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“Don’t Let Nobody Bring You Down”: How Urban Black Girls Write and Learn from Ethnographically-based Poetry to Understand and Heal from Relationship Violence

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Abstract

This paper explores the engagement of African-American, Caribbean-American, and immigrant West African girls in the critical analysis and writing of poetry to make sense of their multi-dimensional lives. The authors worked with high-school aged girls from Brooklyn, New York who took part in a weekly school-based violence prevention program, and who became both ‘participants’ in an ethnographic research study with the authors and ‘poets’ as they creatively analyzed themes from research data. The girls cultivated a practice of reading and writing poetry that further explored dating and relationship violence, themes that emerged from the violence prevention program sessions and the ethnographic interviews. The girls then began to develop ‘poetic knowledge’ grounded in their lived experiences as urban Black girls. The authors offer that ‘participatory narrative analysis’ is an active strategy that urban Black girls enlist to foster individual and collective understanding and healing.

Keywords

Ethnography, Poetry, Black Girls, Violence, Healing

Introduction

In our most recent ethnographic work, we sought to examine urban Black girls’ experiences of multiple levels of violence. We were informed by girls of African-American, Caribbean-American, and West African descent who were participants in a violence prevention program for high school girls based in two small schools in Central Brooklyn, New York. From the inception of the study, we were also intent on incorporating arts-based research methods (ABRM) into our work. The first author’s positionality as an adolescent health researcher, an ethnographer, a poet, and a former youth



development professional deeply shapes our engagement with the participants. Once or twice a year, the first author facilitated poetry workshops with the girls in the violence prevention program. The second and third authors have participated in mini-versions of these workshops, facilitated by the first author, in their graduate-level classes. Collectively, we see that poetry has been used as a tool for both attaining and sharing knowledge in a broad range of disciplines. Langer and Furman (2004), as well as Bishop and Willis (2014), note that ‘research poems’ can be used to (re)present data in a way that emphasizes the subjectivity and emotional punch of participants’ words, which may be missed if used in the traditional ethnographic interview format. Poetry allows for re-presentations of the nuances of people’s lived experiences (Dill 2015; Glesne 1997; Richardson 1993). Therefore, using poetry as an investigative tool allows our participants to reflect on their own lives and provides “a unique entry point into their subjective experiences” (Bishop and Willis 2014).

Conducting Participatory Narrative Analysis to Generate Ethnographically-based Poetry

Oftentimes in our ethnographic research, we as co-authors end up engaging in what Green (2013, 149) calls “Double Dutch Methodology,” shifting our roles and identities depending on how our participants, their narratives, their inquiries, and their strategies of coping need us to show up. For example, at times, we are “observant participants” (Jones 2009, 16) observing, witnessing, and taking field notes in the weekly violence prevention program sessions. Other times, we are co-facilitators of the violence prevention curriculum working alongside the program volunteers and staff. Sometimes, we act as liaisons and advocates between the girls and their school administrators, teachers, and staff, documenting their development and enhanced skills, and supporting their successful matriculation through high school. More recently, we have been interviewers conducting individual semi-structured conversations with the girls about various aspects of their lives. Other times, which we will detail throughout this paper, we are leading and participating in poetry workshops with them. Moreover, we strive to be caring, supportive, trusted adults in their lives, becoming “natural mentors” (Hurd and Zimmerman 2010, 3) for the girls. We are inspired by Brown’s (2013, 52) description of the “homegirls” in girls’ lives who “give their time” to the girls and their full lives, versus merely “making time” in their schedules for workshop sessions. Homegirls are not merely adults who engage in community service or volunteer with girls. The homegirls in Brown’s collective, and our own emerging identities as homegirls see our partnerships with girls as inherently not volunteer work and not helicopter research. Instead, we see this as our Black and women of color feminist praxes as “othermothers” (Collins 1990), teachers, and community leaders (Collins 1990; The Combahee River Collective 1977). Based on our own standpoints of being women of color from urban neighborhoods often stigmatized in the research and policy discourse, as well as in the popular media (i.e., South Central Los Angeles, California, Corona Queens, New York, and North Shore Staten Island, New York, respectively), we are committed to doing work with young people in and countering pejorative narratives about similar urban spaces. Our subjective experiences are also sources of knowledge (Baker-Bell 2017), and they better equip us to engage with young people deeply and artistically because we continue to commit to our own self-reflection (Boylorn 2011).

The first author conducted semi-structured individual ethnographic interviews with 15 current participants and alumnae of the girls’ violence prevention program, ranging from 16 to 21 years of age. The third author transcribed the interviews verbatim, and the first and second authors conducted coding and thematic analysis of the interview data. During the ethnographic interviews, teen dating violence had emerged as a major theme in the girls’ conversations and in their lives. Initially, the curriculum in the violence prevention program had focused on fighting, street gangs, and gun violence prevention, but the curriculum had begun to incorporate discussions and resources related to dating violence and cultivating healthy relationships. The theory and praxis of Intersectionality (Bambara 1970; Collins 1990; The Combahee River Collective 1977; Crenshaw 1991), with its roots in U.S.

Black Feminist Thought, provide us with the analytical tools to better understand these complex, multiple, simultaneous, and socio-ecological factors that shape the conditions of daily life for urban Black girls. Through the poetry workshops, we wanted to engage in a deeper discussion of the interpersonal relationships, romantic relationships, dating violence, trauma, and resistance in the girls’ lives. Therefore, the first author conducted poetry workshops with the current cohort of 10th through 12th graders in the violence prevention program (three workshops on the same day with 20 girls each, N=60). A few of the poetry workshop participants had been interview participants, but the majority had not. These poetry workshops were also able to provide additional member checks of the data and themes, as a way of increasing validity (Furman, Langer, Davis, Gallardo, and Kulkarni 2007, 305). During the poetry workshops, the girls were introduced to poetic techniques, poetic forms, and published works of Black women and other writers of color, such as Nikki Giovanni, Tupac Shakur, Suheir Hammad, Roger Bonair Agard, Mahogany Browne, and t’ai freedom ford to serve as “authorial mentors” (Muhammad 2015, 5) for them.

By engaging in the method of “participatory narrative analysis” (Dill 2015, 131), poetry workshop participants were presented with excerpts from the ethnographic interviews. These excerpts we represented as “research poems” (Dill 2015, 131; Furman 2006, 564; Furman, Langer, Davis, Gallardo, and Kulkarni 2007, 302; Langer and Furman 2004) using interview participants’ exact words from the ethnographic data in the compressed or “poetic” form with line and stanza breaks. The poetry workshop participants then created “interpretive poems” (Dill 2015, 131; Langer and Furman 2004) using the themes expressed in the interview data to respond, in poetic form, to the relationship violence and dating violence mentioned. Our aforementioned roles as Double Dutch methodologists had helped us to build rapport with the girls, so they were eager to write poetry during the workshops. Through the reading, discussing, and writing of research and interpretive poetry, the girls joined us as co-analysts of the research data. We found ourselves pushing past the notion of “collaborative ethnography” (Lassiter 2005), as we were not just “reading with” our participants, not just “reading alongside” them. Instead, the analysis process is shared and becomes communal, as Brown and colleagues (2015) note “because my story is hers/hers is mine.” Césaire (1945) is noted as saying that “Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge.” We believe that through the writing and sharing of their ethnographically-based poetry, as we detail below, our participants have cultivated “poetic knowledge” grounded in their lived experiences as urban Black girls.

“I’m Happy to be Out of It”: Coping with Relationship Violence through Ethnography and Poetry

It took me a long time to accept his apology
cuz like I just hated him so much
He had too much control over me at that time.
I just I forgave
I was still upset cuz
He used to like ask me for money
And if he wanted to have sex and I didn’t want to have sex,
he would become very forceful
and it was not comfortable all the time
and I felt like I was doing the right thing because
I felt ‘oh he loves me so
I have to this and
I have to do that.’
But then, like now, it’s not what I thought it was.
I’m happy to be out of it.
And I’m happy to know better.

Jay¹ was an 18-year-old college freshman when she shared this remark with the first author during a semi-structured one-on-one interview. By then, the first author had known her for about two and a half years, but since she graduated from high school, our check-ins were not weekly face-to-face occurrences during the violence prevention program, but rather by text or social media. This interview, though “research,” was a great opportunity for us to also catch up. Jay’s remarks above were in response to me asking about high points and low points during her time in high school. Jay’s excerpt is her description of a low point—one of her ex-boyfriends leaked nude photographs of her as a way to shame and embarrass her. The photographs went viral. As the excerpt shows, Jay went on to detail how her ex-boyfriend tried to control and manipulate her throughout their relationship. Reflexively, Jay commented how she, at times, justified being intimate with him because he might love her and because she loved him, enacting what Chávez (2002, 14) calls a “paradox of love and violence.” Jay and the other participants in our ethnographic research study have helped us to co-theorize that ‘relationship violence’ is a more useful term than ‘dating violence’ for these experiences, as there is a wide spectrum for the types and levels of intimacy, roles, and duration of romantic partnerships for young people (Dill et al. 2016).

