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Media Health Images of Africa and the Politics of Representation: A South African AIDS Choir Counter-Narrative

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Abstract

This paper is an ethnomusicological and media studies collaborative study that discusses the politics of representation on media health images, especially HIV/AIDS in Africa, and how a South African AIDS support group and choral ensemble offers a counter-narrative to the images that are seen in the Western media. Using ethnographic data on the group's organization, music events, and interviews with choir members, we argue that Siphithemba Choir's story is a narrative of self-representation that subverts the appropriation of their story by the scientific community, and counters the helpless image of HIV-infected individuals that often comprise the face of HIV/AIDS in Africa in the mainstream media.

Keywords

HIV/AIDS, images, Africa, media politics, music, representation

Introduction

At the start of the writing of this paper, there was a media-driven ebola panic across the United States. In the reporting on the outbreak of the virus on several cable networks, motion pictures of sick Africans and the interment of black bodies in West African countries by health workers in hazmat suits were juxtaposed on the screen with the still and healthy image of a white American doctor in New York. The doctor and two other missionaries before him had contracted the disease while on a humanitarian mission to Liberia. The media-driven panic made well for political rhetoric and campaign, complicating and vitiating thus the badly needed education on the public health situation at the time in the US. Ebola does not constitute an epidemic in the US compared with enterovirus D68 that hit up to 48 states in the US with over 1,100 cases by November 2014.

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Kimberly Leonard, a health reporter with the *US News and World Report* warned "enterovirus, not ebola, is the disease worth worrying about [for Americans]" (2 October 2014). Searching for reporting on enterovirus D68, one finds the image of a black boy in a Denver, Colorado hospital taken on 8 September 2014, reused by both the *New York Times* (25 September 2014) (Saint Louis, 2014) and the *US News and World Report* (2 October 2014) (Leonard, 2014) to depict the impact of the virus.[1] The question then is: why is Africa and the black body often equated with global disease epidemics?

The media images referenced above are not unprecedented. Rather it has been a centuries-long practice, even in instances where diseases have been introduced into the African continent from Europe: for instance, smallpox (Theal, 1899), and the Spanish influenza of 1918 (Philips, 1990; Ranger, 1988). Mainstream media accounts tend to present reductionist views whereby African bodies become equated with disease and helplessness. A similar reductionist approach to reporting would characterize African images of HIV/AIDS in Western media especially since the early 1990s, when suddenly the attention shifted from North America, where initially HIV/AIDS was associated with white homosexuals, to Africa as the epicenter of the global AIDS pandemic. The representations are characterized by what health sociologist Paula Treichler described as "Eurocentric, biased, doomsday Western AIDS coverage" (1999: 209). In this media coverage, Africans at large are cast in the light as passive recipients of external aid; too ignorant, too poor and so unsophisticated to understand how to deal with the HIV/AIDS and other epidemics. They echo thus "The White Man's Burden" theme of Rudyard Kipling's 1899 poem, which has been widely interpreted as depicting Africans and other non-Europeans as lacking in intellectual capacity, who therefore need the enlightened Europeans to lift them out of their social and cultural sorry states. The implication is that Westerners maintain a *National Geographic* image of their African counterparts and which in turn shape public policies and Western response to disease epidemic in Africa (Schraeder and Endless, 1998: 29).

While this style of media coverage of Africa has received broad scholarly criticism, what has been missing in the discourse is Africans' ways of engaging in the conversations on global health. Using the case study of the Siphithemba Choir, a HIV/AIDS support and choir group at the McCord Hospital in Durban, South Africa, we suggest that the choir provides a counter-narrative that dispels the doomsday, coffin-bound health representations of Africa in Western media. We examine the group's operation of income-generating projects, their use of music and dance, and the nature of the choir's interaction with the Western biomedical scientists in on-going research on AIDS treatment. Drawing equally from interviews with choir members, we argue that Siphithemba Choir's story is a narrative of self-representation, aimed at first subverting the appropriation of their story by the scientific community who showcase them as their (medical scientists) accomplishment, and second, countering the helpless image of them that is often misrepresented in mainstream media using the platform of music and performances. Furthermore, a brief examination of the contextual encounters of the choir with American audiences also suggests that the members have a consciousness of themselves as engaging in the campaign of counter-narrative to the often one-directional HIV/AIDS discourse.

