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SOLHOT: BLACK GIRLHOOD CELEBRATION OF LOVE, LITERACY, HIP-HOP
AND MOTHERHOOD

BY

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THESIS

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Abstract

In order to create pedagogical methods and practices committed to educational attainment and healthy lifestyles one must recognize the impact of love as pedagogy. In my paper, I demonstrate how I utilize a concept I call “love practices” within a Black-girl-centered space entitled “Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths” (SOLHOT). When assessing the utility of love as practices among Black girls, in SOLHOT, at a local middle school in Champaign, Illinois, I ask the following: what is the relationship between love and Black girlhood? What is/are the impetus, motivation(s), and commitments of Black girls to a girl-centered space? What does it mean to be a part of a space for girls that foreground love? To assess Black girls in a context of love practices, I employ autoethnography, a method that permits me to openly discuss my experiences and research as self-reflective interpretations. My key findings, such as humility, listening, practice, imagining a critical space for Black girls, and recognizing complexities of love, are the critical lessons that have contributed to the process of organizing SOLHOT.

Keywords: *Black girls, SOLHOT, love practices, pedagogy*

“LOVE PRACTICES AMONG BLACK GIRLS:
A BLACK GIRLHOOD PEDAGOGY OF LOVE”

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

“Are those girls going to SOLHOT?”

“Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths” (SOLHOT) is when the bell rings at 3 p.m. at a middle school in Champaign, Illinois. It is me walking through the halls rallying Lil’ homies¹ who are distracted by after-school issues...issues such as the fight everybody’s been waiting to see, that boy or girl she “wanna say goodbye to,” hurrying to finish that last-minute homework assignment, calling their parents so they make sure they can attend SOLHOT! This is the school culture that Black girls come to every day from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. It is girls finally arriving in the midst of the heavy foot traffic in the halls to a classroom or library. “Stop, I gotta go to SOLHOT!” one Lil’ homie usually yells at another student.

“Hey, Miss Sheri! I gotta go get everybody,” some Lil’ homies always say. And they do. Then a Lil’ homie runs into the room to make sure her space is reserved then runs back out alerting every other girl that, “SOLHOT is today!” So as I wait, they all enter. “Today I may come or not, Miss Sheri,” then ten minutes later, she comes back and explains: “But I decided to stay ‘cause I didn’t want to go there anymore.”

SOLHOT is Lil’ homies all in yo face ‘cuz we know that, too. Girls with side ponytails, straight hair (wraps), braids, hair bows, lollipops inside of ponytails, tight jeans, gym shoes, flat shoes, cute shirts (always with the cami), eye liner, eye shadow all enter their space. We all have style! One hug at a time or double hugs. Love is always

¹ Lil’ homie(s) is a term coined in SOLHOT to refer to young girl participants. It is an interchangeable term with girls, Black girls or girl participants in SOLHOT. These terms are all synonyms.

there. “What’s yo name?” “We from the hills,” “You from Chicago? I got family there. They live on such-and-such block. I’ve always wanted to go to Chicago.” Because we know we’re not just limited to Champaign. SOLHOT on Friday from 3 to 5 is our space to shine, so why you here? And sometimes we’re not in a good mood and we definitely don’t play that. You will get checked! Have you tried to get to know my story?

So we start with the weekly gossip. Gossiping is the way to say what we know and how we feel (hooks, 2001). “Did y’all know so-and-so go out?” “Did y’all see so-and-so fight?” “Y’all going to that party?” “Miss Sheri, when you gone bring us...?” “Hey, y’all,” I would always exclaim loudly. “How was your day?” I would ask. Some would respond, “It was cool.” Then we continue with “whose gonna check in?” “Check-in²!” Pacing back and forth, playing in each other’s hair, writing our names in bubble letters, coloring, writing on the body, sometimes boyfriend/girlfriend names or “best friends.” Random laughter because “Girl, you are so crazy!”

It is the start of check-in at 3:15 p.m. Starting with “today was okay but...” So Lil’ homies start telling their truths by saying “Girllll, let me tell you!” SOLHOT is the beginning of a new activity intended to “save our lives and hear our truths.” It is my voice heard loud and clear giving directions for what we want to do and not want to do. My voice calls for the Black girl cipher to begin. So we begin with check-in, an activity, and lots of dialogue. Activities that demand our thinking and force us to negotiate if we really want do that. “I don’t wanna do that activity...right now, Miss Sheri.”

SOLHOT is where the Lil’ homies situate themselves in a space (a part of a school) to be seen and heard. To be listened to. To tell you. It is a place where music

² “Check-in” was introduced by myself as “a welcoming ritual that occurs at the beginning of every Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT). It allows girls to provide a personal narrative of what took place since the last time the group met” (Garner, 2010, p. 229).

happens without a computerized beat, but with words. Our bodies set the tone and the beat. Our words (the lyrics) make the sound(s). “We are, yea I said it, we are...so SOLHOT” “Hey, girl, hey!” As one Lil’ homie may say.

In this space, girls show up to be loved. And in their ways (intentional or unintentional) give love back. SOLHOT is attitude: “up all in yo face attitude”. It is the Lil’ homies affirming their power, beauty, pain, joy, knowledge. It is a space where we talk to each other, at each other, for each other, with each other. This is the space where you hear those loud and soft-spoken Lil’ homies telling you, “We are here! Do you see me, hear me?!” It is a space of Black girl unedited discourse. “You ain't ready for it!” It is that moment where you’re happy for the decision you made. It is a spiritual space where you “DO” without thought but still remain critical in your reflection. SOLHOT is booty shaking, necks twisting, faces smiling, fingers popping, voices loud, from room to hall, the tells of daily gossip, narratives exposed, hugs permitted, attitude(s) given, endless laughter, voluntary critique, afraid and not afraid, wanting to participate and not wanting to participate, showing up every Friday from 3 to 5, coming to be valued.

SOLHOT is Dr. Nikki B. elegantly affirming,

“...A place to show you have confidence in yourself, bootyful, a place to learn, where you find a little sister, to get your mad boogie on, where we girls can be ourselves, where girls can learn from women and women can learn from girls, full of happiness, libation, growing pains, voice, power. (Brown, 2009, p. 68).”

In September of 2007, I began co-organizing a grassroots intergenerational space entitled “Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths” (SOLHOT). SOLHOT spaces are for preteen and teenage girls who identify as a Black girl, girl of color, or an ally. While organizing a SOLHOT space at a local middle school in Champaign, Illinois, I noticed that many of the girls were conflicted with their communities and larger society due to the lack of understanding regarding the complexities of their identity. Moreover, I wanted to establish a space that supported Black girls in ways their schools and other institutions did not. After reading bell hooks’s *All About Love*, I instantly thought about SOLHOT as a space that practices love. hooks’s (2001) analysis of love was relative in that much of our interactions in SOLHOT—despite the external conflicts—affirmed our identities and was demonstrated through political projects and textual artifacts, remaining committed to the space and having honest conversations about ourselves, popular culture, and our communities. By acknowledging the girls actions and reflecting on my experiences co-organizing SOLHOT I found it necessary to critically reflect on the concept of love as pedagogy and, most importantly, how to sustain love through practices. As such, I argue that in order to create alternative pedagogical methods and practices committed to educational attainment and healthy lifestyles one must recognize the impact of love practices as pedagogy.

