspire to the arts, and as scholar-artists trained in the most traditional of disciplines or in interdisciplinarity, there is no security. Creative women-of-color artists-scholars-activists-theorists-writers-warriors-mothers, I celebrate the hyphenated identities even as I despise them. There are so many more binaries

the hyphen seeks to undo: art/science, fact/fiction, theory/practice, intersection/assemblage, creative/same ol', traditional/innovative, woman of color/white, real/fraudulent, accessible/inaccessible, simple/complex, rigorous/easy, collective/individual, youthful/experienced, wise/ignorant, countable/intangible, written/oral, grown/growing, permanent/ephemeral, good/bad, objective/subjective, high/low, standards/willy-nilly, reliable/here today gone tomorrow, digital/analog, public/private, white/Black, queer/natural, silent/loud, rich/poor, transnational/local, secular/sacred, funky/rigid, trained/undisciplined, expert/novice, hobbyist/researcher, sung/staccato, bliss/depression, solidarity/singularity, selfish/narcissistic, engaged/aloof, shared/sequestered, mentor/tyrant, free/private, humility/arrogance, labor/leisure, call and response/didactic, homegirl/foe.

Thankfully, creativity thrives without permission. Permission-seeking behaviors work only to the detriment of creativity. For example, the creative as a means, mode, and source enables me to discuss, practice, and analyze Black girlhood and feminisms even though very few girls and older women who do SOLHOT identify as feminists—even as they do feminism. Creativity is the tension upholding the tightrope between those who insist on bringing feminism to girls, and a space like SOLHOT where we do not presume to know what our work is together until after some time (travel), relationship, dancing, and creating something that we collectively appreciate. The creative is wide enough to encompass the space between Black girls' lived experience and Black feminism already named and celebrated. The creative allows me to attend to the complexities of Black girlhood and affirm Black girls' lives, it motivates me to start something small like SOLHOT that makes big movements possible, and it has been absolutely critical to advancing the ideas in this book in a way that seemed most accountable to those in SOLHOT and also to scholars interested in ideas that transform how people commonly sense Black girls and work them over. But then again, if the artists/scholars/activists I'm speaking to and through and standing with, whose creativity I hope to emulate—if their work is discounted, then perhaps I have not done anything. Which may or not beg further consideration of a question I first heard provocatively posed in a performance by Robbie McCauley (2009):

Is this art?

And a few of my own . . .

Is this theory?

Is this academic?



SOLHOT—the weekly sessions where the vision is refined—is for the girls. Conversely, this book is for scholars, artists, intellectuals, and activists interested in thinking through interactions, time/space, love, and relationships that have Black girls at their center. The analysis advanced in this book is very much dependent on what occurs in SOLHOT, but it is not meant to definitively describe SOLHOT, nor should it be interpreted as the work of SOLHOT. This book, written on a flat surface, consists of chapters that echo a few of the ideas made possible in SOLHOT that would not let me go. Those ideas continued to resound and resonate in my heart until I wrote them out, made more of them with a poem, or analyzed what I was learning in SOLHOT for the benefit of breaking it all the way down—with the hope of shedding some much-needed light on a different way of seeing Black girls that will hopefully influence the reader, challenge policies, and/or make possible arrangements of power and relationships currently not yet formed for the benefit of Black girls not yet overcoming. The analysis that follows in the forthcoming chapters helped us in SOLHOT to do the work better, to think again, and to continually revise our collective vision of Black girlhood. It is my hope that this book also contributes to conversations that direct our attention to the fullness of a visionary Black girlhood as a space of freedom.

The book begins with a performance about how an individual Black girl's story changed how I thought about the kinds of work that could honor the complexities of Black girlhood. Chapter 1, “Tiara: Endangered Black Girls Instruction 301,” features a scene from a play I wrote titled *Endangered Black Girls* (*EBG*), based on the lived experiences of Black girls I worked with in an after-school program (not SOLHOT) and learned about through news stories. Theorizing the process of writing and performing *EBG* on through to subsequent productions made possible only because of the show's original cast, I illustrate how creative means of expression make it possible to fully capture the complexities of Black girlhood and that attending to the complexities of Black girlhood is necessary to affirm Black girls' daily lives. Importantly, performances of *EBG* generated new ideas for ways Black women and girls could be present with each other, and the play was a primary catalyst for suggesting and co-organizing Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT) as transformative collective and creative work. *EBG* as a creative performance not only made it possible for those who were a part of the cast(s) and audiences to revel in the complexities of Black girlhood, but it changed how I related to Black girls and guided the setup of a material space that could

thrive on the performative ways Black girls dared to express themselves among each other, in relation to those who loved them, and express their sense of the world.