Towards Media Politics and African News Reportage

Several inter-related paradigms provided theoretical guidance for this work. We employed the agenda setting theory and framing, as well as the concepts of representation and stereotype as the bedrock for this paper. We equally highlighted the global news ownership, production, and dissemination as forces that shape international news. This is vital because the political economy of contemporary news production may be construed as having become an oligopolistic venture,

dominated by three global news agencies (Reuters, Associated Press, and Agence France Presse) also known as "The Big Three" who produce the majority of international news consumed in the entire world (McPhail, 2006). Located in the global core countries and megacities – New York, London, and Paris – the corporate structure, nature of services, and location of these news agencies have dominated the international news flow discourse since the 1960s including the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) debate. To date, peripheral nations are not able to withstand the competition posed by these core-based news agencies nor have the news agencies changed their style of reportage on the peripheral or developing nations. Therefore, international news production is grossly influenced by underlying cultural and historical factors that stem from the electronic colonialism ideology. McPhail (2006) noted the global news agencies' reportage of African (and Latin American) news stories is often negative and has a one-way slant that does not equalize the East–West and North–South balance. Even Roberto Savio's Inter Press Service (IPS) agency attempts to mitigate the negative news about developing countries by encouraging liaisons between civil societies, non-governmental agencies, and policy makers in developing countries in recognizing the poor and oppressed has proven insignificant in the face of fierce competition from The Big Three. The ownership of news agencies therefore reflects the interest of newsmakers. Since Africa does not partake in major news production, news about Africa is often presented from a Western perspective, albeit in a predigested and romanticized fashion.

Equally as important as the political economy of news ownership and production, is how news stories are selected and presented. Whereas media are successful in informing the general public on matters of importance, they are capable of influencing how those "important" facts are viewed, digested, and acted upon. The agenda setting theory provides a clear framework for examining what news producers choose to present as newsworthy and how those events are framed. The standard agenda setting (McCombs and Shaw, 1973) description has always been – news media may not be successful at telling us what to think but stunningly successful in telling us what to think about. This has been furthered to entail how to think about it and, perhaps, what to do about it (McCombs, 1997). In essence, and considering that citizens of the West view the broadcast networks and newspapers as their sole sources of information, the selected African news stories form the basis upon which they construct their meaning of Africa (Pew Research Center, 2013). In line with our argument, the function of the press media in this manner then serves as a dysfunction of displayed negative imagery of Africa.

Akin to agenda setting is the framing technique and subsequent priming effect. Framing is a technique that allows press media producers to focus on particular issues while situating them within a field of their own meaning – a meaning that they consider dominant. James Tankard (1999), as cited in Sparks (2010), defined framing as the "central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration" (2010: 182). Framing serves a hegemonic purpose of influencing news audience's reception of the story, i.e. it influences a particular interpretation that can be attributed to a story – in this case, a negative interpretation of news about Africa. The accompanying priming effect then facilitates and reinforces the impact by creating an association of those stories and any other stories or thoughts about Africa. Sadly, news media have been incorporating this technique for decades in their presentation of African news. The idea of organizing stories about Africa as different and deviant draws a dichotomy of "us" versus "them". Ibelema considers this practice as eliciting realities for Africa that are "inconsistent with modernity or at variance with standard contemporary practices" (2014: 164) because "Western identity is, in effect, the definition of modernity. Deviation from it, therefore, constituted otherness" (2014: 165). In this case, therefore, reportage such as relates to health and HIV/AIDS in particular, the standard contemporary practice or reality for infected patients in the US presents a healthy and successful person(s) with a name, a

face and other qualifications, while the polarity for Africa is a nameless, disheveled, poor woman or child lacking agency.

The political economy of news production and the process of agenda setting and framing in turn shapes the dynamics of representation, and in the case of developing countries generates stereotypical modes of representation in the mainstream media. The concept of representation as an ideology for interpreting meaning was furthered by Stuart Hall. For Hall (2003), representation allows for the production and dissemination of meaning through the use of language, signs, and images. He deconstructs the vulnerability that continuous (mis)representation might induce on people in their quest of making meaning with the signs and symbols (language) that media present. Hall's view draws inference from the semiotic and discursive ideas of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1960) and the language/power of French philosopher Michel Foucault (1980), respectively. De Saussure posits that language is a system of signs; we merge the idea or concept in our head with a particular form or text. He described this as having two elements: one being a signifier and the other, the signified. For example, the first element could be an image, the second, a concept as in a shape of a heart being an image and the concept will be love (de Saussure, 1916). Unlike de Saussure, Foucault emphasizes discourse as a system of representation. Similar to de Saussure's signs, Foucault explains that a group of statements can equally produce meaning through language. Hall (2003) explains that for Foucault, the discursive events may not necessarily happen at the same point in time. Rather, over time certain discourse could form a powerful meaning just as signs are equally capable of evoking meaning. Applying this to our current study, Africa and its stories have been attributed a negative concept by mainstream media through signs, photographs, and discursive news endeavors, etc. The problem though, as de Saussure and Hall assert, is that meaning should not be fixed; meaning should float and change. Unfortunately, the mainstream media still renders the signifier and the signified as a fixed concept with an immutable meaning as concerns Africa, thus perpetuating anachronistic interpretations of Africa when, in essence, other variant interpretations have emerged.

Africa in Western Media

The African continent, especially, the sub-Saharan region has been continuously framed in a negative light since the inception of the news media. Ibelema (2014) traced this history to the Traveler's Tale whose main purpose is to entertain and present an imagery that represents the Other, the Strange, the Unknown, sometimes with conscious effort to paint a picture that is directly contrary to the Known. David Spurr (1993: 3) succinctly asks: "how does the Western writer construct a coherent representation out of a strange and (to the writer) often incomprehensible reality confronted in the non-Western world?" While traveler's tales may be centuries old, their impact still persist and powerfully so that they still remain the frame of reference and ultimately have constituted the template by which news and stories from Africa are reported. Evidence of this abounds especially in news reports on public health, and we discuss this under five categories.