When assessing the utility of love practices among Black girls I reflect on the following: what is the relationship between love and Black girlhood? What is/are the impetus, motivation, and commitments of Black girls to a space that centers their identities? What does it mean to be a part of a space for girls that foregrounds love?

These questions assisted me while I reflected on my experiences in SOLHOT. Through my experiences, I have recognized that it is imperative to situate love pedagogy into a practice—a concept described as love practices.

In this thesis, I begin by presenting literature on theoretical frameworks that allow me to bridge Black girl identities with the notions of love, practice, and space. Second, I discuss the methodology I utilized to gain a social and cultural understanding of Black girlhood and myself as a participant and observer. Third, I describe the history and social context of SOLHOT in conversation with my positionality. Fourth, I articulate my findings by introducing and discussing the impact of love practices. Lastly, I conclude by articulating my vision for Black girls' spaces, specifically in SOLHOT.

CHAPTER 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Even though we see her everywhere—as the video vixen at the periphery of hip hop culture, or the loud, neck-rolling mean girl in public spaces, do we know her? Do we really know her? Are we aware of her special concerns, her distinct challenges, and the intricacies of her unique experience as she attempts to traverse a society that commonly marginalizes her worth, ignores her struggles, and consistently fails to address her distinct concerns through social or policy action? For far too many of us, the answer is no” (Black Women for Black Girls Giving Circle, 2009, p. 8).

I begin with a quote from *The Black Girls and New York City: Untold Strength and Resilience*, which was commissioned by Black Women for Black Girls Giving Circle, because it speaks to some of the many stereotypes by which Black girls are marked. Black girls often are seen and marked by various historical stereotypical categories. Stokes (2007) affirms by her articulation of Black girls’ sexuality as sexual scripts, suggesting that in American culture illustrations of Black female {sexuality} has been controlled (Stephens & Phillips, 2003) through mass media stereotypes of Black women as Jezebels, Mammies, Matriarchs, materialistic, and Welfare Queens. These labels have perpetuated themselves throughout history and continue to haunt Black women and girls in contemporary culture through various actions and discourse.

The above-cited report (2009) further suggests that these labels are seen in elementary and secondary classrooms where teachers focus more on their perceived notions of Black girl attitude and behavior and less on their academic achievement. The behavior promoted by teachers insinuates “lady-like efforts” that are rooted in these

historical stereotypes perpetuating a negative school environment for Black girls.

Despite the stereotypes of Black women and girls in mass media and educational spaces, it has been noted through Black and hip hop feminism that Black women and girls have debunked these myths by creating meaning for themselves rooted in consciousness, community and self-love.

Black and hip hop feminism as theoretical frameworks exemplifies the complexities and culture of Black girls. It calls for critical assessment of how to position ourselves in the spaces of Black girls (and women) so that Black girls have the opportunity to engage in their own discourses about their identity. It also indicates the impact of a concept I call love practices and how these practices can manifest in spaces occupied by girls who identify with or as Black, youthful, and/or female. It is through Black feminism and hip-hop feminism theoretical frameworks where the relationship between Black girl identity and love further can be assessed. This review of literature demonstrates the interlocking of Black girls and love as political practices, specifically when in collective spaces centering their experiences.

Black feminism

According to Collins (1991), Black feminism is defined as “a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community” (p. 39). From reading the works of Collins, I would infer that anyone who can relate to this “humanist vision” can better understand Black feminism; however, what binds people of color to this type of feminism are the similar oppressions of race, class, and gender. Although identity does not equal ideology and generalizations are never appropriate, the implications are that many people of color, specifically Black women

and girls, readily embrace the frameworks that lie within Black feminism as a means to liberate themselves from the social inequalities that exists: to love.

Collins highlights the importance of recognizing Black women/girls knowledge [stories] as a means in gaining consciousness among themselves and each other. Black feminism exists to recognize and pay tribute to these knowledges, which for example, may also come as self-love affirmations and Black feminism is a discourse that makes this valid and credible. Moreover, Black feminism engages women/girls in theory and praxis; providing a context in which we can consciously decide to name who we are and want to be. It is through this naming that we come to know and love ourselves.

In her essay, Jordan (2002) furthers a personal analysis of Black feminism stating, “I am a feminist, and what that means to me is much the same as the meaning of the fact that I am Black...and permeates my identity, as a woman, and as a Black human being. (p. 269)” Jordan delivers a testimony to how, as a Black feminist, she is committed to validating her whole self. She claims feminism connects her multiple identities. Feminism allows for women to further make sense of their positionality in the world.

Black feminism also serves as a political platform constructing resistance and liberties. The Combahee River Collective (1977) states,

“above all else, Our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable...merely naming the pejorative stereotypes attributed to Black women (e.g. mammy, matriarch, Sapphire, whore, bulldagger), let alone cataloguing the cruel, often murderous, treatment we receive, indicates how little value has been placed upon our lives during

four centuries of bondage in the Western hemisphere. We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work. (p. 2)”

The Collective suggests Black feminism as the personal being political. The most prevalent ideals of politics emerge from one own personal experience of race, class, gender and sexuality. The works and contributions within Black feminism are politics of marginalized people which foregrounds critical points of view, from their personal lives, of social structures. Black feminist theories serve to exhibit the significance of adapting a politic that situates multiple identities for Black women. It gives value to the ways in which Black women create meaning for their lived experiences. The feminists mentioned speak to the ways in which identity is central accentuating human life. They provide tangible explanations for how Black feminist theory foregrounds Black identity for black women.

Hip Hop Feminism

While Black feminism has been and still proliferates women-of color-scholarship hip hop feminism is a more contemporary framework that acknowledges hip hop as a site for young women and girls to articulate and celebrate their multiple identities, while at the same time critiquing intersections of oppressions.

Durham (2007) defines hip-hop feminism as a the “Socio-cultural, intellectual and political movement grounded in the situated knowledge of women of color from the Post-Civil Rights generation who recognize culture as a pivotal site for political

intervention to challenge, resist and mobilize collectives to dismantle systems of exploitation”(p. 304). Hip hop Feminism foregrounds the ways in which Black women and girls use hip-hop to affirm, produce and reproduce meaning relevant to their lived experiences. Hip-hop culture as it relates to girlhood contributes to spaces that recognize and celebrate youth identity (Rose, 1999). It is through hip-hop feminism that girls and women are able to merge the theories and praxis of the past generation such as Black feminism with more contemporary ideologies and praxis.

