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Listen to her: Re-finding culturally responsive poetic inquiry as home knowing for women of African descent

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Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

Abstract

In response to critical turns in knowledge production, scholars of African descent have developed culturally responsive arts-based methodologies. Congruent with culturally responsive research is incorporating home knowing practices such as the poetics of many African and Africentric storytelling practices. This article presents my reflections as a Canadian researcher of African descent on "re-finding" culturally responsive poetic inquiry to interpret, represent, and re-tell the HIV service work experiences of African immigrant women living with HIV. I argue that researchers should strive to decolonize their research with, for and by peoples of African descent by incorporating knowledge precepts and practices grounded in participants' home knowing. Using arts-based methodologies such as poetic inquiry creates an opportunity to critically reflect on knowledge production in research: who produces knowledge, what ways of knowing are valued, and what messages are conveyed through knowledge production and dissemination.

Keywords

arts-based methodologies, poetic inquiry, Black women, people of African descent, cultural responsiveness, home knowing, HIV/AIDS, Africentric methodologies, health service work, narrative methods

Introduction

In response to critical turns in knowledge production, African, Afro-identified, and Black researchers (hereafter identified as "of African descent") have revolutionized methodological approaches for people of African descent. They have not only created space for

Corresponding author:
Lori A Chambers, University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, 246 Bloor St W, Toronto, ON M5S 1V4, Canada.
Email: l.chambers@utoronto.ca

arts-based research but have developed culturally responsive arts-based methods for their academic scholarship (Chambers, 2018). Botswanan scholar Bagele Chilisa (2020) defines "cultural responsiveness" as research practices that respond to the social, political and historical contexts of knowledge generation for people from colonized cultures. For African descendant people in Canada, cultural responsiveness has become a means of reclaiming their cultural strengths in the face of Eurowestern supremacy and systemic oppression.

As a form of inquiry, poetry can be a culturally responsive approach to arts-based knowledge generation if grounded in oral and performance traditions common in many African and Africentric cultures (waThiong'o, 1986). Poetry as performance has served as a "culture of resistance" for people of African descent (Gilroy, 1993: 37), where practices such as spoken word, dub poetry, and Afro-beat have created a counter-culture where politics are danced, acted, sung or played out. While poetic methods in social science research are burgeoning (Prendergast, 2009), this knowing practice has a history for people of African descent. It is a remembering of and recalling to our "back homes."

This article offers my reflections on "re-finding" poetry inquiry as a culturally responsive arts-based research method for people of African descent. In this article, I illustrate my methodological approach to poetic inquiry as found poetry while conducting "Because She Cares," a qualitative study exploring Canadian HIV service work as caring work for African immigrant women living with HIV(Chambers, 2018). I also trace how I "re-found" poetry as home knowing in bearing witness to the African women I interviewed and modified my data collection, interpretation, and dissemination methods in response to their poetic and performative sense-making of experience.

I argue that all researchers should aim to decolonize their arts-based research with people of African descent by (re)-finding culturally responsive poetry inquiry grounded in participants' ways of knowing or what I call "home knowing." This paper also speaks to the transnational community of researchers of African descent in Western contexts. As this article illustrates, culturally responsive inquiry for researchers of African descent can become particular ways of re-finding our "back home" knowing for communities with which we work and for ourselves as well. How participants or we situate our social world are not solely remembrances of "back home"; they are active practices of resistance seminal to navigating systems of oppression in settler spaces such as Canada.

I situated these reflections as a researcher and former service worker in the HIV response, and as an Afro-Caribbean person born and raised in the Eurowestern settler state we call Canada. I use the terms "African descendant" and "African descent" to refer to people who identify as descendants of continental Africa as adopted by the United Nations (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2015). Using terminology that emphasizes the commonalities amongst African, Afro-identified, and Black people, while recognizing their cultural heterogeneity and geographic diversity has become part of a broader decolonizing project that recognizes interconnected histories and legacies of colonization and collaborative strategies of decolonizing praxis.

Colonial loss and (Re)Finding home knowing

I engaged in this experience of developing culturally responsive research and re-finding home knowing as a doctoral student experiencing loss in the academy. One of my most palpable losses stemmed from being a racialized scholar in a Canadian university. Black American scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2000) has spoken about the marginalization, silencing, and invisibility scholars of African descent can experience in Eurowestern academic spaces. This marginalization interconnects with colonized knowledge production in the academe. For instance, African and Africentric knowledge systems are often primitivized, exotified, segregated (i.e., African studies), or treated as cultural artifacts, consequently positioning them as scientific data rather than research methods (Mkhize and Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2014). This has contributed to racist biases in knowledge production, where Eurowestern paradigms are idealized and universalized, and its precepts, presumptions, and prejudices shape the methodologies academics choose and the knowledge they produce. This Eurowestern supremacy results in exploring social concerns of African descendant people through Eurowestern perspectives of reality, which too often perpetuates deficit ideologies and othered perspectives of them (Chilisa, 2020; Mohanty, 2003). So, I found that these losses I was experiencing were not just methodological, but also epistemological, ontological, and axiological (and thus existential). I started to question if or how it was possible to recover what we had lost, as people of African descent, due to Eurowestern knowledge supremacy in Canadian social science research.

