

“It’s a City Full of Walls You Can Post Complaints At”

Street Artist Agitprop as Holistic Pedagogy and the Informal Praxis of One Conscious Cultural Worker

Khalilah Ali PhD

E-mail: khalilahalimc@gmail.com

Received February 2025

Accepted for publication May 2025

Published July 2025

Abstract

Invoking emcee Yasin Bey’s (Mos Def) quote from his verse on “Speed Law” (1999), “it’s a city full of walls you can post complaints at,” this study harvests Black World ways of knowledge production, activism, and expression voiced through an examination of the intersemiotics of various products of Black vernacular culture articulated through image. Through a single-case study and by analyzing unsanctioned and sanctioned graffiti and murals that have often been considered ephemeral vandal’s work, this study explores one Black American public activist’s social justice-oriented graffiti and murals within the contexts of spatial justice, homeplace, racial inequity, gentrification, and ephemerality versus preservation. I interrogate how these visual forms of expression serve as mediums for marginalized voices in urban landscapes, simultaneously contested and embraced, and how taggers, style writers, and muralists are indeed public intellectuals and their activism a kind of community based engaged pedagogy and work Critical Black Didactic Art.

Through analysis of an artist in Atlanta, Georgia, United States, this paper delves into the ways diasporic Black street art seeks to reflect and shape the sociopolitical fabric of cities, highlighting its role in both expressing and challenging experiences of racial inequity and urbanity. Through interviews and analyzing street art, the essay argues for Black social justice-oriented street art’s potential to offer new avenues for understanding and advocating for spatial justice, thereby transforming urban walls into spaces of collective memory and resistance. Through this exploration, the paper contributes to broader discussions on the significance of public art in shaping urban identity, its usability to support community members’ multiliteracy through vernacular culture artifacts, and the ongoing struggle for justice and equity in cityscapes around the globe.

Keywords: *street art, situated learning, multiliteracies, spatial justice, artist intellectuals, critical black didactic art*

Tagging in the SWATS—

It was broad daylight when we were almost arrested outside an old electronics store in Southwest Atlanta, or the SWATS as locals lovingly call the area. Fabian “Occasional Superstar” Williams slightly crouched, spray can in hand, worked diligently yet oddly leisurely to finish a Martin Luther King Jr. piece on the wall while I captured his labor with a cracked iPhone. I remember the disquiet nagging solicitude as I spotted the police car inching toward us, but Fabian neither looked up nor flinched. I envisioned the specter of state sanctioned violence looming—the kind that silenced Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, George Floyd, or Breonna Taylor. Could this defacement, this small but relatively benign act of visual civil disobedience, invite an ugly disproportionate response? Fortunately, the officer appreciated Williams’ work having seen it before. The cop shared that the manager had noted the mural’s brilliance as well, so he would not be pressing charges. However, pointing out Williams’ fruitless endeavor, the manager conveyed that he would be covering it in the drab beige that decorated the blighted facade in the morning anyway.

Ignoring Where They Come from: Students’ Experiences and Cultural Funds of Knowledge and Formal Schools-Statement of the Problem

Black P-20 youth in underserved urban communities move through their neighborhoods, taking in the city’s sights, scents, and sounds. Urbanity implies sensory intensity in the public sphere, which is replete with bodies and vehicles buzzing, the aroma of food wafting, a cacophony of voices, music, horns blaring, advertisements distracting, tags, graffiti pieces, and murals stimulating. However, students enter a formal schoolhouse and are often faced with a contradictory space that privileges silence and conformity through inculcating cultural artifacts

canonized as representative of a “civilized” society. Shakespeare. Bach. Van Gogh. Although individual teachers may have the best pedagogical intentions, schools traditionally have presented a curricular stance that is antagonistic to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) learners’ cultural funds of knowledge. Specifically in the United States, with the increasing conservative assault on diversity and equity initiatives and cultural studies, schools have become sites of alienation and white supremacist indoctrination. While all BIPOC children do not live in cities or towns that invoke the images and sounds I mentioned, quite a few Black children live in and navigate rapidly gentrifying urban communities—like the regentrifying SWATS, and they experience not only physical displacement but also cultural displacement. Schools can be the worst upholders of this displacement by ignoring where students come from, trivializing students’ experiences, and pathologizing their at-home cultural funds of knowledge to instead replace these with dominant group ways of knowing that may actively seek to work against Black communicative modes.

‘A Nigguh Always Got a Story’: Street Art as Narrative Sequencing

One way to address this issue is to consider learners’ interlocking literacies. Black communicative modes are holistic by nature—where the sacred and secular are not dichotomized. Smitherman (1986) contends that Black vernacular communicative modes are communal and iterative (p. 103). Murals and graffiti are examples of Black communicative modes. For example, murals of fallen heroes such as rapper Nipsey Hussle; politicized slogans of solidarity like Black Lives Matter painted in crosswalks; large-scale works memorializing victims of police brutality like Breonna Taylor and George Floyd; celebratory deifications of Colin Kaepernick as a saint or an angelic brightly colored

hovering Martin Luther King; and scraggly tags of “Allah” spray painted in Arabic script under an Atlanta overpass are each representative of Smitherman’s (1986) notion of narrative sequencing. Smitherman contends that narrative sequencing “is a characteristic register of Black communication. Speakers will render their general abstract observations about life, love, people in the form of a concrete narrative—as the saying goes ‘a nigguh always got a story’” (p. 147).

Although generally associated with verbal communication, I extend narrative sequencing to include visual communication to make sense of street art’s signs, symbols, colors, lines, spacing, shading, and figures as particularly and intentionally ordered for storytelling. When conceptualizing this project, using street art in local schools in Atlanta, Georgia, to support learners’ multiliteracies, I ask: What stories do street artists seek to tell through images? What is the iterative response expected by community members who view these works? How can we function as citizen archivists and ethnographers by recording and retelling the stories these murals seek to tell?

