



Adult education and the aesthetic turn: (Re)Imagining for a troubled world

*La educación de adultos y el giro
estético: (Re)imaginando un mundo en problemas*

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Darlene E. Clover

University of Victoria (Canada)

clover@uvic.ca



Sema Kaya

University of Victoria (Canada)

semakayaoman@gmail.com

Abstract:

We live in a deeply troubled world of global patriarchal capitalism that has put lives in peril and made critical adult education work extremely challenging. Grounded in theories of the imagination and the need for a different imaginary, we explore the aesthetic turn in adult education, and specifically how arts-based and creative approaches are being mobilised by adult educators in Canada and across the globe to address social issues and (re)imagine who people are and what they are able to see, hear and know. We concentrate on varied examples of work with marginalised populations in diverse settings and institutions including communities, museums, libraries and universities. We explore how aesthetic practices reshape perception, disrupt silences, look back to think forward, dislodge fixities of commonsense, encourage cultural democracy and democratise culture. By exploring a diversity of practices and locations, we illustrate the range and scope of aesthetic pedagogical practices and emphases. While aesthetic educational work cannot change the world alone, we argue that it is upholding the critical social purpose of our

Resumen:

Vivimos en un mundo profundamente perturbado por el capitalismo patriarcal global que ha puesto vidas en peligro y ha hecho que el trabajo crítico de educación de adultos sea extremadamente difícil. Basándonos en las teorías de la imaginación y la necesidad de un imaginario diferente, exploramos el giro estético en la educación de adultos y, concretamente, cómo los educadores de adultos de Canadá y de todo el mundo están movilizando enfoques creativos y basados en las artes para abordar cuestiones sociales y (re)imaginar quiénes son las personas y qué pueden ver, oír y conocer. Nos centramos en diversos ejemplos de trabajo con poblaciones marginadas en distintos entornos e instituciones, como comunidades, museos, bibliotecas y universidades. Exploramos cómo las prácticas estéticas reconfiguran la percepción, interrumpen los silencios, miran hacia atrás para pensar en el futuro, desalojan las fijaciones del sentido común, fomentan la democracia cultural y democratizan la cultura. Al explorar una diversidad de prácticas y lugares, ilustramos la variedad y el alcance de las prácticas y los énfasis pedagógicos estéticos. Aunque el

field by encouraging new competencies of seeing, knowing, identifying, visualising, historicising and democratising in the interests of a just world for all.

Keywords: aesthetic turn, imagination, (re)imagining, arts-based practices, culture, democracy

trabajo educativo estético no puede cambiar el mundo por sí solo, sostenemos que defiende el propósito social crítico de nuestro campo al fomentar nuevas competencias para ver, conocer, identificar, visualizar, historizar y democratizar en aras de un mundo justo para todos.

Palabras Claves: giro estético, imaginación, (re)imaginar, prácticas basadas en las artes, cultura, democracia

Introduction

We live in a deeply troubled world. Global patriarchal capitalism has put the entire life support system peril. It has reduced democracy and collectivism, given unfettered licence to racism, misogyny, sexism, xenophobia and neocolonialism, and manufactured large-scale poverty and violence. This colossal failure of the imagination has nearly disappeared truth and analogue reality under a maelstrom of intolerance, greed, and a technical rationality of innovation and artificiality and hampered our efforts to assist people to develop the critical competencies required to change course. For Haiven and Khashnabish (2014) if there was ever a need for the imagination “it is now” (p. 3). Without the opportunity to imagine this world differently, people are left to the self-serving dreams of the powerful and in danger of retreating into a fatalist, immobilist state of acceptance. Capitalist ideology as failure of the imagination begs for opportunities to reimagine together who we were and who we are and to become co-creators in setting the directions for how we can be seen and who we might become. For Alder (2006) it begs for art, because “art, after all, is about rearranging us, creating surprising juxtapositions, emotional openings, startling presences” (p. 490).

Our article focusses on an important global response to this failure of the imagination – what Wildermeesch (2019) called ‘the aesthetic turn’ in adult education. This ‘turn’ includes the mobilisation of arts-based and creative approaches as well as an emphasis on what people are able, allowed or being made to see, hear and know about themselves, each other and the world. I (Darlene) have played an active role in the aesthetic turn, beginning with my work in the 1990s with International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) in Toronto and then as an activist feminist scholar at the University of Victoria. I have evaluated community projects, facilitated workshops, taught courses, published widely, created zines and visual essays and co-produced artworks and exhibitions. I have studied the visual storytelling pedagogies of museums. This work has given me what feminists Gardner and Gray (2017) call a ‘view from somewhere’ which I bring to this article.

