A Study Guide for Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood
by Ruth Nicole Brown

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**Author Statement**

I could not be more thrilled the YWCA of the University of Illinois picked my book, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood* (University of Illinois Press, 2014) for the very first “Community Reads”. My hope is that the set of events organized by Andrea Rundell of the YWCA in conjunction with SOLHOT sparks action oriented discussions about the issues facing Black girls and the possibility of engaging Black girlhood as a visionary space of freedom.

This study guide provides a way to begin necessary conversations about several Black girl truths presented in the book. I have included a reflection about making the music video book trailer, chapter summaries, a list of important scholars whose ideas inspired my own, discussion questions, writing prompts, and additional resources for readers. A general audience was assumed in the construction of this guide so by all means, follow up on the people, ideas, and references mentioned as there is so much more information underlying what is presented here.

When Black girls reflect on their own lives, I believe they articulate radically different ideas about their lived experiences than what is often portrayed in the media and presented as “facts” to uphold institutional norms and status quo attitudes. *Hear Our Truths* documents the creative potential of Black girls and women working together to advance original theories, practices, and performances of Black girlhood that affirm complexity, interrogate power, and produce humanizing representations of Black girls’ lives.

Much of what I know about Black girlhood as a space of freedom I learned in Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT). SOLHOT is an intergenerational space that I founded in 2006 and continues to co-organize today that celebrates and recognizes Black girls as producers of culture and knowledge. In SOLHOT, we discuss diverse expressions of Black girlhood, critique the issues that are important to us, and create art that keeps Black girls’ lived experiences at its center. In the book, I offer scholarly analysis of a very familiar subject—an after-school program—but my aim is to dismantle the neoliberal and elitist normative assumptions characterize much of youth interventionist programming. *Hear Our Truths* is really not about the program—it’s a book about the life and death urgency that is Black girlhood and the necessity of articulating what we as Black girls think, feel, know, love, sense, hear, and sound.

Of course, I owe everything to anyone who as ever participated in SOLHOT. I wrote the book because SOLHOT is guided by a complex set of ideas that the world desperately needs. What those of us who do SOLHOT know about Black girlhood is worth sharing in every form imaginable. At the same time, all limitations and misgivings in the book are my own. At the end of the day, I want you to know and remember Black girls’ truths, all of them.

In peace,
Ruth Nicole Brown
Champaign, IL 11.16.15
• **Summary of Book Chapters**

• The introduction foregrounds the contributions of Black feminism, Black girlhood studies, and performance studies scholarship to reveal and affirm the complexity of Black girls’ lived experience. I make the case that, along with the critiques of dominant images of Black girls and Black girlhood, we need radically different ideas and new terms of engagement. The book’s primary argument--namely, that the deployment of collective and creative methodologies allow for a necessary recreation of a more usable, or accountable, discursive and relational understanding of Black girlhood that values Black girls’ lives--is articulated and supported in the introduction. In addition to laying out the primary argument, I provide an overview of the book’s organization, a methods section, and a summary of the upcoming chapters.

• Chapter 1, “Tiara: Endangered Black Girls Instruction 301,” features *Endangered Black Girls (EBG)*, a performance ethnography based on the lived experiences of five Black girls. Through a critical engagement of the research, writing, and production of *Endangered Black Girls (EBG)*, I take up the question of why and how performance expands possibilities to celebrate Black girlhood in ways that account for individual differences and group affiliations. I argue that it takes creative means of expression to fully capture the complexities of Black girlhood and that attending to the complexities of Black girlhood is necessary for affirming Black girls’ daily lives. I demonstrate how performances of *EBG* generated new ideas for ways Black women and girls could be present with each other, leading me to suggest and co-organize Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (*SOLHOT*) as transformative collective and creative work.

• In *SOLHOT*, when Black women remember their experiences working with Black girls, they recall their work as sacred. The primary question guiding chapter 2, “When Black Women Remember Black Girls: A Collective and Creative Memory,” is, how do homegirls perform memory-work as a way of re-constituting *SOLHOT* as a sacred experience that makes Black girlhood possible? Based on eight interviews of homegirls ages 20-36, I constructed a creative and collective memory to demonstrate how *SOLHOT* as sacred work makes possible a space from which to not only celebrate Black girlhood in all of its complexity, but to affirm Black girls’ lives and to value the lives and living of all.