Brown (2009) contends that Black women and girls can be used interchangeably in that both bodies are fluid. She further states that, “Black girlhood [is] the representation, memories and lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female” (p. 1). While Black girls often are mischaracterized within popular culture discourse as fighters, video vixens, at risk, passive sexual objects, etc. (Pough, 2004; Sharpley-Whiting, 2007), hip hop feminism re-articulates the significance in recognizing the multi-facets of Black girls as part of hip hop culture.

Morgan (1999) states that feminism should critically engage the intricacies Black women live with, benefit from, and even perhaps enjoy some of those aspects. Morgan appreciates a feminism that takes the focus off women as victims and allows them to explore who they are as women and the complexities of such an identity (Bowen, 2012). Simply put, she is suggesting that Black women are more than their oppression (Morgan, 1999). As such, spaces that develop through hip hop feminist perspective are necessary in celebrating Black girlhood.

Space(s)

Creating spaces that affirm Black girl identity is another accessible basis for which we can imagine and transform culturally relevant pedagogies for Black girls wherever they are. According to de Certeau (1984), spaces occur “as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities” (p. 117). de Certeau’s explanation suggests that people interacting with one another creates space. Through creating spaces, bodies formulate actions that contribute to [re]producing structures constituting what happens in that respective environment or place. In communities, for example, it is through the movement of bodies, actions, and interconnectedness that space(s) are produced. Straightforwardly, anywhere there is interaction space is developed.

To actualize spaces foregrounding Black girl identities, I refer to Belgrave and colleagues’ references to relational theory. Relational theory indicates, “relationships and interpersonal connection are important to females and form the core for the development of their personal identity” (p. 331; see also Giddings, 1984; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1986). This theory suggests that Black girls thrive from culturally relevant values, beliefs and building positive relationships with their peers (Belgrave et al., 2004). Although Belgrave and colleagues research focus on intervention programs, which I do not necessarily agree with the language of “intervening” their theory of relational theory still implicates the importance of culturally relevant spaces for Black girls. In this case, communities or individuals can generate positive spaces that foregrounds their actions, dispositions, and experience. Since space can be anywhere Black girl celebration (Brown, 2009) can take the form in a classroom, home, bus stop, conferences, coffee shop,

meeting, etc.

Practice

The actions, elements and dispositions within a space situate what Bourdieu (1977) claims as “habitus,” practice. He describes habitus as “The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment...systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (p. 72). Habitus is how one engage and act in the world. They are principles that guide one’s behavior engaging in “doing” without presupposed thoughts. It is a way of acting as is, combining “perceptions, appreciations, and actions” (p. 72) in one’s behavior.

How Black girls talk; how Black girls walk; things they like to hear; their reactions to various ideas, objects, and so on all inform their habitus. With the influences of Black Feminism and Hip Hop Feminism, being in spaces with Black girls and women adhering to their ideas, listening to their stories, and observing their behavior and actions, I came to this concept of a love practice.

Love

“Yet, as mentioned earlier, we are capable of creating small yet meaningful ‘spaces of hope’, where we (in cooperation with fellow human beings) can learn how to develop the kinds of disposition, consciousness, community, organization, and political culture required for revolutionary love (Harvey, 2000)... We can reserve time and energy for meaningful dialogues about our social worlds with students, children, neighbors, and opponents. And we can learn to become more giving, caring, responsible, respectful, and knowledgeable in our collaboration with others.” (Chabot, 2008, p. 812)

I believe Chabot (2008) articulated well the practical significance for understanding the social and cultural implications of love. It is a call to recognize love as a political and collective actualization. From a feminist perspective hooks (2001) defines love as “care, commitment, trust, responsibility, honesty, respect and knowledge” (p. 54). These moral actions or characteristics are necessities in producing what I proclaim as love practices. I define love practices as the fundamental repeated actions of care, commitment, knowledge, respect, honesty, and responsibility. Since love encompasses many aspects of our lived experiences, it is necessary to integrate love characteristics as part of our daily interactions.

Fromm (1956) discusses love as practice in regard to “discipline” (self-efficacy), “concentration”, “practicing”, “patience”, “supreme concern”, “sensitive to oneself”, and “overcoming narcissism” (p. 98). He articulates that “what the discussion of the practice of love can do is to discuss the premises of the art of loving, the approaches to it as it were, and the practice of these premise and approaches” (p. 97). Fromm lays out the way in which one can incorporate love into their daily interactions. This action lays a foundation for love practices. hooks (2001) further suggests love as practice by contending that it is valuable to utilize specific steps to embrace love in our lives. If these characteristics of love, as hooks (2001) developed and Chabot (2008) and Sleeth (2010) affirmed, are necessary, then they also should serve as practice. Love practices are organic structures that foreground positive movements, actions, experiences, and connectedness.

While romantic love is not central to my claim for love practices, it is still a part of our interactions and will be impacted as well. To focus more broadly on love, I do not

frame it as human eroticism vis-à-vis heterosexual or queer partnerships. Chabot (2008) proposed “by assuming that true love is between two individuals who are insulated from the rest of the world, we deny the possibility of love as a force for social inclusion, transformation, and justice” (p. 808). As such, the type of love practices to which I refer calls for critical thinking, self-reflection, consciousness, imagination, and the desire to be well/healed. While these actions can be present and healthy in romantic relationships love encompasses ideologies that move within and beyond intimate relationships.

A start to implementing love is through self-love. Self-love is an act in which we can begin to employ love characteristics as practice. Since practice exerts habits and daily performance, self-love can manifest within our dispositions and metaphysical behavior. Most often we hear, “You can’t love others unless you love yourself.” Practicing love on our selves models behaviors that are indeed influential traits.

An accessible practice can be utilized through affirmations. hooks (2000) contends that “affirmations helped restore my emotional equilibrium” (p. 56). Affirmations move us into habitual behaviors in order to proliferate a love practice. They become a way of life, a means to our everyday experiences. Through affirmations, we begin to reflect, name, and question the ways in which love is produced or reproduced. Affirmations serve as practical actions for how we can situate love in our habitus.

Conclusion

Love should become a way of living, utilizing all forces, individual agencies, and intergenerational transferences of a loving practice. Love practices, however they are advanced, center all dimensions of love as a means to create, transform, and cultivate aspects that are meaningful in saving ourselves: seeking justice and freedom.

Thinking about love practices provokes ideas to think more critically about the spaces Black girls occupy and how those spaces exemplify knowledge, care, commitment, respect, responsibility, honesty and trust. Love practices can generate spaces that center love, Black girl identity, and Black girls' experiences.

