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BOOK REVIEW

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# LEARNING AT THE MUSEUM FRONTIERS: IDENTITY, RACE AND POWER

Golding, V. (20160422). Learning at the Museum Frontiers [VitalSource Bookshelf version]. Retrieved from vbk://9781317106654

In *Learning at the Museum Frontiers* Viv Golding performs an intricately researched and urgent call for a radical restructuring of the Western museum tradition. Through sharing detailed and thought-provoking examples from several distinct museums including: Horniman in UK, the Museum of World Culture (MWC) in Sweden and District Six Museum (D6M) in South Africa, Golding illustrates the need for museums to follow the lead of feminist hermeneutics and institute elements of critical pedagogy into their practice. She argues that “Such pedagogy is based on collaboration and the telling of more diverse stories, which does not imply passivity on the part of either partner, but rather an active dialogical exchange imbued with mutual respect, which can ultimately lead to ‘intercultural’ understanding and more cohesive communities through highlighting a common sense of belonging” (Golding, 2016, n/a).

Golding (2016) illustrates the lack of neutrality in the museum in the ways that they display and showcase history, echoing the argument of Stephen Weil, that ultimately the goal for such public sites should not be to extinguish such values but to make them overt and visible through acknowledging that to be neutral is impossible. She highlights the way in which museums engage in a process of othering through marking certain pieces as historically significant art, while marking others as artifacts, ordinary objects of everyday use. In this way the museum is reinforcing the notion of a standard Eurocentric and superior culture, reproducing the domination of Western discourses in their showcasing of the “other” (Golding, 2016, n/a).

Using examples of controversial museum exhibits, such as “Into the Heart of Africa” which was exhibited at the Royal Ontario Museum in 1990, Golding argues that a common mistake of such exhibitions is that they utilize the same powers of exploitation and harm that have historically been employed by the museum to put Black pain on display for their own benefit. She illustrates that the African-Canadians who engaged with the exhibit and came out angry were not bringing an inferior way of knowing to the exhibit, but one which was born out of a history of white supremacy and oppression, agreeing with other critics of the display in arguing that the true failure of the museum was to not work in collaboration with the African-Canadian community (Golding, 2016). Here Golding (2016) discusses the importance of collaboration as a bridge between historical significance and modern imaginative, where there is room for participation with the art in the museum, subverting and inverting the traditional museum narrative.

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In this book Golding has expertly illustrated that museums are a product of the colonial project, so the question for adult educators and museum communities is: how might the museum space and curatorial structure be reimagined? Golding (2016) contends that “collaboration brings clarity of thought, especially in terms of ethical considerations about power-knowledge relationships at the museum frontiers for all parties at the local level, with repercussions that extend to the global (n/a)”. She builds off of the work of bell hooks, stating that the politics of location illustrate how marginalized folks move through the world in fear, and Golding argues that it is the responsibility of the museum as a public site to assist their visitors in moving through this fear, through the language of naming racism and breaking its hold. This is why Golding (2016) refers to a spatial location of museum “frontiers”; as this has the potential to be a site of political negotiation and conflict, where one can work at what Hill-Collins notes as an intellectual and spatial borderland. For this type of work to take place, the museum must first relinquish certain power dynamics by inserting new visibilities through collaborative effort. I quote her below:

It should be clear now that the notion of museum frontier space I have been expounding refers to more than physical structures; it alludes to spatial practices – experiences created through interaction between people in a spatial location where they feel safe to explore creatively individual and collective histories. It is a ‘third space’ where people can begin to feel at ease and engage with others in horizontal relationships even if the participants do not share all aspects of histories in common nor attachments to specific geographies and languages, as is the case with the vastness of the Caribbean (Golding, 2016, n/a).

In regard to these spatial politics, Golding (2016) discusses the MWC where all programming is developed in consult with target audiences and at least 60 percent non-European artists, she compares and contrasts projects between the MWC and D6M, where the latter is located on historic sites of oppression and now work to privilege the voices of those previously subjugated (Golding, 2016). She highlights the strength of D6M as being rooted in their focus on memory politics and desire to “flatten traditional hierarchies of curatorial power and control (Golding, 2016, n/a)”. Rather than working to simply increase the visibility of certain stories in the museums, there is an additional requirement of shifting relationships within the museum space and challenging traditional power structures.

Overall, Golding calls for a critical collaborative museum pedagogy which is informed by a feminist hermeneutic praxis, and she has developed this framework through her work at the Horniman Museum Education Department. Using her own experiences as an educator at Horniman, Golding (2016) situates the goal of reciprocal understanding as a challenge to racism in the museum and underpins feminist hermeneutic dialogue as a stepping stone in the disruption of traditional hierarchies, through exposing the emotional experiences of all those involved. This book is an excellent intervention into the traditional museum discourse and offers an exceptional framework for a critical reimagining of both the spatial politics of the museum, as well as the relationship between the museum and their community.