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*Ruth Nicole Brown, Blair Ebony Smith, Jessica L. Robinson, and
Porshé R. Garner*

Funk music. Folks just singing from their gut. To carve out the thing I want. Funk is so Black. Folks playing sound. Making it sound hard but smooth. Creating in spite of. You can create in spite of. Folks are making this low fi music. With a friend & computer for the love. Laughter. Being happy in spite of. Women artists. RnB neosoul soul. Consider the components. Adlibs, little additions, song. Study and listen differently. For the sound. I then translate. Record. Different sounds push me. My contradictions. The sound of emotions. Creative drive and personal will. My dreams. Be. My children smart, funny, joyfully alive. Someone saying some hard shit. Quiet. Blue skies like birds chirping. Loops, repetitive sounds, off-beat, background vocals, tape hiss, off-beat drums, random rants . . .

—the authors

How does Black girlhood sound? How do Black women in relationship with other Black girls and women sound? What do we say to each other when contemplating going solo or remaining together? When love is invoked in the name of Black girlhood, how do we use it to create movement? For us, music making is a relevant, imaginative, and specific index from which to examine Black girlhood as a creative construct capable of reverberating multiple meanings, languages, identifications, and mysteries of Black girlhood.¹ Black girlhood made by Black girls is one such social sound practice of Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT).² Our sound consists of Black girlhood sounds as found in SOLHOT, and became a new practice of organizing ourselves, sharing truths, and disentangling the Black girlhood sold to us from the Black girlhood we loved as practice, poetry, and praxis.

Ruth Nicole Brown started Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT) in 2006 as a space to collectively organize with Black girls and celebrate Black girlhood.³ The four of us (and many others) continue to organize. Fundamental to SOLHOT are the “sessions” that typically occur in youth-serving nonprofit institutions during after-school hours whereby the celebration of Black girlhood is engaged through ritual, art, discussion, and education among those who show up. The sessions represent a particular structuring of time with Black girls to think about Black girlhood and is intentionally organized.⁴ How we use time in service of a collective and emancipatory Black girlhood is poetry,

it is music, it is a living thing: part cyborg, part assemblage, and part weird existential dream. SOLHOT time has a sound, and this essay is about what that sound makes possible.

In SOLHOT, love as the better possibility vibrates every interaction. However, without the constant, consistent, and intentional practice of rituals to make Black girlhood differently than what systemic oppression calls for, heartbreak is inevitable. Once, when the sound of broken homegirl hearts challenged our deepest individual and collective intentions, we turned to music. Like everything SOLHOT, it was music we made ourselves. The music we made inspired us to form a band, *We Levitate* (soundcloud.com/solhot-next-level), as SOLHOT prompted us to engage heartbreak and (re)sound what followed. *We Levitate*, another iteration of SOLHOT, is digitally oriented. According to SOLHOT's website (solhot-welevitate.squarespace.com/), *We Levitate* is "a sonic force of Black girl sounds and SOLHOT vibes where we feel ourselves loved through each other's voice, rhythm, and (heart) beats. This next-level practice of SOLHOT uses digital wrongly to reimagine the collective, resound complex black girlhood, remember relationships, and reverberate love for self, each other, and the new galaxies we are creating."⁵ *We Levitate* sounds like recollections of the past, present, and manifestation of future dreams, déjà vu, Black quantum effects, present and space-time personal and collective experiences, critique, our families who raised us, heartbreak, movement, and fiction in the ways Toni Cade Bambara, Asha French, and Toni Morrison honor us. *We Levitate* has a way we go about this sound: doing digital wrongly.

Doing digital wrongly uses ritual, collective organizing, and (dis)orientation to technology to reimagine the collective as not without you, to re-sound Black girlhood as not biologically determined, and to reverberate love for who was there, who is still there, those who left, those who ain't never leaving, and for those of the future who will come like they've always been a part. Doing digital wrongly reorganized SOLHOT so that the analog practice of meeting with sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade girls after school is also the digital dissed organization of specific sounds, both of which traverse and cherish the survival of Black feminist and womanist creativity.

As conductors of Black girl sonics, *We Levitate* took on the digital as a means of transformation for reconceptualizing Black girlhood yet again. In this iteration, doing digital in the ways we knew how, recorded, and uploaded allowed us to hear ourselves among each other inside and outside SOLHOT, the ways we colluded with and resisted the conditions that set us up for heartbreak, for love, and the in-betweenness of it all. Listening to each other in "studio" required us to access yet another kind of power. As novices to music making,

we used sound, a sense so often leveraged against Black girls and women as a means of punishment and separation, as an embodied source of listening to our hearts in the beats and the breaks of doing collective work.⁶

