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Before I started Ruth Nicole Brown's *Black Girlhood Celebration: Towards a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy*, I wasn't sure what hip-hop feminist pedagogy was. Is hip-hop feminism just really black feminism? And where does pedagogy fit in? I felt familiar and comfortable with each of the terms individually but did not know how to translate them in tandem. How do we combine those words to make something meaningful in the lives of girls? It seems that Ruth Nicole Brown has found a way to do just that.

Nickey Finney's foreword starts off fighting back as a black woman asked to speak to black girls about how to be successful without hearing what those black girls have to say. She immediately rejects the idea of the black girl as an empty vessel. She sets the stage in short bursts of thought about her own experience as a black girl, as a black woman, of her observations about Ruth Nicole Brown and Solhot. Finney starts

About the Author



Ruth Nicole Brown is an Assistant Prof. with the Gender and Women's Studies Program and Educational Policy Studies, Univ. of Illinois at Urbana, Champaign.

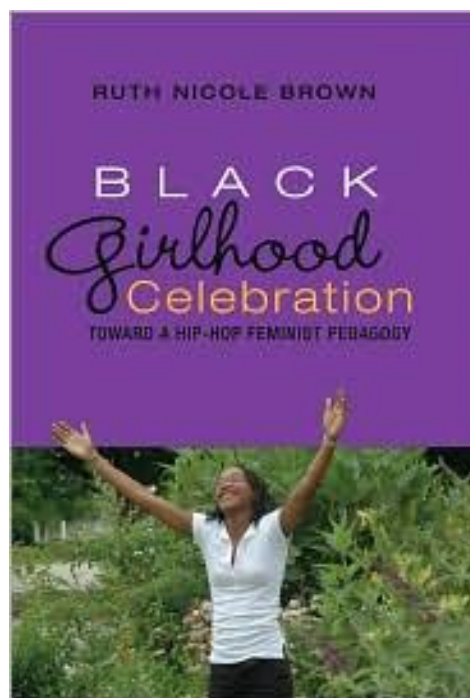
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off the book rotating between the prose of chants she sang as a girl and scholarly claims like, “Solhot’s embrace of Black feminist hip-hop-ology dismantles this dishonest landscape and builds upon the knowledge that black girls have deep understanding” (p. xx).

In the introduction, Brown picks up where Finney leaves off and runs with it. The layout of the book continues to be a mixture of scholarly writing, pieces from members of Solhot and street language thrown in all to make a recipe of hip hop feminism jumping off the pages. Brown states, “...the inclusion of personal narrative in this book situates my research squarely within a tradition of intellectuals who view the practice of writing as more than a way for academics to talk among themselves, who realize the radical possibilities of writing to create communities, transform ideas, and inspire people within and outside the ivory tower” (p. 12).

To clarify what the hip-hop feminist pedagogy is, which is also the theory behind Solhot, Brown discusses what Solholt is not in chapter one. It is not an empowerment program that depends on the powerlessness of black girls. It does not put forth one definition of success for black girls. It is emphatically not, girl saving. It is power, not programs. That is, when empowerment is the goal of a program, rarely is power examined. If power is not examined, how can we do anything but marginalize the girls we seek to empower? To Brown, these distinctions between empowerment and power are anything but small. “Yet, when power relations are not recognized or constantly challenged, the narrative we construct is often singular, linear, and predictable” (p. 28).

In chapter two, Brown challenges the reader to open up their mind to a more broad understanding of girls’ studies and hip-hop. Brown argues that most girls studies programs limit girls’ experiences to most often to the white and middle class girls. “Little about that discourse addresses the material realities of Black girlhood” (p. 36). Brown also reminds us that in order to love hip-hop, black girls do not have to be ignorant of the meaning of the lyrics even though some are



largely misogynistic and violent. Brown does not argue that the misogynistic lyrics of rap songs don't exist but that these girls can be aware of their existence and still appreciate hip-hop. She challenges us to widen our understanding of what hip-hop is; to remember the women who have contributed to hip-hop throughout the years and understand that hip-hop is more than just a love of rap; it is a knowledge, a way to speak, a lifestyle that remains largely unexamined by those outside of it.

Brown spends chapter three discussing what Solholt is by showing us activities, writings and discussions that were produced for and in Solhot. She shows us an agenda, discusses themes and examines power versus authority. Brown invites us to the Solhot meetings and allows us to peek in to a place where black girls are celebrated, where their voices are heard. She gives a clear example of addressing the topic of sexuality and how she intervenes if a participant says something homophobic. Yet Brown shows how these types of comments lead to discussions, not lectures in order to come to a place of understanding.

Chapter four of Brown's book shares the story of Little Sally Walker as a dance cipher. She starts with a story, watching girls dance, looking hyper sexualized and enjoying being the target of the male gaze. Like the other adult women in the room, Brown feels an overwhelming sense of disappointment that these girls are willing to publicly disgrace themselves. Yet in the next song, she is moved by dance herself and has to reorganize her thinking. Brown's transition is on the pages for the reader to witness. She states if we define celebration as, "...namely an ideal that encourages feelings of self-love, mind-body connection, peer support, physical activity, listening and creating connections between girls and women, then it was certainly that" (p. 92). Brown reminds us that applying our own standards to the actions of girls limits our understanding of what it means to celebrate black girlhood. By recognizing the power of these dance ciphers, she was able to consciously use them to allow black girls to share with each other the experience of celebration.

Brown's chapter five gives us more of the writings that were generated through Solhot. Here, some the girls she

references throughout the book share their voices. The representation that Brown argues is critical to understanding exists here. The girls are described and their pieces are shared, at times. Brown also discusses the girls who won't share and the different experiences that created that refusal. She presents the challenges of providing a place for the girls to have a voice and balancing when girls are objectifying themselves. Brown offers several thoughts but no concrete answers on these types of balances. Then again, when working with black girls-what answers come easy?

Brown's conclusion leaves us with a clear definition of hip-hop feminist pedagogy that I am not going to share because it would oversimplify it all. You can't just read the definition and think, "Now I know." You need to experience the entire book, to journey through Solhot, the debates, its members and its creator, Ruth Nicole Brown. In order to understand what it means to celebrate black girlhood through hip-hop feminist pedagogy, one must commit to the simple act of opening your heart and your mind to something much more complex than a one line definition. It is what Ruth Nicole Brown has attempted to do that makes this book worth reading. "Solhot is for all of us who...are less than celebrated on a daily basis, yet are committed to dropping our bags, spitting our rhymes, and healing our hurts" (p. 30).

About the Reviewer

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