The Paths of Greater Resistance: An Interview with Zenzele Isoke

Simply stated, associate professor of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies (http://cla.umn.edu/gwss), Zenzele Isoke researches resistance.

More specifically, Isoke is “looking at the multiple ways that black women create political spaces in cities, to enable different forms of resistance.”

The Oxford dictionary defines resistance as “the refusal to accept or comply with something.” Isoke explores the many ways in which black women ‘refuse to accept or comply with’ the status quo of racial, gender and sexual subordination in cities.
Over time, and in different places, black women have come together to “reconfigure the meaning and practice of the city for black people.” Using the arts, spoken word, educational programs and other activities, they organize and reshape their communities.

In her book, *Urban Black Women and Politics of Resistance* (http://www.palgrave.com/us/book/9780230339033) (2012), Isoke examined several of the different forms of resistance black women have used to re-imagine their communities:

- **Political Homemaking** – These are forms of “community mothering” such as re-telling histories in public forums, and using words to re-configure black people’s understanding and practice of living in cities.

- **Activism and the LGBT community** – These groups have come together to challenge extreme forms of social violence, especially the premature deaths of black people.

- **Hip-Hop Politics** – Black women use hip-hop feminism to create connection across difference among black communities and communities of color. Hip-hop provides a means of coming together and documenting the forms of violence committed against black people.

Although black women have been effecting change in their communities for a very long time, their resistance has not always been recognized as political activism. Isoke tells us that “a lot of black female agency has been ignored or seen as ‘behind the scenes’ work”.

Black women’s resistances evolve over time, as needed. “These are short lived assemblages” says Isoke, “in which they come together, they challenge an issue, work together for a period of time, and retreat back.”

“Whether it’s a movie night, a clothing exchange, a rant fest, or poetry,” Isoke explains, “they come together and re-emerge in different places. So it actually changes across their life span. You have black women coming together across multiple differences to create different forms of political spaces all the time within cities.”

Isoke is interested in these histories and all the ways in which black women do this work. But she sees that these efforts are often ignored or devalued.

So it is important for black women to find ways to come together, as she says, “to provide affirmation of each other’s political efficacy, leadership potential and each other’s ‘being-ness’.”

“A lot of it has to do with the way black women see ourselves. Being able to see ourselves as creative, to see ourselves as artists, being able to see ourselves as intellectuals.”

Coming together in support of one another helps to reaffirm black women’s efforts in this work. However, it is also, says Isoke, “an important part of the way black people are able to survive the onslaught of racism, racial terrorism and gender violence that our lives are marked by.”

As a part of understanding how black women work towards change in cities, Isoke is seeking to more fully understand the differences in black identity for women.

“Whether in the US or elsewhere, what does ‘blackness’ mean,” she asks, “when they evoke ‘blackness’ as a way to make sense of their resistance?”

For example, Isoke described how the Twin Cities has people from many different places who identify as black. These include people from Somalia, Ethiopia and parts of the US who are “all coming together and recreating blackness. It has a different meaning [here] than in, say, Newark.”

Exploring these differences further, Isoke has talked with hip-hop producers, MCs and spoken word artists in Dubai to learn what blackness means to them.

She wanted to understand how participating in hip-hop as a cultural form allows the women in Dubai “to articulate new meanings and properties of blackness.”

There are women in Dubai who are Palestinian, Sudanese, Algerian, and Emirate people. Although they all identify with blackness, they are all very different.

Isoke examines how hip-hop brings these women together to communicate and explore what blackness means for them. Hip-hop provides a way of communicating across differences and a channel for sharing themes of resistance.
“This type of scholarship provides young people, particularly people of color, a pathway in which they can also find their voice and find their meaning in relation to academia, and the larger world.”

It’s taking time but these efforts are making a difference. “Black women need to understand the ways in which our political and cultural work is actually changing and having a tangible and observable impact on urban spaces.”

When asked what she feels the impact of this work has been for these communities, Isoke has a powerful answer:

“The observable impact comes from folks who manage to overcome the really ‘death-dealing’ consequences of racism in their community.” She sites the police violence, institutionalized bias in the educational institutions, “you know, the school to prison pipeline.”

“It’s the folks who managed to come out of urban spaces and were able to create a different kind of life for themselves by being politically and civically engaged. That’s where the impact comes, for me.”

[Header Image Credit: Amelie Hyams, 2016]