Commodification of African News Stories. The commoditization of news in a digitized world has ensured that news is increasingly no longer a mere presentation of current events but has equally incorporated the notion of entertainment. "If it bleeds, it leads" has become the dominant guiding principle for the selection and presentation of news and this is particularly evident in the coverage of African news. Therefore, in their quest for ratings and increased readership and viewership, news editors and reporters strive to present their audience with deviant stories that entertain as

Figure 1. "The perils of pregnancy: one woman's tale of dying to give birth." Source: *Time* magazine Monday, 14 June 2010.

much as, if not more than, they inform (Ibelema, 2014; Okigbo, 1995). This argument has continuously dominated the international news flow discourse that it sometimes is disregarded and likened to a broken record. Mody (2010) observed that the "news frames of media of different countries reflected not just their national interests but also what they deemed to be expectations of their particular audiences" (2014: 171). Such expectations include negative developments and events including crisis, disease, disaster, corruption, among others (Mellese and Muller, 2012).

Objectification/Reductionist Approach. Some scholars however assert that Africa is no longer represented in negative light in mainstream media (see de Beer, 2010) despite blatant headlines like the May 13, 2000 cover story of *The Economist*: "The hopeless continent," and Charlayne Hunter-Gault's description of Africa with four D's, namely "death, disaster, disease, and despair" (2006: 107). The counter-argument maintains that such representation is no longer the case. But our findings of specific examples from the same year (2010) when de Beer published his study shows otherwise. African news stories still lack the extensive coverage that encompasses some history and life of individuals in the news other than the zeroed-in event. Equally and often, Africans infected with HIV/AIDS are presented in the news with little or no human dignity. They are nameless, have no life except their life with AIDS or other ailments as depicted in the story – basically reduced to mere objects. For example, *Time* magazine's 14 June 2010 coverage of a woman dying in child birth in Sierra Leone was accompanied by a naked picture of the woman with both breasts clearly exposed – a picture that would seem obscene for an American woman but nevertheless, acceptable for an African woman.

Another example is the CNN's 10 September 2010 report on Kenya by Kevin McKenzie, which focused on child labor with the caption "Boy earns 1 cent a goat in slaughter trade." (http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/africa/09/15/kenya.child.labor/index.html?iref=allsearch).

This story was accompanied by a three-minute video that isolated eight-year-old and six-year-old boys transporting goats to a market square. Whilst these examples may be construed as laudable investigative journalism that unearths child labor and a lack of basic needs for pregnant mothers, they are typical of the brand of stories that are covered for Africa. It is in light of this type of reportage that *Columbia Journalism Review* writer Karen Rothmyer (2011) reported a study that reviewed African news coverage by the 10 most read US newspapers and magazines between May

and September 2010. Results show that of the 250 stories about Africa that were portrayed in the selected newspapers and magazines, 245 of the stories were about poverty in Africa while only five stories covered the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth in Africa which is one of the most current news events on the continent.

Binary Oppositional Views. Historically, the coverage of HIV/AIDS by the Western, especially US media, always assumes binary oppositional views. Early in the 1980s, the news then was framed in what Gilman (1988) referred to as the "healthy us and the diseased other" (1988: 4). Similarly, Albert (1986) noted that readers of newspapers and magazines in the 1980s were fascinated by AIDS stories not because of the disease but because of the deviant character of the victims. Initially, the binary oppositions are depicted by the labels of homosexuals versus heterosexuals, then the black community versus the white community, and people with low socio-economic status and those with high socio-economic status. Later that label is transferred to Africa and other developing regions of the world versus the developed countries of the world. Bardhan's (2009) study reviewed AIDS stories coverage by the three major news agencies, the Associated Press, Reuter, and Agence France Presse. Results show that HIV/AIDS was framed as "a problem of the lesser-developed world" (2009: 300). In other words, AIDS in the United States is different from the "African AIDS." An example of this rhetoric of Otherness is the stark difference between the faces of AIDS for the US and the African countries. The faces of AIDS in the USA include sports celebrities, rock stars and entertainers who are successful in their various fields. According to the list collated by Brian Krans of Healthline (2013), famous faces or poster personalities of HIV/AIDS in the US over several decades include: NBA champion Earvin "Magic" Johnson; actor Rock Hudson; summer Olympics gold medalist (diver) Greg Louganis; rock musician Freddie Mercury; visual artist Keith Haring; Robert Reed of The Brady Bunch; winner of the Triple Grand Slam tennis titles Arthur Ashe, among many others. They serve as spokespersons, writers of bestselling books and philanthropists. In contrast, the faces of AIDS in Africa are nameless and are often represented by women and children who lack agency. Descriptively, they are poor, live in very rural communities with no basic sanitary amenities. They are often extremely thin, and exude the imagery of severe suffering and abject poverty as evidenced in the February 2003 TED video by a US journalist Kristen Ashburn (https://www.ted.com/talks/kristen_ashburn_s_heart_rending_pictures_of_aids).

