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Collier, Mary Jane. (2014). *Community Engagement and Intercultural Praxis: Dancing with Difference in Diverse Contexts*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

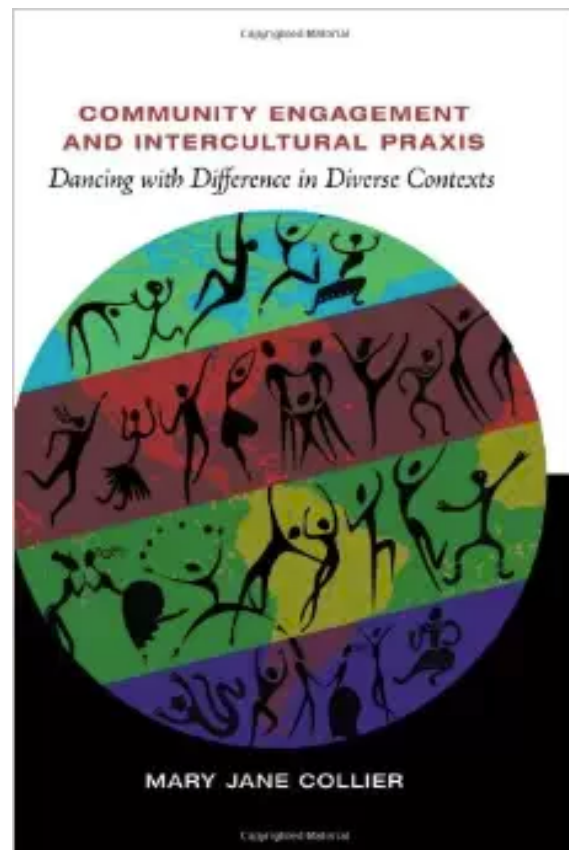
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Dance is among the oldest of art forms and is as diversely codified as the musical arts or theatre. What dance *is* for any given cultural group will be deeply bound to the history, belief systems, and modes of interaction of that group. A group's understanding of dance, in fact, may even help illuminate its epistemological orientation. The use of dance as the guiding metaphor for Mary Jane Collier's (2014) *Community engagement and intercultural praxis: Dancing with difference in diverse contexts*, invokes immediate, physical questions that resonate with the activist-scholar interested in better understanding and/or improving community-based social change work. Collier, who is keenly familiar with the ways in which cultural differences can inhibit intercultural research and praxis, invokes dance as a form of melioration; throughout the book, she interprets intercultural organizing in communities, and the interactions of the researcher within such, as "dances" that strive to bridge gaps or break boundaries between people negotiating difference and working for change.

People who work to ease community polarization and who find ways to cull the violence that erupts in the face of unequal power distributions



form the subject of the book. Presented in nine chapters and detailing case studies of intercultural communication across four continents, Collier (2014) and her co-authors interrogate community engagement on “the contemporary global and neoliberal scene of struggle” (p. 2). The dance metaphor is employed to illustrate that the ways skilled practitioners of intercultural social justice work negotiate their relational differences is a form of dance unto itself. Collier’s metaphor sustains the consciousness that cultural differences deeply influence cultural conflicts. Collier’s passion is promoting social justice through her research on intercultural community work. Among her book’s strengths is its awareness of the ways in which neoliberal policies impinge upon intercultural praxis, both through social structures and human relations. Collier calls for a critical communication studies approach to analyzing intercultural community work, and the book provides hopeful, practicable advice for both practitioners and scholar-activists. The case studies address the ways in which scholars and practitioners negotiate their own dances of difference as they work together, but also, sometimes, at cross purposes.

In her opening chapter, Collier (2014) provides a brief history of neoliberalism and situates her work on the global scene as that which responds to neoliberal influences, not in direct conflict or opposition to such economic policies but arising due to their negative consequence. She takes care to name her work “community engagement” (p. 3) as opposed to community development, to separate her work from “international development efforts” (p. 3). Collier’s community engagement scholarship and the organizations highlighted in the book seek to increase justice, equity, and inclusivity for community members. Grounded in critical communication and interpretive perspectives, the subjects of this research and the researchers themselves engaged in a reflexive and ongoing dialogue about their identities and their cultural/spatial contexts. Culture is understood as discursively constructed, a consequence of the intersection of diverse groups, and not oversimplified in terms of people’s shared practices or psychological tendencies. After explaining her theoretical perspective, Collier’s describes her praxis, defined as a “process of engagement that joins critical, reflective,

and engaged analysis with informed action for social justice” (p. 12). The goal in this process is to create community spaces in which power imbalances can be realigned and the roots of injustice can be addressed.

Each of the seven case studies represented in the book focuses on a the work of a cultural organization and utilizes critical discourse analysis and participant observation to ask a set of broad questions about the organization, its community location, cultural identities at play within the organization, political and historical contexts, the nature of the community work and its outcomes, and the potential for future praxis. Different researchers author several of the chapters, derived from dissertation studies, with Collier as second author. Each chapter reflects the theoretical and interpretive stance introduced by Collier and upholds, to a large extent, the commitment to critical praxis. The seven case studies take the reader to diverse spaces in Asia, Ireland, Africa, and the United States, and demonstrate several variations of Collier’s methodology.