“It’s A City Full of Walls” Purpose

Invoking emcee Yasin Bey’s (Mos Def) line from his rap “Speed Law,” “it’s a city full of walls you can post complaints at,” this study harvests Black vernacular ways of knowledge production, activism, and expression voiced through an examination of the semiotics of street art as narrative sequencing (Smitherman, 1986). Using the words of one Black artist, activist, and educator and analyzing his artifacts, this study’s purpose is to explore social justice-oriented street art as educative within the contexts of digital and spatial justice, homeplace, racial inequity, gentrification, and ephemerality versus preservation. I interrogate how these visual forms of storytelling serve as mediums for marginalized voices in urban

landscapes, simultaneously contested and embraced. Further, taggers, style writers, and muralists who find walls to post complaints are indeed public intellectuals accessing an informal politicized praxis informed by their community-based engaged holistic pedagogy. Further, by analyzing these pieces in Atlanta, this paper delves into how Black street art reflects and influences the sociopolitical fabric of this Black city that is “too busy to hate.”

I examine the Atlanta-based street artist who intentionally embraces a Black Aesthetic (Neal, 1968 and views urban walls as critical sites for public discourse, protest, and educational engagement. By situating Williams’ work within the broader context of street art as holistic pedagogy, this research underscores the significance of artistic activism in challenging systemic inequities, and providing alternative educational spaces outside formal institutions. I highlight his role in both expressing and challenging experiences of racial inequity, corruption, economic disparities, and gentrification. Additionally, this paper addresses the ephemeral nature of street art and aims to explore the semiotics of street art and its usability to support learners’ social justice and digital and spatial literacy in and out of school. I examine the dynamics of ephemerality versus preservation in terms of Black World street art to examine graffiti in the context of holistic education—including exploring it as situated learning that centers multiliteracies of the communities in which these works sit.

Street Artist Agitprop as Holistic Pedagogy: The Informal Praxis of One Conscious Cultural Worker

That moment outside the electronics store was not just an act of belligerence—it was a teaching moment. By choosing Martin Luther King Jr. as his subject, rather than leaving behind a crude tag, he

turned the wall into a textbook... a living compendium preserving the saga of Black Atlanta. His work is art, activism, and metaphoric transliteration of curricula. Through his incautious daubs of spray paint, Superstar's piece embodied the ethos of holistic education. Holistic learning principles insist educators foster in learners the ability to develop nuanced proficiencies in negotiating complex social interactions, diverse cultural intricacies, and varied mechanics of influence within human networks. As Gee (2004) points out, in a world that grows more pluralistic by the day, this kind of social literacy has never been more essential. Thus, reflecting what Cope and Kalantzis (2009) describe as the necessity of developing the skills necessary for navigating diverse media and social landscapes. New literacy theorists (Goleman, 1995) identify several foundational literacies—intellectual, social, and creative—each vital to students' overall well-being and allowing them to connect meaningfully with others. Barton and Hamilton's (1998) assertion that literacy practices are embedded in broader social contexts highlights the importance of developing socioemotional literacy through real-world interactions rather than in isolation.

Williams' Informal Praxis—A Framework

Fabian Williams' artistic practice must be situated within the frameworks of holistic education and cultural work, both of which provide critical insights into the pedagogical significance of street art as counterhegemonic force. I interpret Williams' activism as an outpouring of the Black Aesthetic (Neal, 1968) and explore his works' educative utility by examining his public murals, graffiti, and installations as holistic pedagogical interventions that challenge dominant narratives, cultivate critical consciousness, and engage the community in sociopolitical discourse. Street artists like Williams who identify as cultural workers often create educative, politically subversive, and site-specific work that seeks to

disrupt hegemonic structures and amplify marginalized voices. Within this realm, contemporary Black artists embracing a Black Aesthetic (Neal, 1968) utilize unsanctioned public spaces such as the electronics store wall in the SWATS as platforms for transmitting cultural funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), engaging in resistance, and fostering social transformation. Public art as a holistic educational practice promotes multiliteracy, critical dialogue, and civic engagement, connecting learning to the lived realities of viewers. Williams' work, rooted in an educational orientation informed by Freire's (1970) concept of critical consciousness, seeks to educate learners' conscientization, positioning his artistic interventions as tools for collective reflection and social change.

Further, I access conceptualizations of cultural work, drawing upon Gramsci's (1992) organic intellectual as counterhegemon, to emphasize public art as a contested site of ideological struggle. Hall's (1997) notion of culture as a site of reproduction further contextualizes how street artists resist dominant representations, while bell hooks' (1994) and Freire's (1970) theories of teaching as cultural work underscore the intersection of education, art, and political resistance. Additionally, the theoretical critiques of Fanon (1961), Bhabha (1984), and Spivak (1988) highlight the postcolonial dimensions of cultural hegemony, reinforcing the liberatory potential of artistic expression. Through these combined theoretical perspectives, this study explores how cultural workers, such as Williams, create, critique, and disseminate visual art as a form of counter-narrative production, utilizing their practice to raise awareness, disrupt hegemonic discourse, and catalyze social transformation.

Findings—Graffiti and Street Art as Resistive Educative Text

Atlanta has long served as a dynamic locus of artistic resistance. The city’s annual “Living Walls” conference reinforces its role as a major hub for street art and public discourse, commissioning works that address pressing issues such as gentrification, racial justice, and identity formation. Williams’ work, as part of this broader movement, demonstrates how Black artists navigate public spaces as a form of counterhegemonic engagement, employing street art to intervene in processes of urban renewal and community displacement.

Themes

Through interviews, observation and analysis of murals created by Williams, the study highlights three key dimensions of his work:

1. **Cultural Resistance and Historical Reclamation:** Williams reimagines Black historical and cultural icons, using vibrant visuals to challenge erasure and promote cultural literacy.
2. **Spiritual and Emotional Resilience:** His work often incorporates spiritual motifs and meditative themes, encouraging reflection and balance in both personal and collective contexts.
3. **Social Critique and Activism:** Many of his pieces directly confront systemic injustice, inviting dialogue around issues such as racial inequality, mass incarceration, and political resistance.