Sleeth (2010) affirms how love is absolute and integral in our lives. He claims that any behavior—rather appropriate or unavailing—the most essential basis for human interaction is love. It is clear that love can and will produce effective change in people's lived experiences, change that motivates mutual respect and humility for one another and ourselves. With love as a healing principal, spaces of love practices through Black and hip hop feminism frameworks can form civilized unions and collective care for Black girls.

CHAPTER 3:

METHODOLOGY

Autoethnography

I interpret my experiences (as practice) in SOLHOT by utilizing autoethnography as a method. Spry (2001) defines autoethnography as a narrative reflecting on one's positionality amongst others in a particular context. This method is a merger between autobiography and ethnography, where the researcher critically reflects on him or her to create meaning in his or her research. Autoethnography permits me to not only critically observe the girls but myself as a young Black graduate student from the South Side of Chicago—and my contributions to the research. The narrative of my participations and observations becomes a significant segment of the research process, and I reflect on my experiences in order to provide a socio-cultural understanding regarding Black girlhood (Walls, 2006).

I have chosen an autoethnography due to my years of co-organizing (“creating”) a space for and by Black girls. My experiences in SOLHOT are the guiding presence to assessing my observations (Denzin, 2003). Denzin states that through autoethnography, the researcher is a “cultural critic” reflecting on their own context (s) through their own limitations. In many ways, it can be difficult to observe and take notes when you are actively involved with all participants. However, my narratives provide tangible examples of my limitations and contributions in SOLHOT as well as offer an honest analysis about this process.

In this autoethnography, the “I” will be used in ways to connect my Black girl identity to other Black girls in SOLHOT. The “I” and “we” will be used interchangeably

to demonstrate how I see myself as a participant and collectively work with the girls to develop love practices. These two pronouns also suggest the fluidly and inclusivity of Black girlhood. Being that I am a Black girl transitioning into womanhood, I use my knowledge and practice to demonstrate a love and appreciation for the complexities within Black girlhood.

Self-reflection also bridges my personal accounts with other Black girls in articulating our truths love. It gives me the opportunity to take accountability for my actions and observations, while highlighting the voices and experiences of other Black girls. Autoethnography is the most efficient way to demonstrate what happens (needs to happen) in a Black girl space in order for it to thrive. Denzin also affirms this, in that as a writer, I “refuse to make to make distinctions between self and other, creating the space for autoethnography, for feminist, racial, indigenous, and borderland standpoint theories and inquires” (Denzin 2003, p. 269; see also Foley, 2002 p. 475). My assessments are contributions to contemporary autoethnographic social and cultural perspectives.

Autoethnography situates my narrative so that readers will be able to grasp a personal understanding of my involvement in SOLHOT and how I came to know what love is, how it looks and it can be a practice. Since SOLHOT is so personal to me auto ethnography is method that formalized my personal accountants as research.

CHAPTER 4:

THE PRACTICE: SAVING OUR LIVES HEAR OUR TRUTHS (SOLHOT)

“I want, when they see me, they know that every day when I'm breathing is for us to go further. Every time I speak I want the truth to come out. Every time I speak I want a shiver. I don't want them to be like they know what I'm gonna say because it's polite. I'm not saying I'm gonna rule the world or I'm gonna change the world, but I guarantee you that I will spark the brain that will change the world. And that's our job to spark somebody else watching us.” -Tupac (1994)

(My) History

To understand my relationship with Black girls I reflect on my experiences in spaces of SOLHOT. In 2006, Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown founded SOLHOT. Her visions and productions inspired women and girls to build a collective that moved beyond and within various spaces celebrating Black girlhood. Due to support from local residents and a mother of one of the participants, SOLHOT transitioned from the local Don Moyer Boys Club and the Urbana Free Library to partnering with public schools. From 2009 to 2012, SOLHOT spaces convened at one middle school and high school in Champaign, Illinois, one middle school in Urbana, Illinois, and one high school in Rantoul, Illinois. The sessions in these spaces met for about three months once a week at each school. In the sessions, the girls and young women of color critiqued, developed, and created knowledge that their educational institutions did not provide, such as topics relevant to Black girl culture.

Over the years, because of the collective work from several university students and local residents, SOLHOT has taken place in public schools, libraries, and after school

organizations, resulting in performances celebrating Black girl identities; exhibits displaying photos taken for and by girl participants, and scholarship foregrounding Black girl lived experiences through conference presentations, published articles, and books. SOLHOT has been present in many spaces because of the dedication and commitment from those who participate in Black girl celebration (Brown, 2009). In order to assess what it means to be a part of space that centers love and Black girlhood, I discuss and reflect on my personal experiences to situate my overall findings.

I began SOLHOT as a volunteer in the year of 2007 at the Urbana Free Library as an undergraduate student. Before meeting at the library, I had an orientation meeting with two of the organizers. This orientation was interesting in that I met Black women who shared my passion for working with young people. In our orientation, we introduced ourselves, discussed our backgrounds, and the two organizers began talking about SOLHOT. Although SOLHOT's principles were very different from the organizations and groups to which I had been previously exposed (for example, in SOLHOT, we should not say "sit down" or "shut up") and the information presented in the orientation made me very excited to become a Homegirl³. After the first year of working collectively with other Black women and girls in SOLHOT, I had found a home and a new passion. I am not sure how this passion came about, whether because of my previous jobs as a Chicago Park District camp counselor or if this was a spiritual calling; either way, I had come to space that was very similar to home.

One particular experience I remember is from my first day in SOLHOT at the Urbana Free Library. Among the girls that arrived there was a young fair-skin Black girl

³ Homegirl(s) is a term coined in SOLHOT for anyone who refers to himself or herself as a woman, adult, facilitator or organizer in the space.

with a ponytail, large pink coat with fur around the hood, and tomboyish disposition. She approached me and asked, “Where you from?!” I responded, “Chicago.” She walked very close to me, chest-to-chest and exclaimed, “So, what, you GD?!”⁴ and began forming her fingers to represent gang signals. Due to my background of being raised in a working-class Black neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago and that my neighborhood was known for many years as and currently occupies Gangster Disciples territory, I was definitely familiar with her disposition and statements. As she continued to wave signals in the air—and although intimidated—I gave her a very long hug (and she hugged me back). We both smiled. Despite our first impressions our connection on that day was symbolic for how I came to know and love SOLHOT. I learned that our Black girl presence was actually present—in a community dominated by a white institution—and it took a gang sign and hug to make sure our presence was sincere and real: the real of being Black, young, female, students in public institutions while still being grounded in our African-African American culture.

In September of 2008, I was asked to co-organize a space at the Don Moyers Boys and Girls Club. I was elated. To this day, I am not sure where my facilitation and leadership capabilities originated, but I was asked, and my journey as a co-organizer began. At the Club, there were about 10 Lil’ homies and 10 Homegirls. Everyone in this space was new, with the exception of Dr. Brown. The young girls and university students were primarily African American between the ages of 11 to 25. We met from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. every Friday. Most of girls at the Urbana Free Library participated in this space as well, including my GD friend.

