

Inquiry for Social Transformation: Black Mother Scholars Redefining Scholarly Inquiry Through Black Artistic Expression

Stephanie Fearon^a

Corresponding author:

Email: sfearon1@edu.yorku.ca


a. York University, Canada.

Article Info

Received: April 10, 2024

Accepted: August 23, 2024

Published: September 14, 2024

 10.46303/jcve.2024.35

How to cite

Fearon, S. (2024). Inquiry for Social Transformation: Black Mother Scholars Redefining Scholarly Inquiry Through Black Artistic Expression. *Journal of Culture and Values in Education*, 7(3), 161-176.

<https://doi.org/10.46303/jcve.2024.35>

Copyright license

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.

ABSTRACT

Writing, dancing, drawing, spittin' rhymes, and other artistic expressions have long offered us, Black mother scholars, opportunities to reaffirm our humanity amid oppression (Fearon, 2023). Art offers Black mother scholars space to reconceptualise inquiry in ways that engage our families, challenge injustices, and usher social change within the educational milieu and beyond. The centring of Black artistic expression in educational research invites Black mother scholars to affirm the parts of ourselves, our families, and our communities that dominant forms of inquiry and anti-Blackness have sought to discredit. Educational research grounded in Black artistic expression compels us all to reimagine scholarly inquiry for social transformation. In this paper, I critically reflect on an arts-informed research study I led with a group of Black Canadian mothers who are adult literacy learners. In this reflexive piece, I explore how grounding research practices in Black art allows opportunities for storytelling, story listening, and Black refusal. Specifically, this paper explores the ways Black art supports researchers in addressing power differentials inherent in inquiry processes. The paper concludes with a series of reflective questions challenging scholars, especially Black mother scholars, to redefine traditional academic boundaries and recommit to social transformation through the arts.

KEYWORDS

Educational research; black art; black mothers; adult education

PREAMBLE

In the 1960s, my grandmother left Jamaica and set out to Canada. She joined some of her sisters in a small flat in downtown Toronto. She secured domestic work in hotels and private residences across the city. Now in her late eighties and living in east-end Toronto, my grandmother and I sit at her kitchen table sipping chamomile tea. She narrates the early experiences of Black Jamaican mothers in Canada. “Life was so hard,” she sighs, “They paid us so little.” My grandmother recalls the pervasive racist and sexist ideas that deemed Black mothers like her as best suited for domestic work disregarding her dream of returning to school for fashion design (Crawford, 2003; Fearon, 2020). She smiles reminiscing about Sunday dinners with her sisters in their two-bedroom flat.

My grandmother is a skilled storyteller combining English and Jamaican Creole. She embodies the stories — she waves her hands, points her lips, and even kisses her teeth to accentuate pivotal moments in her tales. Although she struggles to read, my grandmother is an artist tracing Black experiences in Canada through oral stories. My grandmother, like other Black mothers, uses art to systematically investigate injustices, organise for better futures, and practice joy. My grandmother reminds us that “if research is about learning, so as to enhance the wellbeing of the earth’s inhabitants, then story is research” (Kovach, 2009, p. 102). Upholding research as story facilitates the centring of inquiry within a world constructed in and through Black mothers’ discourse and action (Onuora, 2015; Mishler, 1986).

Introduction

Dominant notions of scholarly inquiry demand objectivity, neutrality, and autonomy throughout research processes (Toliver, 2022). Such Eurocentric approaches to inquiry dictate who is a researcher and how researchers should engage Black communities. Indeed, in the afterlives of slavery, academia has long disparaged methodologies and frameworks that embody Black mothers’ artistic lives, cultural values, and creative work (Fearon, 2023). Like my grandmother, we, Black mother scholars, continue to practise a tradition of using the arts to tell our stories, heal, and cultivate liberatory sites. Our writings, rhymes, dances, and paintings are freeing spaces where we conjure up research identities and possibilities.

The centring of Black artistic expression in educational research invites us to affirm the parts of ourselves, our families, and our communities that dominant forms of inquiry and anti-Blackness have sought to discredit. In fact, we leverage “the arts to help sustain who we are, as we recall and (re)member in the midst of chaos what it means to thrive” (Love, 2019, p. 111). For us, Black mother scholars, the function of Black art in research is to do more than tell it like it is— it is to imagine futures yet unfolded (hooks, 1995). Educational research grounded in our artistic expression compels us to reimagine scholarly inquiry in ways that usher social transformation.

