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Black girl pedagogies: layered lessons on reliability

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ABSTRACT
This essay highlights and extends the distinct and critical work of Black Girlhood Studies. With a particular focus on how it differentially engages Black girls and Black girlhood, it takes readers on a journey of rumination through my exploration of coming to understand reliability as taught to me by Black girls and Black girl celebratory spaces. Utilizing poetics and reflexive writing, this essay names and elucidates three facets of reliability – tracing, collective grounding, and embracing paradox. Overall this essay describes reliability as an important Black girl pedagogy and articulates the cultural and educational importance of Black girlhood and Black girl celebratory spaces.

KEYWORDS
Black girls; auto/ethnography; Black feminism; vulnerability

Where and Why I Enter: An Introduction to Reliability and Mattering

To be a Black Girlhood Studies scholar in a body marked Black, youthful, queer, and gendered, is to know and not know what it means to be a Black girl. It is to be a woman who sees herself as girl and woman and to see the girls who lay claim to the label "Black" move and live in and from the space in the face of discourses that simplify, flatten, and reduce Black girl in similar ways racialization reduces Black in the USA to African American. Equally, it is to know and not (fully) know what it means to be a Black girl in this moment. Extending Gaunt's (2006) articulation of Black girls' creation of knowledge through kinesthetic and musical practices as translocal, I contend that being a Black girl is a translocal[1] experience. Context, age, temporality, and other factors create unique and varied encounters and still there is a common texture to Black girlness. Black girls, like Black women, are (mis)read, hyper(in)visible, appraised through historical and cultural windows marked by tropes of Blackness and white femininity (Collins, 2000; Davis, 1983; Hooks, 1989). Thereby embodiment, or moving through the world as a Black girl, entails dialogue with, against, and through these juxtapositions and the discourses they create. Further, aesthetics of this common texture comprises negotiating, managing, and/or refashioning stereotypes; being disappeared into more popularized dichotomous discourses, and asked (oft times expected) to serve as containers of secrets, burdens, and lessons. Likewise, this aesthetic as signalled in Gaunt's articulation also encompasses genius and innovation. To be a Black Girlhood Studies scholar in this moment, for me then, is to be keenly aware

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of the ways this texture is surfacing, especially now as the formalized field takes stage – a stage that at times disappears labour associated with its naming as well as work done decades before, which serve as pillars to Black Girlhood Studies[2].

Candidly articulated by Owens, Callier, Robinson, and Garner (2017), "Black girlhood studies actualized as an important, necessary, and rich field of inquiry because Ruth Nicole Brown dared to believe not only that Black girls were worthy of our intellectual, artistic, and political labour, but … they could, if we listened, change the world" (p. 117). Her naming of Black Girlhood Studies in the germinal work *Black girlhood celebration* also explicitly identified celebration as a grounding principle and distinct marker of the field, and unapologetically professed, Black girls matter. Continuing the labour recognized and named as Black girlhood celebration, this essay is homage, reliability in practice.

This is a thoughtful, wild (read: non-linear and seemingly unstructured to some) but not reckless sifting through, sitting with, and clarifying of lessons, memories, and experiences working alongside and on behalf of Black girls. So, at the ground level is where I enter. Where Black girls pound fists to drive home points. Where inquiry and reflection take place. Where I sit in the messiness of what I thought I knew, what I seek to know, and what I am coming to know about how I know what I know. This is recognition. Where there is floor space to roll around in Black girl images, scrap papers, notes, thoughts. Where readers are taken through a passage. Here, voices, stories, and experiences with and learning from Black girls take precedence. Where reliability, Black girls, and what it takes to be Black girl reliable stand heavy inside my body. Where Black girl matters are centred. Where I make room for what I am coming to know I know about being "Black girl reliable" *and* how I learned it.

Utilizing poetics and reflexive writing, this essay takes readers on a journey to excavate my coming to understand reliability as taught to me by Black girls and Black girl celebratory spaces. Specifically, it elucidates three facets of reliability – tracing, collective grounding, and paradox. To implement this reflective process, this essay articulates Black Girlhood Studies as an intervention and provides an intergenerational perspective of Black feminist theory. Then through poetics and rumination it articulates three dimensions practices of reliability. Lastly, it offers provisional contemplations on what it means to be "Black girl reliable."

Black Girlhood Studies as Intervention

Black Girlhood Studies is a mattering[3] project. As such, it is, though not exclusively, concerned with emboldening embodied experiences of being Black and girl. Additionally, as a field it examines and accounts for the rub between self-identification, self-concept, as well as meaning made in Black girlhood sites and projections of Black girls, discourses of race and language to describe Blackness. Further, Black in Black Girlhood Studies refers to racial, cultural, imaginative, and historical collective heterogeneity shared by people of African descent (Gill, 2012). Accordingly, it places Black girls and experiences of Black girlhood at its helm. Posed in Black girl vernacular, "What do you know and how do you know it" (Brown, 2009), implores that knowledge comprises the information itself and its source. Similar to Related to Tuck's (personal communication, June 13, 2017) insistence that citation is a political practice, what do

you know and how you know it is Black Girlhood Studies citation. Thereby, as it pertains to Black girls and what it means to be reliable to Black girls and Black Girlhood Studies, it must also entail the tracing of what I know (the lesson) and this tracing also involves how I know it (an ever unfolding story).

As an interdisciplinary field that chaffs with guiding principles and/or contemporary conversations in Girls' Studies, Black Studies, Education and (even) Black Women's Studies/feminism in particular, Black Girlhood Studies makes visible creative, intellectual, and cultural production of Black girls and Black girlhood while simultaneously illumining the dearth of attention afforded Black girls and Black girlhood in these fields until recently, if at all. Within dominant Girls' Studies paradigm, as noted by scholar Lipkin (2009), the category girl is usually age specific, white, and non-white girlhoods are immaterial. Similarly, the lived experiences, contributions, and intellectual labour within Black Studies writ large is sexed and as a result generally relegated scholarship explicitly highlighting Black women especially those utilizing feminist analyses, girls, and Black sexuality on the margins of the field (Karenga, 1994; Walker, 1983). Mirroring Black Studies and Girls' Studies, Education too has been slow to take a vested interest in Black girls. Until 2008, Black girls' educational achievement served as filler for race and/or gender discourses. It is only within the last decade that the specific realities of Black girls' educational experiences have become a particular point of interest to the field[4] (see AAW, 2008).

Different from the aforementioned fields, Black Women's Studies foregrounds race and sex and theorize about and from the place of living and surviving in a world while living in a body marked Black and woman (Beale, 2003; Davis, 1983). Generations of Black feminism, prior to Black Girlhood Studies' emergence, engage in elucidating and producing theory with Black women as focal point. Black women's girlhoods may inform Black feminist thought and is discussed by some in Black Women's Studies. For the most part, however, Black girlhood and girls remain unmentioned as key ingredients in its theories, standpoint, and episteme.