⁴ Gangster Disciples (GDs) is a gang formed on the South-Side of Chicago in the 1960s (Williams & Moore, 2001).

Our efforts and successes of building relationships, hosting presentations celebrating the projects and performances of the participants, speaking with parents, and offering academic support were recognized by one of the participants' mother, and she recommended our presence at a middle school in Champaign, Illinois. Then from 2009 to 2012, I began co-organizing a SOLHOT space at this school by meeting with the vice principal to plan logistics, hosting meet and greets for interested Homegirls, primarily African American, and interested Lil' homies during their lunch hour(s).

Practice with Homegirls

As a co-organizer of SOLHOT, I was very careful that college students were not seen as the "experts" who go into the community to "fix" or "enlighten" young people. Rather, an aim to create a community of girls and their allies, a community that strives to have all fed, loved, safe, and celebrated for who they are. I continued to assure Homegirls that in SOLHOT, girls are never told they are too loud, to shut up, to sit-down, to think this way, or to declare what's appropriate. Girls are able to come and go as they please and make their own decisions. As I would say in this space to the Lil'homies, "Yes, hun, you can go to the bathroom; you do not have to ask." They can participate or choose not to.

I also informed them that sometimes cursing might occur because if "shit" has to be said in order to express how they truly feel, then so be it. This may not imply disrespect because they learn about "respect, honesty, responsibility, trust, knowledge, commitment and care" alongside those, curse words. Belgrave et al. (2004) suggests, "many adolescent females, especially those in early adolescence, engage in negative interpersonal behaviors, such as gossiping, verbal insults, and exclusion of others. These

behaviors, considered ‘relational aggression,’ are socially maladaptive and do not help the girl to meet her positive relational needs” (p. 332). While verbal insults and exclusion are in fact negative, gossiping on the other hand—which I do not deem aggressive—has assisted us in thinking critically about the complexities of Black girl experiences. Moreover as mentioned earlier, hooks (2001) contend that gossiping is the way to say what we know and how we feel. It is about how we interpret “negative behavior” so that we do not perpetuate historical perceptions and stereotypes of Black girls.

Many suggestions I made to assure a refusal to historical stereotypes and limitations seemed to be challenging for Homegirls. Through my organizing, I have noticed Homegirls leave the space without appreciating Black girl celebration. There has been numerous University of Illinois students, Champaign residents, and institutional agents who have partaken in SOLHOT as Homegirls failed to realize the implications of creating and maintaining a Black girl space. Many of these women have perpetuated sexist, oppressive, and elitist ideologies while participating (or not participating). These ideologies may include but are not limited to demanding power over Black girls due to age differences, ignoring Black girls’ presence by little to no interaction, attending spaces among Black girls with an anti-love attitude, expecting ego boosts during one-on-one conversations, stereotyping, colluding with white supremacy and institutional racism, making excuses that undermines “showing up,” and so many other disrespectful intentions that the list may be longer than the Nile river. Some have made claims such as “Black girls are homophobic,” “they are too ghetto,” “I cannot relate to them,” “they need to listen to me.” Interestingly, these same people usually mention structural inequalities as their reasons to participate in SOLHOT in the first place yet cease to

acknowledge how these inequalities has been internalized and projected onto the girls for their own protection in maintaining privilege.

This realization influenced my personal growth. I've always struggled in a space with women that had trouble finding their place in SOLHOT. I couldn't understand how and why they didn't get the thrill of working with the Lil' homies. In part, I felt this way because of my passion for collective work with young people and my peers. While reflecting on some of the hurtful e-mails, blogs, and conversations with many of the Homegirls (who did share their perspectives) about how they "didn't fit in" I began to think about ways I may have contributed to their challenges. I questioned myself. Why are these women having trouble connecting with these girls? What am I doing wrong? Am I listening? Many nights I cried reflecting on my own position. "Is it me or them?" "Why are people so upset with me as a co-organizer?" I also asked myself if it were an issue of my disposition (which some have said to be loud and bold), if it were an issue of my age (older Homegirls not respecting my perspectives because I was younger), or if I were in fact not being responsive to their needs and wants. I am still learning about my position and what I contribute in creating inclusive spaces for everyone. Yet, also noting that historical stereotypical frameworks really can't have a place in Black girl spaces; and maybe this is why some Homegirls actually didn't "fit in". However, due to these confrontations and conflicts, I have been working to improve my listening skills, ask more questions, and always reflect on my own biases and perspectives.

To adhere to some of the challenges and differneces the Homegirls claimed to have among the Lil homies and each other, I contemplated and implemented various strategies such as hosting sister circles where Black women can have honest

conversations about their experiences in SOLHOT, encouraged facilitation for their own ideas through activities, noted and discussed what Homegirls could contribute, and promoted skills that could be utilized. Some of these strategies resonated with Homegirls, while others left the space either in good or bad standing. Currently, I am still thinking about what I could change as a co-organizer to sustain a Black girl collective.

Along with my own strategies, I had also been fortunate to build relationships with women who taught me what it truly meant to work among youth. These women were always prepared to work with Black girls by being on time, listening, posing critical and political questions regarding our lived experiences, and being very humble in their interactions. One of their most praiseworthy attributes was the time, commitment, and work they put into the space by ensuring the participants have a snack even with little to no funds; reserving spaces for SOLHOT to meet; spending endless nights writing curricula, papers, articles, and framing activities; taking girls home after SOLHOT sessions; and most importantly, always reflecting on how SOLHOT can improve. As Pough (2004) states, “Understanding how young people created so much with so little makes it easier to think about we can continue to build, expand, and improve on the culture.” Although it takes funds to provide food, supplies, and performances, the acquisition of which is very challenging, SOLHOT remained consistent because organizers continued to coordinate successful spaces without much monetary support. The capital that sustained SOLHOT was through activities created, public performance successes, writing theses and dissertations and relationships cherished” (p. 7).

The young women with whom I’ve worked with developed SOLHOT organically with love as a foundation. They believe in the social and political transformations as

pedagogies. It was through their efforts and wisdom that I have been able to witness myself and my peers grow more confident, loving, and knowledgeable of self. I have had the privilege of bringing my ideas of what Black girls and women can do and/or think while understanding the importance of adhering to the beliefs and experiences of the girl participants in SOLHOT.

Practice with Lil Homies

The observations of the Lil' homies and my participation I assess from this point forward were from the local public middle school in Champaign, Illinois. I met with the Lil' homies at this school in 2011 for three months every Friday from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. About 15 Lil' homies had perfect attendance throughout the entire year. The girls at this school who participated in SOLHOT were primarily African American girls in the 6th through 8th grades; ages ranging from 11 to 13. Some of the Lil' homies who graduated from this school and went on to high school also came back to space. All of the Lil' homies were from working-class families in the Champaign area.