The murals analyzed in this case study include portraits of historical figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. and James Baldwin, contemporary icons such as Colin Kaepernick, and symbolic imagery such as Buddha figures and allegorical representations of systemic oppression. Each

analysis situates Williams’ work within the broader theoretical frameworks of holistic education and culturally sustaining pedagogy, while also considering its practical implications for teaching and learning.

The case study continues with an analysis of Williams’ murals, grouped into thematic categories that illustrate their alignment with holistic education and culturally sustaining pedagogy. Each mural is examined for its visual language, cultural symbolism, and educational potential, demonstrating how it cultivates critical consciousness and fosters an inclusive vision of learning.

Posting Complaints—Our Interviews

In our interviews, Williams discussed that he was both encouraged and demoralized by mural defacement by the city mostly, but also by other artists; he shared his response to removal, tampering with, or destruction of his murals and the importance of these actions. Williams also discussed inter-artists relations and respect, specifically as it pertains to the Kaeperbowl event, an event to protest the city’s demolition of his Kaepernick and Black Panther pieces, that he organized. I discovered the emergent themes around community and cultural context because much of Williams’ work could be found extended throughout the west side of the city of Atlanta with the West End neighborhood and the areas around the Atlanta University Center as his central focus. Williams embedded symbols particularly those from African cultures of Egypt and the Akan people of Ghana West Africa into several of his pieces which also represents a broader concept of a larger Black World Community. Also, Williams discussed artistic conflicts within and outside of the community. Williams particularly put emphasis on the bureaucrats and other organizations within the community that promoted gentrification, yet did not support local street artists and sought to

limit where and who could erect public work. Williams also discussed camaraderie and rivalry amongst artists as an aspect of personal artistic and community identity. In terms of symbolism and meaning in art, Williams uses quite a bit of symbols that refer to god Akan Gyame or supreme god or cultural representations in Africa of Orisha (Yoruba gods) and Ntr (Egyptian gods); there are also symbols in the subculture of graffiti that Williams directly uses. The following discussion focuses on the most salient themes that emerged from the interviews and analysis of the images.

Contribution to Awareness of and Discussions Around Social Justice

Public spaces can be categorized into three types: everyday, social, and symbolic. Illustrative of this typology, Williams works' implicit and explicit meanings are centered around political education (situated learning), intersemiosis (work and neighborhood/street together creating meaning), and disruption through gentrification. Williams' artistic vision accesses themes of empowerment and he seeks to positively represent Black folks. Throughout our talks, there was a consistent thread in Williams' narrative that his activism was to challenge urban blight through beautification of the community and celebration of Black icons. For example, Williams' 300-foot-long 15-foot-high expansive commissioned mural on Morehouse College's campus, an all-male HBCU located in the heart of the west side of Atlanta, drew a large audience every time he was there working on it. The colorful large-scale piece that took him 5 years to complete tells the story of African people before the transatlantic slave trade up to the present. It includes images of ancient Egypt or Kmt (Kmt is also Williams' son's name) as well as Ghana, Nigeria, and ancient Kush. The work functions as a "scroll" telling African history in the African diaspora and our journey across the ocean with images of Orisha Yemoja (mother of the oceans) protecting the captured, building the nation

through the labor of the enslaved, and depicts the Buffalo soldiers, founders of great institutions, activists, spiritual leaders, athletes and hip hop and soul artists. As for his influences and motivations for creating works like this, Williams states, "The stuff I'm interested in is just not like commercial culture. My work I found a way to involve my concerns and like the way I feel about the way things are heading."

Williams' expression of the everyday, social, and symbolic through street art are used to represent his individual experiences and beliefs such his strongly held afrocentric and panafricanist ideals to "liberate the minds of Black people."

While scaling and designing his murals, Williams uses a "lazy grid" a term adapted from his developer and designer career to refer to the customized grid system he uses to ensure accurate proportions, alignment, and composition of his pieces. Williams used a projector, but now mostly uses a simplistic set of graffiti bubble letter hieroglyphs to make it easier to accurately replicate or scale his initial sketches onto the wall:

Sometimes I use a projector, but like sometimes if I don't have enough space or there was not an electrical outlet, I would just do it free hand. Free hand is just you, just it up till you get it right.

Williams integrates spirituality into the design by using hieroglyphics to not only geometrically prepare his concrete canvases, but also as a coded prayer. The artists sets intentions for his murals through this sacred writing as he outlines the grid.

Legacy, Heritage, and Change

Not only is Williams' work an expression of his diasporic Black freedom dreams and his spirituality, but it also indicates the importance of art as activism, or artivism for Williams. The impact of his art and the hopeful legacy that it

might leave behind is a testament to his desire to affect change. One such example is the Kaeperbowl street art movement in Atlanta spearheaded by Williams. On the eve of the 2019 Super Bowl, an unassuming blighted building adorned with murals of Colin Kaepernick in an Atlanta Falcons football jersey, actor Chadwick Boseman and activist and sports icon Muhammad Ali both as renditions of the comic superhero the Black Panther was demolished. While whispers of conspiracy abound, Williams contends that the sudden removal of a half-burnt building surrounded by equally ramshackled dwellings left untouched did not make sense. The sudden demolition of just a part of the damaged building was perceived by many as a targeted action against the Black community, Colin Kaepernick's quiet agitation against police violence, and the symbols of freedom, protest, censorship, and challenges to gentrification those symbols indicated.

Pulling from his evangelical Christian upbringing in Fayetteville, North Carolina, Williams quotes from the Bible Isaiah 54:17, "no weapon formed against me shall prosper; that's kind of like what the message was." The artist expressed that Kaeperbowl reflected the resistance themes of Kaepernick's kneeling protest which aligned with the ethics of the city "too busy to hate" which also resonated deeply within the art community. For Williams, Kaepernick's stance reflects the city's rich civil rights history, and the destroyed murals symbolized unity of purpose and shared identity. Therefore, the act of destroying the building seemed a conspiratorial act reflective of the previous onslaught of anti-graffiti actions implemented by the bourgeoisie city leadership. Williams' Falcon's-jersey-clad-Kaepernick-mural intimated that the Atlanta's football franchise should hire the footballer because, "He's a better quarterback," highlighting the barbershop scuttlebutt of many who thought Kaepernick should come to Atlanta (some believe it still to be a liberal Black Mecca) after his NFL ousting.

