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WHAT ARE ADULT EDUCATION AND RESEARCH FOR? RESEARCHING (AND) THE FEMINIST IMAGINARY

ABSTRACT: As an academic teaching courses on critical theories of adult education, I employ arts-based teaching and research and facilitates community workshops worldwide. I argue that working across formal and nonformal spaces is a central part of the social responsibility of academics in adult education to work for change, and equally, stems from the conviction that theory and practice need one another. Theory enables us to see more deeply and clearly into what is taking place in the world or what we are being taught to see and to believe about the world. Theory guides both the why and how we educate, the context and intention of which is central and the diverse methods we use, which are elemental.

I wish to ask the strategic question: What are adult education and research for? How participants and students answer this question, this essay argues, depends on where they stand and their perceptions of the world and of education and learning. Everything adult educators think, say, do and/or teach is done in context. My context as a feminist adult educator is our highly inequitably gendered world. Gender is understood as central to the web of assumptions behind dominant social imaginaries that hold certain conceptual frames in place. I maintain that the mesh of recent crises has brought to light a steady rise of a global patriarchal backlash of fundamentalist and fascist agendas across the globe, threatening the gains made by women and LGBTQIA communities.

Asking what feminist adult education and research are *for* produces a complex of answers, but for adult education and research the answer must be: for *radical* gender and social justice change, for the disruption of patriarchal knowledge, for the fight against "epistemic injustice", and for new imaginaries for women to make sense of and story the worlds they inhabit.

Finally, the essay discusses the aims and methods of a 5-year international SSHRC project focused on *feminist imaginary as a pedagogical tool for epistemic justice and change*.

KEYWORDS: feminist imaginary, gender, aesthetics, epistemic justice, agency, storytelling.

A second, silent pandemic: Sexual violence in the time of COVID-19 (Recht., May 2020, *Harvard Medical School Primary Care Review*).

Stories of gang rape, sexual assaults at gunpoint, and rapes committed in front of children were among some of the accounts emerging from Kyiv last month (McKernan, April 2022, *The Guardian*).

Ministers have vowed to tackle decades of *systemic* and *entrenched* gender health inequality in England (Gregory, July 2022, *The Guardian*).

At least 4,091 women were victims of femicide in 2020 in Latin America and the Caribbean (UN Women, November 2022).

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Violence against women is one of the deadliest forms of violence in Asia, yet it is dramatically overlooked by governments and policymakers (Rodriguez, Shakil & Morel, March 2018, Asia Foundation).

Females are six times more vulnerable to contracting HIV than their male counterparts… in a country where a woman is killed every three hours, according to police statistics (Killian Chimtom, May 2022, *Crux*).

I teach courses on critical theories of adult education, and arts-based teaching and research at the University of Victoria, Canada to masters and doctoral students. I also facilitate community workshops with, for example, homeless and street involved women who aim to reframe how they are represented by the public and the media. I take community groups on museum hacks defined as critical analyses and interruptions to the stories these institutions tell and do not tell in Canada and abroad. I am a member of Research Committee of the International Association of Women's Museums (IAWM), a global feminist space of encounter that brings together educators and curators in women's and gender museums to share their work. I work across formal and nonformal spaces because I believe that as an adult educator academic, I have a social responsibility to work for change, and equally, that theory and practice need one another. Theory enables us to see more deeply and clearly into what is taking place in the world or what we are being taught to see and to believe about the world. Theory guides both the why and how we educate, the context and intention which is central and the diverse methods we use, which are elemental.

At the beginning of each class, museum hack or workshop I ask the strategic question: What are adult education and research for? How participants and students answer this question depends on where they stand and their perceptions of the world and of education and learning. For me, the background to this question is the issue of context; context is critical because nothing is de-contextualised. Everything adult educators think, say, do and/or teach is done in context.

My context as a feminist adult educator is our highly inequitably gendered world. At a recent adult education conference in Portugal, a discussion erupted about the term gender. It was argued that our continuing to label and position ourselves and others as either male or female was problematic because it cemented normative binaries that pigeonholed and thus limited who people are and/or can be. "Gender stability" has been the problem and therefore, if we would just stop talking about it, researching differences between men and women (the *stable* categories), thinking of ourselves as a particular gender, saying things like "it's a girl" when a baby is born, normative binary gender thinking and practice would, with time, disappear. For many young people today,

gender is seen, experienced and accepted as much more complex and fluid, something that can change over time in expression or identity (or both).

I too would like to see the practice of (en)gendering vanish. However, I fear there is still too much to be gained (and maintained) from centuries old social constructions of power and privilege, of superiority and inferiority, that underpin *gender* than was understood. Based on my experiences gender remains a critical category of analysis because the stability of gender binary oppositions maintains oppression, epistemic exclusion, and violence, particularly although not exclusively against those who self-identify (or have been identified) as women (feminine). The global headlines listed above attest to this, and they are but a few of the hundreds I could have selected. As a feminist adult educator, I take up gender not simply as body parts (although gender is very much about body control), states of mind, or even behaviours. For me, it not simply a struggle for identity and subjectivity but rather a persistent asymmetry in hetero-patriarchal power that is deeply embedded as normal in all our institutional and organisational structures, social, political and cultural practices, intra- and interpersonal relationships, in ideas of what counts as knowledge and in our ways of thinking about ourselves and others and has colonised our collective consciousness. Gender is central to what Lorraine Code (1995) calls the "web of assumptions [the dominant] social imaginaries [that] hold certain conceptual frames in place" (Code, 1995: 29). And of course, it is deeply complex because "gender is not just about gender. It is a slippery thing that rubs up against other social signifiers" (Scott-Dixon, 2006). Just as the examination of whiteness within structures of inequality has enabled us "to see how norms are constructed as the racialised "Other", [so too] does asking questions about both normative and trans genders and observing how they intersect with other social relations" (Scott-Dixon, 2006: 19). Ceasing to talk about gender or use gender as a lens in our teaching and research robs us of what Krista Scott-Dixon calls "a richer critical analysis of the gender system as a whole" (Scott-Dixon, 2006: 19).

Feminist adult educators need this analytical category because convention and history have very much been framed by and in favour of the patriarchy, a word that has fallen out of favour in much gender adult education work but remains central to feminist theorising. Gender discrimination is the most far-reaching, enduring and "defining inequality of our time" (Shameen, 2021). The powers that be worldwide are "still predominantly male [and] the millennia-old status hierarchy between men/male and women/female persists" (Vintges, 2017: 165). Indeed, "patriarchal patterns of gender oppression remain more resilient than any of us [women/feminists] suspected" (Vintges, 2017: 165). In 2011, adult educator Noelle Wiggins predicted that gender inequality "was likely to get worse" (Wiggins, 2011: 34). Part of this "getting worse"

can be attributed to the corona virus but Naureen Shameen's (2021) study illuminates something far more disturbing which has been there all along, and perhaps only came more to light – for some – during the height of the epidemic. Shameen highlights the slow but steady building in the form of "a global patriarchal backlash [of] rising fundamentalist and fascist agendas" (Shameen, 2021: 2) across the globe that threatens the gains women and LGBTQIA communities have made.

> Forces of extremism, cultural imperialism, ideological colonization […] and the (re)imposition of patriarchal heteronormative family values […] are shaping the parameters of public discourse and consciousness (Shameen, 2021: 10).

Through policy, rights are curbed; through violence, fear and compliance are instilled; through the intimidating power of social media, messages of misogyny, intolerance and *white* masculine supremacy invade our homes and our lives. Equally troubling are vigorous campaigns to vilify "feminism as the primary threat to public morality" and actions "to protect family values" (Shameen, 2021: 10). According to a 2022 Ipsos global survey of more than 30 countries, "one in three men believe feminism does more harm than good" (Beaver, 2022). The term "feminazism" is being applied worldwide to undermine and/or silence loud acts of feminist resistance. Running alongside is a "neoliberal feminist" discourse "that is increasingly dovetailing with dominant ideologies and conservative forces across the globe, thus defanging it of any oppositional potential" (Rottenberg, 2018: 12).

