NEIGHBORHOOD DEMOCRACY BOOK REVIEW

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In Astra Taylor's book, *Democracy May Not Exist, But We'll Miss It When It's Gone,* she writes: "The promise of democracy is not the one made and betrayed by the powerful: it is a promise that can be kept only be regular people through vigilance, invention, and struggle" (Taylor, 2019). This reflection on democracy's promise returned to me while reading Richard Guarasci's *Neighborhood Democracy: A Model for Building Anchor Partnerships Between Colleges and Their Communities*. Guarasci's book outlines the urgent need for institutions of higher education to center civic education and reciprocal community partnerships in support of an always constructed ideal of democracy. Taylor's outline of action parallels Guarasci's proposal to engage communities ("regular people") with vigilance (a careful attention to history and place), invention (the need to develop new and critical forms of engagement) and struggle (a recognition of the forces of inequity and racism that we confront)—and all of this in counterpoise to the constructions and betrayals by the powerful.

Guarasci's argument, articulated throughout the book, is built through reflections on the historical, economic, and cultural challenges faced by institutions of higher education. He summarizes:

> Essential to its future, higher education must expand its role in addressing social and economic inequality and deepen its commitment to raising a generation of antiracist, civic-minded, and democratically educated leaders capable of imagining and developing an inclusive and stable democratic society. …This mission will require the development and expansion of university-neighborhood partnerships, which will serve as the incubator for educational opportunity, increased social capacity, and democratic citizenship.

His opening assessment of the perils of democracy encapsulate how economic inequality, institutional racism and growing nativist populism, have eroded democracy's legitimacy in the United States, and he immediately connects those trials to the potential for higher education to renew its responsibility for rebuilding democracy through sustained partnerships with the neighborhoods that live in the "shadow"[1] of the university. But he also

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1. As we have seen in recent years, what we call and name people, places, and processes play an important role in both intentional and unintentional meaning-making. While I do understand the use of the term "shadow neighborhoods" throughout the book (which certainly describes the shadow the university casts on these neighborhoods), I also couldn't escape the unintentional stereotypes of darkness and pathology so prevalent in deficit-based understandings of communities of color that this term implies. Those communities are certainly in the shadow of the more powerful institution at its periphery, and they are also challenged and severely impacted by racism and economic inequities. But they also are resilient and resourceful in the face of those challenges. Much of what is outlined in the book is in opposition to the deficit frameworks this term engenders, so, I believe, finding another way to name these neighborhoods would be useful.

connects those challenges to the real and everyday impacts on young people in Staten Island's Port Richmond community—where Wagner College is located and where Guarasci was its longest serving president. One of the great assets of the book is his ability to move from histories to data summaries, and then to stories. The chapters that include specific stories of students, faculty, administrators, and community partners are meaningful, providing compelling narratives of the pathways, hardships, impacts, breakthroughs, and importance of their collaborative work. In particular, the reflections by community partners revealed benefits to themselves and their community—which included the importance of being seen and recognized through the work; access to resources and the extended programming and outreach it supported; the pathways for local young people to attend college; and the economic educational and leadership capacities for community leaders.

He outlines the fiscal and public trust crises that universities now face, as well as the shifting mission of higher education—from a pragmatic distancing from civic and political life to a deeper engagement that builds democratic values. He argues that civic learning most comprehensive form is through reciprocal work with community partners, and that such work can renew the university's historic responsibility for re-building democracy through relationships that are symbiotic and mutual. Within this context he highlights K–12 education and the construction of pathways for underrepresented youth as important best practices.

His chapters on making the case for neighborhood partnerships and the diverse models for those partnerships make detail-laden arguments for this approach as a replicable practice in different contexts, emphasizing the various programs responsiveness to size and type of institution and the importance of specific "legacies, locations and people. I appreciated the comprehensive proposal to center civic education and community partnerships within higher education's mission and practice, and Guarasci provides the historical, economic, and human contexts to justify and support this approach. As an administrator of a community-based learning center at a research university I know that I will be sharing these strategies and goals with administrators on my campus. Yet, I also recognize the gaps and omissions in his compelling outline.

Universities and colleges are places where power and privilege are both implicitly and explicitly wielded, and higher education is a place where structural racism, patriarchy, and systems of oppression still operate daily. That universities are challenged to be places for social transformation because of their intrinsic relationship to power is only partially addressed in Guarasci persuasive claims. Responses to this reality vary, especially from those of us committed to social transformation. Some acquiesce under the weight of this insight and work from a space of utility and limited impact. Others work in the liminal spaces—the undercommons—of universities, operating subversively through our academic freedoms *within* the university, but not *of* the university (Moten & Harney, 2004). And others find constructive practices somewhere in-between this broad range. Robin D. G. Kelley has articulated this condition as a "tension between reform and revolution, between desiring to belong and rejecting the university as a cog in the neoliberal order" (Kelley, 2018).

As a response to the crisis of democracy and the limitations of transformative change in higher education, Guarasci's narrative is an optimistic take committed to reform—and I'd argue a necessary, if incomplete, one. I think it would be best to read this book in parallel to other texts, studies and theories that critique the normative practices of community engagement. The structures and strategies he proposes to institutionalize community

engagement within higher education are essential. But to avoid this work's co-option into student-centered narratives of "giving back," it is important to take a closer look at these programs and determine if they can be reflectively and critically designed and constructed. While Guarasci describes many programs as asset-based and reciprocal, it may be necessary to bring community-based teaching/learning and research scholarship with explicit anti-racist and de-colonizing frameworks to assure their transformational goals.

Although our democracy is built on complex foundations that include practices of oppression, exploitation, and exclusion (and which parallel the contradictions inherent in our higher education institutions), we also know that we can construct alternative structures of cooperation, solidarity, liberation, and justice. If we are committed to the promise of democracy, Guarasci's convincing proposals, enacted critically, can provide the "vigilance, invention, and struggle" (Taylor, 2019) necessary to support transformative democratic social change within our institutions. Which, in turn, may support the social movements, political education and activism outside of the university that have always been the primary driver of substantive social change.

References

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