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Signature:

Khalilah Odessa Ali

Date

'For Us Poetry is Not a Luxury': A Case Study of Six Black Women Artist-Educator-
Activists

By

Khalilah Odessa Ali

Doctor of Philosophy
Educational Studies

Emile Vanessa Siddle Walker, Ed.D.
Chair

Carole Hahn Ed.D.
Committee Member

Nicole Ray, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Maisha T. Winn Ph.D.

Accepted:

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D. Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

Date

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Activists

By

Khalilah Ali

B.A., Georgia State University, 2000

M.Ed., Georgia State University, 2003

Advisor: E. Vanessa Siddle Walker, Ed.D.

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Abstract

‘For Us Poetry is Not a Luxury’: A Case Study of Six Black Women Artist-Educator-Activists

By Khalilah Odessa Ali

Scholars have contributed to a growing body of inquiry into the use of performance, visual art, spoken word, and hip-hop to improve student literacy and promote student activism. Additional scholarship evaluates the effectiveness of Saturday and after-school programs that incorporate hip-hop and spoken word into their curricula (Denzin, 2003; Dimitriadis, 2001; Fisher, 2007; Goldfarb, 1998; Stovall, 2006). However, further attention should continue to shift towards the educators who create and work in these programs *and* who teach in those non-school spaces, what Fisher calls Participatory Literacy Communities (PLCs)--such as black bookstores, coffee-shops and performance venues (Fisher, 2007, 2009). My work complements and extends such scholarship by drawing attention to alternative forms of education and by highlighting the ways in which selected African American women artist-activists’ cultural performances function as educative texts in a range of learning settings. This study explored the ways six Black women construct artist, educator, and activist identities and how these multiple identities converge in and through works in a range of educational spaces. Using interviews, observations, and analyses of artifacts, I focused on the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between the politicized art Black women teachers produce and their beliefs about education?
2. How do artists/activists function as teachers in various spaces--the schoolhouse, after-school program, art group, coffee shop, or performance venue?
3. How do the artists’ race and gender influence how they produce art, engage in activism, and educate in these various spaces?

Findings indicate that participants believe their works behave as educative texts and are their primary means for promoting social justice agendas. Across cases, artist-activist-educators shared that they function as teachers in various spaces--both traditional and subaltern, yet often find themselves ‘betwixt and between’ (Bhabha, 1994; Turner, 1987; Winn, 2010) these seemingly antagonistic spaces. The study suggests that educators involved in the discourse surrounding teacher identity development should continue to interrogate how teachers conceive of the ways in which identity shapes their educational philosophies and teaching.

Key words: case study Black women teachers; womanist pedagogy; art, activism, and education; teaching and performance