What feminist adult education and research are 'for'

To borrow from Rebecca Solnit (2014), the picture I have just painted of our current patriarchal, binarised world represents "a failure of the imagination" (Solnit, 2014: 10). It represents a failure of an adult education and research imagination as well, although not for lack of trying on the part of so many around the world. This returns me to my question: What are adult education and research for? In the context of failure and a deeply troubled and gendered world, the answer has multiple dimensions. For me, adult education and research must be for radical gender and social justice change. This means understanding and tackling the root causes of all forms of injustice and being a critical player both locally and internationally since misogyny, oppression, intolerance, exclusion, and sexualised violence(s) are global. Adult education and research must also be for the disruption and dismantling of the patriarchy which still has the knowledge, social, cultural, and economic resources with which to fight back. We can and are losing the rights we have fought for decades, often with the simple stroke of a pen. Thirdly, adult education and research must tackle "epistemic injustice", a particular

kind of injustice that has excluded entire groups of people such as women as "knowers", as producers of knowledge (Fricker, 2007). Epistemic injustice is an offshoot of social and political forms of oppression and a central feature of patriarchal systems of epistemological colonising (Dotson, 2014; Fricker, 2007). Those perceived as "knowers" are understood to have sculpted, imagined, discovered, designed, storied, and otherwise named and shaped the world. These knowers infringe on others' epistemic agency by preventing them from utilising and affecting epistemic systems. Knowers also have a remarkable capacity to remain ignorant of worlds that do not serve their interests. Those positioned as non-knowers participate unequally in the world. They experience persistent epistemic exclusion that hinders their contributions to knowledge production, their ability to be producers and shapers of knowledge, despite the fact that they do produce and shape knowledge. Non-knowers are often unjustly coerced into contributing to epistemic practices against their own political and epistemic interests. It is therefore critical that education and research work for a sense of epistemic agency and autonomy, the ability to utilise persuasively shared epistemic resources to participate actively and fairly in the creation of knowledge and resources and when required, to contribute to the revision of those same resources and ways of knowing (Dotson, 2014). Epistemic agency and autonomy are critically related to political agency insofar as particular actions require knowing they *are* possibilities for action before they can be enacted (Jackson, 2002; Green, 2017). Therefore, central to epistemic agency is the development of *a sense* of agency, because as Michael Jackson (2002) reminds us, sense precedes acts of agency. A sense of agency from a feminist perspective is firstly, for women and others who have been epistemically marginalised to know both historically and today, that their deeds matter. That is, their actions, large or small, are meaningful, genuine and have intrinsic and extrinsic value to the world. Secondly, a sense of agency is about knowing their words matter and that no social, political, cultural or historical location of them as tellers can disallow or silence their voices. Miranda Fricker (2007) calls this "testimonial justice", whereby women's words are heard, believed and used to shape the present and the future. Thirdly, a sense of agency is *seeing* oneself the way one wants to be seen. This is the power of self-representation of self-(re)visualisation. Sight is often our most powerful sense, and what we see is what all too often what we consider to be factual and truthful. Without the power to self-represent, women will remain hostages to the visualising, and all too often objectifying, powers of men (Clover, Sanford & Harman, 2022). Finally, a sense of agency is about the imagination. A different world can only become thinkable and actionable once it is imaginable. The imagination "is highly consequential because control over it is control over [...] the future. Imagining what could be is a very powerful tool" (Helmore, 2021). Feminist adult education and research need to engage this power, particularly, the (re)politicisation of

the imagination towards alternative visions of how a more just gender (or de-gendered) world could look, feel, and function. For me, current (and persistent) attacks against feminism are troubling and so too, and perhaps even more so, the rise of "neoliberal feminism". However, these attacks and reformations provide a platform for the political imagination because they illustrate a recognition of feminism as a deeply disruptive and fundamentally emancipatory force that needs to be curbed and tamed before it can give people the strength, wisdom and courage to resist, to speak out and fight back and, equally importantly, to (re)imagine the world as otherwise.

The aesthetic turn

An important pedagogical response to the *failure of the imagination* of which I have been an active part for over two decades is what Danny Wildemeersch (2019) in a special edition of the *European Journal for the Research on the Education and Learning of Adults* called the "aesthetic turn" (Wildemeersch, 2019: 117). A key element of the aesthetic turn is a marked increase in the use of creative and arts-based practices and methods. Worldwide, women and feminist adult education scholars, activists and researchers are taking up and using artistic and creative mediums ranging from theatre to textiles, photography to documentary films, exhibitions to installations, and oral storytelling to graphic novels to address ongoing gender, social, cultural and ecological injustices and inequities (*e.g.*, Clover & Sanford, 2013; Yang & Lipson Lawrence, 2017; Butterwick & Roy, 2018; Bishop, Etmanski & Page, 2019; Clover et al., 2020; Clover, Sanford & Harman, 2022). At the very least, aesthetic practices enable us to see more into our own experiences and to hear the normally unheard but also, they enable us to disrupt and reconfigure the patriarchal web of assumptions of common sense in which women are all too frequently complicit. Another key element of the aesthetic turn is the understanding that experience, knowledge and politics all contain an aesthetic dimension because aesthetics is the:

> […] pursuit of a politics within which people can live with our whole selves — as political, social, emotional, physical beings who need to be able to find dignity and delight in many different dimensions of our being (Shotwell, 2011: 119).

Feminist aesthetic politics, the foundation of my teaching and research, attends to the plural experiences of those who self-identify as women and the varied ways they, and others who have been excluded and marginalised, make sense of and story the worlds they inhabit.

Uniting feminist aesthetic theorising and practice as/and research

In collaboration with a group of women from around the world, I recently received a Social Sciences, Humanities Research (SSHRC) grant for a five-year study entitled: *An international collaborative study of the feminist imaginary as pedagogical tool for epistemic justice and change*. The questions that guide this study are: How are feminist adult educators and women's and gender museum practitioners conceptualising and operationalising pedagogically the feminist imaginary? How are their feminist creative and arts-based practices enabling women and LGBTQIA communities to imagine the world otherwise, and in so doing, to take the risks needed to create the change this gendered world requires? In one sense, this study is familiar as I have been using, investigating, and writing about arts-based and creative education and research practices by, with and for women for many years. It is very new, however, in that it moves beyond the simply binary of male-female and brings in a new (for me) feminist aesthetic group in the form of women's and gender museums. There are now 105 women's and gender museums established in 96 countries worldwide. These institutions are important because as Code (1995) argues, creating a sense of agency is also about location. She speaks of the need for rhetorical spaces where women can be seen, heard, understood, and taken seriously; spaces where subjectivities are variously enacted, and identities are constructed and continually reconstructed in the enactings. In rhetorical spaces, women and LGBTQIA communities have the opportunity to re-historicise the past, story the present, represent themselves as knowers and agents and imagine a gendered future that could be entirely otherwise.

I am bringing these groups together for a number of reasons. Both feminist adult educators and women's and gender museum practitioners use a plethora of arts-based and creative strategies to make women's and gendered lives and experiences visible. Both groups mobilise the imagination to promote a more critical consciousness and vision of hope and future possibility. Both groups are grounded in feminism(s) as a political force for change. Both groups have to contend with the complexities and potentials of categories such as women, feminism, sexuality, and gender. Both groups focus on working with immigrant, refugee, Indigenous, and women living in situations of poverty, oppression, and violence as well as LGBTQIA populations that face similar abuses and exclusions. Both groups also work in the interests of epistemic justice by (re)establishing women as "knowers", as producers of knowledge, and thus, as critical social actors and creative beings. Both groups take up practices of feminist storytelling (orally and/or visually), narratives that bring together experience and imagination to give shape to broader thoughts about what the world is and what it might be. This list

goes on. Yet despite these commonalities of purpose and practice, these two groups work in isolation from each other and therefore, know nothing of each other's work. By bringing feminist adult educators together with women's and gender museum practitioners, this study will give us a global view of how the feminist imaginary is being envisioned, articulated, educated, and made actionable, and our findings will contribute to gender justice and change worldwide. Moreover, by bringing these two groups together we respond to Metis scholar Kim Anderson's call for practices of "radical relationality" (Anderson, 2020: 38), to Wiggins' assertion that we must continue to forge new links across diverse theoretical and practical "fields of action that have been separate" (Wiggins, 2011: 11) and to Ktunaxa scholar Joyce Green's assertion that by investigating "across different spaces of feminist theorising and organising [we can better] address issues ranging from colonialism, racism, sexism. […] to sexuality and emancipation" (Green, 2017: 17).