Giving attention to sacred work and spirituality in relation to time, chapter 2, “Black Women Remember Black Girls: A Collective and Creative Memory,” shows how first, before any such thing experienced as freedom can be claimed, Black girlhood must be made, and in SOLHOT the space of Black girlhood is made through time, a timing that is infused with the sacred and spirit. In SOLHOT, to “homegirl” means engaging Black girls in the name of Black girlhood as sacred work that implicates time. Sacred work acknowledges the ways spirit moves one to act, often beyond the material conditions of one’s immediate circumstance. The primary question guiding this chapter’s analysis is, How do homegirls remember SOLHOT as a sacred experience that makes Black girlhood possible? In response, this chapter features a creative and collective memory constructed from the interview transcripts of eight SOLHOT homegirls and M. Jacqui Alexander’s (2005) *Pedagogies of Crossing: Mediations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. The memory shows how homegirls’ labor constructs SOLHOT as a methodology and cosmology that makes Black girlhood possible, affirms Black girls’ lives, and enables personal and collective transformation. Homegirls do the sacred work of making time and mastering several kinds of knowledge, of the body, interior and personal, and the body collective, extending beyond oneself, to make Black girlhood possible as a matter of life and death.

Chapter 3, “When Black Girls Look at You: An Anti-Narrative Photo-Poem,” considers what it means to be seen and looked at as a Black girl. Building on the visual-poetic analysis of June Jordan’s (1969) *Who Look at Me* and M. NourbeSe Philip’s (2008) *Zong!*, I offer an “anti-narrative photo-poem” that couples photography, poetry, and intersubjective insights of Black girlhood to specifically address the institutional norms and interpersonal dynamics that govern their lives and promote a limited knowing of Black girls premised on sight alone. The primary purpose of this chapter is to show that Black girls actively decide who and what is worthy of their presence and attention. The anti-narrative photo-poem invites those who dare to look to answer with action, as June Jordan suggested, but to do so while giving attention to the kinds of nuanced intersubjective interactions that hinge on the particular usable truth that Black girls are looking at you, watching them.

Chapter 4, “Bad Days: ‘If You Hit Me, I’m Gonna Hit You Back,’” foregrounds girls’ stories about fighting against a critical literary backdrop of Black girlhood as recounted in June Jordan’s (2000) *Soldier: A Poet’s Childhood*, Toni Cade

Bambara's (1992) "A Girl's Story," and performance poems written by four SOLHOT homegirls. This analysis of girls' narratives about fighting and violence in their daily schooled lives does three things: (1) validates girls' stories about fighting within a larger context of structural and interpersonal violence; (2) describes the kind of power Jordan argues is necessary to address both adults' complicity in violence (against youth) and the systemic nature of violence; and (3) demonstrates how and why the performance of homegirls' poetry enables girls in SOLHOT to practice freedom as Bambara instructed. In response to girls' stories, a performance of listening, courage, and interdependence as exemplified by SOLHOT homegirls is advocated as a visionary solution to the popular-policy problem so often constructed as girlfighting, mean girls, and/or bullying. Rather than making state-centered appeals for justice within a flawed system that depends on the further criminalization of Black youth, this chapter speculates on what freedom and justice may mean between Black girls and women beyond the United States prison-industrial complex.

Chapter 5, "More than Sass or Silence: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood," presents a soundtrack of Black girls' expressive culture as ethnographically documented in SOLHOT in the form of original music. To think through the more dominant categorizations of how Black girls are heard, as both sassy and silent, this chapter samples Andrea Smith's (2006) "Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing" to offer a new frame I call "The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood." Music made from conversations in SOLHOT is used to emphasize how three logics of the creative potential framework, including volume/oppression, swagg/surveillance, and booty/capitalism, amplifies Black girls' critical thought to document the often overlooked creative process of Black girl music making, demonstrate how hip-hop feminist sensibilities inform girls' studies, and, most importantly, move those who do Black girl organizing toward a wider repertoire of actions and conversations that affirm differences among Black girls and differently sounding Black girl knowledge. The creative potential framework shows how Black girlhood organizing is more productive when we listen to what Black girls know, forgo dominant characterizations, and expand on how they share what they know.

I conclude with a series of personal letters that underscore the necessity of envisioning Black girlhood differently than it is described on mainstream television, written about in popular magazines, uncritically interpreted through statistics, and rendered in policies that punish, segregate, and silence. The letters are addressed to people whose love and compassion is a testament to

continue this work and who intimately know the necessity of maintaining personal healing while also advocating for the abolition of all forms of Black girl servitude. Moreover, because I am often asked about replication, or ways to bring SOLHOT to wherever you are, I write anticipating this request, even as I maintain that SOLHOT is not meant to be prescriptive and does not offer itself as a successful model of girl programming. Embedded in each letter is a high five and hug, my expressed gratitude to those who get the spirit of the work, even if they call it by a different name, organize with different somebodies, and foreground altogether different issues. The letters represent a kind of personal meditation that on the sly challenges systemic inequalities, appealing to those who inspire and motivate Black girlhood renewal as a space of freedom.

The writing out of how we mean freedom in *Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths* is as significant as the dancing out, talking out, and acting out that all goes on in SOLHOT because the word shared extends the vision, improves practice, and widens the cipher. In the pages that follow, I have documented a few moments of how we sensed freedom to mean acting on our desires as Angie, who always keeps it SOLHOT, required—“without worry and consequence.” And because there is more work to do with desirous Black girls, there are also, by necessity, more stories to write. This Black girls’ song is but one version on an unlimited playlist.

