

A Call to Action

Creativity and Black Girlhood

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BOOK REVIEW

Ruth Nicole Brown. 2013. *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.



Ruth Nicole Brown is a visionary. In her latest book, she focuses on the cultural production of black girls in a space she created and called “Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths” (SOLHOT). The work should be read not only as a case study or even as a record or documentation of events but as a call to action. Explicitly stating her goal to “influence stakeholders in service provider positions that affect young people” (9), Brown also takes aim at the academy that so often falls short and that takes an incredible amount of time to change and to move forward. We cannot wait for this mammoth machine because Brown’s call to action is urgent.

The call situates Black Girls’ studies as actionable space and emphasizes working from a place of love. In order to insist on this ethic of love, Brown also insists that we read her work in a way that “invite[s] a Black-feminist poetic and communitarian politic centered in Black women’s and girls’ creativity” (11). In other words, we must hear, as her title suggests, because her call to action is centered on creativity and, as readers, we are interpellated into the process.

From the first chapter, Brown incorporates spirituality as a primary tool for this work and so we understand that this is not simply an academic study, although it is that as well. Citing Alexander, Brown uses the same “organizational codes” (2005: 62) that govern the format of SOLHOT meetings to organize her text. The “Acts of Recognition... [acknowledging] who walks with us” (Brown 2013: 64) is a ritual to signal to the participants that their work is sacred and that it moves through and with time during which the event will start and stop. Because Brown includes the naming of feminists (for example, Barbara Christian, June Jordan, Trinh Minh-ha) at the start of each chapter, the reader also participates in the ritual that starts each SOL-



HOT meeting, and is reminded of the power of invoking the memory and context of so great a cloud of witnesses. While the use of these rituals suggests harmony and coherence in the group, Brown lets us know that SOLHOT is a collective but its members are not always interested in the same things, and are neither always agreeable, nor willing to participate. As readers, we are positioned as listeners because, to be a part of SOLHOT, we have no option.

Each chapter centers the scripts, poetry, and song lyrics produced by the group, rendering the text itself as something of a performance space. Black girls are clearly the intended audience and readers. In this way, Brown presents performance as an action that honors the individual black girl's story at the same time as connecting it to the larger machine of systemic inequality. Brown knows that there are dangers for marginalized girls in exposing their stories to an audience that may not be what I think of as black-girl-literate. Her first chapter includes her own story and artistic work and a consideration of the risks she herself is taking in using this approach in a time of the punishing neo-liberal university system. In so doing, she foregrounds her own vulnerability and not just that of the girls with whom she works. Her own artwork, very much about vitality, survival, and hope, speaks to the possibility and necessity of changing academic cultures.

Using interviews from members of SOLHOT, chapter two operationalizes the term homegirl and the work of the relationship-building needed for participating in such a space. The nicknames for the homegirls are shared; this provides a sense of the individual characteristics of participants. For example, one girl is called "Orisha" or "The One Who Favors Red II" (66) but this access to individual girls' experience is secondary to the theme of memory and black girlhood. In reflecting on what collective memory of black girlhood might mean, Brown draws on the work of writers such as Toni Morrison and Edwidge Danticat and extends the tradition of storytelling from multiple perspectives. Brown links the work of acknowledging and revering the memories of fallen black girls or black girlhoods denied the work of organizing a space like SOLHOT. This kind of labor, she argues, requires "making" (51) time. She creates a non-linear text that raises questions about the relationship between memory and time, labor and creativity, and story-telling and resistance.

Chapter three examines the cross-over between what happens in SOLHOT and what occurs in the external context of the program, what happens when they overlap, and how the environments (physical, geographical, institutional, atmospheric) respond to each other. In engaging the reader, Brown implements a method that mixes photographs and lyrics, one she calls an "anti-narrative photo poem" because it furthers the experience of discontinuity, resulting in

further “blurred boundaries” (101). The structure of the photo poem is jagged, giving one a sense of walking on tiptoe, or spinning; it puts the reader in motion, which is crucial to altering a gaze, to changing a perspective, to revising a reading. Rooted in the critical black feminist pedagogies and cultural analyses that reformat power, Brown’s approach draws attention to the critical relationships between research methodology and the research product.

