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WORKING THE MARGINS OF COMMUNITY-BASED ADULT LEARNING: THE POWER OF ARTS-MAKING IN FINDING VOICE AND CREATING CONDITIONS FOR SEEING/LISTENING

Shauna Butterwick and Carole Roy (Eds.). Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 2016, 192 pages.

Reimagining the Margins through Arts

Funny how, in the midst of everything, something tugs on your sleeve, telling you to pay attention to what's in hand. In the early morning, I am reading *Working the Margins of Community-Based Adult Learning*, noting everything that matters; phrases and paragraphs are sunlit by my highlighter.

Edited by Shauna Butterwick and Carole Roy, the book is an international tour of 14 community-engaged arts projects: Prisoners create a puppet performance for their fellow prisoners and outside community; Filipino domestic workers design a feminist fashion show; incarcerated mothers dance with absent daughters courtesy of Skype; a photo voice exhibit illustrates exclusion for the differently abled; a co-created historical exhibit “allow[s] community members to recognize and hear the ‘other’....opening up spaces for dialogue across differences” (Bowers, p. 75).

Each story offers a lesson, a perspective, an insight. Authors share their reflections about what happened, what they learned, what tugged on their sleeve. We read about the complexities that dwell within individual groups, the importance of learning how to listen; we come to recognize how various levels of personal, communal, social, political and economic structures of our society and institutions perform us. Writes Kim Villagant, “I reflect on the tension between being an artist and a facilitator, between being tokenized a queer Filipina activist and the power of my identity as a catalyst for social change” (p. 89). The authors speak to their challenges, their mistakes, their hesitations, the humbling recognition that they are first, human, and second, learners. As Villagant notes, “I was learning to connect the reality of my individual experience to the collective struggle. And I felt heard” (p. 90).

The intention of the work is “to encourage participants to identify the cultural and contextual realities and issues of power” (Hoffman, p. 62). Community-engaged arts make visible what is often concealed or lacking, thus “enlarging the space of the possible” (Sumara & Davis, 1997, p. 299). New possible relationships are considered. As Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) writes, “Decolonization is about challenging the very idea of what it

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means to be human....It is about imagining human relations that are premised on the relationship between difference and interdependency” (p. ix). Artist facilitators seek to bring into presence inequities and collective wisdom, often surprising themselves in their learning. Writes Bowers, “I learned how the arts can communicate both individual and collective perspectives by providing engaging ways for necessary exchanges in multicultural and pluralistic societies” (p. 79). Murray Gibson, who wove his way through a community tapestry project with university students and the local L’Arche Antigonish community, writes, “We could not anticipate the outcome but we held our collective breath and plunged into this new experience” (p. 30).

The work of artist facilitators is not a simple one. Brian Nichols, who brings arts materials and massage to patients in hospitals, confesses, “Some days I simply see myself as being a kind of distraction to the widespread pain and suffering that exists on these wards [communities, world]” (p. 38). Learning through the arts is a pedagogical adventure of reciprocity, insight and possibility, yet also risks ambiguity, inter-relational tensions, not-knowing. The responsibility of artist facilitators is not to convey participants to a pre-determined outcome, but to create and cultivate spaces of shared vulnerability (Thomasson, 2017), working across differences, dwelling in the unknown, the not-yet imagined, bringing forth collective voices of empowerment and agency through creative action.

Engaging in the arts signals opportunities for political action, therapeutic engagement, and community building, enlivening individual and collective participation and understanding. These stories illustrate how teaching and learning through the arts is a way to form “new transnational [and transactional] relations and demonstrat[e] women’s and [others’] ability to effect social change even while occupying seemingly marginalized spaces” (Butterwick & Carillon, p. 118). “We must be willing to ask and re-ask questions from our separate positions...as well as together, to take the risk to pose increasingly difficult and more uncomfortable questions across our differences” (Selman & Battye, p. 166). Here, within the gap between past and future (Arendt, 1961), within the interstices of education, social justice, and art-making, is a generative space of interplay within which communal revitalization, learning, and belonging may arise.

Those labeled as dwelling at the margins are in truth at the centre of our communal learning; the invitation that awaits us is to imagine other than what is. Here, within these pages are society’s canaries, who speak to structural and institutional failings of our society and our communal failure of imagination. The work of community-engaged arts is simultaneously an act of love and an invitation to take action. Those who engage in collective art making are in the middle of the mess, and we must salute their courage and be witness to what arrives.

Our responsibility as citizens is to reimagine what it means to be human, as the editors invite us, as the writers, who so generously share their experiences, reveal in their telling. To encounter each other so that we might begin anew, with all the possibilities that choice, action, mindful awareness invites. As Levison writes, “Natality is manifest whenever individuals and groups act in relation to the world in ways that suggest that seemingly intransigent social processes can be changed” (2001, p. 17).

How might we learn to listen to the melodies that sound our humanity, individually, collectively? “The starting point of artistic work is to be excited and troubled by one’s experience of the world....In such a liminal space, it becomes possible to doubt, to experiment, communicate, think” (G. Mitchell, pp. 109, 113). Such a stance requires that

we see all our relations, human and non-human, as interrelated. Our responsibility is to explore in creative action as educators, as citizens, with a shared willingness to trouble and be troubled and yet remain in dialogue; to respect and care for each other; to engage in kinder wiser ways of being in action.

Here, in the meeting of the arts, education, and communal participation, in the spirit of Paulo Freire's *conscientization* and Hannah Arendt's *natality*, dwells the promise of social justice and the world's renewal.

Lynn Fels,
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