Black girls and Black girlhood are tertiary and assumed inconsequential to the aforementioned fields. While there is more visibility and increased airtime in public policy, media,[5] and in some fields for Black girls, it is imperative that Black girls and Black girlhood be explored, theorized, and imagined independently and to do so, must be taken on their own terms. Black Girlhood Studies stands in as a reliable location and ever developing archive for Black girls. Furthermore, as a disposition it presupposes that the necessary shift does not reside in Black girls' choices of dress or tone (Henry, 1998; Lei, 2003; Morris, 2007), performance of femininity (Jones, 2010), hypersexuality (James, 2012; Moynihan, 1965; Rose, 2008), or an overall collapse of Black girls' experiences into race *or* gender discourse (AAUW, 1998, 2001; Lopez, 2003; Watkins, Lewis, & Chou, 2001). The gaze upon Black girls is problematic. Affirming and showcasing why Black girls and Black girlhood matters, Black Girlhood Studies' particular orientation to Black girls, recognizes paradox as strength and therefore simultaneously expands which Black girls matter. In other words, "the labour of Black Girlhood Studies and Black girl advocates is to engender work with Black girls, which claim, embody, and contribute to the infinite and even conflicting representations of Black girls" (Hill, in press). Thereby, as a field centring Black girls and Black girlhood, it makes room and in fact deems Black girlhood central to the imagining, survival, and future of Black girls

and women specifically and Black life generally. Congruently, in demanding a celebration of Black girls in all of their complexity, Black Girlhood Studies is more than a nascent academic field; it is an act of being "Black girl reliable."

Intergenerational Thoughts on Black Feminist Theory

Black feminist theory emanates from an insistence that the lives of Black women, in particular, and the sociocultural realities around them, are intellectual and cultural bedrocks best theorized, examined, reimagined, (and critiqued) by Black women. While all individuals are not and need not be Black women, it subverts the norm that scholars are not Black and certainly not women. Simultaneously it situates positionality/standpoint as a power tool for theorizing (Collins, 2000). Essential to Black feminist theory is the role of the body. At its core is the recognition that the marking of bodies is a political project and one that places Black women (and girls) in precarious, subjugated, and undue positions. Through various mediums and across space and time Black feminists discuss, repeatedly experience, name, and theorize living in a body marked Black and woman as well as its affect (see Beale, 2003; Davis, 1983; Jordan, 1980; Lorde, 1984; Parker, 1989). Black feminist theory facilitates critiques of structural systems, doctrines, and sociocultural realities that perpetuate and magnify conditions that seek to inhibit Black women' potentiality from living in the world as full selves.

Black Feminist Theory and Bodies

Appraisal and perception of Black bodies reside at the core of Black feminist theory. (De)valuation of the Black bodies began during slavery. Equally, it is there that it became a collective object from which individual Black bodies have grave difficulty escaping. The subjugation of and reduction of Black people to bodies afforded the making of "the Black body," which Young (2010) conceptualizes as, "an *idea* of the black body has been and continues to be projected across actual physical bodies" (p. 4). This depreciation and clumping of Black girls and women's experience is noted by Black feminist philosopher Katherine McKittrick (2006):

> The "not-quite" spaces of black femininity are unacknowledged spaces of sexual violence, violence, stereotype, and sociospatial marginalization; erased, erasable, hidden, resistant geographies and women that are, due to persistent and public forms of objectification, not readily decipherable. (p. 61).

Illuminated in the preceding statement is that Black female bodies are inextricably bound to history. I am not suggesting our bodies are identical or that they are void of agency. I am, however insisting that how we are read, evaluated, and utilized is constituted through a historically configured Black female body. Our everyday living, choices, style of dress, performance of femininity, etc. are mitigated through historical readings and appraisals of *the* Black female body. Taking these veracities into account I situate the body as s dynamic haunted entity contextually understood with physical, discursive, individual, and collective manifestations.

Expanding Black Feminist Theory

Paralleling this layered framing of the Black female body is paradox – common ground on which Black feminist projects and the many iterations of Black feminist theory stand. Black feminism is subversion. As a space intentionally carved out for the intellectual production of Black women to flourish, Black feminist theory and thereby Black feminist pedagogy has always intended to (and does) do more than make visible Black girls and women as well as the historical, cultural, and social factors, policies, pressing, and shaping their lives. Huckaby (2013) asserts, "limited social imaginations occupied with differently valued binaries produce the logic that relegates feminist scholarship to 'woman'" (p. 567). Similarly, anecdotal conversations and scholarly engagements wrongfully assume that the utility and applicability of Black feminist theory begins and ends with Black women. Black feminist theory exists because as Hull, Bell Scott, and Smith (1982) insist:

> Naming and describing our experience are important initial steps, but not alone sufficient to get us where we need to go … only through exploring the experience of supposedly "ordinary" Black women whose "unexceptional" actions enabled us and the race to survive, will we be able to begin to develop and overview and an analytical framework for understanding the lives of Afro-American women."

To do this work Hull et al. names requires systematic analysis, intercultural critique, healing, and more. In its many facets – theory and pedagogy to name a few – Black feminism through its enactment is an undoing and a reorienting of life.

Black feminist theory is varied and ever evolving. While it places Black women and a feminist analytic that deconstructs systemic oppression writ large, the foci taken up and/or used to ground different expressions of Black feminist theory range. In *Black feminist thought* for instance, Collins (2000) drives home the necessity of a Black women's standpoint and the core themes informing it. Deemed in many spaces a canonical text, Black feminist theory in academe builds off, extends, and/or makes particular turns away from this text. Pertinent to standpoint theory and various approaches to Black feminist theory is that our understanding, sites of analysis, and blind spots are informed by who we are, contexts in which we were raised, and the conditions and contexts informing our coming to know Black feminism. For this reason, and because it is not the intent of this essay, I will not offer a literature review of Black feminist theory. Instead, I discuss some Black feminist concepts and theories that bridge Black feminist theory and Black Girlhood Studies.

In response to narrow constructions of Black identity, Black femininity in particular, and to initiate deeper and layered understandings of Black experience, Hooks (1990) offers "radical black subjectivity." Embracing paradox and in pursuit of self-definition, hooks insists that Black females find power and possibility in the margins, in the wrongness of Black femininity. Offering an explicitly embodied way of deploying radical black subjectivity, though I doubt this was Lorde's (1984) intent, is her concept of "the erotic as power." As a transgressive tool, the erotic purports women's knowledge production is embodied, pleasure-filled, and spiritual. Moreover, the erotic is an untapped technology that is more accessible the more we are in tune, self-defined, and therefore unbothered by ideas of wrongness mapped onto us.