The “digital” in our work points to the digital process as one dependent less on technoculture than on the technology and media culture involved in the processes we made through relationship, community, and honest emotional rewiring and merging of heartbeats and sonic wavelengths. We used technologies such as GarageBand and the VoiceNotes phone app, applications with which we were already familiar. We did not ask “what can digital do for me?” or “how can this digital form advance us?” but, rather, “is this thing on??” in order for us to say and do the things we needed to do for and with each other. “This thing” included digital forms we engage everyday such as email, laptops, and cell phones, but also, importantly, the compilation of personal experiences related to our work with SOLHOT. Our decision to elevate each other and the promises we made postheartbreak, over the actual technology and software used, is what is most important about our conceptualization of the digital, not the things connected to robot making. Dominant digital humanities narratives and practices often focus on the creation of new technologies or the technological affordances of digital devices and instruments, but we have found that tech-driven projects give the illusion of advancement based on specialized (often elite) expertise about a machine at the expense of people. For *We Levitate*, the technology is not the marvel, and celebrating Black girlhood with Black girls is always the intention. Our love story is made possible by the promises made to each other as redemptive declarations and assurances of choosing each other, which necessarily included the digital that we didn’t want to miss.

*I was in what I thought was a loving relationship that ended so terribly. I note that as significant not because I want to remember that moment, but because I think *We Levitate* gave me something greater than me to think about. Making sure I came with my verses and was ready to lay them was number 1.*

We Levitate’s music-making process is an experiment in doing digital wrongly. Doing digital wrongly allows us to critique ourselves in relation to the work we did together based on how sounds arrived to us and what we brought to it. We had access to a wide range of sounds, from girls’ laughter, philosophical questions, utterances, organizational confusion, promises, personal frustration, to falling in love and creating life, which we then put to use through music to service our organizing and scholarship. We figured out the technology as we went along. In much the same way Black girlhood can never be pinned down

in SOLHOT, We Levitate sounds like something other than the prescription, every track. We choose to be intentional about making and playing with a Black girl sound as something more complex and nuanced than the immediate and reactive sensations, categorizations, and dominant constructions of Black girlhood. We Levitate tracked those other sounds, including our differences, unspectacular regularities, background noises, cleanly produced verses, and first takes, to track the sonic elements of Black girlhood in SOLHOT.

In this essay, we offer the concept of doing digital wrongly to describe and analyze a simultaneous process of Black girl theorizing about Black girlhood, Black feminist praxis, and digital disidentification. We Levitate follows in the tradition of (non)-disciplin(ed/ary) Black women artists who “represent[ed] and resist[ed] the conditions of their lives through creative uses of the black body.”⁷ By doing digital wrongly, specific promises opened up our hearts, our music, and our work in SOLHOT.

Our descriptive analysis of doing digital wrongly suggests another way to think about the relationship between Black girlhood, music, technology, sound, and sustaining progressive inter and outer actions among and with Black girls and women. Through barz, beats, and catchy hooks, the music left and returned to us, renewable energy in favor of continuing our collective celebration of Black girls, specific racialized gendered sensibilities of Black girlhood familiar to those who do SOLHOT, and different means of coming together and thinking about the difficult, nuanced, and unwieldy conversations about Black girlhood we most cherish.

We Levitate

A note about how to read what follows: we show ourselves in relationship to each other, first, before we situate our analysis in previous literature and advance particular interpretive analytics. We believe theory and literature reviewed are evidenced in this particular telling, in what we left untold, through photography and collective (first-person) narrative traces of We Levitate’s collective story. To emphasize our relationship to each other and the various ways we met and created is unconventional, and is our approach to knowledge production more generally. Slightly incoherent, disorderly, and messy as were the materials we were working with, the following narration also shows just how much was made with all we did not know (about each other, the work we did in SOLHOT, the technologies involved)! Moreover, there was so much we made with Black girls in SOLHOT, and because they are not pictured you’ll have to imagine our authority relies on something else besides your consumption of

“look at us with the girls” photos. Uncodable stuff is our preference, and we know its sound because of the nuanced relationship between Black girlhood, SOLHOT, and We Levitate.

To create the narrative, we each responded to the prompt—how did *We Levitate* start?—not to locate an origin story but to remember the singular details that were important to each of us. Our responses became a litany about our personal lives, SOLHOT, music we love, music as research (which is typically the least utilized art in arts-based research), that allowed us to listen radically to each other.⁸ Definitely (un)orchestrated, the story demonstrates the organic nature and uncertainty of feeling our way through a significant organizational dilemma, now history. Much like our music, we edited the narrative based on how we felt, at times featuring “better” or “clearer” versions and, at other times, sounding the mixed messages, unclarity, and uncertainty. As the narrative shows, there is nothing essential to doing digital wrongly. It is one path among many that enabled us to stay, return, and come back to each other. We have not figured it all out, and that, too, is doing digital wrongly.