• Chapter 3, “When Black Girls Look At You: A Visual Analysis of School, Home, and Community,” asks the reader to think through theoretical and practical considerations of what it means to be seen and looked at as a Black girl. Building on the visual poetic analysis of June Jordan’s (1969) *Who Look At Me*, and the provocative writing strategies of M. Nourbese Philip (2008) as presented in *Zong!*, I offer an “anti-narrative photo-poem” that couples photography, poetry, and intersubjective insights to specifically address the institutional norms and interpersonal dynamics that govern their lives. The primary purpose of this chapter is to show that Black girls actively decide who and what is worthy of their presence and attention. The anti-narrative photo-poem invites those who dare to look to answer with action, as June Jordan suggested.
Chapter 4, “Bad Days: ‘If You Hit Me, I’m Gonna Hit You Back,’” foregrounds girls’ stories about fighting against a critical literary backdrop of Black girlhood as recounted in June Jordan’s Soldier: A Poet’s Childhood, Toni Cade Bambara’s “A Girl’s Story,” and performance poems written by four SOLHOT homegirls. The analysis does three things: 1) validate girls’ stories about fighting within a larger context of structural and interpersonal violence; 2) describe the kind of power Jordan argues is necessary to address both adults’ complicity in violence (against youth) and the systemic nature of violence; and 3) demonstrate how and why the performance of homegirls’ poetry enables girls in SOLHOT to hold those “counter intuitive thoughts” that Bambara teaches “set us up to practice a freedom that improves upon use.” In response to girls’ stories about fighting, a vision of Black girlhood dependent on listening, courage, and relationship is advocated rather than state-centric appeals for justice.

Chapter 5, “Misunderstood: More than Sass or Silence But A Black Girl Sound Nobody Can Organize” presents an analysis of a five-track musical compact disc created by SOLHOT participants. Articulating the resources Black girls often create and rely on to give meaning to their everyday experiences through music, I show how music production may operate as a specific kind of community good. Placing the ethnographic music production of Black girls in SOLHOT in relationship to contemporary debates and tensions in hip hop feminist literature and girls’ studies invites readers to consider a broader range of critical narratives about the significance of music and lyrics in the everyday lives of Black girls and articulates new Black girlhood organizing logics that do not solely depend on injury or oppression as definitive practices of Black girlhood.

While the previous chapters each demonstrate a particular affective strategy for rethinking Black girlhood, the conclusion features a series of letters to different people for the purpose of connecting the ideas presented about Black girlhood in the book to larger academic and political conversations about womanism, Black male feminism, Black men, the prison industrial complex, Black womanhood, my own intimate family life, and the abolition of all forms of Black girl servitude.
A Music Video for Hear Our Truths:
Watch video here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OomZIYFmFkE

Nowadays, it is common for authors to use book trailers as a means to promote and advertise their book. Basically, a book trailer is a short visual presentation of what the book is all about. When thinking about the kind of book trailer I wanted for *Hear Our Truths*, a music video book trailer immediately came to mind. Luckily, the people at the University of Illinois Press were willing to assist me and green lighted the project with enthusiasm. The book trailer is easily one of my most favorite aspects of *Hear Our Truths*. I owe a ton of gratitude to all those involved at the press, with a very special thank you to Ami Reitmeier (who edited the video with extreme care) and to Larin McLaughlin, the very best book editor ever.

The book trailer music video for *Hear Our Truths* was shot and directed by Jayda Thompson. Jayda was an original “OG SOLHOT” homegirl. She graduated from UIUC and Columbia’s film school (yes, she’s ivy leagued trained) and when I asked her to make the video, she flew back to Champaign-Urbana from out East to do so. In SOLHOT we really do have everything we need to make what we desire. It was overwhelming to work with her on this project because as we shot the video around Champaign-Urbana I was intensely moved by how much she has grown in her craft while still remaining the same beautiful, fun, easy going Jayda I remember from SOLHOT. To see her as a professional filmmaker now while I can also say, I knew her back when, is a joy that is really indescribable. Jayda is also a photographer and it is her photo I used for the book’s cover. I completely trust Jayda with imaging the book and SOLHOT because she knows how crucial issues of representation are for Black girls and women. She definitely knows how to show us as we see ourselves and that is a skill too rarely taught in film and media departments. Even before SOLHOT, Jayda was doing work in the community with girls and it shows in her art. Jayda was there on SOLHOT’s first day and remains fully engaged in presenting SOLHOT to others in visual form with integrity and artistic excellence. I am so proud of her and thankful for her gifts, presence, will-do spirit, and because she loves us attitude.

The two artists featured in the video are local emcees Klevah https://klevahninja.bandcamp.com and T.R.U.T.H. https://truthisps.bandcamp.com/album/eve-ep. Go to their websites and buy their music. Klevah and T.R.U.T.H came up with the original song, “Young Girl” and I asked them to set it to a T.C. beat. At the time, I did not know what I was asking of Klev and T.R.U.T.H, meaning I did not know they both were in different and separate groups and also doing solo projects. It was a bit naïve on my part to ask them to work together without knowing their
The concept for the video was developed by all involved and organically emerged during the one-day shoot. I love everyone who is in the video and everyone who is in the video is definitive SOLHOT. My favorite moment is probably us at the waterfalls in Champaign (shout out Springfield and First) paying homage to TLC.’s “Waterfalls” video. What did not make the video cut was the very lively meal we shared at my house in the middle of the shoot when we were all kicking back, eating well, sharing sista-homegirl stories, being the very best of family, playing games, and laughing loud and long. The day we made this video, Black girl love reigned supreme. I remain humbled.