As I immersed myself in the decolonizing literature, I understood why this loss was so profound. For people of African descent, colonized knowledge production has contributed to “amputation” (Fanon, 1967) or “spirit injury” (Jagire, 2011): a disconnection from the cultural values, practices and precepts that guided our ways of knowing pre-European colonization. Pivotal to redressing colonized knowledge production is to reclaim, redevelop, and reconstitute home knowing practice; this can offer cultural restoration, survival, healing, and social justice (Dei et al., 2000; Gray et al., 2013). Notably, poetic inquiry has been positioned as a home knowing when grounded in storytelling and story sharing practices common in many African and Africentric cultures.

Poetic inquiry

Poetic inquiry is a body of qualitative research where poetry is integral to the methodological design or research methods (Prendergast, 2009). In poetic inquiry, the researcher as poet “chooses a variety of lenses through which to re-present what is seen” (Hordyk et al., 2014); participants’ sense-making through narrative becomes the theoretical lens that grounds poetic interpretation and representation. Leggo (2008) offers poetry in research as a non-linear representation that disrupts the empirical dualism of art-science, mind-body, self-other, researcher-participant, interpreter-audience common in academic writing. Poetry as an embodied practice can respond to the emotive ways in which we make sense and share our sense-making of the world, recognizing that our body and emotions plays an integral part to understanding our experiences (Vacchelli, 2018).

Poetic interpretation also engages emotive ways of knowing less favored in academic scholarship, such as empathy, self-awareness and self-reflection, allowing for a multi-sensorial mode of interpretation (Beltrán, 2019).

Poetic inquiry can become a decolonizing methodology when it centers the embodied, emotive and performative knowing practices of a colonized people. For instance, a decolonized methodology with, for and by people of African descent would recognize African and Africentric knowing practice as integral to how African descendent people gather and share knowledge. Incorporating arts-based methodologies grounded in African and Africentric epistemologies addresses the epistemological dominance of Eurowestern ways of knowing. This in turn can shift research towards epistemic multicenterness (Dei et al., 2000): local knowledge of a people are given centrality in research, and other epistemic perspectives are integrated based on their congruency with local worldviews (Wilson, 2013).

In many African descendant cultures, poetry is not just an art form; it is grounded in oral storytelling traditions. Kenyan theorist Ngugi waThiong'o (1986) proposes that scholars of African descent should harken back to how we know in efforts to decolonize our minds. For Thiong'o, this includes the use of orature and poetry in scholarship since it has a history and longevity that precedes and succeeds colonization. Black American, Barbadian-Carriacou theorist Audre Lorde (1984) offers poetry as the source of theorization, a "revelatory distillation of experience" (p. 37). Women of African descent have used cultural performance practices such as poetry to subvert dominant knowing practices, share viewpoints, and raise consciousness within home collectives (Collins, 2000). As such, creative modes of knowledge production such as poetry have served to subvert colonial subjugation and recite culturally congruent theorization.

Poetic inquiry as found poetry and Re-finding home knowing

Found poetry is an approach to poetic inquiry where words from qualitative data are extracted to create poetry (Butler-Kisber, 2020). It typically involves poetic interpretation and representation methods within and through data. The "within" process uses poetry as an analytical tool, or distilling the thematic essence of qualitative findings using poetic interpretive methods (Glesne, 1997; Riessman, 2008); the "through" process uses poetry as a representational form, such as using poetic structure, rhythm, and meter to represent narrative findings (Prendergast, 2009). While there is no prescribed method to found poetry, the process typically involves a combination of qualitative transcription, interpretation and representation methods to craft poetry from qualitative data. In this poetic recrafting, the aim is to illuminate salient aspects of narrative or narrated experiences such as auditory details, narrative cadence, evocative words, while illuminating its thematic relevance (Butler-Kisber, 2020).

For scholars of African descent, poetic inquiry can also be an epistemic re-finding, a discovery of a method congruent with African and Africentric sense-making that is reverential to the narrated and narrative experience. In this discovery, they may re-find their own poetic ways of knowing within academic texts. For example, Nicole A. Corley (2020) and Davis (2021) used poetic inquiry to amplify the stories of minoritized

participants. Their methodological practices allowed them to re-find their poetic ways of knowing and sense-making as women of African descent.

In her qualitative study exploring the experience of African American high school seniors and their single mothers, Corley (2020) combined poetic and narrative methods to analyze and represent participants' stories as poems. She incorporated poetic transcription and interpretation to emphasize narrative elements. For her, poetry was reflective of the ingenuity of African American storytelling and sharing practices. While not a formally trained poet, Corley's artistic pursuits included reading and writing poetry. Accordingly, finding poetic inquiry to authentically represent participants' stories reconnected to her own creativity.

To use a methodology that complemented her critical epistemology, Davis (2021) "sampled" poetic inquiry methods alongside African American narrative practices to develop culturally relevant poetic methods for her study on minoritized youth civic action. She used inductive coding alongside free verse poetic memoing to capture participants' voices and their emotive aspects. She also used poetic transcription and interpretation to maintain participants' voices and incorporated oral aspects of speech—cadence, voice, tone, pausing, vernacular—into textual representation. In using poetic inquiry as a research method, Davis (2021) re-found her ways of knowing as a poet. Culturally adapted poetic inquiry amplified her and her participants' critical and creative ways of seeing and critiquing their social world.

The work of Corley (2020) and Davis (2021) illustrates poetic inquiry as a research approach that can protest against Eurocentric methodologies and hierarchies of knowledge and co-construct knowledge in reverential ways. As Western women of African descent embracing poetic inquiry, both authors re-found their creative ways of knowing as researchers. In this milieu, poetry can be considered a home knowing approach to research with and by people of African descent.