My view from somewhere concurs with scholars such as Adorno (1997) and McCormack (2021) that art and aesthetics are neither inherently nor universally good. They have been used as tools of patriarchal power, sexism, colonisation, racism, social and cultural exclusion, nationalist propaganda and capitalist enterprise. Museums as public educational institutions have played a critical role in this although

my view from somewhere also shows me that change is afoot (e.g., Clover, 2024). My view from somewhere further tells me that although the aesthetic turn is powerful, it is not powerful enough to undo centuries of destruction. Borrowing from feminist Olufemi (2019), turns are only as effective as we make them. And what we see being made in the aesthetic turn, and explore in this article, is a wielding of the imagination to challenge unjust power relations and expose how they are produced and to encourage new and different ways of seeing and knowing as resistance, agency and renewal.

We begin this article with a discussion of the imagination. Our discussions are not meant to be exhaustive but to illustrate how scholars are theorising and positioning the imagination as a critical cognitive, affective and visual force. We then explore examples of arts-based and aesthetic adult education work with different marginalised populations and in diverse locations including communities, museums, libraries, and universities and how they mobilise the imagination. As this work is expansive, we concentrate on aesthetic practices that address key competencies of concern to adult educators: (re)shaping perception, disrupting silences, looking back to think forward, dislodging fixities of commonsense, encouraging cultural democracy and democratising culture. By exploring distinctive settings, practices and emphases, we draw attention to the diversity and range of aesthetic pedagogical work and the contributions it makes to the critical social purpose of our field. In essence, the aesthetic turn not only helps to carry people through troubling terrain but encourages competencies of imagining and reimagining, seeing, knowing, identifying, being, remembering and working together in the interests of a more just and dignified world.

The imagination and imagining

For feminist Olufemi (2019) the critical question of how we think about the world “remains one of the most important” (p. 8). So too are questions of how we can “to reimagine the world we live and [work] towards a liberating future for all” (p. 6) and just where “we begin to reimagine?” (p. 6)?. An obvious question for us was: What is the imagination and reimagining? Scholars provide a number of theories which respond to these queries and lie at the heart of the aesthetic turn as our examples that follow will show.

The imagination is both “an individual possession” that everyone has and therefore, can be tapped into and a “collective process”, something we do together (Haiven & Khashnabish, 2014, p. 2). Sarbin and Juhasz (1970) outline two discrete processes of the imagination. The first is forming pictures – the process of imaging -- and the second is creative innovations - the process of imagining or making. While drawing on the individual imagination is vital to any efforts for change, Graeber (2011) argues that it is the collective process of imagining that holds the promise of ‘possibility’ because it is this ‘collective dream machine’ that gives us alternative futures and enables everyone to flourish.

Riceour (1979) argues that what is most critical to understand about the imagination is that it is a ‘cognitive power’, a way of thinking embedded in cultural meaning and power, that has two other distinctions. The first is the ‘reproductive’

imagination which relies on memory and mimesis (representation). Remembering is a critical act because it aids “the organisation of social and cultural life by endowing [it] with meaning, a communicative currency” (Pickering, 2006, p. 176). Representation is always a matter of power – the power of seeing, hearing and believing. Ricoeur’s (1979) second idea is the productive imagination which he positions as generative. Similar to Sarbin and Juhasz’s (1970) idea of creative innovation, the productive imagination generates new ideas by grasping together multiple and scattered pieces, disparate and complex ideas and integrating them into intelligible significations.

Building on this, Whitton (2018) identifies five key types of knowledge as imagination. The first is as factual, what we imagine and make as fact or truth. The second is conceptual - how we perceive ourselves and the world around us. The third is procedural which includes processes or acts of making. The fourth form of imagination as knowledge is metacognitive which is intentional and “implies the agency of the learner” (p. 6). This conceptualisation of the imagination for Graeber (2011) has “real effects on the material world” and is always changing and adapting (p. 53). Finally, Whitton (2018) positions the imagination as ‘affective knowledge’. This includes inquisitiveness (curiosity, wondering, questioning), persistence, and a greater tolerance for uncertainty as well as emotions that form appraisals and value judgements that ascribe importance to people and things. Emotions “orient and guide behaviour because [and] affect the goals we aim for and the issues we should address” (p. 35).