With no intents to trivialize the impact of AIDS in Africa or to negate that some AIDS infected people in Africa bore the likeness of the depiction provided by mainstream media and independent journalists, we contend that such presentation is skewed, incomplete, misleading, and lacks objectivity. It therefore, falls within the oft-criticized realm of stereotype, otherness, and tribal fixation (Ibelema, 2014).

Philanthropic View: Helpless and Lacking Agency. Similar to the binary oppositional frame of health news about Africa is the subsequent need to help the needy and helpless of Africa. The majority of health coverage in Africa, even when the theme is not about transnational relations, will ultimately include assistance from the United States or other Western countries. Mwiinga (1993) noted that AIDS stories about Zambia in the 1990s were mostly focused on political donations. Equally, Kalyango and Onyebadi's (2012) study show political and health issues to be prominent themes in the international news coverage about Africa and most often the health crises is presented alongside attempts from the United States to provide aid to those countries.

We did a simple search on *The New York Times* website for "AIDS in Africa" and reviewed three random stories to determine to what extent political donations and philanthropic themes surface in the story. Just a few examples: The first article, "AIDS Progress in South Africa is in Peril" which showcases a print advertising for tombstones "Buy One, Get One Free" recounts improvements

that the South African government have made in controlling the spread of AIDS. Shortly after recounting this effort, this paragraph was interjected:

> Though few Americans or even South Africans realize it, the nation owes much of its success to a single United States program, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR, started in 2003 under President George W Bush. It has poured more than $3 billion into South Africa, largely for training doctors, building clinics and laboratories, and buying drugs. (*New York Times*, 25 August 2013).

The second article, "Three Approaches to Beating the AIDS Epidemic in South Africa" introduced the story with an indication that the AIDS epidemic is at its worst in high-risk subgroups such as gay men, prostitutes, truckers, prisoners, miners, etc. The very next paragraph adds: "To have any hope of beating the epidemic, it must focus on such groups, experts say. Many pilot projects to do that have been started with aid from the United States government program called PEPFAR." (*New York Times*, 25 August 2013). The third article, "Where AIDS Steals Life by the Millions: 'Fire in the Blood' Spotlights AIDS in Africa" was supposed to be a review of the movie "Fire in the Blood." Also, the second paragraph expressed: "Former President Bill Clinton, the intellectual property lawyer James Love, the journalist Donald G McNeil Jr of The New York Times and others offer perspectives on this situation and also on the concern that pharmaceutical companies value profits over lives" (*New York Times*, 5 September 2013).

Distorted Content. African news stories are not accorded the time, space, and talent that are needed to produce a cohesive and comprehensive report. This results in diminution of information in the coverage of events. Often sound bites gathered from parachute journalism are presented. Prior to the internet, satellite and other instantaneous and less expensive communication systems, the price for supporting a single foreign correspondence for one year is about US$300,000 (McPhail, 2006); it is understandable then if Western media were unable to maintain correspondents who will spend enough time to gather substantive information on a news story. One wonders why even today when information is easily accessible, international news coverage is still much distorted and decontextualized. This resonates with Ibelema's assertion that "making an increasingly complex world comprehensible to the American populace necessitates the situating of news within familiar reference points or stereotypes" (2014: 170). Referencing a study by Bleiker and Kay (2007), it is evident that not only are Western media incapable (or maybe refuse) to understand this "foreign" culture, they may have a preconceived lens through which stories from Africa should be viewed.

Bleiker and Kay (2007) reviewed how AIDS in Africa is represented through photography by Western photographers and Africans living within the same community with HIV/AIDS infected patients. They used two frameworks: the pluralist and the humanist perspectives of studying photography and they encompass several tenets including the difference or distance between the photographer and the photographed. As with many creative endeavors, the art of photography is subjective and could therefore be influenced by many factors including social factors. Undoubtedly, the photographer enjoys the autonomy of choosing what image to capture among many choices. Similarly, the photographer decides on the lens angle, the choice of focus and lack of focus, wide versus close-up shots, black and white versus color, and other techniques and aesthetics inherent in the art of photography – and that is how he or she tells a story and showcases the intended meaning that each photograph exhibits. As mentioned earlier, a photographer's decision is influenced by many factors: socio-economic, political, economic, race, gender, religion, etc. The distance between the photographer and the photographed therefore is determined by to what extent the above factors influence the gap – either by narrowing it or widening it – a gap that Godeau, as cited in Hayes (2015: 173), referred to as "double-distance." Bringing in the pluralist and humanist perspectives mentioned earlier, the pluralist presents a heterogeneous perspective due to the close

affinity of the photographer and the photographed. Put differently, the pluralist photographer knows more about the photographed – he or she is aware of other factors that shape the existence of his or her object or person and so could bring in other perspectives that are beyond the prism of a humanist who may confine his or her art to just the obvious. Bringing this argument to our topic, the pluralist is aware that an AIDS patient has a lot of other things happening in his or her life and so will not fixate all shots on the person and AIDS while the humanist is oblivious of other activities in and around the life of an AIDS patient; therefore, all pictures tell the story of the person and AIDS. In describing the humanist perspective, Bleiker and Kay noted, "humanist photographic engagements, well meant as they are, contain residues of colonial values. They are more likely to invoke pity, rather than compassion. They reflect how Western – and thus very often universalized—accounts of HIV/AIDS in Africa are based on very specific assumptions, even stigma, revolving around the portrayal of people affected by HIV/AIDS as passive victims, removed from the everyday realities of the Western world" (2007: 141). They contend the skewed humanistic view and endorsed pluralistic viewpoint in representing HIV/AIDS in Africa. They consider pluralist photography as capable of providing different perspectives of the object other than the established Western standpoint; thus, it "seeks to validate local photographic practices in an attempt to create multiple sites for representing and understanding the psychological, social, and political issues at stake" (2007: 141). Their preference does not necessarily exonerate pluralistic view from some stereotypical assumptions since there will always be some level of subjective insinuations inherent in every photograph especially if examined at a later time than the moment the photograph was taken. Moreover, photographs are incapable of depicting precisely the natural state of the object, which is photographed because every angle could tell a different story. Bleiker and Kay compared the iconographic photographs (humanist) of AIDS patients in Uganda with photographs of Ethiopian children affected by AIDS (pluralist). The construction of meaning through each prism of this typology provided a different perspective and thus different meaning about people infected with HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa.

Below are two photographs "Florence and Ssengabi" by Hooper and "My Favorite Things" featuring Tananesh by Eric Gottesman taken from humanist and pluralist perspectives respectively. The humanist perspective focused only on the disease, so Bleiker and Kay described the first picture in these words:

> Both Florence and Ssengabi were visibly ill. Taken during the early period of Western public awareness about HIV/AIDS, the Hooper photograph provided a "face" that could symbolize the AIDS crisis in Africa. It was published widely in the international media, including Newsweek and the Washington Post… The photograph is very confronting in its direct visualization of illness, suffering, and death (2007: 147).

They also highlighted stark inequality of power between the photographer and the photographed – a trait among many Western journalists and photographers which often compromises the dignity of the person being photographed. This is a staple for many Western journalists covering health stories in Africa because "any Western photographer, no matter how well meant and sensitive his or her artistic and political engagement is, operates at a certain distance from poverty, conflict, and disaster." (2007: 148). In contrast, a different representation through the pluralist prism provides a picture where Tananesh tells a story that does not have AIDS as the center of her narrative. Granted she is infected with HIV/AIDS, but her life does not revolve around the disease, there are other interesting events happening in her life. Bleiker and Kay described her photograph in these words:

> Her pictures do not represent suffering. They place her existence in a larger personal and social context. As opposed to the Hooper photograph, these pictures do not portray a decontextualized world of darkness

Figure 2. "Florence and Ssengabi." Source: Hooper. "My Favorite Things." Source: Eric Gottesman.

> and gloom. Instead, Tenanesh captures the dailyness of her life, its ups and downs, her determination to lead a relatively normal childhood… Tenanesh is not a passive victim in the way Hooper portrays Florence and Ssengabi… We are inevitably confronted with the life of a single person, rather than an abstract image of a disease (2007: 155–156).

Clearly the likes of Tananesh's photo image and story do not form the frame of reference on health reportage on Africa. In contrast to the photo narrative on Florence and Ssengabi, Tananesh in her own personal photo narrative shows her as having agency and power, and her life means a lot more than the virus that inhabits her body. It is in light of the above, that we introduce The Siphithemba Choir and their story as a counter-narrative to Western media representation of AIDS infected persons in Africa.

Towards a Performative Counter-Narrative: Siphithemba Choir in the Politics of Representation

The Siphithemba Choir (see Okigbo, 2011) came out of the HIV/AIDS support group that was founded in 1997 at the McCord Mission Hospital in Durban. Its founding was as a source of alternative care in the form of spiritual counseling, prayers, and social support network for HIV positive individuals at the time when, due to slow dissemination of antiretroviral drugs, doctors and caregivers had little medical help that they could render to patients. The support group was initiated by Mrs Nonhlanhla Mhlongo, a medical social worker, whose primary responsibility was to coordinate the medical social services and to administer pre- and post-HIV/AIDS diagnosis counseling. She was trained at the University of Zululand between 1975 and 1980, an institution that comprised one of the major centers of the South African Students' Organization, the platform for propagating the black-consciousness movement (BCM), led by Steve Biko. Through her training as a social worker at this university, and her experience of the BCM, she followed the philosophy of self-reliance, social networking, and support system as critical forms of intervention in struggle experience, a philosophy that would shape her work at McCord Hospital, and which she inculcated into the members of the support group and choral ensemble.

As a group of individuals who live the experience of being HIV-positive, the choir members show clear understanding about the global health politics, especially the politics of HIV/AIDS, and how that highlights the North–South power disparities in the spheres of economics, culture, and politics. Their aim from the moment of their formation, therefore, has been to counter the dehumanizing images and narratives on different levels, first and foremost through healthy lifestyles realized by engaging in work and industry in order to earn a living for themselves rather than relying on donor handouts from foreign NGOs; second by using the platform of their musical performances to show physical strength and thus to dispel the wrong notion about them as people who are coffin-bound and facing imminent death; and third by seizing every opportunity to subvert the message of Western bio-medical research scientists who like to showcase the choir as evidence of the success of their work.

Alternative Narrative Through Work and Industry

One of the burdens of the stigma of HIV/AIDS in South Africa, especially in Black townships in KwaZulu-Natal where this study was conducted, is that many infected people are jobless. Zinhle Thabethe, a member of the Siphithemba Choir, described how she lost her job when a fellow employee accessed her office cabinet without her permission, read her diagnosis result, and revealed her status to her employers, who immediately fired her (Hainsworth, 2005). In fact, the majority of members of the support group had never been gainfully employed, some for lack of skills. The lack of a strong financial base resulted in deficient nutritional habits making them vulnerable to opportunistic infections. For Mrs Mhlongo, however, this did not have to be. She believed that HIV-positive individuals could still be productive, and should be able to earn a living. Hence she encouraged participants in the support group to use the talents and skills they have to better their economic conditions. According to her, "We've got people who are HIV-positive, and who have no income… they shouldn't go around begging" (personal interview).

Thanks to Mhlongo's good guidance, the support group became a space of work and economic activity. These included the making of Zulu beads which were marketed locally and overseas, and from which individuals earned income as well as saved some money in a common account that was used to support the treatment of sick members. The beadwork project grew over time, drawing hundreds of new members to the support group thus prompting the hospital management to add different types of skill acquisition to the program for members including sewing and knitting, the making of mosaics, computer literacy, and even health counseling. Today most of the members of the group are gainfully employed in private businesses, as counselors in local clinics, and in the IT sector. This, in combination with their overseas performance tours, and record sales contributed to majority of them now having a standard of living that is above South Africa's poverty index.

Much has been documented and written about the use of music to accompany work in African communities (Bebey, 1975: 11; Nketia, 1974: 28–29; Weman, 1960: 80–82), to lighten the burden of work, facilitate productivity, and "to share the burdens and pleasures of the work" as a communal experience (Biko, 2004: 46). Thus singing comprised an integral part of the work activities of the Sinikithemba Support Group, and it was in the context of the income-generating projects that the Sinikithemba Choir was born. According to a choir member, Phakamile Shabane, "We used to sing all the time, and everyone can sing any part they like. But it always sounded good" (personal interview). According to Mrs Mhlongo, "the group sang so well, and sometimes we even shed tears" (personal interview). Another member, Nomusa Mpanza, testified about times when passersby on the street would stop to listen to the sonorities of the group as its members worked at their tasks. The environment of work performed to the accompaniment of song thus created musical consciousness for members, and it was a consciousness that would permanently alter the dynamics of the group.

Figure 3. Beadworks and other artworks by the Siphithemba group. Photo by authors.

Nomusa said the day that changed everything was sometime in early 1998, when the group had finished its work for the day and spent several more hours singing and dancing. "It was like we all went crazy that day, and everybody was watching us. So Nonhlanhla [Mrs Mhlongo] suggested maybe we should form a choir" (personal interview). Thus, at Mrs Mhlongo's suggestion, the support group formally became a choir, and it soon began performing at events in the hospital. The formation of the choir transformed the support group into a trifunctional entity – an HIV/AIDS support group, a microeconomic project, and a choral ensemble.

A Musical Counter-Narrative

The Siphithemba Choir's performance is usually an integration of song and dance. Its repertoire is comprised largely of gospel music, including pre-existing songs they adapted and their own compositions. In South Africa, two recognizable forms of singing are commonly called gospel music. The first is the gospel chorus (in Zulu, *amakhorasi*). *Amakhorasi* are songs of simple, repetitive refrains. The style is performed in dialogic call and response between the choir and a soloist who improvises on a few verses by simply manipulating the theme and existing texts of the song while cueing the choir and congregation into the refrain. The style of singing is generally accompanied with handclapping and dance. Based on an indigenous style of singing in its melodic and rhythmic patterns, the theme often speaks to individual and community experiences in the spheres of faith, economics, love and family. A second form of gospel music draws heavily from Black American gospel tradition fused with indigenous *amakhorasi* style. They equally articulate individual experiences within the harsh economic, social, and political history of South Africa, and performers reformulate them as characteristic experiences of their communities and the society at large. The predominance of gospel music in Siphithemba's repertory is partly in keeping with their

Figure 4. Ncamisile Yengwa demonstrates the *ngoma* dance with vigor at a concert in Durban. Photo by authors.

association with McCord, which is a mission hospital. Dr James McCord, a medical missionary of the American Congregational Church founded McCord Hospital in Durban, 1909 (see McCord and Douglass (1946) for more on the missionary history of the hospital). But the choir members also see themselves as engaged in the mission of preaching the gospel through their music which encapsulates the spirituality of hope in the presence of HIV and AIDS. Their preference for gospel music notwithstanding, the choir conductor, Phumulani Kunene and other members interviewed, revealed that they also incorporate traditional Zulu songs because of their amenability to integration with dance. The dance rationale has several implications as it pertains to the experience of Siphithemba members. First, traditional songs and dance comprise an important medium that is recognizable to their local audiences. They also provide an opportunity for the audience to actively participate, such as when they join the choir in individual soloing in the *ngoma* dance, the traditional Zulu high kick and foot stomp dance. Secondly, Phumulani and Nomusa Mpanza explained that the choir's decision to perform traditional songs was to provide more opportunities for dance as a form of exercise. Exercise is recognized as a key component of "positive living," an expression that conveys the idea of having a positive physical, emotional, and spiritual attitude toward and about the reality of HIV/AIDS (O'Loughlin, 2008). According to Phumlani, Zulu traditional songs, with their accompanying vigorous dance movements (see Figure 4) provided regular exercise for members. Dance is also the choir's way of projecting distinctive African identity in the context of performance, especially in the presence of foreign audiences. Ultimately, dance, for the choir, is a means of maintaining physical health as well as an explicit rejection of the typical depiction of the faces of AIDS in Africa as hopeless and helpless.

Who's Story Anyway? In Contention with Research Scientists

Since the beginning of their collaboration with American research scientists who began using McCord Hospital as the test site for the CD4/Viral Load research project, the choir has received several invitations to perform in the USA and Europe including appearances at the annual Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections and a show in London with Sir Elton John. Whereas these overseas tours enabled the choir to forge closer ties with the scientific community, boosted their economic wellbeing, as well as raised their profile back home in South

Africa, the new relationship with the scientific community also revealed some degree of contention about who gets the credit for the achievements of the choir and the member's physical healthiness manifest in the exuberant music and dance performances. This contention is evidenced in some scientists demand during one of the conferences in Boston that the choir must not perform any song about God on the stage. The demand was made irrespective of the fact that the choir is part of a mission hospital, was founded first and foremost as a support group with prayer and spiritual counseling at the center of their activities, and that gospel songs predominate in their repertoires. According to the choir director Phumulani Kunene, this demand by the scientists was condescending, patronizing, and amounted to utter disregard of the fact that their music is a means of telling their own story and not the story of the scientists.

The truth is that medical research on AIDS did not give birth to the Siphithemba Choir; rather, the member's desire to support one another in their struggles with the virus, their determination to beat the odds of being HIV-positive, and their effort to bring the message of hope and educate their community in the same vein account for the formation of the ensemble. Hence, although the members have benefitted in their relationship with the medical researchers, they still desire to control the message so that their story becomes paramount in the circumstances of that relationship. It is therefore arguable that the story of the relationship of the Siphithemba Choir with the scientists is symptomatic – when viewed at least from the perspective of choir members – of the West's patronizing relationship with Africa. There is a seeming assumption – perhaps unconscious – by Westerners who embark on humanitarian and research efforts in Africa that Africans are, as previously stated, helpless and incapable of finding solutions to their problems. Hence Africa becomes the critical space for vaccine experimentations and drug testing. When these experiments fail however, Africans, who comprise the majority of the subjects, suffer. An example is the reported case of a microbicide gel manufactured by an American pharmaceutical company, a potential treatment that failed in KwaZulu–Natal in 2007 and infected many young Zulu women with HIV (Skoler-Karpoff, 2008: 1977–1987, see also Howden, 2009). When success has been recorded, however, the rules of patents and costs have made it extremely difficult for Africans to gain access to the drugs. At other times, Western scientists instigate doubts about African's ability to handle complicated drug regimens such as the ARV because of "ignorance" about the use of drugs. Choir member Zinhle Thabethe, who gave the keynote during the tenth annual Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections in Boston rebutted this argument: she offered herself as a living example of the success of antiretrovirals in an African environment, thanks to her diligence and ability to manage the complexity of the regimen. Given Zinhle's ability to use the platform of the concert stage to respond to Western scientists' patronizing attitudes, it seems the choir can still meet its objective of raising its voice and telling their own story without necessarily letting them be subsumed in that of the scientific community who want to showcase the choir as evidence of the success of their research endeavors.

"We Are Positive Too": Acknowledging HIV Status by Americans

Besides performing at AIDS-related conferences in the United States, the Siphithemba Choir also visited churches and local schools, where they addressed issues related to their individual experiences and those of their communities back home through performance. In conversation with Professor Bruce Walker of Harvard Medical School who made the initial pitch of bringing the choir to the conferences, he revealed that the choir's school visits had prompted students in some schools in the Boston area to start their own AIDS-awareness campaign projects. According to him, it is important to put a human face on a disease that has often been reduced to statistics. He related how the choir's performances are constantly received with standing ovations and deep emotions.

The emotionality of the responses in the churches could have been for different reasons. It is often easy for AIDS to be discussed in North America as an African or developing-world problem. Some people who are infected or affected by HIV and AIDS in America tend to live in denial of their individual experience of AIDS. While most of the reporting and commentaries on the choir's tours reiterate the increased awareness that the group brings about the AIDS crisis in Africa, the choir members on the other hand made observations about Americans who are HIV-positive but have difficulty disclosing their status. In a conversation with Zinhle Thabethe, a female member of the choir in 2012, she commented on how several individuals in the USA have opened up to her to discuss their HIV status on several occasions following some of her talks during different trips to the United States. Her comments are consistent with a report in the Church World Service newsletter of spring 2003, where an unnamed choir member remarked during one of their tours in the United States:

> We notice that Americans who are HIV+ were very shy about telling others they had AIDS. We would be just about to leave and then someone would come forward and quickly tell us that they were HIV+. We think that perhaps we were role models for Americans living with AIDS and that maybe we helped some of them to think about being more open about their status. We hope we have given them confidence. (2003: 13).

It appears from the nature of these interactions, that some Americans who are HIV-positive are still less likely to reveal that fact than in South Africa. A few years ago, it was reported on National Public Radio that about half the Americans who ought to submit to HIV testing refuse to do so, suggesting that the actual number of Americans living with HIV and AIDS may never be known. This is further evidenced in the November 2014 supplemental report issued by the Centers for Disease Control which stated: "Over the past decade, the number of people living with HIV has increased, while the annual number of new HIV infections has remained relatively stable. Still, the pace of new infections continues at far too high a level." A similar report by John Tozzi (2015) of *Bloomberg News* published on 23 February 2015 also reiterated the fact that "patients diagnosed with the virus that causes AIDS but not getting care account for most new transmissions, estimates show." According to these reports, of the number of people living with HIV infection, one in seven are unaware of their status. This lack of awareness is compounded by the refusal of individuals to submit to testing, thanks to the stigmatization of HIV/AIDS, which is still high and strong in the United States. The reality of the stigma is captured in the testimony of an anonymous young female:

> By now you'd think people would know a lot about HIV, but they don't. I would never tell someone I was not close to. Even when I do feel close enough to someone to tell them, I wonder. Are they going to say, 'Get away from me! Don't touch me!' The truth is that people really do look at you differently when they know you are HIV positive… It is hard. But I know people's ignorance is not going to go away. I still think people are going to hate me or not want to be my friend when they learn I have HIV. (DeNoon, 2009).

To some people who bear the burden of the stigma of AIDS in the United States therefore, the Siphithemba Choir offers hope and courage through its music. Such individuals recognize that they share common experiences with members of the choir, and they are moved to extend a hand of solidarity with the group. By so doing, they gain spiritual and emotional strength to confront their fears. Thus, Siphithemba's music is well received for moving their American audiences to appreciate their experience of HIV/AIDS, and to extend hands of charity toward Africans with AIDS, but equally successful in awakening a new level of consciousness about AIDS within the American society.

Concluding Remarks

We have argued in this paper about an African counter-narrative to media health images of Africa. The Siphithemba Choir does not possess the power of the media, and thus is incapable of producing media narratives that can compete with those of the mainstream media. Their activities however, namely their work and labor productivity, physical show of strength in performance contexts, and the savvy use of the concert stage to contest the appropriation of their story by the scientific community, and to move Americans (and Westerners) to acknowledge their HIV status are powerful enough to both their local and international audiences as a narrative of health that runs contrary to the image of Africa being projected to the world. They are also an example of a proactive African response to local issues that rarely form part of mainstream media reportage on Africa.

A considerable irony is evident however in the use of music and the concert stage by the choir as a means to offer alternative narrative to the AIDS experience in (South) Africa. African bodies, arts, and expressive forms have been sources of curiosity for Europeans for centuries. The curiosity resulted in what Bernth Lindfors (1999: vii) described as "ethnological show business – that is, the displaying of foreign peoples for commercial and/or educational purposes." Ethnological show business with African bodies reached its apogee in the nineteenth century through early twentieth century, that era of Darwin, when Africans' singing and dancing were of interest most to zoologists and imperialist agents preoccupied with the trends of human cultural gradation as justification for conquest and domination of the "Other." Some might argue that the choir's multifunctional use of performance including an attempt to project an African identity has the potential to reinforce the stereotypical images of Africa that are rooted in the nineteenth century ethnological show business. We believe on the other hand that if any such exotic curiosity may have been elicited by their performances to foreign audience, they have equally been successful in letting them add their voices to the conversations on AIDS treatment as well as helped to reveal the reality of HIV/AIDS in the American society that is often not acknowledged.

Finally, although we say that the choir does not possess the power of the mainstream media, yet their appearances on the international stage has drawn the attention of the media and by extension to their message, thus allowing the context of their musical performances become a space for offering alternative narrative that challenge as well as counter the dominant health images especially of AIDS that is witnessed in the mainstream media.

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