Recognizing the evocative and provocative potential of oratory performance, I redesigned a narrative research project that responded to how the women I interviewed made sense of their social world and how their sense-making resonated with me. Through this exploration, I found poetry and re-found poetic inquiry as home knowing with women of African descent.

Re-finding poetic inquiry as home knowing with Women of African descent

The Because She Cares project evolved from my doctoral research on caring labor and employment in the HIV service sector (Chambers, 2018). The study explored how the African immigrant women I interviewed made sense of their work as agential, cultural, and social caring work practices and deciphered their local and transnational interconnections. The study was also methodological, where I explored the meaning of culturally responsive methodologies for people of African descent (Chilisa, 2020).

Ten African immigrant women living with HIV participated as the "Narrators" with ages ranging from mid-thirties to early fifties. All Narrators identify a continental African country as their country of origin or homeland, with East, West, Central, and Southern

African nation-states represented. Their pathways into Canada varied as well: arriving in Canada as immigrants, undocumented persons, or refugees; coming directly to Canada from their country of origin or migrating through other nation-states prior to their Canadian arrival. Engagement in HIV response activities ranged from 3 to over 20 years: some Narrators begun their involvement prior to coming to Canada, others became newly engaged to HIV response activities upon their arrival. The Narrators also had considerable employment experience, not just in HIV sectors, but in other sectors as well; experience obtained in Canada and in other countries, and employment prior to or after their HIV diagnosis.

I would like to share how the Because She Cares Study evolved from a narrative study into a poetic knowledge generation and mobilization project. In this paper, I outline my approach to found poetry that was grounded in home knowing practices. This process entails gathering methodological advice from women of African descent, finding poetry through oratory performance, integrating poetic transcription, interpretation, and representation methods reverential to Africentric storytelling practices, "workshopping" draft poems with the Narrators, and mobilizing them through spoken word performance.

These methodological shifts were consistently grounded in the wisdom of the women of African descent I encountered while conducting this study, all of whom inspired me to develop approaches to poetic inquiry that amplified the voices of African immigrant women who work in the Canadian HIV response. The Because She Care study was reviewed by the Research Ethics Board of a Canadian University. The study was also presented to the African and Caribbean Council on HIV/AIDS in Ontario (ACCHO) to assure its relevance to the Ontario HIV/AIDS Strategy for African, Caribbean and Black Communities (Ontario ACB Strategy). As the Narrators were seminal to methodological development, I will share examples of what they taught me, including relevant poetic passages from the study. I use pseudonyms to maintain the Narrators' anonymity.

Gathering sage methodological advice from Women of African descent

Methodological development was rooted in the African philosophy of "sagacity" (Oseghare, 1992), where I drew from the sage or insightful wisdom of women of African descent, which I discuss in more detail in a book chapter but summarize in this paper (Chambers, 2021). I spoke with African and Afro-identified HIV advocates about conducting culturally relevant research. They critiqued research where they could not see participants as knowledge generators and desired research dissemination to be accessible and understandable to them. They advised that research conducted for women of African descent should also have an advocacy component. Knowledge generated should be mobilized amongst people who could benefit from research findings; this mobilization should aim to catalyze change for community benefit. Lastly, they recommended knowing practices reminiscent of "back home," such as storytelling to gather knowledge, collective dialogue to exchange knowledge, and participatory methods that actively involved the community in knowledge exchange. From their sage advice, I chose performance narrative inquiry and adapted the methods to be congruent with African and Africentric oral storytelling traditions (Madison, 1993, 2008; Riessman, 2008).

Finding poetry through oratory performance

To gather work stories, I used life story data collection. I would pose an open-ended question to each Narrator about their working life in HIV service, and they would direct the story as they saw fit. I found that unstructured narrative data collection, for example, "letting the stories flow" created a space for the Narrators' to perform their stories. And what I witnessed in their interviews was the following. Kissing teeth. Slapping tables. Shaking their hands. Nodding their head. Yelling. Laughing. Singing. Crying. Sighing. Pausing. Thinking. Reflecting. This emotive, emphatic, embodied, expressive being-ness of oral narrative subsequently amplified the work stories they told. Furthermore, their emotional and embodied expressions shaped theirs, and subsequently my, sense-making of their HIV service work as caring work. It was in this witnessing of and bearing witness to the Narrators' oratory performance that I "found" poetry.

The first poetic finding occurred in my second interview. To illustrate her experiences of community activism back home, "Nea" sang a song to me in her local language. I was moved by what she sang and how she performed the joys of HIV service work through singing this song. This song represented both a narrated and narrative experience (Bruner, 1990): a narrative of her HIV service work back home (narrated experience), and the experience in which both of us—her as the orator and singer, and me as the audience—engaged at that moment of the telling (narrative experience). Furthermore, my witnessing of the narrative experience illuminated its sensory, emotive and embodied nature. In writing my field notes, I identified potential themes and how this song made me feel. This experience alerted me to the varied ways in which she compared her HIV service work in Canada and her homeland, and how this song represented this contrast.