Paper overview

In this paper, I reflect on an arts-informed research study I led with a group of Black Canadian mothers who were adult literacy learners living in Toronto. I begin this paper by exploring Black

art in Canada situating it within Black mother scholars' research traditions. Thereupon, I underscore the need for a more rigorous engagement with Black mothers' creative work in educational scholarship. I, then, present Endarkened feminist epistemology and power-conscious as the study's guiding frameworks. Afterwards, I introduce Endarkened storywork as the study's underpinning methodology and autoethnography as its research method. Through a reflection on a creative non-fiction short story derived from emails, diary entries, and participant observation notes, I show how a group of Black mother learners and I used Black artistic expression to develop a subversive form of scholarly inquiry. In so doing, I highlight the possibilities and limitations of using Black art to integrate activism into research. The paper concludes with a series of reflective questions challenging scholars, especially Black mother scholars, to engage in educational research as an act of artistic and liberatory labour.

Imagining Black Canadian art

In the chapter, *On Quiet Happiness, Charcoal, Wood And Metal*, McKittrick (2023) analyzes the groundbreaking exhibition *Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art* (Royal Ontario Museum, 2018). This exhibition was co-curated by Julie Crooks, Dominique Fontaine, and Silvia Forni at the Royal Ontario Museum. McKittrick's (2023) chapter focuses on Charmaine Lurch's installation *Being, Belonging, and Grace*. Lurch's series, comprising five charcoal drawings on white parchment paper, features a young Black woman in various poses. As McKittrick (2023) engages the narratives that accompany the exhibit, she begins to conceptualize a type of Black Canadian art that speaks to space, place, and Black belonging. McKittrick (2023) refutes claims of Black Canadian art as solely involving the excavation and retrieval of Black oppression. Much like Walcott (2023), McKittrick (2023) does not limit Black art to themes of Black Canadians' absented presence (Walcott, 2018 & 2023)—that is, our invisibility and our simultaneous hyper-visibility in this country. Rather, McKittrick (2023) asserts Black Canadian art as creative work that “explores and uncovers the ways Black Canadians navigate, but are not absolutely defined by, racist logics and processes of disavowal” (p. 177). In educational research, Black Canadian art affords us opportunities to investigate Black realities and futures beyond the layered oppressions existing within and through learning systems.

Fatona (2006) also counters narrations of Black Canadian art that rely on an “erasure-to-presence linearity” (McKittrick, 2023, p. 177). Indeed, Black art offers us other possibilities for imagining and living Blackness in Canada (Fatona, 2006). Fatona (2006) observes the making of Black Canadian art as expressing the complexity of Blackness allowing Black identities to emerge and re-emerge in the aftermath of slavery—state-sanctioned violence, exclusion, and subjugation. Ultimately, Black Canadian art serves as a creative site for Black people to validate our experiences as well as to engage in dialogue, conversation, debates, and even refusal (Fatona, 2006; McKittrick, 2023; Walcott, 2023).

Black art in educational research

Mother scholars recognize that the work of mothering “demands that mothers think” and “out of this need for thoughtfulness, a distinctive discipline emerges” (Ruddick, 1989, p. 24). In

Canada, Black scholars have long used a wide array of art forms to explore Black maternal experiences. For example, Black thinkers like Nourbese (1990), d'bi.young anitafrika (2007), and Sears (2003) use dub poetry, movement, theatre, and novels to examine Black Canadian mothers' experiences across time and place.

Within a Canadian context, it is essential to explore what Black art is and how researchers engage Black art in their work. I join other Black scholars, cultural bears (Collins, 2014; O'Reilly, 2004), and critics to reflect on the ways Black mother scholars imagine Black art within educational research. Black mother scholars, like Onuora (2015) and Escayg (2022), use Black art to reorder how we know and engage in educational research on Black maternal life. As an arts-informed narrative scholar, Onuora (2015) practices educational research and Black art from the standpoint of a Black mother raised within Black storytelling traditions. Onuora's (2015) *Anansesem: Telling Stories and Storytelling African Maternal Pedagogies*, is a metanarrative that draws on personal and cultural stories to elucidate the contemporary realities and complexities of Black Canadian mothers. Onuora (2015) is most interested in the ways Black mothers impart maternal pedagogies (Green, 2009) to their children. Onuora (2015) presents her conversations with eight Black mothers living in Toronto as a series of creative nonfiction short stories. The stories are interlaced with personal accounts and folklore. Onuora (2015) upholds her reliance on the art of storytelling for research, noting Black people's longstanding use of stories to articulate our cultural values, history, and ancestral memory. Onuora (2015) further explains, "storytelling serves as an important pedagogical tool for the celebration and reclamation of people of African heritage and for making sense of our experiences" (p. xii). Black art, therefore, facilitates expansive imaginings of education systems from Black Canadian mothers' own cultural and historical standpoints.

Escayg is a celebrated early childhood educational scholar whose research profile includes examining Black children's maternal relationships. Escayg is steadfast in her identity as a Black mother to a number of Black children in Canada who are not biologically hers (Escayg, personal communication, 2024). Her identities as both a mother and a scholar, Escayg notes, affirms that Black motherhood extends beyond biological and legal frameworks. In her piece, *I Love Me! Positioning Black Identity at the Centre of Play Pedagogy*, Escayg (2022) presents a creative short story highlighting the ways a grandmother imparts maternal pedagogies to her granddaughter, a Black early years teacher. In this piece, Escayg (2022) uses Black art to (re)vision mothering as a site that affords Black children agency and power in a world intent on their subjugation. Much like Onuora's (2015) work, Escayg (2022) uses Black vernaculars to tell the story of intergenerational mothering. In so doing, Escayg (2022) prioritizes Black readers bringing to the public sphere what Morrison calls "discredited knowledge" (Walcott, 2023). Black art affirms such knowledge systems as crucial to understanding education systems from Black mothers' lived experiences, relationships, and aspirations for themselves and their families.

By basing their work in Black storytelling strategies like call-and-response, rhythmic patterns, Black languages and spirituality, Onuora (2015) and Escagy (2022) mark and make visible Black maternal life in Canada, adhering to the notion of “art as pedagogy” (Fatona, 2023, p. 210). Their creative research teaches us about the ways Black Canadian mothers’ construct their own realities and those of their children. In taking on an artistic approach to their scholarly work, Onuora (2015) and Escagy (2022) articulate Black mothers’ difference and presence in Canada.

Locating myself within education research and Black art

Like Onuora and Escagy, I reflect on my own journey towards a research practice grounded in Black art. How did I come to write storied accounts exploring the leadership practices of Black Canadian mothers attending adult education programs? What aspects of Black art continue to motivate my work? The catalyst for my creative work began long before I became a mother to two children. My interest in creative approaches to research rests in my relationships with the matriarchs of my maternal family. My grandmother first introduced me to the leadership work spearheaded by Black mothers with low reading skills. Despite her struggles to read, my grandmother is revered within our kin networks for her command of storytelling. This encouraged me to listen to the stories of other Black mothers who face challenges with reading. I am particularly interested in the experiences of Black mother learners who migrated to Canada from the Caribbean.

I lean into Black art to engage Black mother learners and their families in educational research. Specifically, I collaborate with Black mothers and Black artists to create storied renderings, visual and prose, of the research study. Much like museums and galleries, I understand universities as cultural institutions (Hayhoe & Phillips, 1989). I also recognize the central role academia plays in the diminution of Black people’s humanness. Walcott (2023) elaborates:

[Cultural institutions] have also played a significant role in positioning Black diasporic people as not belonging to the nation-states of the West, where they have been enslaved, segregated, and generally brutally excluded from the formation of these places despite being foundational to them (p. 229).

To add, Sandy Grande (2018) emphasizes the university as, “a site where the logics of elimination, capital accumulation, and dispossession are reconstituted” (p. 47). Black art cultivates spaces within these academic institutions to heal from the onslaught of oppressions and dream of just worlds.

In this paper, I do not seek to abandon the canon of educational research, but instead I struggle to remake it into spaces where Black mothers revel in the possibilities of our art as vigorous scholarship and activism. In his chapter, *Why Are There No Famous Black Canadian Artists? Here We are Here and How Diversity and Inclusion Trump Aesthetic Critique*, Walcott (2023) maintains that a robust culture of critique is crucial to the making of Black Canadian art and scholarship. I extend Walcott’s (2023) insistence of critique onto my own work as an arts-

informed researcher and Black mother scholar. In this paper, I critically reflect on my own creative practice with Black mother learners living in Canada. I engage in this reflexive practice to further archive Black art and its related knowledges, practices, and engagements as pivotal to Black communities' use of educational research for social transformation. This autoethnographic paper, accordingly, is guided by the following question: How do Black mother scholars use Black art to reimagine education research as activism?

FRAMEWORKS

Power-conscious framework

Power differentials permeate Black mother learners' relationships with Canadian systems, structures, and institutions like academia. In the inquiry process, this 'power over' manifests in researchers' control over resources, policy, and decision-making. Black mothers spearhead calls, in public and private forums, for research approaches that uphold them and their families as knowledge producers. In this paper, I do not view power as fixed nor as rigidly attached to particular social categories (Conti & O'Neil, 2007; Hamilton, 2007). Instead, I understand power as flowing from complex relationships between individuals, organizations, and institutions, reflecting the dynamics of layered experiences (Conti & O'Neil, 2007; Hamilton, 2020). hooks reminds us that Black mothers do, in fact, possess power such as the refusal to accept the "terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented" (Campt, 2019, p. 83). Black mothers' power resides within their ability to create possibilities for themselves and their children in the face of negation. Emerging from his research with sex workers, Stewart advances the power-conscious framework geared especially for those collaborating with hypermarginalized communities. In such communities, inequities coalesce to shape everyday experience. This framework is based on six core tenets requiring scholars and activists to (Linder, 2018, p. 25):

1. engage in critical consciousness and self-awareness;
2. consider history and context when examining issues of oppression;
3. change behaviors based on reflection and awareness;
4. name and call attention to dominant group members' investment in and benefit from systems of domination and divest from privilege;
5. name and interrogate the role of power in individual interactions, policy development, and implementation of practice; and
6. work in solidarity to address oppression.