Williams felt that the razing of his mural called for a response that echoed the intense sentiment of defiance that occurred after the NFL's censor of Kaepernick (who supported the Kaeperbowl protest). Williams' artistic choice to create these murals reflects that of Kaepernick's defiant anti-police violence stance. Williams argued, "My theory was if I paint on a building that's abandoned and ain't nobody taking care of it, nobody's going to give a damn if I paint here." The artist revealed an unapologetic approach to street art as reclamation of public space and resistance to systematic exclusion—not vandalism. Williams indicated that the building's oddly timed demolition became a rallying call to many artists in Atlanta and illumined the fissure between Atlanta's bureaucratic anti-graffiti elite and the Black creative community and their non-Black allies.

Growing up in Fayetteville, North Carolina, Williams adhered to the strict regimen of the military community in which he was raised. A military man, his stepfather's discipline informed his work ethic. Williams has spent hours working on a piece, even knowing that the piece would be taken down as evinced by our experience at the Flat Shoals Avenue store. Knowing his work would be painted over, even still, after the police and the manager left, he continued to work; although that seems to contradict notions of Christian and armed services morality, Williams' dedication and persistence reflected that strong work ethic, such as continuing to complete something until it's done and perfected, indicative of his upbringing.

Another example of community identity is his identity as a member of the hip-hop community. Although Williams does not rap, DJ, or dance, he does appreciate those aspects of hip-hop culture and states that hip hop's underemphasized element of graffiti informed his work, although he is not a style writer. Williams contends that he respects style writers and taggers, and that as a muralist,

although he is not considered a graffiti artist, he tends to respect those artists, and if he sees their work on a wall he is working on, he incorporates it into his mural.

Williams also legal sanctioned and commissioned murals working in tandem with community organizations and schools. Many of his most beloved pieces are done for these groups. The Morehouse mural is one that he took an extreme discount to paint, and again this notion of ephemerality, being aware that this work would be painted over at some point in time as Morehouse continues to beautify its campus. Perhaps not viewing the mural in the same way in terms of modernity and beautification as they might view something else. Another way that Williams' community identity is extended through his community engagement and collaborative efforts, he states. He had many citizens participate in Kaeperbowl, especially after he shared a viral video of the building after it had been torn down, "They all wanted to talk about it." He further shares:

Once I met with the student council, at the AUC (Atlanta University Center) we came up

with the concept [for the 300 ft mural]; the youth and the Dean helped me like, you

know, workout the details. The graduating class of 2021—their procession was in front of

the mural.

This represents home, place, identity and representation as a work that started small and began to grow to become a part of the identity of Morehouse Campus.

What's Beef?—Community Tensions and Antagonism

"My work. I found a way to involve my concerns and the way I feel about the way things are

heading." In our conversations, Williams often referred to how the "Kaep Black Panther" mural "just so happened" to be marked for demolition, ironically, the first day of Black History Month: "I felt like it was something that called for a response." Although his most well-known, Kaeperbowl was not his last jaunt into civil disobedience. The artist shared other experiences of activism and the ways in which he teamed up other artists on litigation against Atlanta's Anti-Graffiti Taskforce. "They [members of the local council] formed a panel," he states, "we were going to win. I wouldn't have to worry about a police officer rolling up on me" referring to the SWATS abandoned store incident that I witnessed, "It wasn't a legal issue—it was [because] I was starting to do murals like Kaepernick." Arguing that his activism made him a target for governmental retaliation, Williams shares the details of on such subsequent legal battle:

This councilwoman proposed this thing called the Public Arts Ordinance, and she wanted artists to basically list all the murals that they did and if they didn't report them then they would get fined \$1500. . . We found out, just like on a random Monday, it was like everybody else. All the artists got these emails. It was a freedom of speech issue.

Williams elaborated on this attempt at censorship and criminalization of even commissioned street art and outlined his responses to the graffiti task force. This battle invigorated his fight the power resolve resulting in his increased activity in peppering the city with guerilla artwork crafted with social justice messages mostly in and around schools. However, Williams heightened productivity increased his encroachment into areas other graffiti artists claimed thus increasing tension between him, other street artists and the city. I asked him if he had ever had beef with any more traditional graffiti artists: "Yes, but I'm moreso trying to talk to a different audience at this point."

Williams is referencing his audience as people who live in blighted communities and that his work is intended to beautify and teach about social justice issues, political, or historical Black issues where some graffiti artists are creating works for self-aggrandizement and street credibility. And that often comes into conflict with artists there. He talks about a beef he had with an artist in the West End who continually tagged his pieces. Williams incorporated one such tag into another neon glowing Martin Luther King Jr. mural on the corner of Ralph David Abernathy. Although he attempted to incorporate the artist piece into his work, it still caused some tensions.

I can tell you how I can tell you how. I feel like I know how it started, so when I did Martin Luther King Jr. laying on his back with on the Taku, I colored the Taku. There was like a heart there. I colored in the heart and it was red and gold too. After it do, put that symbol in there, yeah.

Williams also discussed another artist who was using an “Allah” tag and that this artist often would paint over or tag his murals throughout the Westside of Atlanta. He tried to reach out to the person and could not find him. Meanwhile, the same artist that he had a conflict with about the Martin Luther King piece, also tagged Williams’ piece on Edgewood Avenue entitled, “Luke in a Cage” based the Marvel character; I noted that Williams is quite interested in Black Marvel characters. This rendition of Cage, though, was of the character imprisoned behind bars of the American flag, representing that iconography as oppressive rather than liberatory. The metaphor was to connect the incarceration of Black men and the embedded institutional racism of America and of oppression. The act of exploitation is deeply embedded in American culture, where even those celebrated as heroes often face ostracism and imprisonment. These resultant tension manifests in the world of street art, as seen in an incident

between Williams and the graffiti artist Taku. Williams unknowingly painted over one of Taku’s pieces, a work created to honor his mother. Upon realizing this, Williams attempted to reach out to Taku to address the situation. While some resolution was reached, the two never collaborated on a project they had previously discussed. Williams reflects on his position as an artist who does not fully align with traditional graffiti culture or muralism but exists in the space between. This distinction underscores a broader ideological divide in public art, where different artists approach their work with varying intentions and philosophies, shaping how they engage with shared urban spaces.

Classical Art Meets the Culture

Although there are heavy pop culture influences in Williams’ art and particularly Black vernacular culture, the artistic symbolism and influence is not just informed by popular culture. He is particularly inspired by civil rights icons, and this is indicative in his work as he merges contemporary with past figures:

There is a cover of a magazine with Muhammad Ali. He had the arrows on him. That was Saint Sebastian. I didn’t want to see arrows going into Kaepernick. I wanted them to break off. The bullets at the end would break off like I’m the One, like Neo.

Neo is the protagonist the Wachowski sisters’ transallegorical film trilogy *The Matrix* where the titular character comes to understand himself as not the computer constructed dullish avatar constructed for him in a faux virtual reality, but the reluctant liberator, like Kaepernick and Ali, with unrealized potential to change the world. These kinds of symbols are embedded in popular culture, but also classical art is found throughout his work. The inspirations for the Colin Kaepernick piece across from Williams’ MLK mural, “Saint Sebastian Kaep,” is informed by Andrea

Mantegna's Renaissance painting of the saint of plagues. Williams portrays Colin Kaepernick, represented in this piece that is across from Martin Luther King one, is a metonym for the plague of racism. This is an example of Williams' community-based culturally sustaining pedagogy. He is attempting to preserve a narrative about Blackness, about liberation, about persecution through his art. These pieces start conversations on the street and on social media. His artistic intent is to preserve culture and historical representation, Williams has murals of Hosea Williams, Dorothy Bolton, John Lewis, Ralph David Abernathy, Coretta Scott King, Ella Baker, Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X; creatives such as Bob Marley, Peter Tosh; southern-bred-emcees such as Big K.R.I.T. and activist emcee Killer Mike and the the Dungeon Family. In terms of the Dungeon Family, which is a collective of emcees that include the famous artists Outkast, Goodie Mob, and Killer Mike, Williams created a large pyramid of these figures as if it was the Sistine Chapel. So again, this notion of incorporating Renaissance art styles, with modern Black vernacular culture, and Egyptian iconography and themes William states just made sense, as for Atlantans the Dungeon Family is godlike in its influence on hip hop culture in the region.

Williams' work is rich in these kinds of semiotic features that convey meaning and communicate information. The verbal pictorial metaphors require us as viewers to engage cognitively. To be able to interpret the metaphors' full meaning, one must understand Black vernacular culture. Thus, to fully understand how Williams integrates classical form with Afrofuturist concepts one must understand Black American vernacularity and our culturally specific use of metaphor. Interpreting with verbal pictorial content as an educator helps individuals develop a kind of multiliteracy which involves understanding and producing meaning through various forms of communication. These literacies are influenced by cultural and contextual factors.

By understanding the cultural context of a text or visual, one can deepen their comprehension in terms of intertextuality. Artists like Williams, as political activists and educators employed these popular figures of history. Kaepernick. Ali. Bozeman. Dorothy. Bolden. Allusions to historical events and other widespread narratives, revolutionary figures, slogans, and symbols, such as the Saint Sebastian arrows, can be used to connect us to the present day. Quite a few of William's pieces have occupied significant space in Atlanta's cultural landscape, with imagery such as slave ships guided by looming ancestral figures and Kaepernick's kneeling symbolizing the struggles around anti-racist work and Black displacement—thereby embedding layered metaphors into the work and lending it a dense intertextuality

The Seven Pieces

Visual Narratives of Resistance and Resilience: Analyzing the Pedagogical and Social Impact of Fabian Williams' Murals

Public pedagogy extends out of traditional school environments, shaping shared awareness through cultural production (Giroux, 2001). Williams' art does this and has served as a catalyst for social transformation as he merges historical memory, activism, and cultural affirmation to challenge systemic injustices while fostering resilience and empowerment. His work operates at the intersection of visual storytelling, political critique, and holistic education, aligning with the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017). Through analysis of several key murals, I noted six thematic categories—leadership and resilience in civil rights struggles, spiritual and emotional introspection, social critique, and activism, multiliteracies and visual storytelling, Black Aesthetics and collective identity, and culturally sustaining pedagogy in public art. Williams' murals offer a multidimensional

framework for understanding the role of visual culture in shaping public discourse and educational practice.

Leadership, Resilience, and Women and Men's Complementary Roles in Civil Rights

In "Hail 2 Queen" a regal Coretta Scott King is dressed in an 80s inspired kente kufi and wide hollow hoop earrings, her gaze unwavering and powerful. A golden crown or halo-like shape surrounds her head, elevating her status to that of royalty or divinity. Draped in deep reds and golds, her attire flows with dramatic folds, reinforcing her imposing presence. The background is dark, allowing her luminous figure to dominate the composition, her posture exuding both grace and command. Williams constructs an image of regality through verticality and balance. The commanding presence of the central figure, framed by strong structural lines, establishes a symmetrical composition that exudes stability and authority. The high saturation of reds and golds evokes themes of power and resistance, recalling historical depictions of monarchs and divine rulers. Thematically, the piece functions as an homage to Black women as cultural and political leaders, drawing upon both historical and contemporary representations of female strength. The interplay between the figure and the surrounding space suggests both historical continuity and an assertion of presence within an evolving socio-political landscape

"Luke in a Cage" depicts Marvel character Luke Cage behind vertical red, white, and blue bars that stretch across the entire composition. His muscular body is tense, his expression resolute yet somber. Harsh light from an unseen source casts strong shadows across his face, emphasizing the contrast between his powerful physique and his state of confinement. The background is barely discernible, fading into darkness, heightening the sense of isolation and entrapment. The composition is

intentionally restrictive, with harsh, angular lines reinforcing the sense of confinement. The palette, dominated by desaturated hues and tenebrism, heightens the emotional intensity of the piece, emphasizing themes of incarceration and systemic oppression. The technique of foreshortening is employed to exaggerate the depth of the cage, enclosing the figure within a tightly controlled spatial environment. The iconography draws upon both pop culture and real-world carceral imagery, engaging in a postmodern reinterpretation of the superhero mythos as a metaphor for racial injustice. The piece functions as a critique of mass incarceration, highlighting the racialized structures that confine Black individuals within cycles of systemic oppression.