The next section takes up our ideas in conversation with scholars of Black girlhood and digital humanities more explicitly, to analyze three distinct promises: “I love you in a space that says we shouldn’t,” “We are artists without form and scholars without method,” and “We are misunderstood and determined to persist.”⁹ The promises heard in the process of making music and our music productions offer an ontological and epistemological unsettling of Black girlhood. But first, a glimpse of why we felt each other worth making promises to.



Figure 1. Jessica and Porshé in the studio when *We Levitate* first came together

* * *

When I returned to campus, I anticipated returning back home, but I was not prepared for what I experienced. The work of celebrating Black girls in the collective looked and felt different. There has always been tension. There were always folks who don't like to work with one another. However, it looked more like a "program" that we want to go to and hurry up and get out than the practice of making space for our hell-bent love for Black girlhood. I felt implicated in many ways but mainly because I had to check myself on "returning home." I felt guilt for leaving in the first place and assumed I would come back to a particular thing. But how could I when I was not there to co-create it? In other words, how could I expect to come back to something I didn't help nurture? Nonetheless, we, I, was left with/in pieces.

I spoke with some of the other homegirls, and there were many suggestions on how to move forward, but what had to be addressed first was how we hurt each other. There were only two people whom I could touch and look at face-to-face, interested in building anew (this is analog, and we needed analog at this particular heartbreak). As I am writing this, I'm looking for the emails about doing music, and what exists are the plans but not the decision. I can't remember the initial conversation.

I remember starting back with the girls, after school, with a heavy focus on creative production. I remember being inspired by the brilliance of Klev (klevahninja.bandcamp.com) and T.R.U.T.H (truthisp.bandcamp.com), and I remember us all being like yyyeeeeeaaaaa, we can ask Aerian what technology we need to create a studio. We just kept saying nextlevel. How did we form? There were three and those who love us. Singing our way through it like Mary J., trying to find the other side of heartbreak.

It was necessary to travel outside the organizing to be reminded that our work is not about navel gazing. And this is really important. SOLHOT is too much. It overwhelms the university, and when we aren't sure, it can overwhelm us. The weight of doing something like SOLHOT that is in, but not of, the academy is a word beyond heavy. To be with Black girls consistently with the kind of care SOLHOT requires is a kind of instruction you can get in the classroom, depending on the teacher and who else shows up, but it can so easily be missed and undervalued by the light weight of white supremacist neoliberal corporate university politics. Even as you are representing SOLHOT and giving it your all, you can still mistrust it because schooling can educate you out of what is Black, what is collective, what is community, and what is good.

I'm still resonating with the question Nikky Finney was asked by an audience member, "how do you know a piece is finished?" and also her revelation of knowing when it's time to do your own dirty work.

Wrongly is really tricky because as Blair said, rightly doesn't really exist. As a teacher of flight in a system that does not teach students how to carry weight, or guides them to believe weight is inferior, I can feel wrongly as failure. What is so good about flying, after all? When it is time for education, knowledge that sits outside the system is what I trust, that is, if it's a flying lesson.

I was thinking of collectivity as flight. We used to kind of fly together. Now grounded, I was still chasing it. I found hip-hop again. I was a student with baby big eyes.

The irony: I first met Klevah as a student in my Black Women and Popular Culture class. I asked her what she was into, and she told me she was into music. I asked if the late-night gigs made it hard to stay awake in class, and she said yes. About a year later, I found myself struggling to stay awake to make it to her shows. In the following semesters, a few students took my class because Klev recommended me. I fanatically attended her shows. I took copious notes. I expanded.

I remember our first night trying to create was the night of the Paradigm Shift show at the Canopy Club. Supporting the local hip-hop scene was our research, so to speak, or what Dr. B called "night class." That night in studio we did mainly covers of songs or things we wrote prior to our first EP. Was "young girl remix" or "free women" when we got into a groove of writing and recording? Everything seemed to stem from those two songs.



Figure 2.
Jessica and Porshé in the GWS basement studio in 2013

We had already made like four songs and still didn't have an official group name. We were just calling what we did nextlevel SOLHOT because we knew that whatever was going to happen going forward, including our work with the girls in SOLHOT sessions, was going to be, look, feel, and sound different than it had before. So around April (about four months into it), once we got some gigs, Beez was like, "what's our name?" We came up with "lyric levitation," "solhot homegirls," "its the ussssss" and liked them all. Leaning a little more toward lyric levitation, Beez was like how about just, "we levitate," and BOOM!

Email from April 22, 2014, from Dr. B to Porshé and Jessica:

okay so just to be clear we are not performing as a group on May 1st (only Porshé) but we'll meet that day at 5 p.m. for our first rehearsal.

You both will get with Ro and make it happen (add magic).

The mixtape name is NEXTLEVEL?

our group name is Lyric Levitation (how about We Levitate) or (Its the usssssss)?

