

## **Book Review—*Reclaiming Community: Race and the Uncertain Future of Youth Work***

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### **Abstract**

*Reclaiming Community: Race and the Uncertain Future of Youth Work (Baldrige, 2019) presents a case study of a community-based after-school organization that supports youth cultural, identity, academic, and political development. This book highlights the organization as it tries to navigate neoliberal educational reforms.*

Key words: after-school program, youth workers, youth development, community-based organization

Bianca Baldrige has been an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, since 2013. Baldrige is a prodigious voice in the field of community-based youth education, having produced several referred articles, book chapters, technical reports, and scholarly presentations. Baldrige is a former youth worker turned critical scholar who explores the organizational and pedagogical practices of youth workers at community-based organizations. She was trained in the sociology of education and uses that knowledge to apply critical theories to the growing neoliberal restructuring of educational spaces. Neoliberalism asserts market-based reforms, such as privatization, standardization, and accountability measures are the most efficient means of increasing educational outcomes such as student academic performance (Apple, 2004). Baldrige views neoliberal restructuring of education as subtractive to communities of color as it frames them with deficit rhetoric and ignores the assets they bring to educational spaces (Baldrige, 2014).

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*Reclaiming Community: Race and the Uncertain Future of Youth Work* (Baldrige, 2019) is a case study about Educational Excellence (EE)<sup>1</sup>, a community-based after-school organization. The purpose of this book was to demonstrate how EE's youth workers navigated political forces that are pushing "market-based approaches to public education, education restructuring aligned with deep privatization, and racialized paternalism" (p. 7). The case of EE is indicative of larger narratives within educational organizations that face neoliberal reforms that threaten the positive development of youth of color. *Reclaiming Community: Race and the Uncertain Future of Youth Work* provides a needed example of how youth workers both challenge and reproduce racial disparities in a community-based after-school organization as they "navigate complex economic, social, and political barriers in their work with young people" (p. 13).

The book is organized into two sections with three chapters in each segment. Section 1 is titled "The Golden Era" and focuses on the 10-year period when EE was led by Executive Director Leah Davis<sup>2</sup> (a Black woman). Under Davis's leadership EE focused on holistic youth development marked by high expectations in academics and cultural identity development. Section one highlights examples of culturally responsive leadership typified by crafting a learning environment that is inclusive and supportive of ethnically and culturally diverse youth (Johnson, 2006; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis 2016). Baldrige framed EE as upholding and sustaining "cultural and pedagogical practices rooted in identity affirmation; high expectations; and authentic relationships of radical care between staff and students" (p. 202). Additionally, Davis was a noted defender against deficit pathologizing and neoliberal reforms of the board of trustees' chair Richard Dunn<sup>3</sup>. A strength of the first section is that Baldrige demonstrates tensions that occurred at EE, which Parker & Villalpando (2007) believe helps the reader to develop a more "layered" understanding of educational organizations. EE had contradictions that reified White normativity, such as upholding respectability politics against various forms of youth culture including forms of dress. However, Baldrige believed EE was a "fugitive space" (p. 5) despite these challenges, where students can escape oppressive structures of anti-Blackness.

The second section titled "Things Fall Apart" focuses on the leadership of Executive Director Gina Roy<sup>4</sup> (a White woman). Roy was named Executive Director soon after Davis, and her

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym

<sup>2</sup> Pseudonym

<sup>3</sup> Pseudonym

<sup>4</sup> Pseudonym

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leadership was typified by eroding EE's past organizational values. EE became "business-like," pursuing market-based objectives such as increasing student academic scores and expanding the number of youths served, rather than providing cultural development and radical care between staff and students. Baldrige writes that Roy's approach "jeopardized the organization's comprehensive approach and intimate relationship building between staff and students" (p. 203) because she did not have a proper understanding of the organizational culture and strengths. The failures of EE under Roy demonstrate how market-based reforms create tensions that are antithetical to creating an organizational philosophy that values cultural pluralism.

*Reclaiming Community: Race and the Uncertain Future of Youth Work* is a rigorous ethnographic case study built on research conducted from 2011-2015. Baldrige conducted numerous interviews, focus groups, surveys, and document analyses. The prose is rich with firsthand examples of the triumphs and tensions that EE youth workers were navigating, making the book an easy read. Baldrige does the additional work of adding an appendix where she discusses her researcher positionality to better inform the reader of the joy and tensions she encountered while completing this study. This discussion is a valuable contribution to the work, as Banks (1998) suggests that researchers must understand and make explicit our journey and values to approach objectivity.

An increasingly important theme researchers have examined in community-based youth education is the need for increased cultural competency for youth workers (Toldson & Lemmons, 2015; Woodland, 2008). The book is adept at examining practices that are both culturally relevant and sustaining, while critiquing neoliberal reforms. In addition, the book has diverse applicability to non-profit management, exploring organizational culture, strategic planning, and navigating board relations. This book is a resource that will provide powerful insights to both researchers and practitioners as they pursue creating dynamic educational institutions for youth of color.

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