In this reflexive paper, I examine how my own identities, experiences, and assumptions intervene in the research process. The power-conscious framework helps me bring to forefront shifting power dynamics present in my own creative research practice with Black mother learners. This framework also supports an analysis that situates my individual interactions with Black mother learners .

Endarkened feminist epistemology (EFE)

Dillard (2000) opens her article, *The Substance of Things Hoped for, The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, by asking Black women scholars, “What happens when one’s life and being in the world are inseparable from research?” (p. 617). Dillard (2000) critiques educational research alerting us to the ways that Black women’s lived realities and cultural knowledge are diminished within and across educational scholarship. For instance, Black mothers’ ongoing commitment to improving adult learning systems is largely overlooked in literature on educational leadership (2022). In so doing, Black mothers and their labour are essentially rendered invisible within educational scholarship. Endarkened feminist epistemology (EFE), Dillard (2000) asserts, recentres Black mothers within educational literature and research practices. In fact, EFE is an extension of Black women’s knowledge production and language unapologetically rooted in our cultural and historical contexts. EFE challenges Black women scholars to reimagine educational research as spiritual, healing, and cultural work (Dillard, 2000). EFE invites Black women researchers to uphold multiple and artful forms of knowing and engaging in educational research. For example, Dillard (2000) calls for “...the expression, self-definition, and validation of Black female understandings and knowledge production in alternative sites, that is, in music (such as in the African American blues traditions), poetry, literature, and daily conversations, to name just a few.” EFE holds several assumptions important to the conduct of research, its methodologies, analytics, and representations (Dillard, 2018):

1. Self-definition forms one’s participation and responsibility to one’s community;
2. research is both an intellectual and a spiritual pursuit, a pursuit of purpose;
3. only within the context of community does the individual appear and, through dialogue, continue to become;
4. concrete experiences within everyday life form the criterion of meaning, the ‘matrix of meaning making’;
5. knowing and research are both historical (extending backwards in time) and onward into the world; and
6. power relations, manifest as racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. structure gender, race and other identity relations within research (p. 619).

EFE provided my reflexive study with a framework to explore the nexuses of Black art, educational research, and activism. Much like the power-conscious framework, EFE attends to power embedded in the inquiry process. EFE helped me to further disrupt and unsettle the relationship between the researcher (as “knower”) and the researched (as “known” or “to be known”) (Dillard, 2000). EFE required me to reposition my scholarly work as a creative responsibility, answerable and obligated to the very Black mother learners engaged in the inquiry.

METHODOLOGY & METHODS

Endarkened storywork methodology

In this study, I engaged in deep reflexivity about my use of Black art to reposition educational research as activism. For this self-critique, I used Endarkened storywork as a research methodology. Informed by EFE, Endarkened storywork refutes traditional approaches to qualitative research. Instead, Endarkened storywork cultivates spaces for various forms of Black art to flourish throughout research processes. Endarkened storywork recognizes the cathartic and spiritual features of Black art and research. It upholds the central role Black art, in general and stories specifically, plays in Black communities. Stories, explains Smitherman (1977), offer Black people globally with a way “to condense broad, theoretical observations about life into concrete narratives” (p. 150). Endarkened storywork attends to hierarchies present in the inquiry process. For example, Endarkened storywork calls for researchers to be held accountable by participants and their communities (Toliver, 2022).

This study centered the personal stories of Black mother learners and my own work as a Black woman, educational researcher, and Black mother scholar. I used Endarkened storywork to deconstruct the stories of my own work as a researcher collaborating with Black mother learners. This methodology requires me to reposition Black art as a space where Black researchers affirm creative ways of thinking, knowing, interpreting, and representing our scholarly work. The study’s findings are storied, thus, allowing me to engage in inquiry processes from my own cultural and artistic standpoints.

Autoethnography

Research is inextricably connected to and an extension of researchers’ lives. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that warns against separating self from research activities (Wambura Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Indeed, autoethnography utilizes data about self and its context to gain an understanding of the connectivity between self and others within the same context (Chang, 2007; Denzin, 2006; Wambura Ngunjiri et al., 2010). I used autoethnography as a research method to critique my own research practice with a small group of Black mother learners. Autoethnography helped me identify and then grapple with intimate and public accounts on how I partnered with Black mother learners to reimagine educational research as activism. In her article, *For Loretta: A Black Woman Literacy Scholar’s Journey to Prioritizing Self-Preservation and Black Feminist–Womanist Storytelling*, Baker-Bell (2017) advances Black woven mother scholars’ use of autoethnography to tell and listen to our own stories. By way of Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2014), Baker-Bell (2017) contends that autoethnography:

- uses the researcher’s personal experience to detail and critique beliefs, practices, and experiences;
- acknowledges and esteems the researcher’s relationships with others;
- uses deep and careful self-reflection/reflexivity to identify and interrogate intersections between self and society, the particular, the general, the personal, and the political;

- shows “people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles”; balances intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity; and strives for social justice and making life better (p. 531).

Autoethnography provided me with space to assume multiple positions simultaneously within the research process — participant, researcher, and audience. Although this blurred distinction between the researcher-participant-audience relationship has become a source of fierce criticism challenging its methodological credibility (Anderson, 2006; Holt, 2003; Salzman, 2002; Sparkes, 2002), autoethnography allowed me to scrutinize my inner-most thoughts about my research practice and identity. This method supported my endeavour to embrace the generative and creative possibilities of my work with Black mothers. Autoethnography truly guided the interrogation of the beliefs, practices, and experiences that informed my relationships with Black art, Black mother learners, and activism. Ultimately, autoethnography helped me create a site where I was able to deeply reflect on, from varying perspectives, the ways that I used Black art with Black mother learners to establish research as a site for social transformation.

Structure of findings and discussion

I appreciate alternative forms of data that capture Black stories. For this study, I drew from multiple data sources. Much like Baker-Bell (2017), I collected emails, diary entries, and observation notes as data. This study also relied on the creative nonfiction story *Mint Tea and Comic Books* (Fearon, 2023). This short story, published in the *Canadian Review of Sociology*, is an excerpt from my article *At Mummy's Feet: A Black Motherwork Approach to Arts-Informed Inquiry* published in the *Canadian Review of Sociology* (Fearon, 2023). I wrote the story to document an early research experience working with four Black mother learners. The data-driven story used information gleaned from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with participants and my personal notes. The story features the characters Dr. Brantford and a research participant, a Black mother named Gloria. In the story, I am reimagined as Dr. Brantford, the study's principal investigator. Presenting my research practice as a short story allowed me to enter a dialogic exercise with my earlier self and participants.

I included excerpts from my creative nonfiction short story *Mint Tea and Comic Books* (Fearon, 2023) teasing out power dynamics, methodological challenges, and world-making possibilities. Two main themes emerged from my autoethnographic study: (1) Black art helps to build rapport with Black mothers offering opportunities for storytelling, story listening, and refusal; and (2) Black art requires Black mother scholars to address power differentials inherent in inquiry processes. Inspired by Bryan (2021) and Warren (2017), I used what both scholars refer to as ‘zoom in and zoom out’ to present the paper’s findings and discussion. Zoom in represents the data collected from the study and its findings (Bryan, 2021). Data is represented as excerpts from the short story *Mint Tea and Comic Books* (Fearon, 2023). Zoom out is both the analysis and discussion of the data (Bryan, 2021). Like Bryan (2021) and Warren (2017), I take an emic approach to this work. Bryan (2021) explains, “I do not construct myself as a

photographer who, like an outsider looking in, captures the experiences of these Black maternal caregivers” (p. 504). I engage in deep and intentional reflection to identify and interrogate my work as a Black mother scholar striving to reimagine educational research as activism.

Theme 1: Black art helped me build rapport with Black mothers allowing opportunities for storytelling, story listening, and refusal.

Zoom in

My early work with Black mother learners involved reimaging a research report as a comic book. I was adamant that this graphic text, filled with imagery and Black vernaculars drawn from interviews with participants, provided an authentic site for Black mothers to share their stories with policymakers and fellow scholars. Participants challenged my research practice by decentring the needs of academia. Participants compelled me to prioritize the realities and aspirations of Black mother learners, their families, and their communities in the research process. This is demonstrated in the following excerpt from the story *Mint Tea and Comic Books* (Fearon, 2023):

Dr. Brantford: The stories that you and the other Black mothers share in the study are gonna help shift how academia understands adult literacy.

Gloria: You know I ain't doing this study for those people up in those fancy universities.

B: Who are you doing it for?

G: We're doing it for our children and even other Black mothers. At least I am.

B: I get it. I'm a Black mama too.

G: When you told us that the final report will be like a comic book. I knew this was something I could do.

B: I really want this report to be accessible for Black mamas, especially those in adult literacy programs. Phyllis came up with the comic book idea and even found a local artist to work with us on the images.

G: I'm not the best reader. But I can figure out a comic book. My sister-friend Daisy, who stays in the apartment across the hall, is gonna be able to understand the report. My teenage son too— he's still trying to figure out this reading thing. This will help him and Daisy push through to their goals.