Y'all. we got this. ready to turn it outtttttt



Figure 3.
We Levitate in Miami for Women on the Rise! in the summer of 2013

We Levitate's Miami performance confirmed this was our work, now. We were invited out to Miami for a Women on the Rise! symposium thanks to Jillian Hernandez and Anya Wallace. We were able to learn from other artists there who were also intentional, flying, and community focused with their gifts. Thee Satisfaction performed and they were amazing! We shared many good Cuban meals at Versailles Restaurant. T.R.U.T.H came and performed with us, which was exciting because this was right after her first mixtape, *Luxocracy*, dropped. Our first time performing full out as bandmates—levitation!



Figure 4. DJ B.E. and Rynea Soul at a We Levitate performance/workshop, Imagining America National Conference in 2014

When the group formed, I was not directly a member of We Levitate and had not attended analog SOLHOT with the girls yet (although I was committed to being in love and already right there with SOLHOT), but I remember when I first heard We Levitate's music that spring semester. It was so honest and so true, and they were in flight, creating a presently better world. We were. I did not see We Levitate asking me to be their DJ, but it was already written.

I was following one of Dr. Brown's SOLHOT classes during my first year in graduate school, and they were creating a Black feminist press of art, stickers, T-shirts, and more, and so I started to think about what it meant to make Black

feminist beats. I was making beats, playing around with a Black girl sound (I did not know it at the time), and they saw/heard me. They saw me, whole and human, someone who had the audacity to be doing digital wrongly, and ask important and nuanced questions about Black girlhood. The type of seeing that is reliable to what we know our collective power to be. From there, I (we, surely) created lovenloops, a *breakthrough* of Black girl sonic imaginative moments, an unknowable ritualistic praxis of playing around with a Black girl sound with and in relation to being with SOLHOT.¹⁰ The way SOLHOT (Black girlhood) sounds in analog, digital, and intentionality becomes and undoes my sound. I am belonging to that sound all the time, every day, in love, loops, and ritual (repetition).

It wasn't until we started presenting this work at academic conferences that I remember Blair officially coming on the scene. She produced songs for our Imaging America conference session and also started sending us beats for studio. Blair had experience creating music before us, and before we officially reached out. See soundcloud.com/lovenloops.

My personal favorite is "Breakthrough." This was my first time sending beats to We Levitate, and it was also a beat I made the night I returned to Syracuse after my mother passed. The vocal recordings feel just as raw and wrong as when the beat was made and recorded.

Blair is always right there with us, even though she did not live in the same town as the rest of us. Because Blair had been making music, sending me these Black feminist sounds over beats way before We Levitate, way before the most major SOLHOT heartbreak to date, I think she pre-knew what was going to be needed. That she later moved to Champaign-Urbana and we now share physical time and space is real quantum. I remember explicitly asking Blair to be our DJ. She said yes. Levitation.

In summer 2014 (the year my mother passed due to a hard battle with breast cancer) during a studio session while at the Qualitative Inquiry conference in Urbana-Champaign, We Levitate asked me to be their DJ. I knew from this studio session with SOLHOT We Levitate, I wanted to be as analog, digital, and intentional as possible as someone committed to doing SOLHOT who did not live where analog SOLHOT took place. Our (my) DJ archive of music and sounds continuously evolve into originally co-created music, sonic memories of home, requests for dance ciphers with homegirls (because Black girls know what they want to hear and dance to, together).

Beyond listening to the music, we brought poetry, raps, utterances, shouts, hymns, prose to an original beat I created for We Levitate. This was a time where "we be," and I had never experienced being in this way, in an academic

space. I experienced the courage, wholeness, and honesty it took to be, do, and create music “wrong” and still create it, most importantly with, for, and by your homegirls. Many of the spaces in which I was present where Black girls were there or Black girls and girlhood was of discussion were absent of using Black girlhood as the organizing nexus to create together and imagine new worlds. It was more about being in service to institutions and economic development than invoking the spirit(s) of Black girlhood to imagine new life for us all. The offbeat kick drum, the feedback in the mic, the not-so-studio speakers are all part of the process of playing with a Black girl sound, creating our sound, (un)knowing a Black girl sound, in relation to one another, and in the process of transforming our world(s), where being fully human and love is the rule.¹¹

DJ B.E. (also known as lovenloops) and producer–beat maker RyNea Soul presented at Imagining America in Atlanta, Georgia, in 2014. It was actually a late-night session after the conference presentation where we met at Jessica mama house for fried fish and spaghetti, staying up way too late freestyling over trap music, theorizing SOLHOT, and discussing Black girlhood and music production that set the stage for so many later studio sessions and eventually our *How I Feel* EP, released in February 2016.



Figure 5.
We Levitate during Black Girl Genius Week 2014. Photo
credit: TwoBrainz

First, it was just free-write on a topic and record. That was very academic. We each worked on songs to an instrumental of our choice. Then, we wrote for each other. After that, we wrote “Ustabe” together. That song couldn’t be done individually. Co-writing that song was the only way to really express how we felt and also how we wanted others to feel the song.