Taking the methodological insights discovered from my interview with Nea, I revisited the narrative transcript of "Naomi," my first interview. As I relistened to the audio recording, I distinguished how Naomi narrativized her experience of work, not just her words but *how* she expressed them. I noted non-verbal communication—pauses, vocal tone and inflection, rhythm, emotional expression and body language—within the transcript. In revising my transcription, I could also see that the narrative had a lyrical quality. Sentences became line breaks, changes in vocal tone were textually emphasized using capitalization, italics, bolding, underlining, and verbal notations. Using textual notations and stylization, the oral features of the narrative experience emerged. In experiencing the Narrators' oratory through the senses, and through the body, mind, and spirit, I became attuned to how the stories resonated with me: their embodied, emotional, and sensorial knowing. I became attentive to how I—as inquirer and audience member—was drawn into these stories: as a person of African descent, of Caribbean heritage, who is HIV-negative and works in HIV-related work. I wanted to highlight the passages that had theoretical relevance to my research question and poetically re-tell passages such that they evoked emotions in the Narrators or myself, and provoked political messages of HIV service work that the Narrators wanted to say. I also wanted to recognize that emotions, the Narrators and my own, were central to our sense-making of their HIV service work as caring work. In bearing witness to the narrative experience, I became acutely aware of what these stories could do—emotively, bodily, reflexively, dialogically—if re-told in a

manner that brought forth what I was experiencing. For me, this resonance seemed best evoked through poetry using poetic transcription, interpretation and representation methods to illuminated what emerged in the narrative experience, such as arguments, tensions, and emotions (Kearney, 2015).

Responding through found poetry methods

In response to what I had witnessed, I adapted my narrative research methods to feature the lyrical and emotive qualities of the Narrators' oratory. I incorporated found poetry into the study's methodology so I could poetically re-tell passages that best convey salient themes of HIV service work as caring work. My approach to found poetry used poetic transcription, interpretation, and representation methods. I drew upon poetic interpretation to capture the poetic cadence of everyday speech (Gee, 1985; Madison, 2008). I incorporated poetic interpretation to draw out and emphasize overarching themes demonstrated within the text (Riessman, 2008; Madison, 1993, 2008, 2011). My approach favored oratory as interpretive performance. As such, I became attentive to the Narrators' body language (which I described in my interview notes), rhythmic inflection, and their use of song or allegory. I would then feature their narrative performances in poetic representation. Lastly, I incorporated poetic devices such as enjambment, cadence, and played with syntax and lineation for poetic emphasis. My approach to found poetry, was guided by critical feminist scholarship, notably, feminists from colonized cultures who incorporated poetry in their intellectual work, including Audre Lorde (1997), Anzaldúa and Saldívar-Hull (1987), and Brand (2001).

To find poems within narrative data, I applied the following methods: deep listening to assist in poetic transcription; and interpreting resonance which incorporated poetic interpretation and representation. I also workshopped draft poems with the Narrators to ensure its authenticity with the original narrative; and mobilized poetic re-tellings to transmit study findings.

Deep listening (poetic transcription). Before conducting poetic interpretation, I relistened to each audio recording. I call this process "deep listening" as it requires me to repeatedly listen to the Narrators' oratory to glean their communicative aspects. I also listened for salient themes concerning the research topic. After I deeply listened to each narrative, I conducted poetic transcription. I would transcribed structural aspects of narrative communication—emphatic expression, vocal quality, speech pacing, body language that I originally witness and noted—into transcripts using a notion style for conversation analysis that I adapted for poetic transcription (Jefferson, 2004). I orally recorded my reflections after each deep listening session. In these reflections, I would discuss what listening to these stories was doing to me: what emotions I was experiencing, what thoughts popped into my head, what meaning was conveyed that may trouble or challenge preconceived notions of HIV and work as relayed by African immigrant women. I used these reflections to critically reflect on the process and to later assist me in interpretation. As I listened, I was attentive to how the interviews made me feel: which parts of their story evoked bodily tensions or provoked emotive responses. In relistening to the Narrators'

stories, as an interpreter and audience to their oratory, I attended to what these stories were doing to me, making me feel, teaching me. Thus, I re-experienced the Narrators' storytelling in the process of deep listening.

In my interviews with "Naomi," I noted how much economic hardship featured in her narrative. Her narratives of life being "so hard" revolved around histories of precarious work as a person living with disabling health concerns. This precarity extended to her HIV service work. Although employed part-time at an HIV service organization, Naomi's work income was not a livable wage, nor did it cover her extended healthcare costs. Thus, she relied on governmental support and its disability and financial benefits to subsist.

After bolding phrases that emphasized Naomi's particularly experience of hardship, I then used poetic transcription to recraft salient passages:

> Naomi: <City> ***is a VERY EXPENSIVE CITY.*** [Yes.] And I don't know. **How you survive? You don't have busspass. You don't have anything.** They don't give you transportation, even. **How you WORK, how you LIVE, is PAID?** They don"t understand you. What you go through? **Sometimes I don't blame. Maybe some people are sitting in the house not looking for job. Depression makes them *to sit*, to *forget it*, you know**?

Using poetic transcription illuminated key aspects of financial precarity and its emotional impact on Naomi. Poetic transcription also aided my interpretation of Naomi's story. As financial precarity thematically emerged as a key aspects of HIV service work as (un)caring work, I poetically re-told these salient passages in Naomi's story. For instance, the paragraph above became a stanza in the poetic re-telling, "Living this Kind of Life":

Living this kind of life

I can't afford to escape.

This is a VERY EXPENSIVE CITY.

How do you survive?

If you don't have a monthly bus pass, or tickets

You don't have anything.