Scholars such as Mills (1959) and Haiven and & Khashnabish (2014) take up the imagination more politically. The imagination is never neutral because it operates within and is influenced by our socio-cultural contexts and practices. Mills developed the idea of the ‘sociological imagination’, a form of imagining that helps people who have traditionally been excluded and oppressed to understand the social world in terms of its impact on their lives and their abilities to make different conscious and informed decisions. Opportunities to exercise the sociological imagination connects private troubles to public issues to stimulate deeper understanding of inequalities, power dynamics, and systemic oppressions. Most specifically within this is seeing what and whose interests the world currently operates, questioning this status quo, challenging or own assumptions to cultivate a new sociological landscape. Haiven and Khashnabish (2014) build on this with their idea of the ‘radical imagination’ which they define as the ability to imagine “the world, life, ourselves and our social and cultural institutions not as they are but as they might be otherwise...to think critically, reflexively and innovatively about the social world” (p. 3).

Culture, art and imagination

Other theories of the imagination are centred in culture and the arts. For Hall et al (2013) culture is critical because it is the complex system of shared meanings and practices that influence how individuals and groups perceive and interact with the world. Harkening back to Graeber (2011), culture is not static but dynamic; it is constantly constructed and negotiated through social processes. It is culture, Hall et

al argue, that plays the most important role in shaping identity and society and it is always influenced by historical, economic, and political contexts and ideology. This makes culture both a site of domination and resistance, an exercise of “power over how people think of themselves and their relationship to society and to others” (Giroux, 2004, p. 62). Although Hall et al (2013) remind us that culture is not simply art, the arts do serve as powerful tools of culture and are central to the imagination and imagining.

Similar to theories of the imagination, the arts are understood by scholars to play a critical cognitive role. For Arnheim (1969), for example, artistic activity is a critical form of reasoning, “in which perceiving and thinking are indivisibly intertwined” (p. v). He goes on to say that “truly productive thinking” will always take “place in the realm of artistic activity and its ability to provide a new imagery (p. v). Grounding his work in a troubled and rapidly evolving world, Wyman (2004) argues that fostering the imagination through the arts is one way to develop the new competencies we require to think differently about our current realities. For Wyman (2004) and Greene (1995) using art is how we unlock the subconscious and allow it to help us to understand abstract concepts, visualise new worlds and challenge preconceived notions. Artistic activity for Arnheim (1969) encourages explorations, transcends the mundane, and creates deeper connections. Greene (1995) places art into the realm of ‘collective process’ when she argues that “participatory involvement with the many forms of arts enables us *to see* more in our experience, *to hear* more on normally unheard frequencies *to become conscious* of what daily routines and thinking have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed (p. 123, emphasis in original).

Building on this, Rose (2001) reminds us that we live in a highly visual where knowledge is increasingly “visually constructed” (p.6). Images are how we define, produce and reproduce reality although they are never neutral nor “transparent windows onto the world” (p. 6). Paying attention to the visual – sight – and to visuality – perception is critical to how we understand ourselves and the world. In a patriarchal capitalist world, images have produced gendered and other social differences including hierarchies of ability, class, and race (Haraway, 1991). This ordering of difference depends on images that create “a distinction between those who claim to see with universal relevance and those who are seen and categorized in particular ways [that are] intimately connected to oppressions of tyrannies of capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy and so on” (Rose, 2001, p. 9). Just as perilous as what we see is where this seeing is done. McCormack (2021) reminds us that art and cultural institutions matter because they mobilise visuality within and beyond their walls. For example, “images of rape and sexual violence that adorn gallery walls suggest these violations are not only normal and acceptable, but glorious in their gilded frames” (p. 12) and this idea materialises in everything from magazines, album covers, and posterboards to television shows and advertisements. What people require is visual literacy, a visual competency that allows them to read and interrogate images, rather than simply absorbing their power to define reality.

With these theories in mind, we turn now to how adult educators are mobilising the imagination in all its forms to address the issues of our time.