In this chapter, black girlhood is re-positioned as agentic. This works against the dominant discourse and images that singularly focus on black girls as being problematic. This is also a chapter about recognition and reflection, of the self and of others, of the individual and the collective identity, and of the ways those identities morph. The critical analysis that accompanies the photographs and photographers is what effectively offers the complex multiple telling of collective stories because images offer context that language alone cannot. The photographs in this chapter are the work of one of the homegirls, a participant and a co-constructor of the SOLHOT experience. They pointedly direct us to reflect on ourselves and our perception of others when they, in turn, are portrayed by someone who *loves* them. The mandate of this work is “service to and benefit of the communities in which they were created” (112).

Ethnography, poetry, and performance invoke creativity as a way of finding resolution of conflict without censorship. On the “bad days” (139) of fighting and the necessary defensiveness that is an undeniable aspect of black girlhood to which Brown refers in chapter four, it is poetry that offers space to explore what survival simply cannot ensure. The impact of this chapter is a direct result of Brown’s reflexivity about herself and the other women who work with the girls; this is testimony and is not to be confused with mere documentation. As with every type of fight that occurs, the most powerful observations about such a fight can come from witnesses. Testimony here is a form of recognition, validation, and acknowledgement of the multiple angles from which any conflict can be interpreted. To perform the poetry is to share the stories of the fights and to re-situate the conflicts. To perform the poetry as a witness of even the bad days is to struggle in solidarity alongside the combatants. Fighting consumes resources that could be better spent in the pursuit of structural transformation, and creating poetry is one way to begin that shift. Spoken word poetry and performance as a method of re-telling the backstory about why conflict is occurring re-focuses the target away from the bodies of black girls toward the systems that facilitate and even encourage violence against them. Performance and poetry provide the girls with access to self-determination; they decide which parts of their conflicts they deem worth sharing, how to do so, and with whom.

Making their conflicts public is risky for black girls but it does offer new solutions and opportunities for additional support.

Chapter five prioritizes aural practices and extends the call for active listening issued in the title through a juxtaposition of silence and sound. In the final chapter there is a return to the discussion on the power of creativity that operates not only as a form of expression but also as the collusion between theory and methodology. Brown analyzes several song lyrics that were produced as part of a SOLHOT project to insist that the ways we choose to listen are of crucial importance. She reminds us of the significance of black girls listening first and foremost to themselves. Listening is integral to praxis, and Brown clearly situates the need for organizers, activists, educators, parents, and black girls and women to practice what they teach.

As an artist practitioner, activist, professor, and woman of color, this book resonated deeply with my own experiences. Each chapter vibrates with motion, propelling readers into analyzing the minute interactions occurring in the very specific space of SOLHOT and yet, before this analysis can crystallize into generalization or vague pacifications, we are zooming outwards to consider the sweeping panoramic scene. Like the most effective texts, the local aesthetic and application is always most valuable in its relationship to the bigger picture. The most provocative performances are always, always urging us to action. Black girlhood is both the theoretical framework and the expression, the praxis, and ultimately the creative potential that is asking and answering important questions. Brown issues a call to action to her readers, inviting us to get involved by extending the analysis of black girlhood that she has pioneered in profound ways. Although the text is not to be mistaken as something seeking external validation, Brown continues to fortify an area of girls' studies that is all too often neglected. Ultimately, her work insists on the relationship between individual and community as the most fruitful site of cultural production; she demands that we listen actively, she highlights and prizes the complexity and creativity that is already present and therefore necessary to cultivate in black girlhood.

We have been issued a clear call to creative action, to reconsidering what actionable spaces can potentially be when they are shaped by love for black girls. Are we listening?



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