How do you WORK?

How do you LIVE?

How do you GET PAID?

I don't blame other people on ODSP[1] or OW[2].

If they are sitting in the house, not looking for a job.

Depression makes you want

To sit

To forget

To give up.

Passage from "Living this kind of life", Naomi

The experience of deep listening for poetic interpretation evoked the emotional experience of listening to stories which allowed me to recognize what work stories were particularly salient to the Narrators' sense-making of their HIV service work as caring work. It also trained my poetic instrument, as emotive connections are pivotal to poetic interpretation and representation (Leggo, 2008).

Interpreting resonance (poetic interpretation and representation). Deep listening goes beyond listening for the words that were said and how they were said to how they *resonate*: as performance text, oratory expression, emotive interconnections, and political implications. Guided by Catherine Riessman (2008) approach to performance narrative analysis, I incorporated resonance interpretation. In performance narrative analysis the structural and thematic elements of oral narrative sense-making are emphasized; interpretation uncovers underlying meaning, including culturally constituted narratives (Riessman, 2008). Drawing upon African American D. Soyini Madison (1993, 2008, 2011) critical feminist approach to narrative interpretation and representation of Black and African women's stories, I further harnessed the catalytic aspects of narrative performance by thematically featuring stories that would have political resonance.

Noting what repeatedly resonated in the process of deep listening, I went back to specific narrative passages to interpret emotive, political, or theoretical resonance: emotive resonance where powerful emotions were aroused in the Narrators or me during narrative sharing, witnessing or interpreting; political resonance where the Narrators declared calls for action that related to their Canadian HIV service employment; and theoretical resonance, or passages that conceptualized caring work in the context of HIV. This search for emotive, political or theoretical resonance typically derived from the narrative experience: how the Narrators told their work stories and how their narratives evoked emotions or provoked further reflection. While listening to the Narrators' interviews, I would review the transcripts and highlight passages that resonated with the participant or myself. Then I would create in-vivo codes—phrases directly from the narrative passage—to collect like thoughts together. Sometimes these passages were only a paragraph or two; other times, these passages ran several pages or occurred at multiple points across an interview.

I would take passages using the same in-vivo code and arrange them into lines, stanzas and parts as per the poetics of the oral narrative (natural breaks illustrated through commas, periods, or changes in the topic). I would often relisten to the interview to ensure that the rhythm fit with the original oratory. Then, I would edit the text such that poetic resonance that I experienced as audience and interpreter was also expressed in the passage. While I strived to keep close to the Narrators' own words, I would sometimes move passages for emphasis, remove words to maintain anonymity, or add or replace words for clarity. I also

incorporated poetic devices to emphasize particular phrases, such as repetition (e.g., "Oh Yeah! Oh Yeah!"). I grouped like passages together if they illustrated similar ideas though they may occur at different narrative time points. Resonant passages were re-told as poems (i.e., poetic re-tellings) using poetic devices to embody the emotive resonance of the original telling and to evoke the theoretical and political relevance of the sharing.

For instance, in discussing her HIV service employment, Nadira shared contradictory work stories and emotional shifts that indicated theoretical and political relevance. She expressed cultural narratives of "gratitude" when narrativizing appreciation of her Canadian HIV service work as an African immigrant woman living with HIV. Yet, she got quite angry—raising her voice, waving her hands, using emphatic language—when sharing work experiences of being differentially treated as an employee. This anger countered the gratitude she initially expressed.

She gave one salient example of differential treatment. As a former client who became an employee, she was presented as her organization's "success story": a living testament to the principles of greater involvement and meaningful engagement of people living with HIV (GIPA/MEPA) at the organization where she worked. Yet, what resonated throughout her work stories were the deficit ideological stereotypes expressed at her workplace—of Black women, African immigrants, and people living with HIV—that she believed her colleagues attributed to her. These resonant passages of being "grateful" for Canadian HIV service employment but undervalued and tokenized as an African immigrant woman employee living with HIV were poetically re-told in the poem entitled, "I'm not one of your success stories":

At the agency where I work

They kept on saying

"You are one of OUR FEW SUCCESS STORIES."

Oh Yea! Oh yea!

And I had to sit everybody down and say,

"Excuse me?

We need to correct some language here.

I was never a FAILURE.

"I was dealing with a lot when you met me.

Living with HIV, living in a new place, as a refugee, with children back home

Social housing, social assistance, school, work, poverty

I hit ROCK BOTTOM because of my situation.

But it wasn't a FAILURE.

I was NEVER a failure.

"I had to deal with a lot of stuff.

A lot of stuff happened AT ONE TIME

My brain couldn't handle it.

That's where I was.

"It had NOTHING to do with me FAILING.

"Failing is …

I was supposed to do this

But I couldn't do it

Because of my OWN CHOICES.

These were NOT MY CHOICES

I didn't choose to be anxious, stressed, overworked, impoverished, depressed!

"So, don't call me a failure.

NEVER call me a FAILURE."

And they were like, "No, we don't mean that you were a *failure*.

When we say you are a success, we are just saying

That YOU OVERCAME."

And I looked at them and said,

"Excuse me?

We need to correct some language here.

That is NOT how you say SOMEBODY OVERCAME.

"Besides

What was there TO OVERCOME?

MENTAL HEALTH?

It's dealing. It's surviving. It's coping. It's living.

How do you OVERCOME living?

