



Book Review

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Tyler Denmead

The Creative Underclass: Youth, Race and the Gentrifying City

Duke University Press, London, 2019, £20.99 pbk (ISBN: 1478006595), 224 pp.

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Troubling discourses on youth and creativity, this book explores the tensions with the positioning of working-class and BAME young people as ‘culturally deprived members of an underclass’ (p. 1). Through Tyler Denmead’s auto-ethnographic exploration of a youth arts studio, he critiques his own position in facilitating young people’s cultural production, in highlighting the often unintended adverse effects of cultural policy on young people. Making a contribution to the fields of sociology of the arts and culture and youth studies, his text builds on the social exclusion of youth as the ‘moral underclass’ (MacDonald, 1997) and their salvation by the ‘creative class’ (Florida, 2002). Denmead’s critical exploration of the supposed ‘soul-saving’ processes of transforming ‘troubled youth’ into ‘creative youth’ highlights who benefits from their human capital. In particular, he identifies the appropriation of the creative underclass for the renewal of urban space and the cultural and economic benefit of whiteness. He argues that this transformation results in the reproduction of subordinate class futures hidden amid promises of ‘social inclusion’ and ‘economic mobility’.

Denmead’s reflexive ‘entanglement’ in reconfiguring the city at the expense of youth aligns with recent work on ‘youthful culture’ (Farrugia et al., 2018) by presenting youth as an enabling brand for economic gentrification through cultural scenes and quarters. Focusing on the ‘performance’ of creativity and its relationship to youth, class and race, Denmead argues that ‘creatives’ are the most desirable kind of urban youth and his studio became a space where young people ‘learnt’ creative lifestyles. However, Denmead also highlights the opportunities of these spaces for activism and the importance of arts practice for social justice. He introduces the three concepts as symbolic cultural practices:

- ‘Troublemaking’ is offered not in relation to young people’s anti-social behaviour, but as a means for them to trouble deficit-based identities through arts practice.
- Being in a state of ‘hot mess’ represents the participants’ struggle to conform just to get by in life.
- Adversely ‘chillaxing’ symbolizes a resistance and refusal to ‘transform’ by young people intentionally being seen to do very little.

These concepts challenge the assumed lack of cultural capital of working-class and BAME young people as well as critiquing assumptions about the arts for social good.

The concept of 'troublemaking' has utility for questioning the deficit positioning of young people through various arts-based initiatives, which claim to be inclusive. For Denmead, 'troublemaking' is symbiotic as both problematic and problematizing. Through arts practice young people are able to trouble representations of themselves as members of an underclass. As this book empirically illustrates, arts programmes frequently and unintentionally relinquish young people's agency and the capacity for their own moral compass. Creative troublemaking, therefore, is 'a means for young people of color to fuck up degrading and dehumanising representations of youth that serve the possessive interests of whiteness' (p. 196). Being trouble and embodying trouble is an antinormative performance of identity, which Denmead argues is conscious and embodied. The arts are tasked with transforming these groups of young people from troublemakers into creative citizens, however inversely young people are using arts practice to trouble the logic of the underclass. Troublemaking, therefore, is an artistic practice whereby young people can challenge classism and racism.

Critiquing the desire to transform 'troubled youth' into 'creative youth' is a key contribution of the book. Denmead empathetically draws our attention to the learnt performance of particular dispositions as part of 'creative youth development' for young people, teaching youth to adopt 'privitized' orientations and accept personal responsibility. The preparation of the underclass to be ideal 'subject-citizens' (Bansel, 2015) through arts engagement is investigated alongside an expectation that creative young people will be successful, upwardly mobile and ready to serve the labour market. The book concludes with Denmead's reflections on recognizing the marginalization of youth through development programmes and no longer believing in creativity as a pathway for social mobility. However, his belief in the power of the arts for social justice remains unwavered. For those who are interested in cultural policy and youth programmes, this book is an important awakening for those who uncritically accept the discourse of creativity as a force for good. This study destabilizes the taken-for-granted assumption about arts activities as 'positive activities' through which young people can 'better themselves'. This book is a timely reminder that youth development programmes do not solve economic problems.

References

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