Now you see us: Reimaging and shaping identity

One of the central concerns of the imagination and adult education is perception. For Kramer (1994) perception is “seeing what is going on” (p. 50) but it is also not seeing or being able to what is going on because that seeing is influenced by prevailing ideologies and cultural beliefs. Our perceptions of ourselves, our own identities, and of others can reflect reality, but they can equally be interpretations or expectations, of that reality. Rasmussen (2021) argues that an important ability people need today is ‘identity competence’, defined as “a competence of self-perception and perception of others” (p. 23).

Our first example of reimaging identity and perception is *Camp fYrefly*, a university-community initiative in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The camp is a lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, two-spirited, queer, and allied (LGBTQTQA) project adult education facilitators Grace and Wells (2007) describe as ‘arts on the ground’ that is aimed to help young adults to move from “hiding and feeling ashamed about their differences to owning them, feeling them, embracing them and living them” out loud (p. 80). The camp employs a variety of arts including poetry, narrative vignettes, dance and cartoons. Improvised popular theatre practices are used on one hand to facilitate difficult conversations about oppression and personal and collective pain. On the other, they provide a means to think through performatively, queer being, becoming and belonging and to “imagine who you would like to be once you deal with all the queer baggage” (p. 77).

Another important artistic tool used is graffiti, specifically in the form a creative mind mapping project with participants to respond visually to the difficult questions of what it means to be sexual minority and to create a more empowering representation of ‘being me’ and ‘being us’. For the adult educators the art is what makes the camp a safe and also dynamic learning and imagining environment as it is through the art that people encapsulate their senses self-resilience and agency. Like many projects we discuss in this section, the creation of the artworks do not simply remain with the producers but are used for connecting and public communicative purposes. For example, the finished graffiti became an art installation to which others in the camp were able to contribute and was used in television network’s programming “as a vehicle for public consciousnesses raising” (p. 74).

Representation

As alluded to in *Camp fYrefly*, central to perception is the issue of representation. To represent is to depict, to make something visible and it is always political because issues of “power, ownership, authenticity, and meaning” are always in play (Kidd, 2015, p. 3). In other words, whenever people create representations of themselves or the world “there are agendas at play, and particular sets of ideas, values, attitudes and identities assumed and normalised” (p. 3). Because representation is critical to what comes “to be seen as common sense and accepted”

(p. 3) it is a powerful educative force that can be used against people, but also, as a means of control over who they are and want to be.

An example of an adult education project that tackles representation as a force is the work of Iroquois-Mohawk artist-educator Lindsay Delaronde who uses different artistic genres to address colonialist and gendered identities. The project *In Defiance* aimed specifically to respond to decades of misrepresented and highly derogatory representations of Indigenous women in Canadian society. Penn Hilden and Lee (2015) speak to this as the 'Pocahontas loop', an idealised 'tough femininity' that places them outside the norm by positioning them as either sirens or duplicitous others. Using photography as a practice of representation, Delaronde worked with a group of Indigenous women to reframe their own senses of identity and agency. Specifically, the participants disrupted how they were 'made to be seen' by representing who they really were through their own self-portraits. As a project of identity reclamation, the women represented and exhibited "their natural sovereign powers of strength, vulnerability, eroticism and sensuality" (Clover et al, 2017, p. 85). These representations, to borrow from Rose (2001), are never innocent because they do not simply make identities visible: they actually make those identities.

To encourage a different imaginary in the general public, in essence a different way of seeing that allows them to query past assumptions, the portraits were curated into an large exhibition at the Legacy Gallery, University of Victoria in the city centre. The exhibition was used by professors in their classes, in art-making workshops and as the basis of public talks about everything from the power and seduction of visualisations and images to indigeneity, settler-colonial relations, and systemic violence and discrimination.

Delaronde continues to build her impact by designing new spaces to imagine and reimagine. One example is *ACHoRd*, a performance art piece co-created with a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous women who perform in public spaces such including the steps of British Columbia Legislature to challenge colonial nationalistic identities. Her 2025 project titled *Walking into consciousness* uses movement and images to encourage students of all genders to journey through anti-racist and decolonial approaches towards an 'awakened' consciousness able to decode the hierarchies of difference they naturalise.

