

BOOK REVIEW / CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

DEBORAH BARNDT (ED.). *¡Viva! Community arts and popular education in the Americas*. New York, NY: Suny Press. (2011). 168 pp. Paper: \$24.95. (ISBN 978-1-926662-51-1).

¡Viva! Community Arts and Popular Education in the Americas is a powerful collection of essays that offers critical analysis of the processes, tensions, and opportunities inherent in community arts practice, which challenges dominant educational and artistic paradigms. The book compiles eight case studies that explore and draw connections between social and cultural histories embedded in the colonial context of the Americas, the structures and ideology of capitalism, and the multifaceted processes of neoliberal globalization. The VIVA! Project ignites an increased sense of injustice as it sparks questions, collective action, and “critical hope” (p. 132).

As Barndt explains, the VIVA! Project utilizes participatory processes to generate collaborative research with eight partners in Nicaragua, Mexico, Panama, Canada, and the US, drawing on the knowledge of key popular education centres such as the Mexican Institute for Community Development (IMDEC) and the Panamanian Social Education and Action Centre (CEASPA). In the late stages of the VIVA! Project, some of the partners had gathered with Zapatistas in the Indigenous communities in Chiapas, Mexico, to show solidarity with those affected by state violence:

As we joined the crowds in shouting, ‘Viva the victims of Atenco - Viva!’ and ‘Viva the free media - Viva!’, the name of our project took on a much more profound and serious connotation; in contexts where peoples’ land and livelihood, identity and dignity are under attack, ‘Viva!’ is a cry of life-and-death struggles” (p. x).

In introducing theoretical and methodological frameworks, the VIVA! Project partners draw upon Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony in struggles for power, and his exploration of “the cultural realm to enrich and complexify a political economic analysis” (p. 11). Gramsci’s significant contributions to social theory facilitate an examination of schools

and media as ideological institutions and the ways in which hegemony is reproduced through processes of education and communication. The VIVA! Project is also informed by the methodology of participatory action research with the objective to redress injustices; although the project partners are cognizant of important critiques of PAR, including its use “in Western development paradigms, its potential perpetuation of colonial relations, and its frequent implementation in projects led by outsiders” (p. 16). At the same time, the authors have searched for resonance and congruence between Indigenous and participatory methodologies.

The book is divided into three sections contextualizing the eight community arts projects. The first section, “Recovering Cultural Histories,” reflects on two projects that respond to the impact of colonialism, slavery, and displacement on Indigenous, African and other racialized peoples in the Americas: the Kuna Children’s Art Workshops in Panama and the Personal Legacy project in Canada. These projects draw on Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999) important insights relating to “coming to know the past” as central to a process of decolonization (p.22).

The second section, “Transforming Urban Spaces,” builds on intergenerational dialogue (engaging young artists with elders) in analyzing forces that shape urban contexts: corporate globalization and neoliberal trade, the industrialization of agriculture, economic disparities, political or environmental exile, war and displacement. The three community arts projects in this section include: the Jumblies Theatre’s Bridge of One Hair project, which reflects on a West Toronto neighbourhood’s Indigenous history as well as recent experiences of new immigrants and refugees from Somalia, the Caribbean, Korea, and Eastern Europe; Telling Our Stories, another Toronto-based project involving political analysis through art and storytelling with youth that draws connections between personal and systemic change; and the Tianguis Cultural de Guadalajara (Cultural Marketplace of Guadalajara), which drew from historic student movements and grassroots organizing from the 1980s to create a space for meetings, exhibitions, presentations and workshops.

The third section, “Community-University Collaborations,” points to opportunities for community-based knowledge production while acknowledging the contradictions in many initiatives,

especially as they have collided with other troubling trends within the neo-liberal university: greater dependence on private and corporate funding for research; a prioritizing of science, technology, and business over the humanities, arts and social sciences in the allocation of state funds; a market-driven curriculum that assumes the university’s main purpose is to secure well-paying jobs rather than nurture the development of critical thinking and active citizenship. (p.100)

This section features projects with Latin American university partners UAM-Xochimilco, in Mexico, and the University of the Autonomous Regions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast (URACCAN), in Nicaragua; both were founded as community-engaged universities. Sergio G. “Checo” Valdez Ruvalcaba, a professor in social communications at UAM-Xochimilco, reflects on collaborative mural projects drawing on previous experiences of research and education with autonomous Indigenous communities of the Zapatistas in Chiapas. Community leaders involved with the Taniperla mural project were imprisoned for one year while the images were reproduced in twelve other countries as a symbol of solidarity. Building on knowledge of Nicaraguan history, professors and students from URACCAN and York University (Canada) were involved in community media production to transform foreign-dominated television programming into locally controlled initiatives. While many strengths of this work are highlighted, the VIVA! Project partners caution about initiatives in other contexts; for “just as university-community collaboration is becoming more recognized as academically legitimate and supported with substantial funding, it is being critiqued for perpetuating the structural inequities upon which it is often built” (p. 101).

The eight case studies of community arts practice are represented in cogent essays, as well as an impressive collection of colour photographs and an accompanying DVD with short, compelling videos on each project. The book also includes a glossary of key terms introduced by a reference to Raymond Williams’ book *Key Words*, reflecting philosophical and political struggles (p.146). Contact information for VIVA! partners is also provided, affording opportunities for knowledge exchange and collaboration. Social activists, artists, professors and students will undoubtedly find this reasonably priced book (and DVD) to be an important resource for community arts practice in multiple contexts. The committed work of the VIVA! community artists is balanced with careful attention to tensions and constraints: “As with all other critical reflections on the VIVA! projects, we have to continually ask of the collaborative relationships: who is benefiting and in what ways?” (p.101). In conjunction with critical reflections, the stories, educational tools, and conceptual resources provided in this book can only strengthen committed work for social justice and equity.

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REFERENCES

- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks*. New York, NY: International Publishers.
- Smith, L.T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Researching Indigenous peoples*. London, UK: Zed Books.