Before SOLHOT sessions began at this school, I met with prospective participants during their lunch hours. I would coordinate with the Assistant principal to confirm lunch times. During the lunch hour(s) I would sit at a table with girls. To get an idea of the number of participants I provided an application for them to complete. The application asked for information such as their name, address, birthday and phone numbers. On the back of the application I would have prompts that asked: What do you want people to know about you? What are your talents? How do you see yourself? Who inspires you? The prompts encouraged the girls to creatively illustrate or write out their responses. I would have available art supplies and we would all complete the application (if we

choose). These questions were intended to spark conversations, introduce a creative way to get to know the girls and to gauge the different interests and identities. During this time I would talk with prospective participants, reunite with past Lil Homies, pass out letters for their parents and discuss the logistics of the upcoming SOLHOT session.

Due to my time at this school, I have built relationships with the girls, and they typically come back to the space and bring their friends. On the first day of the SOLHOT session, there were about 30 girls; the number eventually decreased to 15. I am not sure why numbers decreased.

As I walked through the hallways to our meeting space in a classroom, I always asked Lil' Homies if they were coming to SOLHOT as a way to note how many girls will attend that day. I also wanted to talk with the girls who will not attend to assure them that whatever their reasons were for not attending, they were still welcome in the space.

In our SOLHOT sessions some of the Lil' Homies spoke of the racial differences in the school. This particular middle school had predominately white female teachers. The teachers' ages range from 26 to 50. The Lil' homies shared stories about miscommunication with their teachers stating that they were usually punished through suspension or detention for "talking back" to teachers, moving around the classroom, and/or defending themselves in a fight. They were very aware that they had very few African-American teachers or teachers with shared lived experiences.

To create alternative cultural pedagogical methods and practices for SOLHOT, Lil homies, Homegirls and I collectively developed arts-based activities; lead discussions about identity, health, education, community, and popular culture; and produce performances and exhibits. In SOLHOT sessions, we also produce performances and

build relationships. I always actively ensured that Lil' homies were engaged and celebrated in SOLHOT by encouraging art-based activities geared towards supporting their knowledge and validating the principles by which they live. These activities, such as writing poetry, performance, drawing, photo-voice, writing self-reflections, and dancing, were intended to offer culturally relevant pedagogies and promote academic achievement. My involvement permitted me to create a space that was conducive to their needs and capabilities.

Although my position allowed me to involve myself in many avenues of SOLHOT, that same involvement had also created limitations. Being an organizer, in the center of the space, I knew that I had not always been successful in using my voice. In many cases, my voice has become the “okay” to begin or stop activities, go to the restroom, speak, and/or move. My voice may have also appeared as that of an instructor/teacher due to my attempts at keeping them in the room away from strict administration. There were also times where Lil' homies were distracted and may be prompted by another student or teacher to leave the space; this typically suggest that the girls will be entering and exiting SOLHOT several times. I had to challenge myself to talk less in order to make sure the girls were not discouraged from attending the space or felt silenced. From this, I realized that I must pay close attention to Lil' homies emotions and safety.

In relation to that of an instructor/teacher, the girls called me Ms. Sheri. Although I insisted that they to refer by my first name only, they refused. They were persistent in giving me a title. Traditionally in the Black community, Mrs., Miss, Ms., or Mr. has been the proper references for elders, teachers, or people in authority, signifying respect. To an

extent, I agree with these ideologies in part because my parents taught me to address adults with titles as well. However, I wanted the Lil' homies to see me as a sister; someone who assists in creating what happens in the space. I did not want to frame a top-down structure⁵ in SOLHOT. This was intentional to ensure a comfortable space that would encourage various forms of expression regardless of who is facilitating.

Although I am not their age, I still want Lil' homies to experience a space where power lies in love and can be shared and practiced amongst people with various diverse backgrounds, ages, races, etc. This may be seen as utopian, but it introduces Black girls to the idea of resisting institutional barriers; understanding that actual space(s) do and can exist that honor and celebrate Black girls regardless of age, background, class, etc. I wanted Lil' homies to speak freely and perform their truest character without being discouraged by "authority." We all had an opportunity to learn from one another. I believe I've demonstrated "shared-power" in SOLHOT by encouraging the Lil' homies to facilitate their own activities, referring them as Misses as well, reassuring they can give themselves permission, and repetitively articulating my first name as a valid address. Although some Lil' homies remained persistent in referring to me as Miss Sheri it took me a while to acknowledge that shared-power can exist with or without titles. The titles were the Lil' homies way of establishing respect, while still participating as an equal member. The girls' behavior and attitudes did not alter their true character nor did they

⁵ Top-down structure is a form of power. Jordan (2002, p. 277) claims that "at best, new behavior by the new people among us, the children, is perceived as something to patronize or to tolerate, knowing that the systematic force of our adult demands for slavemimicry." Those who aim towards discipline and authority would pilot the space within a top-down structure.

resist any instructions suggested to them while calling me Miss. It was actually an honor that took some getting used to.

CHAPTER 5:

FINDINGS/ANALYSIS: LOVE PRACTICES

“Black girls learn to love hard. A concrete love. An in spite of love. Even though love. An in between crying love. They learn love hard.” -ras baraka (2005)

It was because of my position in SOLHOT that I began to critically reflect on Black girls (youth), the knowledge they produce (education), spaces they are a part of, and actions practiced just as it is: Love. Love in SOLHOT is demonstrated through Black girls voices affirming who they are as “sexy, beautiful, the baddest, real, unique,” dancing despite being called “hoochies,” performing who they really are and who they want to be, running around when told to sit down, paying homage because they didn’t forget, asking questions that need to be asked, being sassy because “what is being a lady really about?” and writing regardless of educational inequalities. All of these occurrences are political practices that make a Black girl space “the move against the forces of domination and death to reclaim Black life” (hooks, 2001, p. 93). As with hooks affirmation, these practices among Black girls speak to how they collectively affirm their identity, share narratives, create knowledge, and give meaning to their experiences.

While further assessing love as practice in SOLHOT I came to this notion of love practices. I define love practices as the repeated and fundamental actions and characteristics of trust, commitment, care, knowledge, respect, honesty, and responsibility. It is through the practice of these actions that Black girls can develop and create collective educational spaces, making sure everyone is accounted for. Because love is so urgently necessary when conceptualizing youth and education, Black girl existence must be a part of educational discourse.

In SOLHOT, we promote love practices by facilitating discussions about love, writing activities about how we feel, peer mediation to solve problems, academic tutoring, an individual hug to everyone, listening, consistently attending sessions, self-love affirmations. Love practices are a framework for how we can implement culturally relevant pedagogy and effective spaces contributing to young people's holistic nature, such as wellness, academic achievement, literacy, creativity, and overall optimal learning environments.

