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Abstract:
This paper reviews *Experiments in a Jazz Aesthetic: Art, Activism, Academia, and the Austin Project*, a book edited by Dr. Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, Dr. Lisa L. Moore, and Sharon Bridgforth. The book discusses the connection among race, gender, academia, and community and how the Austin Project provides a safe space for women of color and their allies to create work within a jazz aesthetic in order to invoke social change. My paper discusses the disconnect between academia and community and how, for women of color, upward socioeconomic mobility often means severing themselves from their community. My paper analyzes what shape women of color’s activism takes and how the founders of The Austin Project effectively use spirituality to summon social change. It argues that in providing a safe, feminist space for women of color to air their emotions, grievances, and honest thoughts, The Austin Project is doing important, groundbreaking work, work that should eventually become the norm in academia if academia wants to take a more communal activist approach to education. The paper also discusses the effectiveness and politics behind “safe spaces” for women of color and argues that these spaces are a necessary part of activism.

Keywords:
activism, feminism, community, spirituality, academia, multi-ethnic literature, safe spaces, location, texas, and politics
“The Politics of Space in *Experiments in a Jazz Aesthetic: How the Austin Project* Reattaches the Connection among Activism, Academia, and Community”
Dana Horton

Activism is often thought of as a physical act that fights for a social cause. Attending protests and public demonstrations, exercising one’s right to vote, and campaigning for political candidates are all acts that are associated with activism. *Experiments in a Jazz Aesthetic: Art, Activism, Academia, and the Austin Project,* an anthology edited by Omi Osun L. Joni Jones, Lisa L. Moore, and Sharon Bridgforth, aligns activism with other aspects of culture, such as academia, spirituality, and community. Broken down into three parts and nine chapters, *Experiments* provides a unique way of creating art and fighting for social change. The book contains the poetry, fiction, essays, plays, speeches, and lectures that were created during the Austin Project, which started at the University of Texas, Austin and surrounding areas in the late 90s/early 00s, and the project is described as providing “a space for women of color and their allies to write and perform in a jazz aesthetic as a strategy for social change” (vii). One of the many worldviews that is represented in this book is the African-centered worldview, which states that learning is community based and connected to spirituality, although the notion that a common gender and racial experience exists, is one that is heavily debated in academia. *Experiments* highlights how skills, such as listening and improvisation, are important aspects of activism, and writing down an embodied experience and sharing it with others, for example, is just one form of activism that this book illustrates. The statements that members of the Austin Project make about aligning academia with activism, spirituality, and community are convincing and should make those of us in academia reconsider the resistant stance that is often taken against these three entities; common experiences based on gender, race, sexuality, etc. do exist, and instead of writing this point-of-view off as “essentialist,” the common experience can be
used as a way for people to listen to and learn from people who are also going through similar situations.

The need for sharing a common experience is one of the reasons why The Austin Project is created, and it is founded out of desperation and urgency. Jones feels that academia is stifling her as a black woman and wanted to know if there was a way to make her place in the world more bearable: “I sometimes get uncomfortable in predominantly white audiences, fearful that this is it, that life won’t get any better than this – one Black woman in a sea of white people who believe themselves liberal and therefore above self-interrogation” (7). The aspects that Jones wants to see more of in academia – spirituality, community, and activism – are not currently embraced there, especially spirituality, since academia has recently been an atheist institution that focuses more on “reason” than “emotion.” The Austin Project allows women of color and their allies to have a safe space to be spiritual without having to worry that spirituality will be written off as “nonsense.”