In "Kaeplanta" a lone figure kneels on one knee in a stadium-like setting, his gaze directed forward with unwavering focus. A radiant light surrounds him, creating the impression of a halo. His dark athletic uniform contrasts sharply with the fiery red and black background, a color scheme that suggests both urgency and defiance. His form is outlined with bold strokes, making him appear larger than life, an icon of resistance rather than a mere individual. Williams' ability to merge historical and contemporary symbols is evident in the composition's dynamic use of diagonal lines that direct the viewer's gaze towards the central kneeling figure of Colin Kaepernick. The choice of red, black, and white in high contrast creates a visually arresting image, reinforcing the urgency of the message. The illusion of depth through atmospheric perspective suggests an ongoing struggle, a historical continuum rather than a fixed moment in time. The iconography of the kneeling figure, positioned with a halo-like glow, evokes religious martyrdom, aligning Kaepernick's protest with historical narratives of sacrifice and resistance. The title, a fusion of Kaepernick's name and Atlanta, underscores the city's role as a historical and contemporary battleground for civil rights.

Williams' mural "Hail 2 the Queen" puts Black women's quiet contribution to the civil rights movement in the spotlight, citing their mental and planning work in collaboration with male leaders. It overrules conventional tales prioritizing male heroes and relegating female characters to supporting roles, reenacting intersectionality's position in the narrative (Crenshaw, 1991). Similarly, "Luke in a Cage" denounces systemic imprisonment, putting Black life in a principal, yet criminalized, position in America's narrative. By employing pictorial allegory, it questions racial inequality in mass imprisonment, reenacting claims in *The New Jim Crow* (Alexander, 2010). The integration of sports activism in "KaepLanta" (a mural of Colin Kaepernick in an Atlanta Falcon uniform) situates modern-day protest actions in a long lineage of Black forms of resistance. By situating Kaepernick's kneeling about a more considerable racial justice activist heritage, Williams enters a lineage of activist-athletes beginning with Muhammad Ali and extending to John Carlos and Tommie Smith (Zirin, 2008). By creating murals, students have critical consciousness engendered in them, and students can then discuss whose stories become placed at the center of dominant narratives and whose become marginalized. As Freire (1970) insists, education must become a tool for empowerment, challenging students to question dominant ideology and its interpretations of reality.

Spiritual and Emotional Strength: Mediative Imagery Pedagogical Pedagogy

In "St. Sebastian Kap," a male figure is bound, his arms stretched and his body pierced by arrows. His head tilts upward, his face calm despite the visible wounds. His bare torso is illuminated by a dramatic shaft of light, his muscles tense yet dignified. The background is dark, save for streaks of shadow and light, recalling the chiaroscuro technique of classical religious paintings. Williams reinterprets the classical imagery of Saint

Sebastian through the lens of modern activism. The use of foreshortening heightens the immediacy of the arrows piercing the figure, emphasizing bodily vulnerability and endurance. The stark contrast between light and shadow, reminiscent of Baroque tenebrism, intensifies the emotional impact of the work. By overlaying Kaepernick's likeness onto the Christian saint, Williams engages in a sophisticated allegory, likening the athlete's persecution for his activism to that of historical figures who suffered for their convictions. The iconography reinforces themes of resilience and sacrifice, aligning with broader narratives of Black resistance in the face of systemic oppression.

Williams' works also engages with the application of spiritual and affective resilience in working with racialized trauma. "Breathe Deep Buddha" engages cosmical and meditative forms, inviting observers to practice mindfulness in a resistant manner. By fusing Black urban life with Eastern mystical practice, Williams engages with the necessity for harmony in social activist work, in consonance with holistic educational philosophies that attend to emotional and mental development in an interconnected manner (Miller, 2007). Rich colors and peaceful forms contrasted in the mural produce a reflective atmosphere conducive to the pedagogical value of care and introspection in educational spaces. Spirituality and awareness in public artwork raise the educational value of aesthetic experiences in terms of transformation. As hooks (1994) argued, education must become an effective, not an intellectually taxing, transformational one that inspires not merely mental sharpness but healing. Williams' use of meditative imagery in urban spaces invites students to reflect inward about inner lives and, in the same act, confront systemic inequality in outer lives.

Social Critique and Activism: Confronting Institutional Injustices through Visual Media

Williams' murals stand squarely within the Black Aesthetic tradition by challenging state brutality and systemic repression to reimagine Black humanity. Fahamu Pecou, Fabian Williams, and Joe Dreher's collaborative piece "Rise Above," located on the facade of Atlanta's King Memorial metropolitan rail transit station, depicts a Black male figure in midair ascent with his back arched, symbolizing both the spectral trace of transcendence and a collective aspiration toward the future. Rather than adhering to hagiographic representation, the artwork shifts away from traditional icons in favor of an abstract embodiment of Black masculine agency that is communal, aspirational, and subaltern. Similarly, the mural "The People Could Fly," located at the Ashby Street station on the Westside of Atlanta, just a few blocks away from the Atlanta University Center (AUC) and where Williams' demolished Kaepernick/Black Panther mural stood, by Fahamu Pecou, Fabian Williams and Denisha Claxton transforms transit architecture into a symbol of liberation. Featuring a figure based on Black American oral tradition regarding escaped slaves sprouting wings to fly back to Africa; the mural challenges narratives of Black displacement and emphasizes Black agency within urban spaces as well. As a layered surface of Black liberationist semiotics embedded within urban infrastructure, both murals make a counter-discursive claim on public space, transforming transit from mere functionality into a site of memory and insurgency

Likewise, Williams' depiction of Baldwin's visage foregrounded betwixt both dark red and light-yellow serves to prioritize his critical analysis of racism in America and Black identity. In his piece titled "The Fire Next Time" Starring James Baldwin the poet and essayist stares, emblazoned like the Johnny Storm *Fantastic Four* character alluding to Baldwin's characteristic cigarette in one

hand, his gaze contemplative. His face is softly illuminated, highlighting his furrowed brow and deep-set eyes. Surrounding him are Atlanta's cityscapes, merging elements of his intellectual brilliance and urbanity. His posture is relaxed yet dignified, capturing both thoughtfulness and resilience. Williams' engagement with portraiture as a means of intellectual and cultural reclamation is evident in the careful use of soft, controlled lines and warm, earth-toned palettes set as a comic book using copy features of the genre. The city as background, populates the piece with architectural elements, establishes a sense of intellectual space to reinforce Baldwin's identity as both a social commentator and a creative. The use of chiaroscuro enhances the psychological depth of the portrait, inviting contemplation of Baldwin's legacy. The inclusion of a cigarette flames serves as a signifier of thought and introspection, reinforcing the work's meditative quality. Williams positions Baldwin's voice into the ongoing racial justice struggles, challenging contemporary students to engage in critical conversations that began seven decades ago.

Multiliteracies and Visual Narration: Enlarging Frameworks for Meaning in Schools

The concept of multiliteracies, proposed by the New London Group (1996), places significant value on a range of forms of meaning creation in contemporary education. Williams' murals represent such an educational practice in a combination of text, symbolic depiction, and cultural referent in crafting rich narratives. In "Luke in a Cage," the recontextualization of America's national flag in terms of prison bars unlocks a semiotic reading of national identity and racialized imprisonment. Similarly, "The Fire Next Time Starring James Baldwin" introduces comic copy styles, challenging students to exercise multimodal forms of reading and writing.

By decoding such pictorial and textual forms, students build information synthesis skills in a range of areas, enhancing 21st-century critical thinking for literacy. Williams' practice aligns with theory in visual culture studies, such as an over-focus on such theory in political dimensions of representation and an engaged role of the spectator in producing meaning (Mirzoeff, 2015). Students become sensitized to working with rich cultural texts through such murals, enhancing deeper analysis and interpretative capacities.

Black Aesthetics and Community Identification: Affirming Cultural Pride and Permanence

Williams' artistic practice is firmly grounded in the Black Aesthetic, an ethos that foregrounds Black activist work, Black cultural pride, and anti-Eurocentricity in its forms (Karenga, 1968). "Hail 2 the Queen" and "KaepLanta" embody such an ethos, valuing Black leadership and Black activist work at the center of current and historical battles for justice. By pictorially situating current subjects such as Kaepernick in such pasts, Williams creates a sense of continuity, reenacting and revalidating shared memories that undergird cultural identity construction, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and connection among the audience.

These works challenge dominant discourses contributing to erasure and Black marginalization in social development. Re-appropriation of cultural identity in terms of artwork, according to Kelley (2002), is a political act that claims dignity and voice for oppressed communities in the past. In educational settings, such representations become claims of students' lived experiences and a claim of a sense of worthiness and belonging.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy in Public Space: Public Murals as a Learning Opportunity

In "Black to the Future," swirling neon-colored lines encircle a small brown girl. The figure

appears to be stepping forward, their body stretched in a dynamic pose, their expression of wonder. The background consists of deep purples, blues, and glowing yellows, forming an almost dark cosmic-ness. The work has a dreamlike quality, where time itself seems fluid. Williams departs from historical references to embrace a Afrofuturistic aesthetic. The repetition of circular and curved forms creates a sense of fluidity and motion, visually reinforcing the concept of time travel. The palette is dominated by neon blues, purples, and golds, forming an analogous color scheme that bridges tradition and innovation. Linear perspective is employed to create the illusion of forward movement, symbolizing progress and an alternative vision of Black identity untethered from colonialist constraints. The title itself reclaims and subverts mainstream cultural references, repositioning Black identity as central to both past and future narratives.

Fabian's expansive "Black to the Future" mural—depicting children as astronauts and scientists, much like his representations of Black subjects in Atlanta on the walls of Morehouse College—serves as powerful visual statements that challenge restrictive societal narratives. These works transcend the conventional limitations imposed on marginalized communities, allowing learners to envision themselves in roles historically denied to them—scientists, lawyers, activists, and creatives. More importantly, by reaching underserved populations, such artistic interventions cultivate holistic problem-solving skills, drawing from multiple disciplines to reframe and challenge dominant narratives. This aligns with the broader objectives of holistic education, which seeks to foster inquiry that extends beyond traditional academic structures, engaging with the complexities of real-world issues in a meaningful and transformative manner.

Williams' murals represent the values of culturally sustaining pedagogy in prioritizing Black

experiences and lived realities in public life (Paris & Alim, 2017). Not only do Williams' murals maintain cultural information, but they build it, grappling with present concerns and utilizing past examples. That aligns with Ladson-Billings' (1995) call for instruction that affirms and empowers oppressed groups. The public nature of such murals transforms urban spaces into spaces for knowing, challenging traditional epistemological hierarchies. By putting Williams' work in curriculums, instructors can build critical consciousness, promote multimodal literacy, and instill civic consciousness. Such murals reveal how artwork can function individually and at a community level, intertwining awareness of the past with awareness of affairs in the present, thereby opening new perspectives and promoting a more inclusive understanding of history and society.

The Revolutionary Role of Public Art in Learning

Williams' murals make a powerful case study in the intersection of art, social activism, and education. By depicting such themes as leadership, resilience, healing, social critique, and affirmation of cultures, his work constructs a robust pictorial lexicon for working through social issues. Williams' murals compel students to interpret and make meaning in the world, intellectually, emotionally, and in terms of a commitment to justice. As hooks (1995) insists, artwork can serve as a force for revolution, challenging oppressions and creating imagination. Teachers can construct a more reflective, expansive, and transformational educational environment with Williams' murals.