Zoom out

In the story *Mint Tea and Comic Books* (Fearon, 2023), Dr. Brantford informs Gloria of the benefits of sharing Black maternal stories with scholars highlighting academia as the intended audience for the study's report. Gloria counters and insists that her stories are for members of her kinship network. As captured in the short story, I structured this early study to affirm Black mother learners as legitimate knowledge producers and storytellers within academia. I worked with a local artist, community advisors, and the Black mother learners themselves to champion their stories as integral to educational scholarship. While I focused on repositioning participants as legitimate knowledge holders within academic spheres, I unfortunately de-emphasized the role of the story listener.

Audience is central in artmaking. In the art of Black storytelling, the story listener is crucial. Toliver (2022) reminds us that Black people have long used stories as linguistic technology where the storyteller embeds intricate coding mechanisms into the story's design. Butler (2019), a Black Canadian scholar, traced the ongoing practice of Black mothers' use of quilts and quilt patterns for storytelling. Quilts and quilt patterns provided coded messages for Black people to decipher. Toliver (2022) reflects on Black peoples' use of stories overtime and explains, "...the story listener would be called to break the codes by opening their spirits to questions and feelings created by the story and locating connections between the story and their personal lives" (p. xxxi). Story listeners, as such, are required to listen deeply, make observations, form connections, and test their newfound knowledge (Toliver, 2022).

Participants refused to create a report that prioritised the needs, abilities, and understandings of academics residing outside their community. Participants enforced their agency to redefine the intended story listeners as their children and fellow Black mother learners. This refocus of the story listener was critical to their participation asserting that their children and fellow Black mother learners would be able to fully decode their stories and find meaning in them. The mothers articulated that the purpose of their stories was to help their children and Black mothers in their neighbourhood achieve their reading goals. To further solidify their children and other Black mother learners as their true audience, participants used Black vernaculars, imagery, expressions, and references that were accessible to those within their kin networks. The mothers insisted on the inclusion of these Black coding mechanisms in the study's final report, a comic book. In doing so, Black mother learners engaged in the radical act of Black refusal, a rejection of the status quo as livable and the creation of possibility in the face of negation (Campt, 2019).

My initial centring of academics in the study disregarded the ways that Eurocentric research processes render Black people as fundamentally illegible and unintelligible (Nxumalo, 2021). Through participants' acts of refusal, I (re)membered that grounding inquiry in Black art provides opportunities to subvert anti-Black formations in educational research and practice. With participants, I embraced the central roles of Black storytellers, Black story listeners, and Black refusal in reimagining inquiry as a generative and creative process in affirming Black maternal life.

Theme 2: Black art requires Black mother scholars to address power differentials inherent in inquiry processes.

Zoom in

My use of Black art in the research process allowed me to engage in research as pedagogy. As presented in the story *Mint Tea and Comic Books* (Fearon, 2023), I collaborated with local organizations to ensure the comic would be used as a pedagogical document in adult literacy programs throughout the province. However, I did not include participants as valued decision-makers in the research. Instead, I consulted with an advisory group to help steer the study's structure and subsequent dissemination. My failure to fully identify and address power

differentials in my relationships with participants is demonstrated in the following exchange (Fearon, 2023):

Gloria: We want to be part of the conversation, not just the topic of it. More times, after the study interviews, we never see the researcher or the final report. People have a way of disappearing on us.

Dr. Brantford: You and the mothers have a right to engage in research, especially if it's about *you*.

G: I know that. But I've seen a lot of researchers move like I'm not smart enough or interested enough in this thing they call research.

B: We already have a few other adult literacy programs committed to using the final report as a mentor text.

G: Yup, Phyllis [adult education educator] already done put it in our schedule. We're gonna read the whole report together as a class.

Zoom out

In the story *Mint Tea and Comic Books*, Gloria alerts us to the exploitative research practices she and other Black mothers in Toronto have experienced. Gloria details the ways researchers extract Black maternal stories to bolster their academic careers failing to form longstanding relationships with Black mothers and their families. As captured in the story *Mint Tea and Comic Books*, participants praised my relationships with the Black mothers and educators in their community. In fact, my relationships with some of the participants and educators stemmed from organising literacy conferences and workshops over the years in their east-end Toronto community. Although my presence and relationships with the community are profound, I failed to fully address power dynamics inherent in the research study.

Power is omnipresent (Linder, 2018; Stewart, 2022) and manifests in formal and informal ways within inquiry and artistic processes. Stewart (2022) challenges researchers who work with hypermarginalized communities, like Black mother learners, to reclaim and shift language, beliefs, and practices for transformative change. To fully realise a research practice that is liberatory for Black mother learners, I must attend to the power differentials present in my own work. Power differentials between the research team and participants were evident throughout the inquiry process. For example, Black mother learners were not meaningfully involved in designing the research protocol and dissemination.

