

Book Review

Novella Zett Keith (2015). *Engaging in social partnerships: Democratic practices for campus-community partnerships*. New York: Routledge.

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The best elements of Novella Zett Keith's *Engaging in Social Partnerships: Democratic Practices for Campus-Community Partnerships* are deeply insightful, offering powerful ways of conceiving of the role of democratic practitioners and their public work. There are, however, elements that challenge the reader to gain access to, and focus sufficiently, on these insights. Because I want to focus on the most useful ideas within the book, I will start with some of the ways that her writing and editing make recognizing its contributions harder so the reader is forewarned of the challenge involved. I will then be in a position to re-focus on the heart of the book and how Keith is able to shape a neo-Aristotelian and democratic conception of the wise practitioner and how she is able to articulate a situational ethical approach that this practitioner ought to use.

Engaging in Social Partnerships takes on a bit of a strange shape and can sometimes feel to be composed of two insufficiently connected parts. After setting the stage through a short historical look at service-learning—one that, at times, comes across as overly credulous to the movement—Keith spends several chapters in a more theoretical mode. The theoretical core begins with a story highlighting typical problems in service-learning partnerships. The story revolves around a partnership between a university and a local school trying to collaborate to create a family center to further support students at the school and, specifically, around the selection process of the new director of the family center. The case-study revolves around this decision and how it pits the university and its interests in opposition to the community it is supposed to be partnering with, exacerbating tensions and ill-will between the partnering institutions and their leaders. Keith uses this study as an entrée into a lengthy discussion of some of the problems behind universities' attempts to partner with communities, focusing on the problems with modernism, neoliberalism and their normalizing and hierarchizing effects on universities, and particularly, on how these problems set the groundwork for harmful university/extra-university relations. I do not doubt the accuracy of this analysis, though it is one that is well trod.

Before describing the latter section of the book which I want to highlight, starting with chapter 5 on wise practice, I want to note a few other elements that sometimes obscure the value of the work. The book feels, to me, to need better editing, as many chapters would be more effective were they leaner. Additionally, there are some awkward and distracting moments, sometimes in the use of the charts that appear in many of the chapters and sometime in the analysis itself. A paradigm example is Keith's description of the wise practitioner — a neo-Aristotelian conception (pp. 104-116) that places value on context-specific action and eschews universal rules — as the “philosopher-king,” a term that comes directly from, and is inextricably linked, to Plato's universalist view of knowledge and right action (pp. 220-221; cf. Plato, 1968).

When she is not focused on the grand historical trajectory or the obviously problematic (though not at all unusual) issues from the first case-study and turns, instead, to a positive articulation of how practitioners do their work best, Keith's keen eye towards humanizing, democratic practices emerge, as do excellent examples of what those practitioners and practices look like. And here, we get to see the aspects that make the book (or at least the second half of the book) well worth the read. Specifically, Keith paints a picture of a wise practitioner, one who crosses borders, who listens to those who lack power, and who remains committed to working with, rather than on, their community partners. She thus advocates for a situation and context-dependent ethics and epistemology, one where the wise practitioner remains flexible and listens for the hidden possibilities to hold up and respect the voices and knowledge of the oppressed. This view is best exemplified in the shared public work she and others at Temple University did with the Church of the Advocate. This community arts project made possible the crossing of several borders and was built around the teenagers of the Church creating and staging a series of public performances over the course of five years bearing witness to the incredibly important role the Church and its members had

historically played in the struggle for Black freedom. The performances and the collaboration were based primarily on the knowledge within the Black community and the opportunity for members of that community to bring their knowledge, history and actions to light for appropriate recognition. The story highlights the way practitioners need to be flexible, constantly attentive to the ways that their community partners can be in the spotlight and take the lead, and how to build third-spaces that allow those skills to emerge from the community.

One of my friends has long asked me to write about the civic engagement projects I use in my classes. I have, for years, balked because I simply could not find any way to systematize what I have students do and how I work with them to do it. I often thought of the key as simply being open to possibilities, but have struggled to articulate how I knew which possibilities were likely to be productive and generative, and which would likely lead to dead-ends. Keith's work here helps answer my questions and makes meaning of my frustration; there is not, she would say, a systematic way to describe civic engagement work that is truly democratic (as I certainly hope all of mine is, though I no doubt fall short of this goal). Instead, it is about being, as she likes to put it, resonant, re-sounding what one hears, amplifying the voices of those one works with (pp. 173-174). It thus requires finding ways and reasons to work with each other; to move beyond the Self-Other binary, but not to eliminate the different identities and become one. It requires both oneness and multiplicity at the same time; the performers and the audience remain different, but when they are resonant, they "reinforce" each other "by reflection"; that is, they feel "in sync" (Herendeen, in Keith, p. 174).

I do have one further critique of Keith's work, one that is more central to her own purposes. Keith, like many service-learning and civic engagement practitioners, views the university as largely problematic, as a space where views that are likely to harm extra-university communities thrive, particularly in notions of expertise, knowledge and practice that exacerbate hierarchies and de-incentivize democratic and responsive work with these

communities. We might say that these are "at risk" institutions and contain "at risk" practitioners: they are at risk of using their privileges to undermine and harm other communities. On this, we are in agreement. But Keith then focuses her work on how university practitioners can engage the extra-university communities democratically, rather than asking about what responsibility (and characteristics) those practitioners have and need to change the universities that make this work so hard to do well. An analogy might fit here: in "The White Problem in America," Lerone Bennett, Jr. argues: "There is no Negro problem in America. The problem of race in America . . . is a White problem" (Bennett, 1965, p. 29). Likewise, as Keith has recognized, the problem with much of service-learning and community engagement is to be found in the university, its structures and practitioners; and yet, Keith says surprisingly little about changing the university. She does mention, in a single paragraph, that she will not address this, explaining that others have focused on "ways to make engagement part of the core mission of higher education institutions.... For example, resources are needed to support networks and spaces that bridge campus and community and, indeed, provide the necessary professional growth opportunities" (p. 215). While she is right that these are needed, her own account of the university as in the thrall of modernist and neoliberal ideologies points to the unlikelihood that these changes will occur and suggests instead the need to think of civic engagement as including taking on the goal of "getting our own house in order." Her view, like many others, remains outward looking, and this seems to miss some of the most transformative possibilities of civic work. What, we might ask, would the wise practitioner who is committed to democratic and civic engagement do to transform the institutions from which so much harm to the extra-university communities often emerge?

References

- Bennett, L., Jr. (1965, August). The White problem in America. *Ebony*, 20(10), pp. 29-30, 32, 34, 36.
- Plato. (1968). *The republic of Plato*. (A. Bloom, Trans.) New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers.