

Book Review

Arts, Culture and Community Development (2021) Edited by Rosie Meade and Mae Shaw, Policy Press 272 pages ISBN 978-1447340515, £26.99

This book shows the many ways in which the arts provide the means and spaces of engagement for people to *collectively* 'make sense of, re-imagine, or seek to change the personal, cultural, social, economic, political or territorial conditions of their lives' (p. 1). To do so, academics and practitioners from six continents discuss and explore a range of aesthetic forms including song, music, muralism, theatre, dance, and circus arts based on examples from Finland, Lebanon, Latin America, China, Ireland, India, Sri Lanka and beyond. It comprises 13 chapters and an Afterword and is divided into two parts: 'making and sharing collective meanings' and 'negotiating policy and practice'. The first part captures how collective hopes, frustrations and fears are addressed through song, dance, etched on walls or conveyed through puppets and theatre leading to allegiances and memories that illustrate how 'community development is reflected in what is said, done, made, and created by people together' (p. 13). The second part is about the conditions of possibility for community-based arts and media, where the focus is on addressing the consequences of structural violence, inequality, and oppression. Here, the authors explore how cultural practices are conceptualised and negotiated in a wide range of countries and settings.

In *section one*, although the focus of the chapters is very varied, underlying them all is an understanding of the importance of addressing power through collective collaboration and providing a space for cultural expression and affirmation. Chapter 2 (Dardo & Cronin) reflects on how communities of colour can reclaim their primary culture through dance, leading to decolonising action that 'reinforces their cultural and linguistic rights to be' (p.27). Based in Seattle, Grupo Bayano has used the power of Bomba, a communal dance experience, to develop collective cooperation and collaboration; to create a space for cultural expression and affirmation. Chapter 3 (Rosselson) discusses song as a shared experience. The author points out that all movements for social change have their songs but 'colonising powers have always attempted to root out indigenous music and culture. A defeated people do not sing' (p. 48). So, singing is posed as an act of rebellion against the powerful and a way of reclaiming people's own stories.

Chapter 4 (Dakessian, Hassani and Shmaitilly) uses examples from Lebanon to demonstrate how graffiti can signal unresolved questions which are normally only whispered about, by making private reflections visible and public. The authors argue that making private problems public leads to a process of 'becoming' that is mediated by art as it 'emerges as a discursive and critical public sphere' (p. 69). In Chapter 5 (Cortes, Menezes & Mano), muralism is portrayed as an indigenous form and an aesthetic space that reflects ongoing disputes about how that community should be represented. As a result, creating murals 'can become a powerful weapon of the weak, remaining indispensable for these communities' (p. 85). In other words, collaborating and cooperating enables people with very little voice to speak truth to power. Chapter 6 (Mutibwa) shows how art and culture in social movements can resist institutional and market control through collective action and solidarity. The two projects studied (from Santiago de Chile and Rio de Janeiro) demonstrate 'how alternative ways of being, seeing and thinking might work – even if some of these may require communities and citizens to make considerable and long-term sacrifices to achieve social change' (p.104). This latter statement is an important reminder that, while change is difficult, affirming people's creative impulses does lead to sustainable social change. The final chapter in this section (7, Lohman & Pearce), highlights how a group of queer feminist punks 'can disrupt the dominant norms that marginalise their cultural contributions, while also facilitating the creation of new spaces, community groups and cultural artefacts' (p. 111). The project they highlight is called 'First Timers' and is a London-based community-building initiative that provides a space for music that values participation above catering for a musical elite. This approach enables 'community members to identify their own needs and concerns, and to use DIY skill-sharing techniques to provide and extend creative opportunities to others' (p.125). As a result, change is promoted that looks inward as well as outward, and helps people to imagine new futures.

The themes cutting across *Section Two* are about how community projects might avoid the pressures of marketisation and economisation that instrumentalise art and culture and, instead, prioritise broader social and economic policy goals. For example, Chapter 8 (Thomas) demonstrates how access to information and communication about health, education, rights, the law, entitlements, and public services are crucial today, but existing digital technologies need to be radically reconfigured if they are to enable ordinary people to participate fully in society. Everyone, the author argues, should have the right to speak up and be supported both

'through *scaffolding* and with a *framework* ... as part of the wider struggle for participation, justice, and equality' (147). He makes a strong argument for treating access to informational goods and services as a basic human right to create a just participation.