The strong connection that many members of the Austin Project feel towards spirituality is evident by the fact that spirituality is a reoccurring theme throughout many of the creative pieces in *Experiments*, and spirituality is important for the members because it allows them to bond with other people, the environment, and ancestors. For example, Florinda Bryant’s *half-breed Southern Fried* makes the connection between natural settings, Christianity, and African ancestors. “Holy ancestors, mother earth, bless her” is a line that encompasses these four elements (39). “Holy ancestors” places emphasis on ancestors being sacred and a vital part of African-American culture. This emphasis on holy ancestors is also an example of the African worldview, specifically the Ashanti people’s worldview. “Mother earth” is a common personification used to show how nature plays a parental role in the lives of human beings. The focus on nature as a spiritual and living entity is another example of the African worldview and
how “The Earth too has spiritual power” (Busia 195). The title half-breed Southern Fried symbolizes how slavery and “breeding” is responsible for the creation of the African-American race, and this creation was cooked, or fried, in the South. Bryant uses spirituality, Christianity, and African ancestors as a way to explain this phenomenon. For members of the Austin Project, spirituality is needed because it fosters relationships between activists, and it is a catalyst for social change.

The definition of activism is broadened in Experiments and goes beyond the notion that activism is only valid if it is a physical act that invokes massive change. Jones states, “…the jazz aesthetic trusts the process of “embeddedness” in which the women of tAP take their discoveries of clarity and authority and insinuate them into their homes, workplaces, and gardens,” and Jones’s statement shows that the Austin Project members plan on sharing their experiences with the rest of the world (9). The process of sharing experiences is a crucial form of activism that allows for people to connect with each other. “Embeddedness” is an interesting concept because it implies that what the women learned during the Austin Project will be permanently implemented into their lives, and they will actively use what they learned to teach others. The members of the Austin Project have been given the power to share and strengthen their opinions, and Jones continues to write that “The transformations they experience in tAP inevitably make their way to the larger world as the women practice, at every turn, the power they have learned” (9). Experiments broadens the definition of activism by showing how empowering the writing process, performance art, and group projects can be. Jones also implies that the kind of power that the women learned in the Austin Project can only be captured in a setting that is dominated by women, and this transformative practice is one that changed, as well as saved, lives (9). The Austin Project changed the outlook and opinions of the women who participated in the experience, and it also changed the way that the women see the function of activism. In
Chapter Seven, titled “Transforming Practice: Artists, Activists, and Academics Working across Boundaries,” four members of the Austin Project talk about how the experience changed the way they teach, learn, think, and feel. Florinda Bryant is one of the members who talks about how *half-breed Southern Fried* never would have been written if the Austin Project never happened and how she realizes that there are many layers to her identity – she is more than just a “poet” or “artist.” Bryant writes, “The idea of duality was enforced when, within the Austin Project space, the call was issued for the scholar to embrace being an artist, and for the artist to embrace being a scholar, and for an activist to do the same,” and she gets to the core of why the interconnection among all of these entities needs to exist (*Experiments* 324). Bryant’s use of a strong word like *enforced* shows how crucial acknowledging multiple identities is to members of the Austin Project. She also uses *embrace* instead of *accept*, and it seems as if she uses *embrace* because a person’s multiple identities should be close enough that each identity touch and do not run away from each other. The combination of artist, scholar, and activist is interesting because prior to the Austin Project, Bryant saw these three entities as being separate, but the Austin Project showed her that there is no need to keep these identities apart.

The impact of the Austin Project and its focus on activism is discussed even further by Rajasvini Bhansali. The skills that Bhansali learned in the Austin Project allowed her to invoke social change on a global level. She states, “I utilized the skills I had fine tuned in the Austin Project to listen deeply to the stories of the youth, adult staff, and community leaders with whom I was blessed to work in Kenya” (326). Bhansali’s idea shows how the Austin Project did not just make her an activist, it made her a listener as well. *Activism* is a word that implies a physical action, and it is interesting that Bhansali is relating a skill, such as listening, to activism. Listening is also a skill that many activists encourage allies to possess. A key part of activism is making sure that marginalized people’s voices are being heard, and Bhansali is applying the
listening skills that she learned in the Austin Project to her activism. “Fine tuned” shows that the Austin Project helped to shape and enhance the skills that Bhansali already possessed and is a testament to how important a project like this is. The Austin Project provides women with the tools and strength that they need to invoke social change. The tools that the Austin Project members are equipped with are political tools that create change.