By actively training and mentoring young artists, challenging urban planning practices, and using murals as tools for storytelling, Williams situates himself within a tradition of particularly Black cultural workers who deploy art as a form of resistance and knowledge production. His practice reinforces the idea that art is not merely for

aesthetic consumption but for critical engagement, reflection, and transformation. As a result, his body of work exemplifies the intersections of street art, holistic education, and Black cultural consciousness, demonstrating how public art can function as both a site of resistance and a catalyst for social change. Further Gordon's (2000) Africana existential thought is useful in examining critical consciousness and Black cultural identity. The aesthetic and political dimensions of Williams' practice reflect his role as a Conscious Cultural Worker (Ali, 2024) who teaches through art. His murals, graffiti, and installations function as pedagogical tools, extending opportunities for multimodal literacy development, public history, and civic participation. Furthermore, his efforts in mentoring emerging artists foreground the educational dimensions of street art, fostering critical consciousness among younger generations of graffiti artists. His pedagogical interventions disrupt conventional hierarchies of knowledge production, making art a vehicle for both cultural transmission and political critique.

Therefore, Williams' work functions as Critical Black Didactic Art; a form that extends beyond conventional understandings of didacticism in art. While didactic art—art intended to instruct—has historically been critiqued for its overly moralistic or reductive tendencies, Williams' engagement with a Black Aesthetic (Neal, 1968) reframes didacticism through a BAM lens, which emphasizes cultural affirmation, political resistance, and liberation-focused artistry. His work disrupts urban spaces undergoing gentrification, using imagery that reclaims Black history, culture, and resistance narratives. A modern exemplification of this Black Aesthetic, Williams' murals and installations serves as agitation propaganda (agitprop) in that they are explicitly instructive, politically charged, and intended to catalyze movement-building. Unlike passive or neutral art, Williams' practice foregrounds Black identity, challenges systemic violence, and

intervenes in public discourse through its tactical placement and content. The ephemeral nature of street art—its eventual removal or defacement—does not diminish its impact, but rather reinforces its role as a living, evolving site of cultural memory and resistance.

Widening our Narrow View of Literacy

This case study bridges the gap between public art and pedagogy offering insights into how activism can foster culturally sustaining and transformative literacy instruction. Furthermore, by situating Williams' art as a pedagogical resource, the study argues that the artist's work exemplifies the power of visual art to serve as both a mirror and a lens—reflecting the complexities of Black experiences while challenging students to envision a more equitable and empathetic society. As a spatial justice project, the case study explores how street art affirms Black vernacularity and community funds of knowledge. This work fills a gap in research by bridging education, cultural studies, and urban geography through the lens of Black public artists. It offers a nuanced understanding of how street art operates as a form of social justice activism and holistic practice in formal and informal settings. The study also contributes to the discourse on the preservation of ephemeral art forms, highlighting the possible role of digital humanities in sustaining urban cultural memory and fostering spatial justice. The study focuses on street art as a medium for marginalized voices in urban landscapes, accessing a holistic education framework and community-based methodological approaches, culminating in explicating the educative significance of street art in education by supporting multiliteracy and expanding notions of what constitutes literacy and offering a perspective of forming communities with artist educator activist, P20 schools, and researchers.

References

- Alexander, M. (2010). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. The New Press.
- Ali, K. (2024). *The Conscious cultural worker: Counternarratives of black women and artists as radical educators*. Rowman Littlefield-Lexington.
- Barton, D., & Hamilton, M. (1998). *Local literacies: Reading and writing in one community*. Routledge.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1984). Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse. *Discipleship: A special issue on psychoanalysis*, 28, 125–133. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778467>
- Bey, Y. (1999). Speed law [Song]. On *Black on both sides*. Rawkus Records.
- Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (Eds.). (2009). *Multiliteracies: New literacies, new learning*. Cambridge University Press.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- Fanon, F. (1961). *The wretched of the earth* (C. Farrington, Trans.). Grove Press. (Original work published 1961)
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Herder and Herder.
- Gee, J. P. (2004). *Situated language and learning: A critique of traditional schooling*. Routledge.
- Giroux, H. A. (2001). *Public spaces, private lives: Beyond the culture of cynicism*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. Bantam Books.
- Gordon, L. R. (2000). *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana existential thought*. Routledge.

- Gramsci, A. (1992). *Prison notebooks* (Vol. 1; J. A. Buttigieg, Ed. & Trans.). Columbia University Press. (Original work published 1929–1935)
- Hall, S. (1997). The work of representation. In S. Hall (Ed.), *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices* (pp. 13–74). Sage.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- hooks, b. (1995). *Art on my mind: Visual politics*. The New Press.
- Karenga, M. (1968). The concept of the Black aesthetic. In A. Gayle Jr. (Ed.), *The Black aesthetic* (pp. 24–32). Doubleday.
- Kelley, R. D. G. (2002). *Freedom dreams: The Black radical imagination*. Beacon Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465–491.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312032003465>
- Miller, J. P. (Ed.). (2007). *The holistic curriculum* (2nd ed.). OISE Press.
- Mirzoeff, N. (2015). *How to see the world*. Basic Books.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, 31(2), 132–141.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410613462-9>
- Neal, L. (1968). The Black arts movement. *Drama Review: TDR*, 12(4), 29–39.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1144377>
- New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1), 60–92.
<https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.66.1.17370n67v22j160u>
- Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2017). *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world*. Teachers College Press.
- Smitherman, G. (1986). *Talkin and testifyin: The language of Black America*. Wayne State University Press.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
- Williams, F. (n.d.). Personal website and portfolio. Retrieved from Fabian Williams Art.
- Zirin, D. (2008). Calling sports sociology off the bench. *Contexts*, 7(3), 28–31.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/ctx.2008.7.3.28>

Author Bio

Dr. Khalilah Ali is an assistant professor of Education at Spelman College. She is an eclectic scholar of Black vernacular culture and education studies whose work is grounded in New Literacy Studies which Dr. Ali accesses to examine literacy not as a simple acquisition of reading and writing skills, but as a socially situated practice shaped by cultural, political, and technological contexts. Dr. Ali's research examines how various forms of Black World expressive culture—such as hip hop, spoken word, prose, and visual media—serve as sites to explore identity formation, community engagement, and resistance to dominant narratives.