Disputing silence: Speaking and multi-voicedness

The issues of voice and silence are central to adult education and the aesthetic turn because, like identity and representation, they are embedded in relations of power of who is entitled to speak, who is silenced and who is heard. Adult educators 'give voice' "by creating opportunities for those whose perspectives are actively silenced, unheard" to tell their own stories (Manicom & Walters, 2012, p. 11). Equally important is creating space "to speak the unspeakable", that which "cannot easily be articulated" and translating this into a mode of expression that can be engaged with in broader contexts (p. 11). While individual stories matter McIntosh (2016) calls for practices that encourage 'multi-voicedness', the coming together of multiple perspectives,

voices, or viewpoints in order to work across difference, to be heard and to listen to each other with “humility and wonder” (Manicom & Walters, 2021, p. 12).

Our first example of multi-voicedness is *Words, movement and colour: Remembering and learning through narrative and visual art*, an arts-based project by feminist adult educators Bethany Osborne and Shahrzad Mojab at OISE/UT, Toronto. Participants in this project were both men and women who had come to Canada at different times due to violence in the Islamic Republic of Iran and many had been actual political prisoners (Osborne, 2014).

The project included a series of workshops that used a variety of creative and arts-based educational strategies such as composing their own personal testimonies, watching and discussing films and reading prison memoirs of former political prisoners which provided new “historical background information about Iran” (Osborne, 2014, p. 81). The educators also brought in artists to work with the participants with expertise in photography, collage and painting. Artists are important in the aesthetic turn because they enable people to express themselves as ‘artists’ and creative beings and teach them how to create visual artworks of quality that will be taken seriously by the public and therefore, better communicate their messages of atrocities and oppressions (e.g., Clover, 2012). Although many former political prisoners faced language barriers in talking about their experiences the art provided a channel to speak and a safe way to express themselves (*Archive of Defiance* website).

Narrative and poetry workshops were also used to offer people the opportunity “to write part of their stories to learn to how to express themselves in English” (p. 82) whilst workshops on drama and creative movement helped them to perform their pain but also their resilience and hopes for the future. These acts of remembrance and future power culminated into a public event called *Talking Prison*. At the conclusion of the workshops participants chose to continue to continue speaking collectively against state sponsored violence through artistic mediums. From this work has come the website titled *The Archive of Defiance*, defined as “an aesthetically inspired resource for transnational feminist teaching, research, and activism”

Our second multi-voicedness example comes from museums in Japan and Korea. Although silenced for decades, and still highly contested, the Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM) in both Japan and Korea have created exhibitions and spaces that powerfully render visible the lives of the so-called ‘Comfort Women’ who were held prisoner for the sexual gratification of Japanese soldiers during World War II.

The exhibitions and spaces have three primary educational goals. The first is to make available for the first time, public documents from the International War Crimes Tribunal on Japanese Military Slavery that show the damage and trauma inflicted on women during that period (Watanabe, 2019). A second is to bring into view the actual faces and stories of the hundreds of women who were sexually abused. Upon entry to WAM Japan visitors are met “with 179 faces of Comfort Women survivors who [gave] their permission to have their photographs displayed at the museum” (Watanabe, 2019, p. 256). All images are accompanied by ‘testimonial panels’ “written in the first person...to give visitors the feeling that they listening to the

women's testimony" (p. 256). Another pedagogical element of the exhibition is the juxtaposition of "women survivor's testimonies of their ordeals with accounts by Japanese soldiers...and official documents" (p. 256). One aim is to show how "divergently an event is remembered and recorded" (p. 256) and thereby disrupt notions of a fixed truth. It also challenges persistent narratives that brand the comfort women as liars by producing 'fact'.

To add an experiential 'affective knowledge' component, WAM Korea created a suite of cells that replicate the military brothels known as 'comfort stations', where the women who were forced in sexual labour were kept. In the shadowy confined space of the comfort station visitors feel a sense of the isolation, fear and helplessness which the women would have experienced. One challenge for both WAM's was how to showcase violent histories without reproducing the violence on the bodies and minds of survivors of sexual trauma. With this population they create theatre and music pieces that enable them to share their own stories. As history is always with us, public talks and seminars based on the content carry people forward to current practices of sexual enslavement and trafficking.

Looking back to think forward

Building on above, Little (2020) reminds us that history matters because it plays a critical role in human thought. To learn historically means gaining "a better understanding of ourselves in the present, by understanding the forces, choices, and circumstances that brought us to our current situation" (n/p). Rasmussen (2021) calls for an 'historical competence', defined as "the ability to remember previous historical situations and conditions as an important precondition for the ability to imagine lives and communities different from the ones experienced today" (p. 24). It is, however, difficult to imagine the world differently from a historical platform that has been exclusionary or misrepresentative (e.g. Clover, 2024; McCormack, 2021; Olufemi, 2021). For this reason, Giroux (2004) calls on educators "to blast history open" to rupture its silences and limitations and make visible "the legacy of the often unrepresentable or misrepresented" (p. 68).