After chapter one stated that this research did *not* identify itself with international development, chapter two, a study of the role of international development organizations in Nepal, came as a surprise. The study consists of interviews Collier (2014) collected with staff members affiliated with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian affairs, UNICEF, Save the Children, and World Education International in order to investigate how “‘development’ is approached and communities engaged by international organizations working in the region in Nepal” (p. 31). Collier examined the identity positions of the workers to see if international staff inadvertently reinforced Western and outsider ideologies in their community work. She found that the Western-driven nature of the “humanitarian enterprise” (p. 41) along with structural inequalities such as unequal pay for national and international workers and the inorganic application of culture-neutral solutions posed problems for the construction of sustainable relationships between national and international workers. Collier’s interviews affirmed a concern that the INGOs perpetuated relationships of dependency, changed cultural traditions and pushed Western views. From her interviews, Collier concluded that the problems were not completely uncontested and that

both nationals and internationals were aware of these imbalances.

Whereas stark differences of cultural origin and power leveraged within organizations took focus in community engagement research in Nepal, Collier's (2014) investigation of peacemaking efforts in Northern Ireland (chapter three) looked at the work of community relations facilitators as they navigated interracial and interreligious tensions against the historical backdrop of the Troubles, the armed conflict between the Irish Republican Army and the Ulster Volunteer Force waged between approximately 1967-1998. During Collier's study, community relations work was changing in Northern Ireland as an increase in immigration had led to an increase in racially and ethnically motivated violence. Community facilitators' responses to these new forms of violence formed much of the content of Collier's study, and she found the lessons community facilitators had learned from the sectarian violence of the Troubles could be applied to facilitation in the face of the new racial tensions in Northern Ireland in effective ways. The discourse of "good relations" (p. 74), which became the "master or dominant narrative" (p. 83), begged the question for Collier about what was left out of this community relations work? Collier suggested that the dominance of the discourse of good relations may have closed out space for challenges to structural and governmental systems that upheld inequalities. Nonetheless, Collier found an overarching commitment among the facilitators to a social justice orientation and improving the quality of intercultural relations.

The intercultural space examined in the fourth chapter represents a complex struggle for democratization in post-colonial Zimbabwe. Dr. Cleophas Muneri with Collier (2014) conducted a study of the role of the media in the democratization process in Zimbabwe. Combining a discourse analysis of eighteen interviews with representatives of civil society organizations and analysis of two contrasting newspapers, Muneri and Collier examined the meanings of the ideological struggle that took place in the name of democratization. The authors identified a context in which newspaper editorials placed the blame for the nation's social problems upon the ruling Zanu PF party, while the ruling party blamed outsiders, especially Western countries, for these

problems. Meanwhile, civil society organizations, which often negotiated relationships with those same outsiders, attempted to work for the improvement of democracy within Zimbabwe. The researchers unpacked that while democracy was viewed as a “universal concept that should have the same appeal irrespective of where it is applied” (p. 101), historical and cultural conditions affected its application. Economic orientation and cultural identity positions contributed to different groups’ relationship with the ruling party, Zanu PF, versus the opposition, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Political party affiliation had also become an identity position in Zimbabwe, one that was sometimes used to challenge other identity claims between people, when party affiliation was conflated with race or economic identity positions. The chapter concludes with the recommendation that civil society organizations recognize the positions of different cultural voices before defining what community, or community engagement, mean. The authors explained, however, that due to the major control exerted by the ruling Zanu PF party over major institutions in Zimbabwe, any political opposition would face structural constraints, and democratization would remain a struggle.

In each of Collier’s and her colleagues’ (2014) case studies, the researchers sought to address a full scope of identity positions, including race and class, national origin and gender, and other factors that varied from case to case, such as age differences between facilitators in Northern Ireland, education differences between national and international workers in INGOs in Nepal. Chapter five examines the International Peace Initiative (IPI) led by Dr. Karambu Ringera. Dr. Ringera, who was Collier’s advisee at the University of Denver, formed a 501(c)(3) organization in the United States and an international nonprofit in Kenya, and thus manages two boards of directors across two continents. IPI provides support and advocacy for children and women affected by HIV/AIDS in the Imenti North District of Kenya. They provide shelter and educational and economic opportunities for these community members, as well as promoting peacebuilding initiatives for women in their community. These initiatives provide opportunities for the community to respond to timely issues, such

as the outbreaks of post-election violence in Kenya in 2008. By providing training in peacebuilding techniques, women in the community are empowered to communicate effectively with one another on a variety of issues without the need for a facilitator. This chapter is unique among the others, as it lacks a clear methodological focus and seems at first to be a description of the work of IPI. However, it becomes clearer later that the chapter is investigating the effects of IPI in the context of what Ringera and Collier (2014) refer to as “embodied wastelands” (p. 122), physical, corporeal, social, and spiritual places that have been deserted by human actions such as corruption, discriminatory policies, and environmental devastation. IPI is presented as a model of community praxis that “dances” through difference to transform wastelands into productive community spaces, in particular engaging women in a society in which women are mostly excluded from the peace process.