We used prompts like write twenty words that describe our collective work and then picked from our individual list to make one combined list. One of us gets a vision and takes the lead. I like to see how we each interpret the direction of the other members. Go to the studio with a beat, some words, and a concept. I used to assign concepts. After a while it became more about showing up and telling the truth. Ideas are formulated. Songs are created and recorded. There is serious critical reflection. We rehearse. We have to do timed studio sessions because there are four of us all on different schedules. Organic. Messy. Disrupt what used to be.

Doing Digital Wrongly: Black Girlhood Studies and Digital Humanities

In *The Muse Is Music*, Meta DuEwa Jones argues that contemporary poets read, revised, and recited works by their artistic ancestors in order to maintain connections to the past while taking pleasure in their returns to and revisions of historical memory.¹² In this way, Black feminism and womanism guide our simultaneous practices of art, organizing, and scholarship in and with communities of Black girls. For us, drawing on existing Black feminist womanist art and literature gave us a way to begin writing about our practice and more fully interpret the ideas that emerge from our being together as bandbaes and organizers in SOLHOT. Before we ever levitated—that is, created our own sound—we became students and remixed sounds we loved and retold stories to specifically situate ourselves within conversations we wanted to be in, especially as it related to Black girlhood. Research centering Black girls as subjects of scholarly inquiry has recently proliferated.¹³ Our study of Black girlhood is a practice of community making with Black girls, values critique, and organizing, and insists on imaginative and creative work as significant academic contributions, as well as each other as artists and scholars. With our work, we aim to extend the legacy of Black feminist and womanist writers and artists whose ideas, provocations, and testimonies provided a solid foundation from which to theorize, practice, make art, and make music. In doing digital wrongly, distinctions between artist, scholar, theorist, academic, and nonacademic dissipate and motivate our thinking about digital humanities.

In *#transform(ing)DH Writing and Research: An Autoethnography of Digital Humanities and Feminist Ethics*, Moya Bailey articulated the study of digital humanities in ways that resonate with our discussions. Bailey introduced the term *digital alchemy* and defined it as “health praxis designed to create better representations for those most marginalized in the Western biomedical industrial complex through the implication of networks of care beyond its boundaries.”¹⁴ We appreciate Bailey’s intervention at the intersection of health and digital humanities and find it absolutely critical to extend discussions on the emotional and uncompensated labor of “women of color’s production of media as an act of self-preservation and health praxis not centered on appeals to majority audiences.”¹⁵ Bailey wrote, “Women of color, Black women in particular, transform everyday digital media into valuable social justice media magic that recodes failed dominant scripts . . . shifts from biomedical interventions to redefinition of representation.”¹⁶ In our work with Black girlhood, we have not relied on biological identifications; rather, we have constructed Black girlhood collectively and organize ourselves by our preferred representations in much the same way Bailey discusses Black trans women’s use of digital media to shift from bio to redefinition—to make gold. This kind of alchemy is guided by a set of ethics that prompts discussion around connection, creation, transformation, and collaborative consent Bailey so thoughtfully detailed and made available in the form of questions to begin articulating “digital research within a feminist ethical frame.” In much the same way the Research Justice collective at the Allied Media Conference motivated Bailey to research in ways informed by justice, so does SOLHOT’s construction of Black girlhood implicate our practice of doing digital wrongly.

In SOLHOT the digital and analog function together as a gathering mechanism for people who love Black girls. We Levitate’s music circulates the many reasons we came back to each other, keep coming back to each other, and stay doing SOLHOT. It is how our love sounds to resound Black girlhood. The practice of doing digital wrongly is very much about the refusal of expertise, the embrace of who has your back, local sensibilities, spectacular interactions. The courage to step to the mic is a really good filter for listening to how we show up (or not) with the girls in SOLHOT session. Recording music together allows us to hear ourselves in collective, and our willingness to be transformed by the sound created is a critical part of the pedagogy. From the location of SOLHOT, Black girls and femmes are so far ahead of the disciplines and interdisciplines, we’ve been running with productions of new knowledge at the intersection of Black girlhood and digital humanities, recuperating ideas the academic scene

may not have been ready for, but ready or not, were moving imaginatively, radically, and wholly, and weaving ideas that swing. Upholding doing digital wrongly is a set of promises we analyze in the next section that came through our use of the digital, circulate in our practice, and reverb in our music.