Personifying paradox and disregard for potential shaming for a self-concept that denounces respectability is hip hop feminism. Gracing the academic scene through the voice and scholarship of Morgan (1999), hip-hop feminism has grown to be a contentious and generative space for people who find home in Black feminism and hip-hop (see Brown, 2009; Brown & Kwakye, 2012; Durham, 2014; Peoples, 2007; Pough, 2015). Naming the tension of and implicit potential of hip-hop feminism Lindsey (2015) declares, "for many Black feminists, anchoring a feminist praxis or theory in a cultural movement in which misogyny and sexism thrives seems at best misguided, and at worst, impossible" (p. 56). However, since its birth, hip-hop feminism has grown and expanded its contribution to linguistic practices (Love, 2012; Richardson, 2013), Black girl creative spaces (Brown, 2009, 2013), and media and culture (Durham, 2014).

Another expression of Black feminist theory, with roots in hip-hop feminism as voiced by Ruth Nicole Brown is Black Girlhood Studies. Black Girlhood Studies is a conversation and inquiry between lived experiences of Black girls and stories and ideas generated (internally an externally) about Black girls. It accounts for the historical devaluation of Black females outlined by other Black feminist by setting its sights and aims on celebration. Black Girlhood Studies distinguishes itself through its attention on Black girl and Black girlhood as well as celebrating the ability and creativity of Black girls (and women). "This pertinent and genius shift insists that to engage in BGS [Black Girlhood Studies] is to revel in being with Black girls, embrace the vastness of Black girl ways of being, and to acknowledge Black girlhood as a *thing* (it's so real), an experience, a site of great possibility" (Hill, in press). Black Girlhood Studies embraces and creates from paradox as well as holds in tandem identities, positions, experiences, and stories often positioned as hierarchical and incompatible to reveal their simultaneity. Urged by Brown (2009) it is, "invisibility in the midst of hypervisibility. Black girlhood is secrets in the midst of all this attention to girls' voice. Black girlhood is hurt in the midst of playing" (p. 21). As a recent iteration of Black feminism, it situates Black girlhood as a political site of creative potential (Brown, 2013) and generative theory. As an area of study centring the celebration of Black girls and Black girlhood, it requires new ways of engaging Black girls, which begin and continue with unlearning and critically examining the/(my) self.

Who, Where, and How?: On Context and Method

Data illumined in this essay comes from creative and performance-based workshops with self-identified Black girls attending high school and college preparatory programs. These data derive from a larger multi-site intergenerational project interrogating the interplay of schooling and Black girlhood with participants ranging from ages 14 to 70 on the Black girl continuum. To reject mind/body duality, these workshops utilize artistic methods, in particular poetry to disrupt language conventions (Jordan, 1995) and dance and movement to foreground the body and transmute memories (George-Graves, 2010; Gottschild, 2003). The format of these workshops that ranged from 90 to 120 min entailed a 12–15-minute original and improvizational performances[6] recalling poignant memories of my life growing up as a Black girl, a warm up, interactive exercises, and collective processing. Workshop participants as well as the evolving mood

and issues raised directed the order and flow of the workshops. Within a week of each, individual interviews occurred.

With a sense of my motivations, interventions Black Girlhood Studies and the larger project in which data in this essay draws, I invite you (reader) to ruminate with me. To embody my thought process, mirroring stream of conscious thoughts, the writing style below is a shift from the form experienced thus far. The next section embodies a methodical non-linear structure to illustrate reliability through tracing. What appears on page should not be read as the order of events but as a formative dialogue; a dialogue that first took place in my body between data and now manifesting on page. Also, it is a dialogue mediated by (my) commitments and situated identities that you (reader) may or may not have.

Ruminate with Me: A Generative Process

Tracing is a Reliability Practice

> It's Black Girl Genius Week at University if Illinois! Black girls celebrators from various walks of life, ages, regions of the United States, and varying relationships to Ruth Nicole Brown, Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT),[7] and the university, travel to Champaign-Urbana to show up and out in the name of Black girl genius. Clarification: Those who receive sacred invitation extended by Black girl fairy godmother (Hill, in press), Ruth Nicole Brown and/or other homegirls,[8] in SOLHOT, show up ready to give, unlearn, be stretched, and learn. As a lifelong SOLHOT homegirl, I along with a select few others receive front row, really only row seats, on On Wednesday 26 October 2016 to an intimate learning session with SOLHOT homegirl, reknown poet, literary professor, and master teacher Nikky Finney. In a room with 12 people sitting around a rectangular table, with Nikky at the head, she serves us a lesson on reliability. A lesson taught to her by the late poet Lucille Clifton, a personal inspiration since her visit to my elementary school.
>
> Finney leans forward and begins to describe her experience asking Clifton about memories of being called a nigger. She wanted to know how she responded. She assumed, like her she'd be in an uproar. She waited for Clifton to blow up. The blow up never happened. Clifton surprised Finney in her calm insistence that his words did not hold weight and instead were indicators that he did not know her and therefore unreliable.

This man's decision to call Clifton a nigger, for her, was enough evidence for Clifton to render him and his comment immaterial, unworthy of response. Implicit in this lesson is that people who are reliable know your name (or have enough sense to ask your chosen name). Clifton's decision to leave his words hanging in the balance is a poignant strategy and example of what to do with unreliable folk. The lesson (as framed by Finney) begins here. Reliability also rests in Finney's insistence, need even, to tell about reliability in a manner it was taught to her: through story.

> So I needed to go back and in …

So I did. And when I did this memory emerged. What is to be gleaned from it is that reliability is to be taught and received through story. Finney's choice to tell us a story about how she was taught the lesson, through solicitation of a story from Clifton, is essential. It is in the method of storytelling, the manners moments and stories were told, that tracing happens. Upon recent reflection of the account, three dimensions concerning lessons generally and reliability particularly emerged: mind

how the lesson is being taught mind, who is handing out lessons, and mind what (realistic and aspirational) relationship(s) reside between those involved. These three elements help to engage and facilitate tracing.

Certainly, Finney's conception of reliability and the components I name here could be applied widely. Yet, its specificity is clear and apt. Finney offers this story during Black Girl Genius Week, a week long experience dedicated to the practice of celebrating not pedestaling Black girls and Black girlhood. The story is told during a private session with Finney designated for a small constituency of people hand selected by the week's primary organizer, Ruth Nicole Brown. It is in this context, under these auspices that the lesson is gifted. There is something special, specific, and intentional there. I surmise and want to posit here that reliability as tracing, like but also distinct from academic citation, is just as much about the story told as well as who is indebted with the lesson. Tracing as a means of practicing reliability takes serious who receives access to the knowledge. It serves as a means of creating a deliberate genealogy and potential future. As my first record of reliability and Black girls entering the same room, same moment, tongue, in sequence, it is important to begin and continue from here. To apply the knowledge that emerged from tracing and mind "what (realistic and aspirations) relationship(s) reside between those involved," I continue tracing to describe collectivity as a practice of reliability.