The Austin Project provides women, specifically women of color, with a safe, woman-centered space to air their emotions, grievances, and honest thoughts. Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez discusses how the Austin Project shaped her personal activism and interactions with the women of color in the group. She states, “As an academic, I saw new expressions of intellectual activism come alive through the fearless self-disclosure of women’s stories” (338). Gonzalez-Lopez puts intellectual activism together because there is a connection between academia and activism, and these two entities do not have to be separate. She also says that she saw “new expressions of intellectual activism,” which shows how the Austin Project is bringing out innovative ideas in its members. “Fearless self-disclosure of women’s stories” also implies that these new expressions never would have happened in a traditional patriarchal space and that women had to find an alternative space in order to bring about this change. In finding this space, a space dedicated to women, the members were able to be themselves.

The Austin Project also creates community through various forms of memory and shows how memories can be used to bond people. There are various types of memories present in Experiments: gender memory, race memory, and cultural memory are examples of the memories that are highlighted in this book. Gonzalez-Lopez writes that “Each woman’s unique history of womanhood and life united her with the other tAP members through the strikingly diverse yet fluid and common faces of womanhood,” and Gonzalez-Lopez highlights how a community can be created based on a common gender experience (339). Gonzalez-Lopez’s use of “fluid” to
describe the “faces of womanhood” shows how these interconnecting experiences complement each other. Using memory and a common gender experience to create community can be argued as being essentialist; however, labeling it as essentialist takes away from the similar experiences that only someone who is a woman would understand.

There are many arguments against a common gender experience, arguments that would make the “safe space for women of color and their allies” that the Austin Project advocates for invalid, and these arguments have been debated historically amongst women literary theorists of African descent. Using memory and a common gender experience to create community is something that African-American female theorists such as Barbara Smith and Deborah A. McDowell advocated for in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* and "The Changing Same": *Studies in Fiction by Black-American Women*, respectively; however, Hazel V. Carby goes against these theorists and says that “Black feminist criticism has too frequently been reduced to an experiential relationship that exists between black women as critics and black women as writers who represent black women’s reality. Theoretically this reliance on a common, or shared, experience is essentialist and ahistorical” (251). Unlike women such as Gonzalez-Lopez, McDowell, and Smith, Carby sees the focus on a common experience amongst women, particularly black women, as “essentialist.” This is the direct contrast to Gonzalez-Lopez’s statement that a common womanhood is what united the women of the Austin Project, and her opinion is more along the lines of Smith’s and McDowell’s sentiments. Carby’s opinion mistakenly treats women as if they have the same gender experience as people who do not identify as women, and it glosses over the common experiences of womanhood that can help women bond with each other. The fact that a safe space for women needed to be created in the first place debunks Carby’s notion that the “reliance on a common, or shared, experience” is counterproductive.
As *Experiments* successfully argues, academia needs to, literally and figuratively, break down the walls between itself and the world outside of academia. Instead of seeing spirituality as something that is unproductive and unnecessary, it should be used as a way to connect people within academia to the world (which encompasses people, animals, nature, resources, etc.) outside of academia. Small gestures, such as smiling and saying hi to people we cross on the street or listening closely to people we converse with, as Jones mentioned earlier, can help to break down those barriers and make people outside of academia more trusting of academia. In recent times, spirituality, academia, and community have been disconnected, but the Austin Project gives several tips for how to reassemble these pieces into one entity. As members of academia, we have the power to change this disconnect – the Austin Project changed many women’s lives and allowed those women to use what they learned to change other people’s lives as well. Picket fence activism isn’t for everyone, which is fine, because, as the Austin Project shows, there are many forms of activism, and activism starts with a common experience. Sharing and respecting those common experiences is necessary if change is going to happen.
Works Cited