"I have worked so hard to build my self-confidence

To get to this point, I repeat to myself,

‘*I can do this. I can do this. I can do this.*’

Every time.

‘*I CAN do this! I CAN do this! I CAN do this!*’

“And then you turn around and say

‘*Here she is. One of OUR SUCCESS STORIES.*’

All the SELF-CONFIDENCE that I built up

Went SH-H-H-O-O down the drain.

“If you see me as YOUR SUCCESS

You are telling me,

‘*You can’t do this. You can’t do this. You can’t do this.*’

Yes you are. You are saying,

‘*You CAN’T do this! You CAN’T do this! You CAN’T do this!*’

Or I couldn’t have done it

Without YOU.

“You know what?

I am no longer your client.

I am your co-worker.

I am YOUR EQUAL.

I have earned my right to be here.

“When you call me YOUR SUCCESS STORY

You are telling me I am not your equal

And you are telling everyone I was YOUR CLIENT.

“I shouldn’t have to fight for YOUR RECOGNITION.

I shouldn’t have to demand YOUR RESPECT

“So please, stop calling me YOUR SUCCESS STORY.

It’s NOT for YOU to SAY THAT.”

“I’m not one of your success stories,” Nadira

Reinterpreting Nadira's story into the above poem was theoretically relevant to understanding tokenism as intersectional oppression in HIV service organizations. Poetically interpreting her anger—through repetition, word phrasing, emotive expression, and textual formatting—offered Nadira talking back to that oppression. The poem was also a political evocation. I used poetry to demonstrate her resistance to being tokenized and the provocative power of poetically counterstorying cultural narratives of Canadian (White) benevolence and GIPA/MEPA ideologies of success.

Workshopping poems (poetic and performance representation). To ensure that the poetic re-tellings resonated with the Narrators, I "workshopped" the re-tellings with each of them. In the performance arts, plays in draft form are workshopped or performed in front of a test audience to gauge their reactions and critiques (Le Cordeur, 2008). Workshopping actively engaged the Narrators in validating, editing, and rewriting my initial poetic interpretations. In performing the re-tellings, the Narrators as the audience experienced the oratory, which aided their interpretation. Workshopping also fostered dialogue between the Narrators and myself that enhanced collaborative representation.

I met with each Narrator to share the poetic re-tellings deriving from their stories. After I performed the drafted re-tellings, I showed the passages from the original interview transcript and noted places where I removed, changed or added words to confirm if the changes maintained the original meaning. While I offered the Narrators the opportunity to actively engage in poetry writing themselves, such as editing or adding to the existing work, most of the Narrators preferred to witness the poetic re-telling as an audience member and then offer their reflections. In this witnessing of their poems as an oral re-telling, they guided the revision process: noting what parts to edit, additions to make, and other narrative passages they wished to express poetically. This workshopping also reviewed my initial interpretation, which I revisited after gathering the Narrators' insights.

Workshopping actively involved participants in co-creation. For instance, in my workshopping session with Miriam, we collaboratively revised her poetic re-tellings, including editing and revising passages to better convey the emotional labour and resolve she gleaned from her HIV service work, a salient theme in her sense-making of her work. The workshopping process gave Miriam an opportunity to poetically re-tell her story such that it better captured the emotional complexities of HIV service work. Moreover, Miriam enhanced my understanding of her emotional work as (un)caring work which I incorporated in my narrative interpretations.

As Miriam reflected on the process, she appreciated that poetically re-telling her words brought back the emotions she expressed in the telling:

> Miriam: It's the same words but it, it, it expresses the emotions and the feeling, like the actual thing. [Yes. Good that's what I was hoping for. I wanted you to feel…] It doesn't feel like something which is just written.
>
> Lori: Ok and it feels like you? Does it feel like you?
>
> Miriam: Yes. Yea. [Ok.] Definitely.

She also appreciated that representing research findings as poetry could better assure that the findings would get back to people who could benefit from them, particularly African immigrant women and other people living with HIV:

> Because that's the reason why I chose to engage into this, participate in this research. I don't normally like participating in research because I know at the end of the day, they are not benefitting me, they are just going in their shelves, and they are thrown away. The way I want them to benefit me is by getting the information out to other people, then I benefit.... But if you get this information and bring it back again to our community, it helps. - Miriam

Workshopping poems became another narrative event, a reflective and dialogic process, wherein switching our roles—the Narrators as the audience, I as the orator—we collaboratively engaged in the interpretive process. The Narrators commented on what resonated with them in hearing their work stories poetically re-told: what emotions were evoked or provoked in the telling, or what passages could have political resonance if shared with others. Some of the Narrators reflected upon their work differently after hearing the poetic re-tellings of their working lives; others found the re-tellings evoked reflections of their HIV service work that I incorporated in thematic and poetic interpretations.

The workshopping process began the knowledge translation and mobilization (KTM) planning for Because She Cares. Many of the Narrators strategized ways to share the poetic re-tellings, such as hosting community dialogues, publishing them for distribution, or presenting them at conferences where people living with HIV and HIV service employers could be present. We also discussed the evocative and provocative potential of sharing research findings creatively, such as spoken word performances. Workshopping shifted the knowledge generation process as the Narrators became more actively involved in interpretation and KTM. Lastly, sharing the poetic re-tellings, vis-à-vis workshopping allowed me to reciprocate the oratory knowledge sharing the Narrators originally offered me.