Reliability Requires Collective Grounding

In Finney's story I heard, more than the words, I also heard the texture of reliability. I am clear, as homegirl Tru Petty[9] reminded me when discussing an earlier draft of this essay that reliability is a SOLHOT lesson. I know this to be true because as a futuristic space designed under the guise of an afterschool program, SOLHOT stages opportunities and experiences for girls (and everyone else who comes to the space) to be unapologetically themselves. Equally, I know reliability to be a SOLHOT lesson because when initially writing about reliability (Kwakye, Hill, & Callier, 2017), it emanated from salient (re)memory failing the girls and feeling failed by a fellow homegirl. Thirdly, because Nikky Finney is a homegirl and someone whose work grounds its visionary, reliability must be a SOLHOT lesson.

I am, however, intrigued by particular moment of its resonance. Perhaps in that moment I heard it loudest. Perhaps, I attained a level of understanding that opened something deeper within to hear reliability and embrace it as an exchange, as more than a quality, to be or not to be reliable, but as a practice. So I need to go back.

Back into my bag and pull out my phone because I know homegirl Blair had reliability on the dome and wrote about it saying, "In SOLHOT being reliable means being ready to imagine worlds, together" (p. 4). I also needed to go back because Blair and I are in relationship, we are homegirls of SOLHOT, sometimes artist collaborators, and in our work in SOLHOT we take seriously sustaining relationships. My work generally and this essay particularly is about illumining the myriad of ways reliability operates, informs, and is taught through and being in Black girl spaces.

Since 2008, I have been immersed in SOLHOT a collective space for working with, theorizing, and mobilizing Black girlhood as a site of celebration and untapped creative solution. Though, in homegirl and Black girl time travel, we never leave,

I continue to return to that collective grounding space physically, virtually, and discursively, for it serves as place to check in, be challenged, and develop deeper understandings about what see when looking at Black girls, ourselves, and our relationship. It is through this collectivity that theory and praxis, light years ahead of our publishing record is crafted, practiced, tweaked, and practiced again. Those of us who are scholars in academe (because SOLHOT is filled with scholars) have our own niches and even if when in SOLHOT oriented space at the same time; we do not hear nor gravitate to the same things. Yet, in this moment, Blair and I are meditating on and writing about reliability. Accordingly, I wanted/continue to want to hear more of Blair's story and felt an urge to extend our relationship into our writing and thinking through reliability. So, I reached out *via* text (see Figure 1).

Me: Hey love how are u? Quick question: the master lesson with Nikki was in 2016. Ps. As u continue writing this year, know that u have a new place to visit and take respite should u want or need.

Blair: Hey boo I'm well! Gearing up for this move, on my morning walk and it's pure bliss <3 ((heart)) How are you? And yes! I also saw some my 2014 notes that brought up being reliable, something stuck for me during the 2016 lesson, but I think that had a lot to do with reimagining my relationship to SOLHOT at the point, post loving face to face over a year, post-break up, etc.

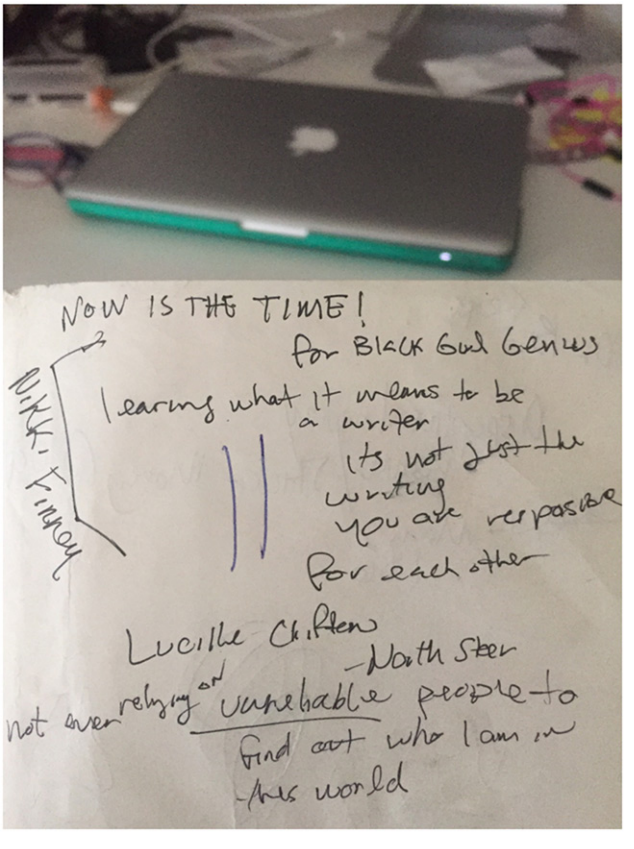

Figure 1. Reliable notes from homegirl Blair.

Me: Gotcha. So Nikky told the story in 2016 with us and u were pondering about it in 2014

Blair: She told that particular story about Lucille Clifton in 2016, I have in my notes she mentioned being reliable to us in 2014 but with a different story, I'll send my notes

Me: Do you have any notes you would be willing to share? Awesome. I'm in Toronto working on a paper on the layers of reliability and want to do some weaving ya know

Blair: Dooope!

Me: When did u write these notes? And [how] would u feel about me possibly including this to include in the dialogue. Don't know how this thing is shaping up but wanna be sure since we are in dialogue that ur here

Blair: Still was during the actual session in 2014. Please do!! We in conversation!! …

(personal communication Friend's 2014 notes)

We participated in the same events, sat in the same room both years when Finney spoke, and yet I do not recall an articulation, an utterance on reliability in 2014. *Why is this fact important,* because it supports my commitment to trace, what I am coming to know I understand about being "Black girl reliable," how it is being taught and who is doing the teaching. Because as an educator I am aware the moment of recognizing what we know is not necessarily the moment it was taught. In addition, our different recalls of reliability also signal the value and necessity of collectivity to reliability in several ways. "Please do!! We in conversation" were Blair's candid closing words in our text conversation. These words confirm our relationship and also the power of both collectivity and tracing. As fellow homegirls, girlwomen who find homeplace (Hooks, 1990) in making space for Black girls and women to be in their bodies and tell their stories, SOLHOT is a mutual grounding space. Combining our homegirl status with our scholarship located in Black Girlhood Studies, we are deliberately in conversation. Said differently, we are part of a similar tracing and I am adding Blair to my tracing practice. In agreement that deep contemplation on and through paper, deepens understanding (Richardson, 2000), I employ rumination as a mode of inquiry to think about paradox as part of practicing reliability. What follows then is a dialogue between stream of conscious reflections (scribbles),[10] and sentient meditations on three salient moments of being with Black girls.