As a Black researcher, I made valiant efforts to construct a protocol and dissemination plan that aligned with participants' creative and cultural identities. In fact, I established a four-member community advisory board to provide additional guidance. The advisory board comprised one Black arts leader, a Black mother scholar, and two Black educators. The advisors contributed to the study's design, facilitation, and dissemination. The advisors held immense power throughout the inquiry process. They informed funding allocation, helped determine the Black art forms used, and guided the selection of the visual artist for the study. The advisory committee did not include any Black mother learners. I did not have a formal system to capture

and act on Black mother learners' input. I did not build consensus with participants around the distribution and dissemination of the research. I simply told participants how the research findings would be artistically structured and who would have access. The absence of Black mother learners' formal integration into the decision-making process is a powerful indication of them not being true partners in my research endeavour. Kovach (2009), Smitherman (1977), and Toliver (2022) maintain the transformational possibilities inherent in the art of storytelling. Accordingly, to reimagine research into constructive political action, Black mother participants must assume leadership in determining which stories are shared, how they are shared and to whom. Heeding Stewart's (2022) suggestions, I am committed to asking participants what their hopes are for the work, who they want to read it, and who they hoped might be impacted. This collaborative process offers space for researchers and participants to discuss and negotiate research possibilities. Dillard (2000) and Stewart (2022) remind me that research as responsibility and Black art are not always easy, are usually unruly, and wrought with conflicting and competing realities. By addressing power differentials inherent in my own research practice, I reclaim the world-making possibilities of an inquiry practice grounded in Black Canadian art.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I began this paper by recounting my grandmother's use of Black art to trace Black maternal histories and imagine Black futurities. In my early years, my grandmother repositioned Black mother learners as skilled artists and researchers. Indeed, my grandmother reaffirmed both Black art and scholarship as sites to imagine and live Black motherhood in Canada. Walcott (2023) asserts the integral role critique plays in the making of Black Canadian art. In this autoethnographic piece, I extended Walcott's (2023) calls for rigorous critique onto my own work.

I situated my own inquiry practice within Endarkened feminist epistemology and the power-conscious framework to highlight methodological challenges, power dynamics, and research opportunities. In referencing excerpts from the short story *Mint Tea and Comic Books* (Fearon, 2023), a creative nonfiction short story documenting a previous research study I conducted with Black mother learners, I highlight both shortcomings and possibilities for Black artistic scholarship. The first theme revealed Black art as integral for rapport building between researchers and Black mother participants. For example, through storytelling, I formed meaningful relationships with Black mothers and worked with them to redefine the study's audience as their children and fellow Black mother learners. Secondly, in this reflexive study, I examined the power imbued in the researcher-participant relationship. Black art requires Black mother scholars to address power differentials inherent in inquiry processes collaborating with participants as skilled decision-makers. In the story *Mint Tea and Comic Books* (Fearon, 2023), Black mother learners assumed control over how study findings would be disseminated in their community.

I conclude this reflexive paper with an offering to educational researchers and activists who centre Black mothers and Black art in their work. I challenge these scholars and change-makers to reflect on the following questions:

- How might the arts offer authentic opportunities for research participants to contribute to decision-making processes?
- What systems are set-up to solicit and act on participant input and artistic wonderings?
- In what ways might we leverage the arts to produce scholarship that refuses the confines of anti-Blackness?

REFERENCES

- Adams, T. E., Holman Jones, S., & Ellis, C. (2014). *Autoethnography*. Oxford University Press.
- Baker-Bell, A. (2017). For Loretta: A Black woman literacy scholar's journey to prioritizing self-preservation and Black feminist-womanist storytelling. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 49(4), 526–543. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1086296X17733092>
- Bryan, N. (2021). "To Me, He Teaches Like the Child Learns:" Black Maternal Caregivers on the Pedagogies and Schooling Practices of a Black Male Kindergarten Teacher. *The Urban Review*, 53(3), 491–515. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-020-00577-9>
- Butler, A. (2019). Quiltmaking among African-American women as a pedagogy of care, empowerment, and sisterhood. *Gender and Education*, 31(5), 590–603. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2019.1594708>
- Campt, T. M. (2019, February). Black visibility and the practice of refusal. <https://www.womenandperformance.org/ampersand/29-1/campt>
- Chang, H. (2007). Autoethnography: Raising cultural awareness of self and others. In G. Walford (Ed.), *Methodological developments in ethnography* (Studies in educational ethnography, Volume 12, pp. 201-221). Boston: Elsevier.
- Collins, P. H. (2014). *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd edition.). Routledge.
- Conti, J.A, & O'Neil, M. (2007). Studying power: qualitative methods and the global elite. *Qualitative Research*, 7(1), 63–82.
- Crawford, C. (2003). Sending love in a barrel: The making of transnational Caribbean families in Canada. *Canadian Woman Studies*, 22(3-4), 104-109.
- d'bi.young anitafrika. (2007). *Rivers and other Blackness between Us: (dub) poems of love*. Women's Press.
- Denzin, N. (2006). Analytic autoethnography, or déjà vu all over again. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 419-428.
- Dillard, C. B. (2018). Let steadfastness have its full effect: (Re)membering, (re)search and Endarkened feminisms from Ananse to Asantewaa. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 24(9), 617–623. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800417745103>