The Lil' homies and Homegirls practice love through dialogue, hip hop music playing, food provided, performances created, hugs given, laughter, smiles, ideas framed, imagination praised, loudness, crying, healing, peer mediations, promoting healthy choices, scholars honored, libation given, daily rituals, stories told, knowledge produced, sisters united, best friends written on paper or bodies, pictures posted, and everything else that contributes to Black girl celebration.

This space provides a context for self-love and respect, physical and emotional wellness, advocacy, hip hop, literacy, performing and writing, sexuality, beauty and body image, and creative expression. Lil' homies and Homegirls understand that they are present by choice and have the opportunity to discuss, create, and re-create in order to do the things in their everyday lived experiences that dominant discourse may deem as ignorant or illegitimate. Lil homies' say what they want but are confronted by real facts and alternatives when what they say are anti-Black girl.

As we convene every Friday, Lil homies and Homegirls participated in debunking myths and creating textual artifacts prompted by art-based activities. The activities engage Black girls as critical thinkers to make sense of what they already know.

Activity

I witnessed the actions of the Lil' homies and Homegirls as love practices and wanted to specifically explore what they thought about their relationship to love. As a way to engage in interactive discussions and incorporate art-based activities, I introduced an affirmation activity and dialogue. I interpret the affirmation activity facilitated as a method to affirm who we really are, love it, and reject oppressive frameworks that may manifest (hooks, 2001). I discuss the activity and dialogue offered in SOLHOT to demonstrate the relationship between love and Black girls. The activity and dialogue was designed to create a critical thinking space about the ways in which we negotiate what we know and about love.

Activity

“What I loved the most today”

Each girl will have a mirror and look into it each session, say what she loves the most about herself, write her responses on a note, and attach it to a mirror.

Dialogue

“What is love?”

Creating our own quotes about love (using magazines, art supplies, etc.)

A Homegirl facilitated the activity. The Lil' homies were asked “Is this activity cool?” to encourage participation. “What I loved the most today” activity asked for the Homegirls and Lil' homies to use any method of literacy to talk about an event, person,

idea, action, etc. that made them feel loved, enlightened, or transformed. This activity sparks ideas about the concept of love. Some of the responses were:

“What I love the most is how thick I’ve gotten.”

“What I love most is my hair. It has grown so much. And it’s cute.”

“I love my smile the most.”

The “Mirror” activity asked Lil’ homies and Homegirls to physically look at themselves. This idea was formed through my personal experience by recognizing who I am (my identity) and appreciating it. Until recently, I only looked in the mirror as a routine when getting dressed. After daily reflections, self-affirmations, writing, and reading I began to proclaim the importance of actually taking time to look at myself. In the process of this transformation, I noticed how self-conscious I was about my hair. By recognizing self-love affirmations as transformation, I began wearing my hair in different styles or not worrying about my hair at all. I shared my experience with everyone as a way to demonstrate various ways we look at ourselves. I wanted the Lil’ homies and Homegirls to be comfortable with sharing their truths privately or in large groups, either way wanting them to become familiar with talking, writing and affirming themselves.

The Lil’ homies and Homegirls enjoyed doing this activity. They were very open in discussing what they loved about themselves. It was all about love—self-love. After the mirror activity, we began to create quotes and collages about our definitions of love. We talked about what love means in our communities and created our own notions of love. In doing this activity, we shared laughs, stories and advice. We learned about each other intentionally and unintentionally.

Observations from the activity and dialogue

“Okay, so write down your thoughts about love. What is love?”

“Miss Sheri? I don’t know what love is.”

“And I don’t know either. We’re gonna try to find out together.”

We sat in a circle in a classroom. Some were writing, doing homework, drawing, and eyes on one another, curious. So we have this discussion, on love, sharing our private stories. Yes, we all were upset about something, but that’s why it was so important to talk about this concept of love. “So what is love?” I asked. The Lil’ homies and I were so intrigued by the concept of love. Lil’ homies began looking at the other Homegirl and I for answers. I responded by saying, “Girl, I do not know. I’m trying to figure it out, too.” Our questions were mostly about navigating and formulating our own analysis of love. “When someone is mad at you do they still love you?” “Can you love someone sometimes?” “Just because she/he does that doesn’t mean its love, right?” “I’m too young to think about love, I think.” Love, as we thought, could be painful but they (We) wanted it not to be. We wanted life to just be all about love. The reality is that hurt and pain exist and figuring out love can become so complex. I thought about how we all wanted answers but the critical process was difficult.

We then began talking about Self-love. Self-love was about not letting anyone hurt you “NO MATTER WHAT!”. Young feminists surrounded me. They were educating each other and especially me about love and didn’t even realize it.

I did talk about my daily practices and how it transformed me into thinking more consciously about myself. I shared how I begin to be more aware when I was sad, looking

in the mirror, writing about my experiences, changing what I didn't like, and setting goals. I stated, "No, this doesn't transform you overnight; just continue to believe." I mentioned bell hooks and reading as reference. We continued to talk about love. The atmosphere was very calm while we were speaking. Some were hesitant in sharing, others adamant, and I was curious. There were uncomfortable moments. One Lil' homie stated, "Sheri, this is why I don't like talking about love. It gets too complicated." One Lil' homie cried. I didn't feel sad for her, though. I felt happy that she thought about it in a way that touched her. And she admitted to it. I gave her a hug and said, "This is a part of the healing. It's not about getting over it but through it." Another Lil' homie responds, "Well, you can't get through a bridge; you can only get over it." I paused. She most definitely got me there. Hesitatingly, I said, "Well." Then we both laughed. I turned back to the first girl and said, "I cry all the time. Ironically, I like crying" I hugged her again. The Lil' homie affirmed, "Yes, I like crying, too; it makes me feel better." After SOLHOT was over and I got in my car, I sent the first Lil' homie a text that read: "I love you, dearly!" I sent the other Lil' homie a text saying: "U are soo amazing. I'm always inspired by you MUAH!" I heard them both. They both heard me. To me, that was love.

In this space, it was so much about their experiences and making sense of it. This is when we "save, motivate and commit to ourselves." The mere fact that girls wanted to learn about this concept of love and loving our selves was comforting. Some Lil' homies came to the space shy and timid; yet softly share their stories and definitions of love. In that moment, I knew that everyone has to something to say, everyone!