In this book, the authors combined the examination of intercultural differences and consistent reflection on what might be considered “best practices” for community engagement to propose how change might be promoted. Whereas IPI is presented in many ways as an ideal example of community praxis, chapter six, which examines the work of Circles USA, could be viewed as its polar opposite. Lawless and Collier (2014) explain that this organization pairs a person living in poverty, called a Circle Leader, with a middle-class person, an Ally, so they can meet and the Ally can help the Circle Leader learn class-improvement strategies. Lawless and Collier conducted an evaluation of the Circles training materials and outcomes and present this chapter as a critical investigation of that process. Based on interviews with ninety participants in the Circles organization, this chapter unpacks the process whereby the authors were able to uncover discourses within the Circles training manuals that actually reinforced negative discourses about the “culture of poverty” and undermined the organization’s stated goal of creating “more socially just, equitable, and inclusive relationships in communities” (p. 147). The researchers found that the Circles curriculum reinforced status hierarchies by comparing people living in poverty to “the middle-class norm” (p. 148) and positioned those in poverty “both as victims and

also as having high potential to individually mover out of poverty” (p. 151). There was evidence of successful and enriching cross-class relationships between Circle Leaders and Allies; however, the authors claimed that the Circles materials, and thus the discourses perpetuated by this organization, failed to recognize that “poverty is a space that is produced through societal systems, one that is easy to enter and difficult to leave, [which] counters discourses of individual meritocracy” (p. 155). In this chapter’s conclusion, the dance metaphor was extended as the authors recommended “the choreographers, dancers, and funders... create a new kind of group/street dance... that can move us all toward changing the landscape of poverty in the U.S.” (p. 161).

The book moves from East to West and from global South to global North, ending with three chapters on intercultural relationships in the United States. Following the analysis of Circles, a national organization, the book’s final two chapters are located close to Collier’s university home in New Mexico. In chapter seven, deMaria and Collier (2014) analyze communications within several community garden projects in Albuquerque, New Mexico. deMaria, whose dissertation research informed the chapter, expresses the long-term goal of bringing forth “action-oriented theories and methods of resistance to confront corporate models of existence that put profit before humanitarian and environmental concerns” (p. 167). Unlike any of the other chapters in this book, in this case, indigenous practices and beliefs blend with contemporary urban culture to inform the organizations’ goals. Identifying hers as a postcolonial Xicana perspective, deMaria links multiple colonizations of people, land, and seeds to analyze the intricate dance between community efforts to resist agribusiness and reclaim urban land for food production. This chapter illustrates how place-based alliances can be used to resist neoliberal corporate control.

Chapter eight, which addresses the work of a pan-Asian organization aiming to end domestic violence, includes a lengthy section detailing the different positionalities of both authors, Chen and Collier (2014). This chapter includes shifts from third to first-person narration, which, though they are utilized throughout the book, sometimes produce a jarring effect. The chapter addresses the complexities

of defining “pan-Asian” and recognizes the potential harm in reifying pluralism and assuming that all members of a race can be understood as possessing equal levels of power (p. 197). This chapter enables readers to understand the problem of ascribing homogeneous, pan-Asian identity to an organization where Asian people from widely diverse backgrounds and cultures play different, and not always equal, roles within the organization. In this chapter, Chen and Collier offer their interpretation of the organization’s empowerment message. They propose an interesting definition of the organization’s approach, calling it “benevolent neoliberalism” (p. 203), explaining that it perpetuates some neoliberal ideals while aiming to aid and liberate its clients. Chen and Collier conclude this chapter by offering recommendations for ways this organization might avoid reproducing social hierarchies of gender, race, and class.

Collier’s (2014) concluding chapter reviews each case study and offers insights into the strengths and weaknesses of each, in effect offering interpretations of the interpretive work of the research, fulfilling the commitment to reflexivity promised from the start. The book’s conclusion provides satisfying reflections on the research methodology and its intentions as well as the relationships between the authors and their sites of research. The conclusion also poses broad questions that remain unanswered. Collier’s vision of critical intercultural communication work is that which stands up to and seeks to resist the violence of neoliberal globalization. It is not always clear, however, the ways in which these cases do that resistant work. In many of the cases, Collier and her co-authors point out ways in which such resistance both is—and is not—occurring. Nonetheless, the critical intercultural communication researcher of Collier’s vision commits to both a critical evaluation of and an engagement with community praxis. *Dances with difference* is a call to action, a call for scholars and activists to engage in the complex struggle for equitable community engagement.

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