Chapter 9 (Pyykkonen) discusses the assumptions about the arts that are represented in current Finnish cultural policy. The author argues that it reflects the general trend of the economisation of the public sector and community work that 'instrumentalise art and culture for broader social and economic policy goals' (p. 166). Another interesting insight is that simply including the arts in broader policies can add new demands to it. These include the contradictory assumptions that art must be innovative and creative but, simultaneously, not be too revolutionary or avantgarde and focus on helping the local and regional economy as well as fostering social cohesion. Chapter 10 (Wong) discusses frameworks for assessing and reconsidering empowerment based on projects in Hong Kong. He shows the importance of prioritising the effectiveness of projects in developing the autonomy of participants that involves trust and the relinquishing of control. He also stresses avoiding purely instrumental values that downgrade art's own intrinsic value because this often results in art becoming less experimental. Chapter 11 (Whelan & Lawlor), which focuses on collaborative art and youth work practice in Dublin, Ireland, foregrounds collaborative practice at the micro (lived experience), and macro (systemic inequalities) levels to show 'the scope of solidarity and resistance associated with the concerted power of practitioners working collectively and imaginatively' (p. 209). The authors argue that this approach keeps contestation alive because it opens the possibility of other futures and shows that the current situation is not the only reality.

Chapter 12 (Spiegel) is focused on the global practice of circus arts – 'a range of physically based creative activities from trapeze to partner acrobatics, juggling and clowning' (p. 213). The authors argue that, by experimenting with new forms of bodily movement and relations, participants can engage with the world differently, especially through rebuilding trust in ways that connect the individual to community. In their own words 'embodied expression afforded through stretching bodily relational capacity itself becomes a community practice ...for exploring what might be needed to realise alternative forms of social relationality' (p.228). The final chapter (13, Premaratna) examines how theatre can contribute to building community and peace in two different contexts - Jana Sanskriti (India) and Jana Karaliya (Sri Lanka). Jana

Sanskriti uses Forum theatre to 'unsettle everyday narratives of structural violence within the community' (p. 232) and works on the issues the community identifies as important, using facilitated collective reflection to challenge what has been seen as the present reality. Jana Karaliya is an interethnic theatre group that produces plays in the Sinhala and Tamil languages to produce narratives of interethnic collaboration. Its key role is to encourage these two communities to envision a shared future. Both groups have slightly different approaches, but they are effective in 'building peaceful communities in contexts characterised by violence' (p. 238).

As you can see, this is a very important book that can help us to be more transgressive against our present conditions. In my opinion, too many books about the arts and culture focus solely on the individual act of creation, so this volume is an exception as it emphasises collectivity. Another contribution the book makes is to our broader understanding of cultural democracy. Throughout the chapters, such democracy is actively enacted, often under difficult conditions of poverty, violence and despair. Despite these conditions, a wide variety of examples are given that demonstrate that personal and communal experiences of oppression can be transformed into action through a rich variety of artistic expressions. The book also foregrounds how making choices collectively can promote understanding of our inter-connectedness. As Meade and Shaw argue 'agency should not be mistaken for power. If activism is not to be construed as an alibi for ill-funded or inequitable distribution of resources, the realities of structure need to be vigorously reasserted' (p. 243). Almost every chapter provides examples of economic and neoliberal rationalities that have been contested in ways that have enabled participants to challenge and problematise taken for granted structures through specific art forms. Another strength of the book is the huge range of arts that are covered, and their impact. I was particularly interested in the use of graffiti (Chapter 4) to shed light on what had been thinkable, but unsayable, and the ways in which Circus Arts (Chapter 12) draw on bodily movement to collectively reconfigure people's social interactions through viewing and engaging with the world differently. I had not previously thought of either of these examples as being able to reconfigure people's ways of challenging conventions. The book also offers ideas about how meaningful engagement in arts, culture and community development can be used to challenge neoliberal assumptions about performativity through collective action.

In conclusion, this book provides resources to find 'interstices for resistance' (Tett and Hamilton, 2019: 253) that enable the disruption of the current neoliberal regime and to help more emancipatory regimes to take root. Getting to this point though, as Williams (1977) argues, occurs not only through struggle and action but also through changes in deep structures of feeling and imagination. In particular, he argues that dominant discourses 'select from and consequently exclude the full range of human practice [yet some] experiences, meanings, and values are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of some residue – cultural as well as social - of some previous social and cultural institution or formation' (p.125). These *residual* resources were formed in the past but are still 'active in the cultural process ...as an effective element of the present' (p.123) through people's 'practical consciousness'. In addition to these resources, there is '*emergent*' culture which carries new meanings and values, and 'depends crucially on finding new forms or adaptations of forms' (p.126). Unusually, this book provides examples not only of residual resources through, for example, people reclaiming their own cultures, but also of emergent cultures that show how new worlds, ways of being and ways of seeing can be prefigured when people experiment with the arts. I thoroughly recommend it to you all.

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References

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- Williams, R. (1977) *Marxism and literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.