Findings

Sometimes Lil' homies negotiated whether they wanted to do⁶ the activities. In many ways, I feel that it's not about them refusing to participate but deciding in a short time period if these activities are actually relevant. I do not feel girls resist engaging in activities such as writing (although I hear some say "I don't feel like writing"), but instead, they understood SOLHOT as space without structural rules and choose not to write because in this space, girls have a choice. Choosing to write or not is a way to exercise that choice. For example, movement such as, body-shaking, neck rolling, fingers snapping; talking such as gossiping, addressing issues, telling a story; performance and drawing, becomes what they are interested in doing (but to which they are not limited). This evokes creativity and motivation among Black girls. Although Lil' homies may not acknowledge their contributions to the space, whatever feelings, ideas, concerns, actions acquired keeps them coming back to SOLHOT every week. I've observed the appreciation Lil' homies exhibit when interactive knowledge(s) and practices are present and accessible. Girls in SOLHOT love being interactive in articulating their truths and become more comfortable with expressing their knowledge in its truest form.

Our love practices in SOLHOT are very much like Healing Justice in that care, self-care, knowledge, respect, commitment and responsibility are reiterated in the space. According to Padamsee (2011), healing justice is another example of how love practices encourage care and collective action. Healing Justice can be defined as the "need to move the self-care conversation into community care...to move the conversation from individual to collective; from independent to interdependent" (p. 1). The mirror activity

⁶ To "Do", in SOLHOT, is a way to engage or practice the agenda/purpose of activities. "Doing" is the actual implementing of the activities agenda/purpose into our lives (whether it is by just talking about it or applying to daily routines.)

and self-affirmations activities in SOLHOT, for example, are practices that articulate the same methods as Padamsee's framework, developing collective self-care/love models. These activities are expansive in that the girls and I are able to look at our selves and begin having conversations about what it feels like to look at ourselves in the mirror. What does this mean? How do we feel? What do we see? What do we like? Dislike? What do these things say about our self-care? How can our self care transfer into our daily and communal experiences? We begin to host collective truths about who we are and want to be. As jazz singer Abbey Lincoln declares, "Nobody knows how to see God in themselves, and how to draw on that as the only source of energy you need" (Barnett, 2007, p. 11). In response to Abbey, SOLHOT self-love activities as practice enable us to "see the God/love in ourselves" in relation to Healing Justice: "this source of energy we need." Self-affirmation along with mirror activities is practices used to initiate us talking about ourselves to each other. Practicing how to ask questions about ourselves, care for ourselves, inquire about each other, and offer care for one another. "How are you?" "Are you okay?" "What can [we do] to be there?" "What do you need?" "I like this about myself." "I would like to improve this." "Today I feel." "Yesterday made me feel." "I love this." "My favorite part about myself is." "Look at me, y'all." "I never noticed this about myself until right now." This is a discourse that we convey within the space. Affirming and reaffirming each other and ourselves. Collective Care as justice.⁷

It's not about using these specific activities to practice love but having an awareness that actual love practices/activities exist. It's similar to putting all of your ideas

⁷ "Justice refers to fairness in relation to the self, others, and all life in Creation, and undergirds the drive toward social action that establishes equality, freedom, the drive toward social action that establishes equality freedom, and human and environmental rights" (Harris, 2010, p. 120).

in a box and being able to pull from it or add to it. A friend once said, “Love works differently for different people.” In this case, I wanted to make those “different” ways accessible. In SOLHOT, we share our various approaches to love and figure out (if we so choose) if they really are different. I did not intend to limit the girls’ notions of love to a particular framework but more so promote a space to create and learn about multiple frameworks we all can offer. My motive was to generate ideas about love so we can feel it, know it, accept it, embrace it, give it, and receive it. We may not have answers but there are certainly questions raised to assist in thinking about our experiences. We do wish to be well (Hansberry, 1999).

CHAPTER 6:

CONCLUSION/ BLACK GIRLS ARE LOVE

“They ask me what I'm writing for I'm writing to show you what we fightin' for” – Lyric by Talib Kweli “The Blast”

Since love is the ultimate healing transformative power, Black girls are very much present in this theory. Love practices among Black girls are the repeated actions of trust, commitment, care, knowledge, respect and responsibility taken to uplift the spirit, produce knowledge to liberate ourselves, offer healing, celebrate human existence providing a foundation to save ourselves and hear our truths. Therefore, SOLHOT is a space of hope where there is an emphasis on love, which is crucial in creating a collective; freeing ourselves from the oppressions of pain-stacking pressures, alienation, confusion, sorrow, and fear. Love practices in SOLHOT offers Black girls celebratory spaces preventing institutionalized thinking and historical stereotypes that traps their potential in the first place.

Creating spaces that exude love practices Black girls are able to seek care, support, trust, and freedom. As Dr. Ruth Nicole suggests, “You can't be free alone.” In SOLHOT, I make sure I give every girl a hug, tell them “I love them,” call them by their names (or nicknames), ask “How are you?” say “I missed you,” remember birthdays, show a smile, dance with them, develop imaginations while creating activities, and anything else that I have made us feel uplifted, supported, and seen. These are love practices—love practices that touch the heart and free the soul. Now, these are the feelings I have encountered while being a part of the SOLHOT collective. Have these practices been an alternative outlet from public school subjugation? For me, yes. For the

girls, yes. I believe I can speak for some of the Black girls in SOLHOT, because they keep coming back to the space. As Jordan (2002) contends, “Nobody runs away from safety, from a truly supportive, respectful, open situation” (p. 279). If I am absent for one of the sessions, my phone begins ringing with words of concern and apprehension about SOLHOT “happening.” These phone calls are a testament of the impetus, motivation, and commitments of Black girls to a space.

Love practices as pedagogy encourages a collective that exemplifies how we can holistically support youth. The pedagogy of love developed in SOLHOT demonstrates Paulo Freire’s theory of pedagogy and love. Darder (2002) tributes to Freire life’s work on pedagogy stating that,

“Living a pedagogy of love in our classroom and our communities defies the prescriptive formulas and models of the past, calling for the ‘reinvention’ of our radical vision not only of schooling but American society- a vision of a society that is unquestionably shaped by democratic commitment to human rights, social justice, and radical distribution of wealth and power.” (p. 30-31).

Love practices have the potential to inspire and activate people to apply similar pedagogical approaches to every space in which Black girls and youth in general are a part. Practices that call for refusal to systems and beliefs that limits Black youth expression. It asks that we all commit to saving our lives hearing our truths. It serves to offer ideas and imagination when contemplating how to implement culturally relevant spaces for Black girls. This thesis is a contribution to Black Girl Studies and scholarship

that supports Black girlhood. It is an attempt to spark ideas (without limitations) and brainstorm ways to practice love, create inclusive educational spaces, and promote a love agenda. Most importantly I have informed you, the reader, that a Black girl revolution is approaching. Don't forget to bring your swag.

For future research, I would like to critically examine individual Black girl narratives in relation to how they practice love within their personal lived experiences. I would like to share their words as a means to celebrate Black girl voices of Champaign, IL/Chicago, IL. Their words would be a part of Black girl discourse for those interested in the celebration of Black girlhood. Black girls have stories, too. In this, I intend to share their experiences as moral human beings, which can be seen through their individual love practices.

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