There are two primary challenges that are, for me, important. Firstly - and this a universal problem – when women's and gender museums think of "adult education" they see it in its liberal form, as simply adults going back to school or upgrading their skills. This project will aim to disabuse them of this limited perspective of the field. The second challenge is that women colleagues in mainstream museums can be quite critical of women's and gender museums. They see them as "ghettoising" women and argue that bringing women's stories and artworks into mainstream museums is the better way to ensure cultural and social equity. I agree that weaving women's arts and stories into mainstream institutions is critical. The legitimacy mainstream institutions bring to women's artworks and stories by including them should never be underestimated. However, I also believe that women's and gender museums bring something unique and play a very different role that is vital for the struggle for gender justice and change. Intentionally women's and gender museums are activist in nature. They are in fact the direct result of the "legacies of struggle by women's and feminist movements for social, political, cultural, aesthetic and particularly, epistemic justice" (Clover, 2022: 96). As activist institutions they are willing to take risks which, of course, bring risks. One example of this is the travelling exhibition entitled *Cultures of Headscarves*. Its overt challenge to sexist xenophobia and patriarchal control of women's bodies, received a bomb threat (see Franger & Clover, 2020). Women's and gender museums also see their primary mandate as *education*, that is, they exist specifically to (re)educate the public, whether that public likes it or not. Women's museums are also engaged in the process of negotiating:

> […] the complexity of the category of 'women', the constructions of the feminine [and] the constrictions and silences of women in patriarchal society [through] processes whereby women intervene […] and articulate their own experiences (Wolff, 1990: 10).

These institutions also work to enable new and different feminist representations of history, culture or society which are, as much as possible in a patriarchal world, unmediated "by the point of view of men [and] outside the dominant culture and language of men" (Wolff, 1999: 510).

Feminist knowledge construction and mobilisation

Our study is a feminist collaborative international study and it is important to explain what I mean by this. There is of course no single definition of feminist research but there is a high degree of concurrence over the epistemological grounding of the research process (*e.g.*, Cook & Fonow, 1986). Firstly, feminist research has the intention to empower women or others who have been systematically marginalised, by uncovering and challenging relations of power and other inequities. In other words, gender justice is central. Secondly, feminist research takes women and gender as a focus of analysis. This means women's and gendered voices, experiences and concerns are placed at centre stage. Third, and connected, is the use of the research project to create consciousness. This includes the researchers themselves and the study participants. Our hope is that our research project will itself become a rhetorical space where we will generate new ways of seeing and knowing. A fourth key element of feminist research is the rejection of a subject-object dichotomy. Objectivity is neither real (attainable) nor the point. This includes the use of "I" or "we" when speaking and writing about the study, rather than the detached third person *the researcher* or *the author* which creates distance or what we call in feminist museum-speak, the *god voice*, the practice of speaking from on high and from nowhere (un-situated). No one speaks from nowhere so own up to where you speak from (privilege, insider, outsider and so forth). Feminist research is also concerned with ethics throughout the research process, in the use of the results and how they are shared. Finally, for me and this team, feminist research is about ensuring that what we find is made as accessible as possible to as many people as possible and this means learning to tell stories, something I discuss shortly in more detail.

We also chose a collaborative approach because although this faces challenges (power, *etc.*), collaborative approaches are a means to share the project workload and to leverage others' expertise (*e.g.*, Linabary, Corple & Cook, 2021). Feminist collaborative studies also provide opportunities for reflexiveness – our work, ourselves and the world – which is also a process of mutual learning. Collaborative work also increases productivity and particularly for us, a diversity of outputs, and I will speak about this shortly. We chose an international approach because gender issues are global and because women's and gender museums and feminist adult educators are global. Specifically, we are a group of feminist scholars and museum practitioners from Canada, Korea, Bangladesh,

Albania, Germany, Egypt/Netherlands, Spain/Argentina, England, Scotland, Senegal, Costa Rica, and Chile who will be working together for five years.