Our first example of blasting history open comes from the Zambian Women's History Museums whose pedagogical mission is to address women's exclusion from the past and their limited representations. This online museum has created a new imaginary of African women's history through an animated podcast called *Leading Ladies*. As the website notes, the podcast fills a gap in "knowledge and information in mainstream historical narratives of African women and from an African woman's perspective" (n/p). It is an imaginative bringing to life women who "walked before us and those to come.... Those who fought for peace and danced to the drum." The podcast tells stories of diverse African women who lived between 17th and 19th centuries and their roles not as wives and mothers, but as military generals, warriors, feminists, peacemakers, diplomats and more. Through its creative animations, the podcast not only brings history back and to life but challenges assumptions that women are "incapable of being leaders" and playing roles beyond the reproductive

(n/p). Using animation was necessary because images and stories did not exist save in oral form, in the stories that women tell but which were “in danger of passing out of contemporary knowledge” (n/p). This animation offers new role models for young women and provides a platform for broader discussions aimed to disrupt gendered ‘natural order’ narratives and replace them with conversations about patriarchal colonialism and its present-day impact.

Moving to Scotland, to increase the visibility of women, and particularly, lesbian, bi and queer women the Glasgow Women’s Library and Museum (GWL) has designed a selection of accessible resources and practices titled *Touching the past*. The GWL found that it was difficult to see a future when people could not easily touch records of our pasts because they had not been preserved or created. *Touching the past* seeks to undo some of that imbalance by caring for and presenting the rich variety of materials which is also a vital record of the collective organising done by these lesbian women – covering not only homophobia and sexism but also racism, class consciousness, disability activism and the need for childcare to enable mothers to attend events. The archives are used for seminars, arts-based workshops and other education activities including the Women’s Heritage Walks. These tours, as noted on the website, offer “a unique and inspiring insight into the hitherto unsung women who made Glasgow such as pipe-smoking forewomen, revolting schoolmistresses, suffragettes and other brazen women who threw off the shackles of a restrictive femininity.” This historical project, like the one above, illustrate Rasmussen’s (2021) idea historical competence and what Graeber (2011) called possibilities, in this case by showing how women have lived in decidedly ‘other ways’ thereby expanding and but also, offering role models and inspiration for the future.

Dislodging fixities: Visualities of common sense

Building on the above, another central aim of the aesthetic turn is to address in creative and visual ways the often-hidden ideologies that construct commonsense and maintain assumptions about people and society. Hall and O’Shae (2013) describe common sense as a “form of ‘everyday thinking’ which offers a framework of meaning people use to make sense of the world” (p. 8). As a “compendium of well-trying knowledge, customary beliefs, wise sayings, popular nostrums and prejudices” (p. 9) common sense is able to cement the status quo as a ‘natural order’. Chollet (2022) calls on us to shine a light on the ‘immutable truths’ embedded in common sense to show their arbitrary nature and replace that “with others that allow us to live fully realised lives” (p. 38).

A highly imaginative project aimed to illuminate common sense making comes from a museum in Toronto, Canada. A four-month exhibition titled *All Dolled Up: Fashioning Cultural Expectations* at the Bata Shoe Museum used dolls from around the world to make visible gendered, race and cultural assumptions and how they make us see and believe certain things. The background of the exhibition is black and white which may at first appear that things are true and simple. The exhibition is also part objects, animated cartoon and part restricted enclosure with dolls from around the

world standing caged behind glass that discourages play or any form of tactile interaction. While there are many different themes and issues running through the exhibition, three stand out. One is how dolls have been used to fashion femininity and masculinity. The Barbie doll is a central feature of this narrative positioned as she is as a cultural icon that represents the female ideal. The exhibition visually tells stories of, for example, how Barbie's feet were shaped historically to only fit stilettos and despite her array of bathing costumes she is suited for the fashion runway rather than a walk on sand. While this may be something that many know a striking contrast is created by visually juxtaposing stories of Barbie with those of Action Man who, as the exhibition label notes is "not seen as a doll". Men's 'dolls' are not feminine playthings but rather, adventurers whose feet are shaped to fit footwear that ranges from naval boots to scuba flippers.