A Promise: I Love You in a Space That Says We Shouldn't

We did digital wrongly, in part, because we did not have access to do it right. As Black women scholar-artists of Black girlhood, we must reckon with the increasing corporatization of higher education, and pervasive misogynoir and homolotency in the art/music industry, academy, and larger world.¹⁷ We did digital wrongly, in part, because how we felt and what we knew about Black girlhood started to seem less important in our practice than a commodifiable Black girlhood. We were doing digital wrongly because staying with wrongness righted us. Before we called ourselves We Levitate, it was Jessica, Porshé, and Dr. Brown in her office that we dubbed “the purple curtain,” recording and playing ourselves back to each other to tune our ears to what we had to say. Against cylinder brick walls, we approached the microphone completely uncertain about what we would hear. The response was the bass and our hearts thumping. The condition was this: I love you in a space that says we shouldn't; a Black girl sensibility that made us possible. Part of the weight those in SOLHOT are asked to carry is this promise—and to know if you're in a space that says you shouldn't love, and when it's time to say I love you. Levitation occurs when the love is felt.

I was teaching a course called “Time Travel as Creative Practice” with the Education Justice Project. EJP is a prison education program. My best teaching and many of my best students were experienced in EJP. I was contemplating why real education and the very best of what the university is supposed to be was happening in the prison and not allowed to happen on campus.

Here we want to talk more about the “us” in the context of a collective identity, one that prefers the organized chaos of SOLHOT. In “professional” music making, sonically spotless cuts are preferred. Similarly, Black girlhood is often invoked to produce Black girls without blemish for the sake of what would be considered successful for documentation, wide circulation, and capitalist consumption. The “clean” version is a taught preference. Recording is a trap to capture sound. It also captures how you're showing up, with whom, and for what purpose: trap. We used soundproofing equipment to minimize outside noise. Our noise remained: children's cries, questions, laughter, the

furnace turning on, door slams, mess ups, and interruptions. Could this too be the sound of Black girlhood? Would and could we love them all? We felt power in the affirmative. We learned in studio that the “us” could amplify Black girlhood as we found it reliable. When we minimized convention, love, care, joy, fun amplified.

Our first mixtape, when performed live, conjured what we knew about Black girlhood from organizing many years together, foregrounding the love that made “us” possible and could inspire other people to move on that love for Black girls everywhere. The concept for our mixtape was love letter trilogy. We tasked each other to write about each other. Ruth Nicole drew on the vibe of Tribe Called Quest’s Bonita Applebum and wrote a song called “For You.” Jessica drew on Outkast’s Jazzy Belle and wrote “Jazzybelle Retell.”¹⁸ Porshé drew on Shalamar’s “This Is for the Lover in You” for a song she called “This is.” In SOLHOT, love for Black girlhood and Black girls is often articulated as the primary reason homegirls sacrifice their time, energy, and labor to make SOLHOT something worth the girls’, the community partners’, and external collaborators’ time. To be more specific about the quality of our love, then, the love letter trilogy expressed what Summer Kim Lee articulated as resonant love, “an opening toward something, or someone, unknowable and immeasurable in the shared resonant space-time of being singular plural.”¹⁹ Resonant love is what circulates in SOLHOT when we say we love you. Resonant love as conjured in SOLHOT in the name of Black girlhood means aesthetic valuations of Black girlhood as fluid premised on what those who show up say it means, how it harms, heals, and affects them. Resonant love makes possible a Black girlhood that is neither a biological argument nor one attached to chronological age. In doing digital wrongly, the “us” obscures Black girls, We Levitate, and those we love. That’s our preference.

Doing digital wrongly is an intervention in knowledge production that does not reward schooled answers, resists elitist expertise, and does not capitalize on commodified notions of Black girlhood that are of no use to Black girlhood in SOLHOT. To conjure “us” loved, in spaces where we know if love is the rule or not, we made music. Relying on our skills of Black girl morphing, as in being more than one thing at the same time and doing something you do not know technically (in our case it was music), does not make sense in a field that overdetermines Black girlhood as without power.²⁰ It is exactly our nonsense, amateur practice that creates power, linking us once again “with amateur, the one who loves, and hence of the emphasis put on pleasure and raw substance rather than on competition and conventional mastery.”²¹ Black girl unknow-

ability is a soundwave.²² We do digital wrongly to undo the categories and to disorganize the archive, so that there is no official limit on what is possible to do together and how Black girlhood can organize us to move rooted in our rhythms.

A Promise: We Are Artists without Form and Scholars without Method

In *“Artists without Art Form”: A Look at One Black Women’s World of Unrevered Black Women*, Renita Weems summed up criticism Black women writers often received when she wrote, “That she is a woman makes her work marginal. That she is a Black Woman makes it minor. That she is both makes it alien.”²³ For Weems, Black women artists who revere Black women in their art means that they also had a reverence for their lives. We Levitate, a band made up not of musicians but of people who met through the work of SOLHOT, listed love as act of naming and celebrating each other’s artistry because those “alien” sounds are also what made our celebration of Black girlhood transformative.