The central goal of our study is to explore collaboratively what the feminist imaginary means and looks like to us, within and across our two diverse yet similar groups. We will be exploring why and how we use creativity and imagination to disrupt normative patriarchal and colonial habits of consciousness and how new ways of seeing, knowing, and acting are being made possible. Together we plan to theorise the feminist imaginary as a pedagogical force for change, uncover differences and similarities between these two groups, and explore how they navigate respectively the critical discursive complexities of the categories of women, feminism, and gender in their diverse locations.

Returning to the principles of feminist collaborative research, we will use our findings to strengthen the work of feminist adult education practitioners and women's and gender museums worldwide and expand knowledge through a variety of methods. To expand the field of feminist adult education, we will publish papers in adult education journals and participate in conferences. To broaden the field of feminist and museum studies, we will submit papers to journals such as the *Journal of Museum Education, Museum International, and Museums and Society*. We also plan to publish chapters and books and to propose special editions of academic journals in both museum studies and adult education.

Of central importance for us is also sharing our findings with mainstream museums and women's organisations. As a research team we have many connections to museums, museum and women's organisations, and professional bodies. We will present our findings (or facilitate workshops) at museum conferences, submit articles to *ICOM News* and *Herstory Magazine*. We will also provide content for the website of the International Association of Women's Museums (IAWM) so that all women's and gender museums have access to what we are learning.

Creative outputs and/as storytelling

Creative knowledge mobilisation is important generally, and to this study specifically, because we want our research to reach a broad public, which brings me back to storytelling. Team members of this feminist imaginary study, including graduate students, bring with them a variety of aesthetic skills – graphic notetaking and novels, comics, exhibition curation, video creation – all of which we will use to tell stories of and from our study. Sonya Atalay et al. (2019) reminds us that "in our hypervisual culture, presenting research in a visually engaging way can have a powerful and democratising (sic) impact" as well as a powerful means to learn. Visual methods, such as zines,

videos and animations aid researchers "in telling engaging, memorable stories about our work [and] bring much-needed creativity to our work lives and to our research" (Atalay et al., 2019: 769). Using output materials such as zines, comics and animation is not only an effective way of communicating to broad audiences, but it also challenges researchers to clearly explain (sic) complex concepts and ideas, using words and images together to interweave multiple lines of evidence into coherent, compelling, and engaging visual narratives. These tools allow us to move academic knowledge into the hands and minds of diverse audiences, including policymakers, community partners, and other scholars, both in our own field and across disciplines (Atalay et al., 2019: 770). Although, as Megan Harvey argues "we are all, every one of us, tellers and consumers of stories" (Harvey, 2017: 1), academics are not often good at telling engaging stories from their studies.

One skill we all share is object-based research. This will include identifying objects in archives to use in the study in a variety of ways as well as participants bringing with them objects and using these as symbolic and metaphoric platforms to discuss complex understandings of feminist work. Another key storytelling method we will use will be exhibitions, both virtual and physical. Exhibitions tell stories by combining visuals and narratives in ways that are highly accessible, meaningful and engaging. One plan is to design a global exhibition on the feminist imaginary which will be curated in diverse ways in the many women's and gender museums. As educators, we also have educational design skills, meaning we can create engaging and creative public programming activities around the physical exhibitions.

Final thoughts

Carolyn Kennedy and Tina Ngaroimata Fraser remind us that "the implementation of complex gender change is no small matter" (Kennedy & Ngaroimata Fraser, 2012: 13). In addition, as one union official once told me: "It is not that you are not smart enough, it is not that you are not working hard enough, it is that what you are trying to do is very difficult". I have no illusions that this work will not be difficult and also, that the profound changes I would like to see will occur in my lifetime. However, the cross-fertilising of these two distinct yet similar feminist activist-pedagogical groups will provide new and important pedagogical and activist knowledge that has the greatest possibility of being seen and heard. For me, this study is *a rhetorical space* for critical reflection and learning, a location to theorise, investigate, design, educate, and imagine a new feminist sense of agency and future.

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