- Dillard, C. B. (2000). The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen: Examining an endarkened feminist epistemology in educational research and leadership. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13, 661-681.
- Escayg, K-A. (2022). Love Me! Positioning Black Identity at the Centre of Play Pedagogy. In K. Murray, A. Te, & J. Watt. *My best Idea: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Volume 2* (pp. 28-32). Rubicon.
- Fatona, A. M. (2006). In the presence of absence: Invisibility, Black Canadian history, and Melinda Mollineaux's pinhole photography. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 31(1), 227-238. <https://doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2006v31n1a1761>
- Fatona, A. (2023). Digging us: Making visible Black Canadian narratives. In J. Crooks, D. Fontaine & S. Forni. *Making History: Visual Arts & Blackness in Canada* (pp. 226-239). Royal Ontario Museum.
- Fearon, S. (2023). At mummy's feet: A Black motherwork approach to arts-informed inquiry. *The Canadian Review of Sociology*, 60(2), 326-331. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cars.12434>
- Fearon, S. (2020). *For Our Children: Black Motherwork and Schooling*. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Fearon, S. (2022). Braiding Our Lives: Black Immigrant Mothers and Adult Literacy. *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, 34(2), 7-28. <https://doi.org/10.56105/cjsae.v34i02.5628>
- Grande, S. (2018). Refusing the university. In *Toward What Justice?* (pp. 47-65). Routledge.
- Green, F.J. (2009). *Feminist mothering in theory and practice, 1985-1995*. The Edwin Mullen Press.
- Hamilton, P. (2020). 'Now that I know what you're about': black feminist reflections on power in the research relationship. *Qualitative Research*, 20(5), 519-533. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794119891583>
- Hayhoe, R., & Phillips, M. J. (1989). International academic relations: Some reflections on universities as cultural institutions in the world community. *Higher Education in Europe*, 14(1), 59-67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0379772890140109>
- hooks, b. (1995). *Art on my mind: Visual politics*. The New Press.
- Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations and contexts*. University of Toronto Press.
- Linder, C. (2018). *Sexual violence on campus: Power-conscious approaches to awareness, prevention and response*. Emerald Publishing.
- Love, B. L. (2019). *We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom*. Beacon Press.
- McKittrick, K. (2023). On quiet happiness, charcoal, wood, and metal. In J. Crooks, D. Fontaine & S. Forni. *Making History: Visual Arts & Blackness in Canada* (pp. 176-183). Royal Ontario Museum.

- Mishler, E. G. (1986). The analysis of interview-narratives. In T. R. Sarbin (Ed.), *Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct* (pp. 233–255). Praeger Publishers/Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Nourbese Philip, M. (1990). *Harriet's daughter*. Women's Press.
- Nxumalo, F. (2021). Disrupting anti-Blackness in early childhood qualitative inquiry: Thinking with Black refusal and Black futurity. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 27(10), 1191–1199.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004211021810>
- Onuora, A. N. (2015). *Anansesem: Telling stories and storytelling African maternal pedagogies*. Demeter Press.
- O'Reilly, A. (2004). *Toni Morrison and motherhood : a politics of the heart*. State University of New York Press.
- Royal Ontario Museum. (2018). *Here we are here: Black Canadian contemporary art*. Toronto, Ontario.
- Ruddick, S. (1989). *Maternal thinking: Toward a politics of peace*. Beacon Press.
- Sears, D. (2003). *Adventures of a Black girl in search of God* (1st ed.). Playwrights Canada Press.
- Smitherman, G. (1977). *Talking and testifyin: The language of Black America*. Wayne State University Press.
- Stewart, T. J. (2022). "I don't feel studied": Reflections on power-consciousness in action research with college student sex workers. *Action Research*, 20(2), 162–179.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/14767503211023127>
- Toliver, S. R. (2022). *Recovering Black storytelling in qualitative research: Endarkened storywork*. Routledge.
- Walcott, R. (2023). Why are there no famous Black Canadian artists? Here we are here and how diversity and inclusion trump aesthetic critique. In J. Crooks, D. Fontaine & S. Forni. *Making History: Visual Arts & Blackness in Canada* (pp. 226-239). Royal Ontario Museum.
- Walcott, R. (2018). *Black like who?* (20th anniversary edition.). Insomniac Press.
- Wambura Ngunjiri, F., Hernandez, K.-A. C., & Chang, H. (2010). Living Autoethnography: Connecting Life and Research. *Journal Research Practice*, 6(1), 1–17.
- Warren, C. (2017). *Urban preparation: Young Black men moving from Chicago's south side to success in higher education*. Harvard Education Press.