Mobilizing poetic re-tellings (Performance arts-based knowledge translation and mobilization). Culturally responsive HIV research should respond politically, respectfully, and safely to the cultural impacts that HIV and its response activities have had on African descendent people. Ideally, it should catalyze knowledge such that it engenders critical reflection and socially just action. For the Narrators, that meant mobilizing their stories to reach people who could positively address their work conditions.

In collaboration with HIV advocates, we continue Because She Cares as a participatory KTM. With permission from the Narrators, we published their poetic re-tellings as an anthology and translated study findings into spoken word performance art. To maintain the Narrators anonymity, actors of African descent who are current or former HIV service employees perform on their behalf.

More recently, we have performed at Canadian HIV service and allied organizations to generate discussions on HIV service work as experienced by the African immigrant women interviewed. We follow each performance with post-performance discussions or what we call "kitchen table talks." Over food, audience members discuss the performance and the meaning of HIV service work as caring, uncaring, and care-full work. For many

audience members, the kitchen table talks become a "freedom area" to discuss some of the opportunities and tensions of working in Canadian HIV service organizations as racialized immigrant women living with HIV. In these discussions, people often cite poetic re-telling passages that resonate with them and use these passages to jump-start tough conversations. In some instances, women of African descent who work in HIV service work specify elements of the play that illustrate their own lived experiences of anti-Black racism, sexism, and HIV stigma. Translating and mobilizing research as poetry allows the audience to engage more fruitfully with the issues conveyed. In mobilizing research as Africentric poetic performance, "Because She Cares" becomes decolonizing praxis.

Discussion

Re-finding poetic ways of home knowing

While "found poems" has been defined as a methodological approach to transcribing, interpreting, or representing qualitative research as poetry, I found this definition did not fully convey what I found. For me, "finding poems" was a relational practice, a respectful practice, a moral practice, a healing practice AND a home knowing practice. Finding poems in participants' narratives encouraged me to listen deeply to them, represent them in a fashion that represented their sense-making of HIV and work, give back the Narrators' stories in a creative fashion that recognized their contribution, and offered research methods that responded to how many women of African descent from oral narrative cultures know their social world.

In discovering other researchers of African descent who re-found poetry in their research, I became attentive to the moral and political imperative to incorporating home knowing approaches to poetic inquiry. For Corley (2020), poetic inquiry was a moral evocation to ensure that her representation of participant narratives was congruent with the narrative and narrated experience. For Davis (2021), poetic methods were a political evocation to develop critical poetic inquiry. In both examples, re-finding poetry was an alertness to the poetic nature of oral narrative speech and a cultural response to interpreting and representing African descendent people's narratives poetically. In reflecting upon my moral and political imperative to transcribe, interpret and represent the Narrators' stories poetically, I realized that I was finding poems through the evocative qualities of the Narrators' oratory while recognizing the importance of mobilizing their stories to catalyze critical reflection and hopefully inspire organizational change.

In finding poetry in the Narrators' oratory, I also recognized that I was re-finding my ways of knowing as a person of African descent brought up in a Caribbean oral storytelling culture. While my Jamaican background and its storytelling practices may have fostered alertness to the esthetic and rhythmic quality of oral narratives, these qualities were also coming from the Narrators themselves. I became more alert to the poetic qualities of oral narratives and how they could generate cognitive, emotive and reflexive meaning for the audience. I also became attentive to how I—as an inquirer and audience member—was drawn into these stories: as a person of African descent, of Jamaican heritage, and an HIV-negative worker. In finding poetry in the Narrators stories, I found

our—the Narrators', my own—ways of knowing our social world. Through oratory. Through performance. Through poetry.

In reflecting back to thinkers who theorize poetry as decolonial practice, I am reminded of poetry's evocation of homeplaces. Poetic inquiry as home knowing is congruent with Ghanaian George Sefa Dei (2012) theorization of the trialectic space of local knowledge of African descendant people, where knowing moves beyond the rational mind to encompass body, soul and spirit, interfaces with history, and its legacies, recognizes the sacredness of our knowing practices, and its connection to our cultural precepts and practices. Using methods that culturally respond to how WE know as people of African descent, can promote their epistemic salience and relevance in social science research with, for and by people of African descent.

Possibilities and tensions of poetic inquiry as home knowing

This paper invites greater recognition of poetic inquiry as a culturally responsive practice that has utility in qualitative research. When conducted with, for and by, people with an experiential understanding of its decolonizing potential and cultural reverence, it offers a space to re-member and re-find home knowing too often subaltern in the academe, yet relevant to colonized communities with and for which we conduct research. The utility of poetic inquiry as home knowing is three-fold: it promotes research methodologies from the cultural standpoint of the people for whom the research is intended, positions research participants as knowledge producers as it grounds research method in their sensemaking and conveying of experience, and recognizes the mind-body duality of academic knowing practices, particularly how emotional resonance shapes analytical interpretations.

Poetic inquiry as home knowing is well-suited to epistemic standpoints grounded in indigenous knowing practices and participatory frameworks. Other thinkers who ground their research in their ancestral knowing practice have used poetic forms to celebrate its cultural relevance while troubling Eurowestern centrism in academic scholarship (Ahenakew, 2016; d'Abdon, 2016). As part of their participatory research practice, qualitative researchers can work with community members to reflect upon their home knowing practices, such as learning about the role of oratory and storytelling performance in knowledge transmission, and collaboratively incorporating such knowing practices into research inquiry.