As Black women writing about Black girlhood in SOLHOT, we delighted in the “unrecognized, unnamed talents” that did everything institutional language promised us but continuously fails to deliver.²⁴ We needed Black girlhood full of “exquisite idiosyncrasies” and the “shiny Black girls” who are often overly centered in the gaze of those who mistake SOLHOT for a program.²⁵ We did digital wrongly because Black girl courage is abundant in SOLHOT, even as we are “Black female artists, yet without form.” The girls we revered were worth us trying again.

Not only were we Black women artists without form, we were scholars without method. The extended pedagogical insight of Trinh T. Minh-ha is incomparable and completely relevant to doing digital wrongly,

I remember many years ago teaching students in a film production program and telling them it may help to do extensive research on the subject of their interest—whether this has to do with a culture, a people, or a performance, for example—but ultimately they would have to let go of that research when they are on the site, for the elaborate treatment they are often required to write would not be of much use then. . . . But as you can imagine, it’s difficult for many of us to make use of such freedom in nothingness, and some would much rather have a set of ready-made criteria to proceed by, for they badly need story lines, treatments, techniques, and “methodologies” to operate. These provide them with an illusorily stable ground on which to advance.²⁶

In SOLHOT homegirls study Black girlhood, and they have to do extensive research which includes reviewing literature, being with those who identify as Black girls, and certainly interrogating their own socialization as Black girls (if relevant), as well as their current relationship to Black girlhood. But SOLHOT's creative act of remaking Black girlhood and the willingness to be organized by a collective construct of Black girlhood, also requires letting go. Letting go evokes fear and freedom. As Trinh T. Minh-ha taught, without the right way manual/methodology, we become afraid even though we hate the manual because we know it is false. Doing digital wrongly confused qualitative inquiry and digital humanities, so as to make messy, if not obliterate the "I," "need," "expected," and "official method." Doing digital wrongly, We Levitate learned that we are not and can never be without the resources needed to get it done.

My homegirl/bandmate/now partner lost her mother. We Levitate and the feeling of pain from her losing someone she loves so much actually saved my life. I didn't want people to miss me if I had a choice.

Initially, we did not know how to use any music software or play instruments, but we knew what good music felt like to us. Our technologies were what we brought with us and were willing to share. Following the ideas of Hazel Carby, Eric Henson wrote, "in this case (We Levitate) doing 'digital wrongly' utilizes technology to build female networks that have been common in many gender/sex systems of color."²⁷ Our networks were not bound by a structure of linear space and time but enhanced by flows, alliances, affinities, assemblages, and multiplicities so that we could sound like Black women, Black girls, writers, scholars, rappers artists, DJs, daughters, mothers, organizers, with the girls, away from the girls, doing the work, and not doing the work. Once we uploaded our music online, those with whom the sounds resonated connected with us across distance and differences. This changed our organizing, as we found ourselves in unlikely but completely desired community. To be without the right thing sometimes means being with other things that are useful for disentangling tired, unerving assumptions about the who of Black girlhood, the how of technological advancement, and the what of success and (academic) achievement. Doing digital wrongly is an articulation of do it (y) ourself, working-class raised sounds that are contingent on our distinct contributions. Aesthetically, it requires a kind of availability to what you might have been schooled to trash. It is to sense the free and freedom in Black girlhood so much so it compels you to listen and sound, if not music. There isn't a model of a right way to do it, which should not be confused with anything goes. Many models might be sold to you. We refuse so much.

My favorite We Levitate song is "Ustabe." I know I know. I love the sound. It sounds like what happened. It's so alluring and smooth. Feels good and then it drops and then she wasn't. It hurts. Remembering that feeling doesn't take me back to the moment but reminds me of moving forward. We also made that song together in one sitting which was difficult for us to go back to it.

A Promise: We Are Misunderstood and Determined to Persist

The crowd goes wild for "Miss Me," a We Levitate song Plainro and Danitra helped us to create at the purple curtain studio. After playback, Plainro told us the song was going to be an anthem. He was right. "Miss Me" is our most requested song, and one of the few songs we made a video for (<https://vimeo.com/117677259>), produced by TwoBrainz. As complex and complicated as participation can be in organizing, "Miss Me" renders participation simple, as in, if you in you in, and we know you with us because you are. You are in the -ly of the thing. "Miss Me" exposes "what stinks and the forms of social power produced to cover up that stank."²⁸

"Miss Me" names the conditions doing us in with the righteous anger so often misunderstood when expressed via Black woman and girlhood sensibilities. Our acceptance of anger, wrongness, and misunderstanding invokes the "Black Ratchet Imagination," as theorized by LaMonda Stallings, as our performance of "Miss Me" is one "of the failure to be respectable, uplifting, and a credit to the race."²⁹ On the other hand, our refusals and unavailability for servitude are also very much a part of doing digital wrongly.