A second theme is how dolls reinforce notions of 'the other'. A portion of the exhibition is dedicated to souvenir dolls. As the exhibition notes, "a principal feature of souvenir dolls or dolls depicting 'other' cultures is the use of costumes from the past that highlight difference." The dress has little to do with historical fact or accuracy and works to cement preconceived notions of 'the other'. The exhibition also stories how cultures get mixed up due to racism and/or in the interests of sales, with a doll from one culture wears the fabric of altogether different culture. There are far more female souvenir dolls than male.

A final central theme is 'gender fluidity'. Mattel released a doll that is supposedly gender neutral. These dolls are dressed in clothing that aims to challenge prescribed gender norms suggesting that gender is constructed, rather than natural. However, when one pays attention to the clothes and shoes labelled as 'unisex' it becomes clear that historically, these styles are by and for men. What is presented as gender neutral, the exhibition show us is a universal 'maleness'.

Culture and Democracy and Democratising Culture

The ideas of cultural democracy and the democratisation of culture were first championed in adult education by Williams (1958). He argued, in his case, that working class people needed to participate in all aspects of cultural life and for cultural forms to reflect a wider range of human experiences. In the aesthetic turn cultural democracy is the belief that culture is not merely something to be consumed and that everyone has the right to participate in cultural/artistic creation and influence its directions (e.g., McGauley, 2016). At its heart, cultural democracy is about people making art as a right, a means to (re)imagine and express their own experiences and to engage in an unintimidating and accessible way with the public. An example of cultural democracy in action comes from Brasil.

For many years adult educator Bruno de Oliveira Jayme (2016) has been working with a group of people known as *catadores* (waste pickers) who function as recyclers of the discarded but are the most marginalised and discriminated populations in Brazilian society. One of his major projects has been to work with the *catadores* to create a series of abstract and impressionist paintings and mosaics which were

curated into seven art exhibitions in different cities across the country. The artworks produced reflected fine art techniques which the recyclers had to learn and shared their stories of poverty and social exclusion as well as the ways they have bettered themselves and each other. The process of creating the paintings strengthened their artistic and visual literacy skills as they (re)imagined a different reality for themselves. Exhibiting was used to showcase their artistic talent and engage the general public in a 'culturally' mediated conversation – through the artworks -- which has shifted perceptions away from the *catadores* as simply a social problem towards a more fulsome idea of who they really are: artists and contributors to the ecological health of society (de Oliveira Jayme, 2016).

The basis of democratising culture is to make culture accessible to a wider group of people. This is seen as problematic when used solely to educate the working classes, for example, to be more valuable to the wealthy or to address a perceived lack of morality (e.g., McGauley, 2006). But for adult educators to democratise culture is about knowledge creation, growth and agency.

Our example of this is the work of adult educators Hyland-Russell and Groen and the programmes at the University of Calgary called Storefront 101 and Humanities 101. The intent of these programmes is to offer new and critical experiences to marginalised adult learners. They were conceived to address the socio-cultural barriers that push people to the margins of society creating “not only the financial impoverishment that circumscribes daily choices” but intellectual and cultural impoverishment (Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2013, p. 46). Until these programmes many marginalised adult learners felt they had no right to access museums, theatres and so forth because they were not good or smart enough.

To overcome these feelings of inferiority one activity included a visit to the Glenbow Museum. Far from what was expected, students were able “to explore immigrant experiences, lives of the Aboriginal Blackfoot peoples who occupied this territory before European colonisers, settlers and immigrants, and the artistic legacy of modernist painters” (p. 48). The curators played an active role in providing information and facilitating reflexive conversations in relation to the experiences of the peoples represented in the exhibits. One method was a creative writing exercise that “elicited lively dialogue from the students on their personal backgrounds and how their history had affected the people they had become and how they understood their sense of belonging or not belonging in the world” (p. 48). Other classes have attended feminist exhibitions as well as theatre performances, and lectures on literature or Indigenous arts. These cultural events were selected to resonate with social justice and aesthetic themes that were threaded throughout the course. In some cases, exhibitions “offered a counterpoint or juxtaposition to texts studied in class, while in other cases they offered an interpretation of a text students had studied” (p. 49). As Hyland-Russell and Groen note student responses to these cultural excursions were “keen and engaged...offering perceptive comments and questions relating to their personal experience as well as to broader concepts of social construction and negotiation” (p. 48). In a conversation following a dense scholarly lecture at an artist's work students queried if there would be the same ability to engage with the work if

academics “had spent a night sleeping on the streets” (p. 49). These programmes have encouraged intellectual growth and the skill of critique, and have had meaningful impacts of people’s lives:

She had been up since dawn and waiting on an outdoor bench near the theatre for three hours, unable to contain her excitement and anticipation of attending her first-ever live theatre. She was 45 years old and never imagined that she would be permitted to pass through the doors of the theatre, a doorway in which she had huddled more than once during her days of homelessness (p. 49).