Despite the benefits of home knowing in poetic inquiry, there are also ethical considerations and salient tensions in using this method. Notably, its decolonizing aspects—positionality, voice, and representation—present challenges. While poetic inquiry can promote oral storytelling and poetic performance as a knowing practice that can foster accessibility, it also leaves room for diverse interpretations. For the Because She Cares project, I questioned how the poems might resonate with audiences who are not well-versed in the methods or the topic. Could audience interpretations of the form and its content constitute social perceptions, assumptions, and prejudices of people of African descent, immigrant women or people living with HIV? We introduced post-performance discussions to create a dialogic space to unpack such perceptions; yet recognize that it may take more than a 90-min conversation to tease out implicit biases audience members

may hold. Meaning is constituted with the personal, cultural, experiential, social, temporal, and historical contexts in which we are embedded and engaged. Using a method where resonance features in interpretation requires reflection on what may resonate with the audience. What resonates amongst people with insider perspectives might not induce the same feelings or meaning amongst audience members from different social locations.

Poetic inquiry as home knowing should also create space for local languages, yet that can pose challenges when language diversity is a consideration. While the Narrators of Because She Cares were invited to speak in their local languages, with some doing so, most of them shared their stories in English, *my* local language. Because I conducted interviews in English, I question if participants felt permitted to express themselves in their local language, even though encouraged to do so. Furthermore, language is nuanced; meaning can get lost when interpreted from one local language to another. For example, when participants used their local language, it required English translation to foster my understanding. As I was unfamiliar with the local languages used by participants, I may have missed salient meanings of words and vernacular, but also of body language and allegory.

While interpreters may resolve some language challenges, they can also alter the dialogic space. For the Because She Cares study, having an interpreter could have resolved the translation issue, but introduced new concerns, including if the Narrators would have been as willing to share their stories of living with HIV, a health concern that still is stigmatized, amongst people who may identify from their country of origin, and possibly may know them. Additionally, having another person bearing witness may have changed how the Narrators shared their story, altering its performance and subsequently its resonance and interpretation. While including local language interpreters on the study team could facilitate translation, it can also introduce other considerations, including how people may share and perform their stories when someone else is bearing witness to them, particularly if the topic is sensitive.

While poetic methods can elevate participants' voices, I question if the form can truly do so in the current Eurowestern centrism of academic scholarship. For instance, I recognize the irony of presenting any study, including this one, as decolonizing praxis, if an imperialist language in its written form serves as the dominant mode of knowledge representation. Another tension is the Eurowestern context of academic knowledge production is not currently structured for diverse knowing practice. Dissemination requirements delimit how participants' stories are presented in academic spaces. While spoken word offers a dissemination method that resonates with represented communities, the written and oral products delivered to academic audiences—centered around the plot of a research question, structured around time or word counts—continue to represent dominant modes of knowledge sharing. In this context, there is the danger of poetic retellings becoming ornamental to rather than representative of scholarly thought. Conducting knowledge sharing outside of academic spaces has resolved some of these tensions. Much of the knowledge mobilization for Because She Cares has been in community settings amongst people employed in HIV services and African descendant people living with or impacted by HIV. This has allowed the project's teachings to reach the communities to which the work is intended. Yet, as I disseminate its teaching into

academic spaces, I find myself splitting the knowledge. Presenting a short poem at an academic conference rather than the entire spoken word play. Or submitting a methodology paper with limited poetic content to meet page or word counts.

Although critical thinkers are demanding multicentered scholarship and representation of diverse voices, and research studies such as this one strive to push the boundaries of academic scholarship, home knowing methods will remain on the academic fringes until greater space is given to them in research, including supporting poetic forms of representation within theses, conference presentation, and journal articles.

Conclusion

As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasized, letting the subaltern speak should open up greater space for local communities to speak about their social conditions because they know these conditions (Spivak, 1988). I argue that qualitative researchers let the subaltern speak through knowledge production and use methodologies and methods that are founded on local worldviews. People of African descent who are embedded within the academy should speak as the subaltern and use their outsider-within positioning to promote African and Africentric home knowing methods within their research including poetic knowledge gathering and sharing practices common in many African descendent cultures.

While we still must contend with the tensions of culturally responsive research in Eurowestern academic spaces and its modes of epistemic authentication, this should not deter critical scholars from striving to decolonize qualitative knowledge production. Instead, we should use these tensions as a knowing space to produce culturally responsive research methodologies with, for and by people of African descent and re-find our home ways of knowing within the academe.

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ORCID iD

Lori A Chambers https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9835-607X

Notes

1. ODSP is the Ontario Disability Support Program, a government program administered in the Province of Ontario, Canada that provides financial support and health benefits to people with a diagnosed disability or illness impeding full employment (Ministry of Children Community and Social Services, 2020).
2. OW is the Ontario Works program, a government program administered in the Province of Ontario that provides employment and basic financial assistance for people who are temporary unemployed and meet select eligibility criteria (Ontario Works Act, 1997).

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Author Biographies

Lori A. Chambers, MSW, PhD, RSW is a social worker, community health researcher, HIV advocate, and storyteller currently completing her postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Toronto in Toronto, Canada. Her research incorporates performance and poetic narrative practices grounded in "back home" storytelling traditions to illustrate how minoritized women narrate and make meaning of their experiences of HIV. Visit www.becauseshecares.com for more information on the poetic inquiry methods discussed in this paper.