**Reviews of Hear Our Truths**

http://gas.sagepub.com/content/29/2/301


**Q&A with Hear Our Truths Author Ruth Nicole Brown**

http://www.press.uillinois.edu/wordpress/?p=14028

**Key Scholars/Artists/Activists Cited in Hear Our Truths**

The scholars/artists/activists listed below are powerhouses. Do look up their work and be transformed:  
Assata Shakur  
bell hooks  
M. Jacqui Alexander  
M. Nourbese Philip  
June Jordan  
Toni Cade Bambara  
Layli Phillips  
Nikky Finney  
Abbey Lincoln  
Kyra Gaunt  
Toshi Reagon
Key Terms Cited in *Hear Our Truths*

Definitions for each of the terms below are presented in the book.
Black girlhood
Sacred praxis
Photo-poem
Anti-narrative
Potential
Digital technology
Homegirl
Do-it-yourself (DIY) art
Anti-narrative
Structural violence
State sanctioned violence
School violence
Fighting
Justice
Power

Discussion Questions

1. What are common stereotypes of Black girls? Black women?

2. What is the myth of “good hair”? What politics are involved in the care and perception of Black girls and women’s hair?

3. How does the concept of “endangerment” in relation to Black children shape public policies?


5. How do you experience school? Have you ever been in trouble at school? If so, what happened? If not, why do you think that is so?

6. What is the relationship between a bad day and a corrupt system? What is a good day to you, and how are they made possible?

7. How can schools be accountable to Black girls? Black youth?

8. Who has the power in your school? Place of work? Place of worship? In your neighborhood?

9. If you could sing a song to anyone, who would it be? How would it go?

10. When you listen to Black girls, what do you hear?
**First Steps: Take Action**

1. Look up more information on one of the Black girls/women mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 1 to learn more about them (Jhessye Shockley, “Amber Cole”, Jacqueline Scott, Sakia Gunn).

2. Name a Black girl or woman who has saved your life and send her a thank you card.

3. Write a love letter to one of your homegirls telling her just how much she means to you and send it to her.

4. Pick a photograph of a Black girl and tell a story about what you see.

5. Make a list of the opportunities, spaces, and organizations that exist where you live that encourage, support, and develop Black girls’ creativity.

6. Ask a Black girl who trusts you, why they do and what, if anything, you can do to further support them and their friends. Listen.

7. Think and write about a time someone questioned and/or punished your laughter? Where were you? What happened?

8. Name a specific practice of decolonization you engage via relationships. How do you relate to people in ways that feel important and are different than what society dictates as “normal”?

**Additional SOLHOT Resources**

SOLHOT website [http://SOLHOT.weebly.com/](http://SOLHOT.weebly.com/)

We Levitate sound cloud [https://soundcloud.com/SOLHOT-next-level](https://soundcloud.com/SOLHOT-next-level)

Left of Black Episode Dr. Mark Anthony Neal interviews Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown about *Hear Our Truths* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzCIWEIDyzY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzCIWEIDyzY)

Outkasted Conversations #29: SOLHOT Dr. Regina Bradley interviews We Levitate about the influence of Outkast on Black girlhood [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXCnyvlNZWA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXCnyvlNZWA)

**A Few Current Events: Black Girls in the News**


#myfatsexstory Tackles Fat Black Female Sexuality by Sesali Bowen

Another Black Girl Assaulted by White Cop: Do We Matter Yet?  
By Kirsten West Savali  
http://www.theroot.com/articles/news/2015/10/assault_at_spring_valley_high_school_black_girl_choked_dragged_by_white.html

Video: TDSB principal under fire after chastising black teen about her natural hair  

Selected Film Shorts

“Seventh Grade” by Stefani Saintonge (2015)  
https://vimeo.com/131421041

“A Girl Like Me” by Kiri Davis (2005)  
https://vimeo.com/59262534

Selected Feature Length Films About Black Girls

Black Girl in Suburbia by Melissa Lowery (2015)

Girlhood “Bande de filles” by Cèline Sciamma (2014)

Pariah by Dee Rees (2011)


Our Song by Jim McKay (2000)

Drylongso by Cauleen Smith (1998)

Black Girl by Ousame Sembene (1966)

Selected Bibliography