In the member-checking poetry workshops, participants were given Jay’s excerpt, re-presented in the form of a poem, and were asked to write a letter poem in response to her. This prompt was inspired and adapted from Oprah Winfrey’s (2012) “Letter to Her Younger Self” and Suheir Hammad’s (2003, 200) poem “Nothin’ to Waste.” Sixteen participants wrote letter poems in response. We selected the following five poems, which we felt represented the groups’ sentiments. Our participants shared:

Dear Jay,
 I look in your eyes and see pain and sadness
 Your biggest concern is what he’ll do next
 You’ve spent too many days thinking of ways to get out
 You will have to learn to leave
 I am proud of the fact that you left him
 You know the worth of having the strength to leave
 Because you are good enough!
 Love, Kim

Dear Jay,
 I look in your eyes and see a very strong and beautiful woman
 Your biggest concern is to not end up hurt
 You’ve spent too many days unhappy and stressed
 You will have to learn how to stand up and say no
 I am proud of the fact that you stood up for yourself and got out of the relationship
 You know the worth of yourself. Don’t let nobody bring you down.
 Because you are good enough!
 Love, Nidi

Dear Jay,
 I look in your eyes and see a strong young woman
 Your biggest concern is staying happy and loving yourself
 You’ve spent too many days feeling uncomfortable
 You will have to learn to be strong and fight for yourself
 I am proud of the fact that you got out of that relationship
 You know the worth of yourself and your companionship
 Because you are good enough!

¹ All names used are pseudonyms, selected by the participants.

Love, Aisha

Dear Jay,
I look in your eyes and see an innocent young lady
Your biggest concern is you!
You've spent too many days worrying about that low life
You will have to learn that you don't have to do things you don't want to do
I am proud of the fact that you are okay
You know the worth of your pride, your body
Because you are good enough!
Love, Caroline

Dear Jay,
I look in your eyes and see that you're happy and beautiful
Your biggest concern is that you love so much
You've spent too many days unhappy and wasting time
You will have to learn to not settle for what you don't deserve
I am proud of the fact that you got out of that relationship
You know the worth of yourself and your dignity
Because you are good enough!
Love, Nadine

These group of poems to Jay affirm her decision to have left an unhealthy relationship. Although these girls did not know Jay personally, as she graduated from high school before they were part of the violence prevention program, they knew enough about toxic relationships to adequately support Jay's decision to leave. This leads us to believe that they may have also witnessed cycles of violence in their own lives. Their poetry offers peer support of Jay's coping, with their sentiments of "stay happy and love yourself" and "don't let nobody bring you down." However, it is interesting to note that despite them knowing that getting out of a violent relationship is critical, the girls offer a spectrum of emotions from sadness to strength. Overall, these poems and these poets help us to better understand that "violence prevention" is complex and painful, and that even the strongest women can still be hurt.

"It Was a Girl": Queering Relationship Violence through Ethnography and Poetry

Some of the participants in the violence prevention program identify as lesbian, bisexual, and/or 'I just like who I like.' Lesbian, bisexual, and sexually-fluid adolescents also experience dating violence. In a one-on-one interview, Fleeky, who was a 17-year-old high school senior at the time, shared the following, re-presented below as a research poem:

It was a girl.
I still speak to her. Like almost every other day.
But it was just hard because we would get into an argument and she's like thicker than me.
She would push me and I would push her back.
She was a bad influence too.
I remember one time she had my phone cuz she didn't want me to go to school but I wanted to go.
So yeah, I feel like nobody should have to go through that.
Like, I could understand if I was going to like a party or something where you don't want me to go. But I was going to school.
It was like, I really can't do this anymore like how much am I supposed to tolerate?
Like everything I want to do, she's sucking her teeth. Like
'oh you about to go do this,
oh you about to go do that,'
when in reality I wasn't.

It was just so horrible
because I knew she didn't trust me.
And there was no reason for her not to trust me.

In the same member-checking poetry workshops, participants were given Fleeky's excerpt, re-presented as a poem, and were given the same prompt as above asked to write a letter poem in response to her. They shared the following:

Dear Fleeky,
I look in your eyes and see confusion and frustration
Your biggest concern is for her to trust you
You've spent too many days following her around
You will have to learn to stick up for yourself
You need to know the worth of yourself
Because you are good enough!
Love, Janice

Dear Fleeky,
I look in your eyes and see a strong woman
Your biggest concern is that your partner doesn't trust you
You've spent too many days trying to apologize
You will have to learn to let that person go
I am proud of the fact that you are trying
You know the worth of yourself
Because you are good enough!
Love, Kay

Dear Fleeky,
I look in your eyes and see a strong, independent woman
Your biggest concern is if she would put her hands on you and mess with your education
You've spent too many days wasting your time
You will have to learn from your mistakes
I am proud of the fact that you stood up for yourself
You know the worth of yourself, babygirl
Because you are good enough!
Love, Lexi

Dear Fleeky,
I look in your eyes and see that you're beautiful and you're your own mind
Your biggest concern is knowing your worth. Don't let no one take you for granted!
You've spent too many days dealing with her BS
You will have to learn that time is precious
I am proud of the fact that you didn't give up on yourself
You know the worth of yourself, because you're beautiful
Because you are good enough!
Love, Suzie

Dear Fleeky,
I look in your eyes and see confidence and potential
Your biggest concern is you can't figure out whether to walk away or not
You've spent too many days complaining about how you're treated
You will have to learn that there's a moment in life when you just have to move on

I am proud of the fact that you see that she's becoming a problem
You know the worth of yourself and your freedom
Because you are good enough!
Love, Maya

Through these response poems to older program participants, the girls demonstrated that there is strength in vulnerability. They recognize the humanity and 'know the worth' of a young woman who they did not know personally, a woman who, at times, could not see her own humanity and worth because of the abuse she was experiencing with a same-sex partner. Through poetry, the girls are able to offer encouragement, advice, and solidarity to one another in the program and potentially other girls in their schools and neighborhoods like themselves.

Discussion

What began as an ethnographic study of multiple experiences of violence in the lives of urban Black girls, melded with the authors' autoethnographic (Boylorn 2017) experiences of navigating society as urban Black and Brown girls and women and collective witnessing with the girls in the program. Then, the girls, through their poetry writing and poetic witnessing, began their own cultivation of autoethnographic and collective poetry. Ethnographically-based poetry illuminates the shifting relationships between ethnographers and research participants and the shifting relationships among research participants themselves. The Double Dutch nature of being an ethnographer (Green 2013) and of engaging in participatory narrative analysis reveals that urban ethnographic research, especially with marginalized communities, is evolving, blurry, complicated, flexible, expansive, and emerging. Just like the game of Double Dutch, these metaphorical and literal observations, pauses, jumps, dances, and twists as ethnographic researchers are perfectly okay.

Urban Black girls are navigating their way through adolescence on a daily basis. During conversations in ethnographic interviews and through reading and writing poetry, they begin to unpack the complex psychological, emotional, and physical abuse that can occur within romantic relationships. Ginwright (2010, 10) calls this consciousness, moving from individual blame to understanding the root and systemic causes of personal issues, 'radical healing.' Therefore, our participants became engaged in agentic forms of individual and collective radical healing, primarily through the "practice, process, and product" (Jocson 2006, 134) of poetry. Participatory narrative analysis becomes central to critiquing patriarchy, sexism, and gender-based violence in the broader society and in interpersonal relationships. Through the participatory narrative analysis in this project, urban Black girls have helped to reveal the mechanisms in which victims become survivors and leaders as they begin to cope with their complex and multiple traumas and as they engage in safety planning for themselves and their peers. Member-checking of ethnographic data as an analytic exercise shifted into the girls literally checking in on one another in real life. The girls support one another on the page during and after poetry workshops and in conversations during the violence prevention program. They echo to themselves and one another "don't let nobody bring you down!"

As "community-accountable scholars" (Gumbs n.d.), we as authors do not want to only document the girls' trauma and their resolutions, but to also use their poetry-as-data to affect change. Ethnographically-based poetry has the immense potential to inform case management and psycho-social support for young people, training and professional development for natural mentors, curriculum enhancements for intervention programs, and funding priorities at the philanthropic level. Urban Black girls use poetry to demand that we witness their narratives, their strategies, their progress, and their lives.

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