In an article on the politics of anger in the music of Poly Styrene and Anabella Lwin, Jayna Brown discusses how emotions are gendered, with anger producing a heavily masculinized affect.³⁰ In much the same way, the anger of "Miss Me" invites discussions of masculinity in the work in SOLHOT. "Miss Me" signifies through sound the multiple masculinities at play in the work of celebrating Black girlhood. The violence, signified by gunshots at the beginning of the song, blasts reductive assumptions about the gendered labor of Black girlhood. "Miss Me" allows for a representation of SOLHOT in a way we often experience it; hard core, pleasurable, transformative, and full of what you did not expect and perhaps did not want to confront. "Miss Me" disrupts conventional gender scripts and a masculine feminine binary. The "Miss Me Remix" incites the raunch Jillian Hernandez theorized as "an aesthetic, performative, and vernacular practice, an explicit mode of sexual expression that transgresses norms of privacy and respectability."³¹ That the crowd loves it shows just how much Black girlhood studies and those who

work with Black girls are ready for nuanced conversations about intersectional nonbinary identities.

“Miss Me” is also a diss track, an indictment of the systemic erasure of women and girls of color in hip-hop, and the uncompensated labor hip-hop culture relies on to sustain itself. Everyone wants in on the “Miss Me” remix because there is so much to say about the particular ways Black girls and women are devalued by systemic oppression in a studio where those who love Black girls are in control. With “Miss Me,” we stay missing while taking up all the space—being present in the sunlight and the shadows, in spaces marked elite and those abandoned. Anger sounds like seven people on a seven-minute track. In the performance of “Miss Me,” how quickly we learned that the “we” we speak of is strong, that crew is deep and will show up, radically present with us. If we show up as all of who we are, you can’t miss the anger. When we perform “Miss Me,” we ask the audience what they are angry about and encourage them to name what disturbs their peace. Their responses tell us just how much more work we have to do and how prepared they are to get into the lessons we have to share about Black girlhood.

To decolonize Black girlhood through creation of sound is to unmark the bodies and minds of Black girls from what we think we know about them, from what they are told is best for them.³² Doing digital wrongly creates a singular plural us and we. It innovates forms of knowledge production as it transforms digital-methodological theorization. The relationship between image and sound in doing digital wrongly is reflexive and reflective of who is and who is not there and who we don’t want you to see. It distinguishes between and among what is presented, and that thing acknowledged as presence. What is so good to us about this is when the anthem is sung, here and there, “I” is a “we,” love and anger are among each other. That electric thing is also of the underground, specifically the Chicago drill music scene. It directly conjures violence to make something else with it. What we create was and is of value in SOLHOT because it’s something schooling systems have not figured out how to test and exploit. Misunderstood and determined to persist sounds in “Miss Me” as an anthem produced by an intensive a collective emotive capacity unattached to binary gender schemas full of care.

Conclusion

When a collective organizational heartbreak was experienced in Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths, We Levitate created the music we needed to turn back

to each other and our collective organizing. Doing digital wrongly was how we did it, which was different and unexpected, even to us. The sounds of critique about our condition at that time—margins becoming central, grassroots becoming hegemonic, and motivation turning into taken for grantedness—was an absolutely heartbreaking moment probably familiar to anyone who has ever participated in collective organizing, formal and informal knowledge production.

Trust in schooling and analytic ability allow for astute and necessary critiques of the interlocking oppressive systems doing Black girls in, but what of the creative knowledge needed to perform rituals of a wholly creative Black girlhood? What if the thing needed to overcome, or come over, was a song? In SOLHOT we create what we need for the Black girlhood we make. Our do-it-ourselves music digitally redirected us to new sounds of saving our lives and hearing our truths. Doing digital wrongly, we sang, poemed, spoke, and rhymed into the mic. The ideas that mattered most to us—ghosts, generations, living, forgiveness, failure, grace, wisdom, movement, health, fun, love, and freedom—came through song, verse, poetry, and image to heal some past hurts and feel ourselves beautiful through each other's voice, rhythm, and movement again. Lovenloops, melody, hooks, beat drops, pitch, delivery, flow, bars, gospel runs, and the funk are once again in our repertoire of Black girlhood.³³ The girls still want SOLHOT, and they expect us to be there to meet them with a worthwhile contribution. Doing digital wrongly affirmed our individual and collective desires while moving us toward a sound of Black girlhood we can't refuse.

Notes

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2. Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT) celebrates Black girlhood through collective work, art making, political education, and always celebration. SOLHOT began in central Illinois in 2009 and continues to date. For more information on SOLHOT, see Ruth Nicole Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration: Towards a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009); and solhot.com.3. Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration*, 6.
4. Brown, *Hear Our Truths*, 53.
5. We Levitate's catalog may be found on soundcloud, soundcloud.com/solhot-next-level, and bandcamp, welevitate.bandcamp.com/. The coauthors of this essay make up the band We Levitate.

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