This work is an example of the difference between an education from above that aims to fit people into an ‘elite’ cultural system and an education of equals and discovery that uses culture worlds believed to be off limits as a platform of empowerment.

Building on this is our second example of democratising culture which comes from my own (Darlene) work with museums. As noted above, museums tend to enjoy immense cognitive authority and a high level of trust in what they show and tell as historically inclusive as well as truthful or factual. Yet many of these institutions are in fact extremely biased and their visuals and stories prop up problematic commonsense assumptions (Clover & Sanford, 2024; McCormick, 2021). As Cramer and Witcomb (2018) remind us, museums are extremely adept at teaching people “to see what we are being taught to see and to remain blind to what we are being taught to ignore” (p. 18). To illuminate both these teachings I developed the Feminist Museum Hack (FMH). I take students or community groups into museums and using a series of questions ask them to ‘really’ look at what the visuals and labels show and tell. Questions ask them to count the number of artworks by women and by men, consider the languages being used in the descriptions of artists, to whose history matters, to notions of beauty, gender, identity and class. Participants also explore how museums use ‘stagecrafting’ - positioning and lighting - to teach them certain things.

To take seeing into action, participants use coloured Post-it notes to write their findings which they place next to labels, artworks, objects and so forth. Other visitors have read and queried the notes which gives participants the opportunity to discuss their findings. Seldom do visitors get angry but when they do, it is a teachable moment to explore people’s beliefs about ‘truth’ and these institutions as well as issues of sexism, colonialism, white privilege, and racism often inherent in their remarks.

Aesthetic experiences like this, Greene (1995) reminds us, encourage conscious participation, energy and a renewed “ability to notice what is there” (p. 125). It also encourages noticing what is ‘not there’ for that too shapes what we think we know about ourselves and others. The FMH aims to sharpen visual literacy and discourse analysis skills and equally, disrupt the authority of museum. It also involves imagining solutions as based on our visit we formulate ideas for changes the museum can implement. To date, we have managed some important changes in sexist and racist language and expanded historical narratives.

Final thoughts

Our aim in this article was to explore the aesthetic turn and more specifically, how adult educators in Canada and other parts of the world were (re)centring the imagination to help people to respond to our current failure of the imagination. The imagination is critical, Helmore (2021) reminds us “because control over the imagination is control over the future” (n.p.). For this reason, “the imagination is the most subversive thing a people can have” (Mohanty, 2012, p. xi). Central to the power, subversion and control of the aesthetic turn is the development of critical competencies not as things ‘measurable’ but rather, as seeing, identifying, remembering, visualising, speaking, producing, animating, knowing, and learning in the interests of a different future for all.

The imagination, when liberated through engagement with cultural expressions, is how adult educators are helping people to see beyond belief, to defy the constraints of expectation, and to uproot the hidden assumptions and immutable truths that control their lives. The imagination is how adult educators do not simply disrupt silence and but encourage a visual multivoicedness. In critical and creative ways, this work allows people to look back historically to blast history open by showing its exclusions and the limitations it has placed on our present and future (Giroux, 2004). Arts-based practices of imagining and reimagining are also how adult educators make culture ‘ordinary’ (Williams, 1958), how they place production in people’s hands and challenge elitism and authority.

The aesthetic turn is neither the full nor only answer to this troubled world. Moreover, small activities seldom lead to immediate and dramatic social change. However, work like this does allow for collaborations and networks to develop, which are key to future collective actions to address oppressive social relationships and dynamics of power. The turn keeps the critical social purpose of adult education alive by reimagining a more just and dignified world. It is a space, to borrow from the poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti (2007), where one can trust in the imagination and re-fertilise it. Instead of trying to escape reality, we can plunge into the flesh of the world and never let a sluggish imagination drown out their hearts.

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