Reliability to Black Girls Embraces Paradox

Scribble I.

complicates

creates unfamiliar/unassumed/seemingly incompatible lovers

requires relationship

is relating

acknowledges the seen as constructed

relative and context informed

layered and active

(*analytic notes,* June 2017)

My performance ends. I am done dancing, spitting poetry, and sharing defining moments in my life. To communicate we are, or at least working to be, in relationship, I have us circle up. We talk school, hair, frustrations with parents and teachers, and more. To dive deeper into our individual experiences of living in the world as Black girls with different passions, ethnicities, body types, skin complexions, and a common value for formal education, we take some time to write in response to the prompt "I know what it feels like." Philipi, Christa, Deborah, Unique, and Nicole[11] start to write.

After about 10 min, we shift gears and with music playing in the background, identify three words or phrases that give meaning to the rest of piece, three words and/or phrases that stand out in our writing. Finally, taking on the words and phrases, we translate the words into a movement phrase. The girls take time to survey the space to see what props they might use to tell their story. Christa even asks me if it is okay to use people as props. My response: *so long as they are okay. Use everything that makes sense*. As part of their phrases, I informed them to include noise or sound of some kind to signal a release, a purging of the experience.

I did not have access to their papers because I did not want them. Their words (illustrated in Figures 2–4) did and still do matter. What mattered most though, in that moment, was how they carried these stories *in* their bodies. Watching Christa make room to crawl under a desk, I saw isolation, possible hiding. Then she got up and pushed Nicole (a willing prop). When Deborah stood rocking with her arms clasped around her.

What was she was trying to hold in and keep out. Was she holding onto something that kept her locked out and away? Philipi's slow pacing felt like a search, a longing. What might she be missing? Home? I wonder, are these experiences and feelings attached drowning them on the inside? Once their movement phrases were devised, they paired up to share and then we each shared in the circle while others held space for the person sharing. The cacophony of this exercise is filled with sighs, pounding fists, and a scream.

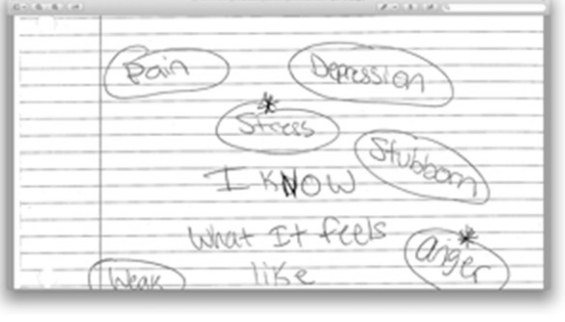

Figure 2. I know what it feels like 1 (Nicole, 14).

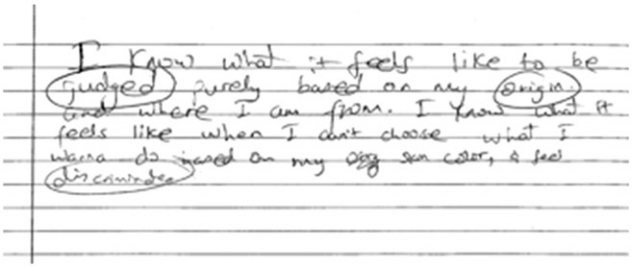

Figure 3. I know what it feels like 2 (Unique, 16).

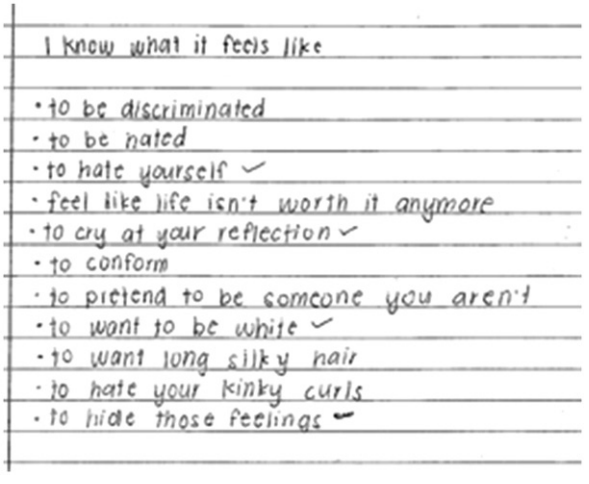

Figure 4. I know what it feels like 3 (Deborah, 17).

The exercise is over. The workshop ends and I am left to my thoughts and the knowledge written and given to me by the girls. I am hesitant to read their words. *What if I know tacitly the knowings they share? What if their all about pain?* I was unhurried to read what they wrote for a number of reasons, the most important one being: I desired to hold onto the moment back in the workshop when they manifested some release from the weight of their feelings and experiences. I anticipated these writings would comprise events and beliefs loaded with ways that these Black girls are wrong.[12] I was right. Innumerable times Christa, Philipi, Nicole, Deborah, and Unique shared space with unreliable folk and that these occurrences accumulated in them prompting second guessing, shame, hurt, and anger, to name a few.

Caught between contradictory archetypes and antithetical worlds, Black girls are often swallowed up into one discourse or another, depending on the trending issue of the day. The fact that these high school girls quickly expressed knowing these particular sentiments speak volumes to the types of messages and meaning assigned to Black girls. Further, it signifies the repeated, deleterious, and untrustworthy sources in which they are in contact. Dwyer and Jones (2000) assert, "Marking and making difference by binding White and Other in their respective places, this racialized geography has been reproduced on and through the built environment" (p. 213). Therefore, our bodies,

more specifically their identifying markers and the value attached to them, influence Black girls' traversing of space.

Power, however, also resides in the work of bodily knowing and refusal, which occurred through the exercise of "feels like." There is contention and disruptive productivity of bodily knowing. Aware of and impacted by structural and cultural impositions, these girls also express their knowing that Black girls are special. When asking the girls about what it means to be a Black girl, Christa states, "To me being a Black girl is always fighting stereotypes that people have about all of us." Embedded within her statement is awareness that Blackness is loaded with tropes and pathological constructions. Correspondingly then, to be a Black girl is to constantly be placed in a position of working through, against, and/or within this knowing. To be a Black girl is special both because of this distinctive reality endured and because through the process of navigating such a reality, Black girls' distinctiveness is reified. Stated differently, Deborah asserts:

> I'm a Black girl, which means that I'm different. I'm special. I'm not like other girls because I have a different type of ethnicity. Not just that I'm like Irish or Polish. Being Black just feels different because it's not like there's a specific type of Black. There's all types.

