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BOOK REVIEW

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# CURATORIAL DREAMS: CRITICS IMAGINE EXHIBITIONS

Shelley Ruth Butler and Erica Lehrer, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, Quebec, 2016, 383 pages.

*“To this day, I never have the satisfaction of saying this is a perfect job, well done. I've learned something in this job, I hope I can do better next time, but I just have to keep on learning different things” (Myles Horton, in Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 173)*

*Curatorial Dreams* (2016), an edited collection by Canadian museological scholars Shelley Ruth Butler and Erica Lehrer, takes as its premise the notion of going back and gathering and then (re)imagining and (re)producing exhibitions. In their introduction, Butler and Lehrer posit dreaming as a method with which to engage with curatorial practice, as well as “a new method of academic knowledge production” (p. 7). As such, *Curatorial Dreams* provides an entry into (re)envisioning the work of curators in ways that allow it to unfurl within and outside of institutional boundaries, to challenge existing practices, and to return to past problematic exhibits and remake them in ways that embody ethics of care and responsiveness to the communities with which they engage. In essence, a curatorial gleaming of that which has been refused (or deemed as refuse) through institutionalized practices.

Butler and Lehrer have carefully curated their book to include essays by fourteen scholars, educators, and museum practitioners. Each chapter proposes an exhibition that is meant to be a carefully “curated argument” (p. 15), wherein the authors dream an exhibition that addresses past flaws (such as Butler's chapter troubling the Royal Ontario Museum's *Into the Heart of Africa* exhibition) or pushes the boundaries of curatorial practice into new spaces (like Marcus's chapter situating an exhibit within the seemingly impenetrable walls of the World Trade Organization). *Curatorial Dreams* imagines exhibits across the globe (Australia, Barbados, Canada, Chile, the Netherlands, Poland, South Africa, Switzerland, and the United States) in a diversity of settings (museums, scientific institutions, art galleries) and representing a multiplicity of topics. Each author demonstrates the generative potential of critical curatorial work that addresses the often left out (in museum exhibits) intersections of class, race, gender, and ability. Their curatorial dreaming bring forth the possibility of this work to transcend the historical limitations of institutional structures through practices that “resists the pedagogical impulse and disciplining effects of scholarship” (16). It is this renewed pedagogical hope, embedded within a critical tradition, that is most relevant not only for museum practitioners, but also for educators.

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Butler and Lehrer write that their practice of dreaming is not limited to museums, but rather they “envision curatorial dreaming as a pedagogical strategy for the classroom” (p. 17). As a method, *Curatorial Dreaming* encourages curators to reveal their knowledge making processes within new (sometimes imaginative) spaces that ensure “the institutional struggle between curating and pedagogy can be sidestepped” (p. 9). What would it mean, then, for adult educators to sidestep these same boundaries through the method of curatorial dreaming? What potentials could they present that might transform pedagogical practices both inside and outside the classroom?

It is in the practice of reflective going back, of gathering what works and what does not work, and proposing new directions that account for systemic injustices that curatorial dreaming holds the most potential critical adult educators. Critical adult education finds itself at the intersection of practitioner knowledge and contestations of ideology, hegemony, and power within educational institutions (Brookfield, 2005). This is precisely the borderland or a “curative” space as Lehrer (2016) calls it in her chapter on curatorial dreaming new spaces to contextualize controversial Polish figurines that allows for “an alternative form of entry into an otherwise habitually trodden domain of ossified memorial postures, a space that allows a reconfiguring of relationships both to the past and to (ideas about) other people” (p. 53). Attending to the rich possibilities of this space, as well as its limits, allows for adult educators to begin to re-conceptualize their own pedagogical practices in an educational dreamscape.

The practice of curatorial dreaming or, in this case, pedagogical dreaming allows adult educators to begin to answer the persistent question of: what is critical about critical adult education. A question taken up by Carpenter and Mojab (2013), when they argue for an “embodied historical materialist critique” that “should revolutionize our relations *in their entirety*” (p. 163). Curatorial/pedagogical dreaming allows for the historical and material relations of educators and students (curators and communities) to not only be recognized, but to also be made evident and holistically addressed within our pedagogical practices. Incorporating this practice into our work as educators moves us into the position of working towards the Freirian understanding that teaching “[is] a tool that creates the conditions for the oppressed to become empowered and to find the hope necessary to act toward liberation” (Kincheloe, McLaren, Steinberg, and Monzó, 2018, p. 238). Curatorial dreaming provides a method into dismantling power structures within pedagogical sites.

In the chapter on his dreamed exhibit, *The Terrible Gift: Difficult Memories for the Twenty-First Century*, Simon (2016) writes of the practices of daydreaming and curatorial dreaming saying that they “can embody the seriousness of laying out conditions of possibility. They offer an incisive critique of the present, and a prescient, possible movement toward something better. They open windows. As such, a curatorial dream must be understood as an ambition and a form of anticipation” (p. 176). It might be easy to dismiss *Curatorial Dreams* as a book that reveals in the perfections of hindsight. However, the value of the book lies in its proposal of a method that allows educators in all settings to throw the windows open and “to question the pretenses of power, to speak truth to its origins”, to become “‘agitator’ or, if you are lucky, a ‘shit stirrer’”(Carpenter and Mojab, 2013, p. 163). *Curatorial Dreams* provides a method in which to offer new critical pedagogical possibilities in spite of and despite of traditional understandings of educative practices and institutional boundaries.

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