The complexity and uniqueness of being a Black girl is displayed in Deborah's statement because she locates Black girls' one-of-a-kindness in the expansiveness of the term. Specifically, that because Black comprises so many different variations of performance, look, and overall aesthetic that to be Black is special. Both Christa and Deborah's statements also support that what Black girls say they know and what they feel about what they know do not always correspond.

Deborah, in the juxtaposition between her written reflection and movement phrase, illumines this paradox. In her writing she wrestles with identity, stereotypes, and what to do with internalized racial oppression. Bodily though, she stood still looking forward. She turned away. She threw her hands up. I contend her body knew what she told the paper. Her body knew that what she felt and possibly still feels, was problematic. Experiences fall flat, often, on paper (Jones, 1997, 2015; Spry, 2011). Deborah's body, however, carried a different story, a layered story. Her body facilitated a telling of what she knew about how the world saw her and yet her body, through lifting an arm and quick wrist flip, as if to shrug it off, knew that and more. What the *more* was exactly, I am uncertain. That what the world told her was problematic? She could no longer hide the feelings? She no longer wanted to be White? That she never *really* wanted to be White? The particular contents of the more, remains uncertain. What was clear then as continues to be is that movement, even to embody textually identified experiences, shift the meaning, weight, and possibly the power contained by the experience.

In all three textual articulations above, each girl expresses knowing what some form of pain, isolation, and/or self-minimization feels like. On sight, these truths could be interpreted as evidence of lack – of Black (girl) pride, celebration of self, and strength. Yet, the body says this and more. Accordingly, to be reliable to Black girls in response to this moment is to read texts created by Black girls, written and embodied, as in dialogic chaff. Once something is written, it is written. However, once something is written onto the body, it does not have to remain there exactly as it was written. The body can rework it, rethink it, and even transmute it. Irrespective of whether or not

they felt like they were drowning in the weight of their experiences, I wonder, *do they feel more capable and lighter to continue swimming?*

Scribble II.

Better yet, ask questions

see the colors and feel the textures:

Read: Reliability is not essentialist and definitive

(*analytic notes*, June 2017)

Pasta and I sit on the floor, writing words, drawing pictures, and naming "Black girl comforts[13]." The other girls who signed up did not show. That stung. And yet Pasta is present. More importantly was this moment Pasta and I shared. Curious about what made her take interest in the workshop and show up, I disclose my first reaction to Mrs. Seys, my former history and geography teacher in an enrichment program who now works with Pasta. While telling her of my impressions – she was serious, afrocentric, and totally different (appearance wise) from the women in my family – I asked her to write down what immediately came to mind about Black girls. We began writing (see Figure 5).

(Note: Capitalized words are those written by Pasta)

While sitting there on the floor with her, we talked. She asked me questions about life, high school, why I thought my teacher Mr. Dodd, mentioned in my opening performance was not fond of Black children. I answered. I also asked questions: how would you describe your family, how do you feel about school, what is an experience in school that stood out to you? Her response:

> "I feel very uncomfortable in school in a way, because of my skin and how people are like, 'oh look at chu hanging out with all those Black people' and I be like, 'okay.' I don't know, sometimes I feel very uncomfortable when I'm around people who are loud and obnoxious and I wonder, 'am I really that person's friend? Or am I that person behind a shadow?'"

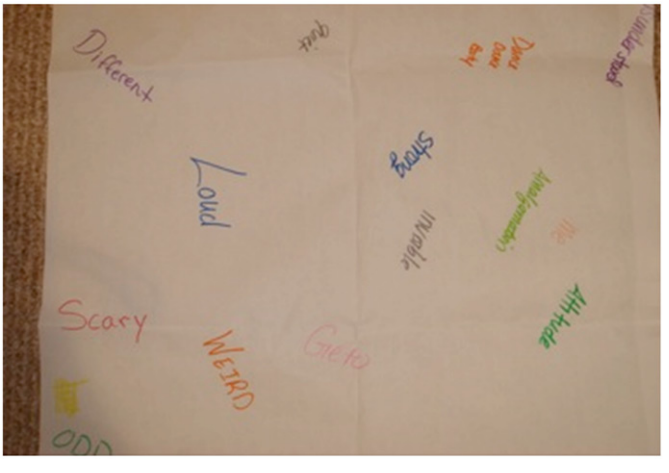

Figure 5. Assumptions about Black girls.

Minutes before this story, she wrote on paper "Shy, Darkness, Ugly, quiet, stupid, odd" as words to describe herself along with the statement, "Hate being the odd person of the family." In Pasta's self-description as well as those of what immediately comes to mind when thinking of Black girls, I wanted there I wanted there to be more positive words on the page than negative ones. Depending on interpretations of words, there were more words with complex meanings than outright negative ones. What words would appear if other Black girls were present, I wonder, and would she willingly use the same words?

Pasta's words to describe Black girls generally coupled with her in school experience signify distancing between her and other Black girls. Pasta's recollection of the aforementioned moment combined with the context clues creates likelihood that these youth were not Black and somehow saw themselves, perhaps culturally closer to Pasta. Plausible reasons for her discomfort: *Because she was singled out because of her skin? Because she is associated with loud people? Because her choice to hang around loud and Black people is singled out?* Comparably, I wonder, *Is she singled out solely because of her skin? Why is her hanging out with these "loud and obnoxious" people noticeable to others?* These questions roamed my mind while I listened intently and let her tell me what she wanted me to know.

From the point of racialization, Pasta's ethnic background, skin complexion, name, and hair texture made her "different," as she described herself, and still Black. Pasta's family is Dominican and she mentioned on multiple occasions being different from everyone else in her family. Meeting her mother, I am clear she is darker than her. Could it be that like me, she is the darkest in her family? In talking with Mrs. Seys following the workshop, she insisted Pasta's mother would not dare identify as Black. I wonder what the world and her Dominican family conveyed to her about Black people. Only high school girls who self-identified as Black were invited to be part of the project and attend workshops.[14] They were the authority on this matter. Pasta not only showed up, she arrived early because being Black resonates with her.

Based on her deep reflection of being called out in school for hanging with "loud" and "obnoxious" people, it is clear she is less comfortable around people who inhibit certain performances of Blackness. This can also be justified and at the very least understood, when anti-Black specifically myths about Black Americans are touted in ways that encourage others to identify, if possible, as something else ethnically (Adams & Busey, 2017; Lamb & Dundes, 2017). Another possibility for Pasta's concern is that is able to mask parts of her and being around youth who embody attributes she masks bring her discomfort and calm. What is clear is that Pasta shared clear awkwardness when it came to this particular performance of Blackness. Overall, her uneasiness can be attributed to the betwixt and between place she occupies as an Afro Latinx.

The discourse of race in the USA often conflates race and ethnicity, forcing Latinos and Latinos to beholden to their ethnicity. Equally, the law has proven many times that being Latino/Latina (now Latinx) does not inherently give one access to whiteness. And yet Black is not default either (Oboler & Dzidzienyo, 2005). Accordingly, Pasta's Dominican ethnicity, accent, complexion, and hair texture, excuses her from the category Black in some spaces. Yet, her skin colour might constitute her as morenita (a Brown girl in the Spanish), which in Dominican culture can, in some but not all cases,

be conflated with being Black. The coming together of her features and ethnicity make for a complicated lived experience (Cherry, 2015), one that justifies her contentious affiliation with Blackness. Crucial to the point of reliability is that even with the contention and possible shame; Pasta is Black because she said so.

Scribble III.

willingness to name what you see and it be accurate and unreliable

asking questions

deferring to self identifications and identifiers

(June 2017)

It is Saturday morning and we (five girls and I) are sitting in a circle. I ask them what immediately comes to mind about Black girls and as if in incantation they begin: Loudddddd, ratchet, promiscuous, angry. There is side chatter and laughter, until "Not all of us are idiots and start twerkin' in the middle of the hallway for no good reason! I actually read books!" breaks agreeable conversation. A 16-year-old Unique was oh so serious. Bugs could have flown all in my mouth, because figuratively and in my head, my jaw was wide open, thinking: So because they like to dance, they are idiots? Girls these days that twerk do not also read? Since when? *I certainly loved to shake my ass and did so every opportunity possible. And I absolutely loved to read. Have Black girls changed?* Then Christa joins in, "or have 20 bodies. That's trashy pride!"

I consort with my scribbles. *Name what you see*. I see Black girls. I see five teenage Black girls all part of a college preparatory program speaking about the world and how they see it. I see Black girls refusing popular representations of Black girls. I see Black girls talking back (Hooks, 1989) to stereotypes. I see refusal. Posing questions that I did not ask in *that* moment but want to consider here:

> So let me get this straight, if I dance in the hallway, I don't read? And, if I do these things I likely also have sex often and a false sense or pride? Shaming 101. Are these girls virgins? I know these girls twerk because I worked for the program's summer program, and have seen them with my own eyes. What makes their twerkin' different? Different because the program is not officially school? Different because they, for sure, read books? Different because when you are the person doing … , … is automatically different?

Scribble IV.

where being humble is a practice

read: assume you see a piece of it

read: you're knowing of another aint all of who they are

(June 2017)

In the moment, this line of questioning did not occur. To be frank, I was not focused on *what* the girls said and shared. My focus was *that* they spoke and expressed. At the top of the workshop when asking the girls why they agreed to take part in my research project, they all stated and/or nodded their head in agreement that they came because I said it would be a space where they could speak their minds and talk about what mattered to them. This confirmed my assumption that making space for

them to talk about their lives, concerns, joys, and woes proved essential. To add to the mix a probing of their truths felt inappropriate. As I reflect years later on my gut decisions, I trust them even more and wonder, what constitutes a reliable move in this context? In other words, if a similar situation presented itself with the same surrounding contexts, whether or not it was reliable, my actions would be the same. And what does that mean?

Am I saying in some cases I am satisfied being unreliable? To whom? And why? Are there plausible reasons to refuse being reliable? In this moment, I surmise that it depends on the conception of reliability. More importantly, because paradox is a real thing in Black life generally and Black girls and women's lives specifically, and because to be a Black girl is a daily rejection of either/or in the name of survival and self-love; I imagine being reliable and refusing reliability (can) happen(s) simultaneously. For example, Unique's evaluation of the other Black girls can be real and real suspect. Real, because it her reality and therefore, of value. Real suspect because while it speaks to her subjectivity and perception it also reduces their actions to apolitical and reckless. Even more suspect as it perpetuates what she avidly rejects and denounces – being reduced to a flat archetype. To render Unique's analysis a mere misreading devalues her navigation through oppressive tropes, systemic binaries, and vital knowledge generated from it. Equally, to only assign a stamp of approval to her assessment, conflates her observation as their experience. Rather than an either/or, this instance is best understood as a both/and one. To embrace paradox as a practice of reliability involves the risk of appearing unreliable to some.

The three above ruminations illustrate the complexities of holding space for Black girls to be and share truths about their lives. Reliability is not prescriptive. As illustrated in each of the preceding instances, context and aim must be used to guide interactions. When bringing to life and sharing Black girls' experiences, paradox must function as a tool not a liability to avoid. These particular memories caused great pause and invoked challenge. They made me think deeply about patterns of stereotyping, feeling odd, wishing I had more butt, smaller lips, and wrong. Yet, in the position of researcher and a "young Black woman" as some of the girls described me who had "it all figured out," I thought about the many cards I could play and how to put them to use in the name of Black girls knowing more of what it feels like to be enough, to be heard, to be celebrated.

Notes on Being "Black Girl Reliable:" A (Provisional) Departure

Through my journey that unfolds here, I am viscerally aware of the significance, transient, and relational nature of reliability. Elucidated in this essay are three practices of reliability taught to me by Black girls and being in the Black girl celebratory space that is SOLHOT. These approaches hold in tandem historical and cultural representations of *the* Black female body that haunt Black girls and Black girlhood while acknowledging and celebrating Black girls' ability to shapeshift (Cox, 2015), unlock and conjure creative potential (Brown, 2013), and transmute ubiquitous and inconvenient realities into art (Brown, 2009; Taaffe, 2014; Winn, 2011). Celebration and paradox are pillars of Black Girlhood Studies. They emphasize the importance of Black girls being taken on their terms and for scholars, advocates, cultural workers, and others who believe Black

girls matter, to mind conditions under which Black girls are making, remaking, unlearning, and articulating selves and to create different and enhanced ones.

Arising from the journey are three key ingredients in being "Black girl reliable." Being Black girl reliable requires that the spaces we make for Black girls must be or working toward being expansive, imaginative, and thoughtful enough to hold a celebration of all Black girls. The girls discussed in this essay self-identify as Black. They lay claim to this location, despite how they are seen by the world and even at times themselves. As illustrated in Pasta's story, identifying as Black can be (though I wish otherwise) a struggle. Similarly, as a scholar who takes seriously her work with Black girls and women, seeing the ebb and flow between Black girlhood and womanhood affords a particular engagement with Black girls and my body. To see girl as not bound by age but as a political location that Black girls and women, traditionally defined, can claim and reclaim, is to make Black girlhood an unending site of possibility. To be constantly working toward a space that is affirming for all Black girls is to build a space that sustains intergenerational relationships, evolving self-definition, and the endless potential surrounding who might find resonance in Black girlhood.

Secondly, being Black girl reliable requires intimacy with Black girls and the self. Intimacy here is defined as an affinity and empathic sentiment with and toward. In this case, time and relationship labels do not predetermine intimacy but rather depth of presence and intention. These factors are important because they help to carve out the distinctions between research *on* versus *with,* giving voice versus making space for Black girls to speak, and conducting research versus creating communal teaching/learning spaces. In the workshops I facilitated with Nicole, Pasta, Christa, Philipi, Deborah, and Unique, I utilized my opening performance to create a pathway for creating an intimate and sacred experience. My disclosure of tales from high school, body insecurities, family drama, and more clued them in that engaging vulnerability as a choice (Hill, 2017) can be freeing and is potential-filled. Before doing this work of vulnerability and unlearning with Black girls, I initiated a similar individual project. Connecting to the first ingredient, to even envision spaces for all Black girls necessitates that we, those responsible for finding and holding space for them, be able to see all Black girls there, theoretically. Then, we must do the intrapersonal and interpersonal work to actualize or continue practicing constructing such a space.

The final ingredient I want to offer is that to be Black girl reliable demands that we see ourselves in Black girls and them in us. This feature might prove more complicated for some people more than others. However, if we – scholars, advocates, cultural workers, and others who believe Black girls matter – take to heart that Black girls are knowledge producers, innovators, and pumped with solutions to issues they and other minoritized individuals face then we must be willing to learn from them and engage the world like them. To do so, requires more than rhetoric. It demands for me that I (re)member being 12 and constantly called a young lady and hating the way it sounded. Or (re)membering the many times I was popped by my mother for dancing provocatively. It obligates me to see myself simultaneously in Unique and the girls she called idiots for twerkin' in school because to see myself there illuminates paradox of and the translocality across time, age, and trope. Warned by Dillard (2012) that the seduction to forget engenders a move "away from ourselves" and adoption of "other's principles or notions of identity and proper conduct as our own" (p. 15), being Black

girl reliable mandates that I (re)member and work with and on behalf of Black girls as I (because I am) one.

Scribble V

Reliability is relational, generative, and a practice of doing productive cultural work

ephemeral,

haunts and excavates,

and …

(*analytic notes*, June 2017).

Notes

1. In *Games that Black girls play*, a seminal or as articulated by Owens et al. (2017), a "tool" and key text that ethically illumines the musicality genius of Black girls, Gaunt (2006) describes Black girls' play and engagement with music as translocal knowledge and defines it as, "the ways in which vernacular practices transcend divisions of geography, and thereby class, age, national origin, and migration" (pp. 57–58).
2. As part of the special issue, 10 Years of Black Girlhood Celebration, in *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* Owens et al. (2017) discuss the politics of citation as it relates directly to the building and formalizing of Black Girlhood Studies. In particular, they name the danger of disappearing key scholars, artists, and works from the field that helped to pave the way for the academic discipline. To pay homage, their article offers a unexhausted literature review that makes distinctions between "tools" or key works that explicitly tend to working with Black girls or methodologies that ethically help to engage Black girl work from an interdisciplinary vantage and "generative works" or a list of texts including fiction, organizations, articles, and other works that center Black girls and/or Black girlhood.
3. At the Curriculum Inquiry Writing Fellows retreat, Eve Tuck facilitated the session, "Citation is Political." During this workshop she walked us through an unlearning and rethinking process of engaging citations and within that process, declared citation practice as a political gesturing towards what mattered to us. She insisted that citation is the academic tool for making a theory, concept, and/or matter. Since this workshop I continue to reflect upon my citation practices and how my work as a Black Girlhood Studies scholar can and should engage this practice.
4. Black feminist scholar Lightfoot (1976) first called for more educational research examining the sociocultural realities of Black girls. Following this urging, there were also a few scholars who did educational research centered on Black girls' experiences (see Evans-Winters, 2005; Fordham 1993; Grant, 1994). However, prior to the recent surge of interest in the last decade, Lightfoot's insistence was largely ignored within the field of education.
5. Under the Obama administration, White House forums and research initiatives such as Black girl princess party, Advanced Excellence In Education for Black Girls, and the white-house-council-on-women-and-girls/. Likewise, popular social movements folded into mainstream such as #BlackGirlsRock for http://www.blackgirlsrockinc.com/about-us/ as well as #SayHerName, a campaign creating eulogies to name and remember the many Black girls – cis gender, queer, and trans – robbed of life all serve as evidence that Black girls on people's minds.
6. With a goal of creating a reciprocal and generative research process, I began each workshop by sharing my particular experiences as a Black girl through performances comprising of music, dance, original poetry, and narrative.

7. SOLHOT as a cultural space continues the production of the ever-produced narrative of Black girlhood featuring Black women and girls coming together, contradicting each other, resisting, creating new ways of being, and falling apart"(Brown, 2009, p. 25).
8. There are a number of ways to describe what constitutes a homegirl in SOLHOT. One conceptualization visionary and organizer, Brown (2013) offers is, "Those who consciously labor to meet the girls' expectations" (p. 6). Simultaneously, and parallel to tracing as a reliability practice, she is sure to name a homegirl as being responsible for coming up with the name, and its relationship to fashioning a Black feminist project that undertakes labor to bring to light intragroup challenges we undergo to be more present to each other, in community as Black women (see Smith, 1983).
9. A pseudonym embedded with affection and accuracy.
10. Scribbles are stream of conscious renderings that hold these spaces together as their leaning is to feel what I am writing about and to write from that exact space. They are synthesis of multiple forms of related data (i.e. interviews, workshops, reflections). In this format they are visceral grounding articulations.
11. These names are pseudonyms chosen by the girls.
12. Black feminist Jordan's (1980) "A poem about my rights" refuses wrong as a marker of who she is while offering a catalog of individual and structural realities that confirm she, like all women appraised as Black, are deemed wrong, unfit, a problem. This poem parcels out the specificity of being Black and woman and refuses insisting, "wrong is not my name. My name is my own … my simple and daily and nightly self-determination may very well cost you your life."
13. Words, pictures, and statements that made them feel comfortable and/or at home.
14. Although African American (girlhood) is positioned as the normative Black Girl, this has not been my experience with Black girls I work with or in regards to the girls who are the foci of this paper. As a result, the girls who came to participate and self-identify themselves as Black are a mix of American born, second generation immigrants, as well as girls who came to the USA after being born.

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