

Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage

McKenzie, M., Hart, P., Bai, H., & Jickling, B. (Eds.) (2009). *Fields of green: Restorying culture, environment, and education*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press Inc. 376 pp. ISBN 978-1-57273-879-9 (paperbound)

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Fields of Green compels the reader to re-imagine complex and nuanced relationships between *environment*, *culture*, and *education* through the contributions of philosophers, activists, poets, artists, journalists, researchers, teachers, and a variety of other contributors of fields of inquiry and practice. The emotional and scholarly plea on the part of the editors was to “consider the stickiness of cultural imaginaries, or the stories we live by, and reflect on when embeddedness in particular understandings and practices might best be left as is, and when things may call for attempts at unsticking, for disruption” (McKenzie, Hart, Bai & Jickling, 2009, p. 2). The book is a kaleidoscope of contributions providing strategies and spaces of education that offer possibilities for alternative stories and daydreams to consider living by. Collectively they invite the reader to re-consider the entangled relationships that give meaning to environmental education.

The hefty soft-cover text consists of 376 pages (7” x 10”) with small (10 point) font. It consists of a Primer, 20 chapters, numerous short text and image vignettes interspersed between the aforementioned chapters, a Conclusion, Chapter and Vignette Contributors, and an Author and Subject Index. The Primer is an alphabet book for global citizens. It is an open text, a hybrid form of inquiry blending memoir, poetic process, and essay, inviting the reader “to write and read the reader’s own entries, layering narratives as acts of imagination, oriented towards social change” (McKenzie et al, 2009, p. 12). The 20 chapters that follow are organized into four parts. *Part I: Complicated Conversations* tackles the kinds of assumptions and understandings that maintain current discourses and practices of environmental education. *Part II: The Sensuous* continues to build on the critical work of Part I, but extends this significantly by exploring possibilities offered by the senses, experience and emotion. Heavily reminiscent of David Abram’s work, this chapter inspires the reader through “romantic resistance and sensuality, showing us different alphabets through which to know the world” (Abram, 1996, cited in McKenzie et al, 2009 et al, p. 5). *Part III: Waves, Hybrids, and Networks*, builds upon experience and the sensuous but focuses more specifically on how social and political interactions among human beings as well as with the rest of the world structure our feelings, our ways of knowing and acting as individuals. And lastly, *Part IV: Geographies of Place-Making*, examines how culture and place are intertwined, while considering the pedagogical potential these intertwinings reveal. In doing so, we are faced with a variety of places, e.g., families, communities, home, cities, etc., that we are part of and engage with. The Conclusion, brings together this complex imaginary, or as Braidotti (2006) calls it, “[the]

dialogical confrontations with others with a mix of affectivity/involvement and objectivity/distance” (p. 95) underscoring that the contributors each search for, theorize, and practice approaches that probe education that “walks the blurred line between cultural determinism and resistance” (McKenzie et al, 2009, p. 9). The volume closes by considering curriculum in this way:

Curriculum is found in human eyes, in rivers, in animals, in the language of music, poetry, art, science, history, anthropology, in what is public, intimate, beloved (Dunlop, 2009, p. 16).

The editors’ final appeal is to have the reader consider their own curricula in the pages that follow, and in the daydreams and stories to live by they may help to elicit or remember.

What I find compelling about this book is its content, form, and argument. The great forefather of critical pedagogy and poststructuralism, Martin Heidegger, once suggested that for humanity to move beyond the modern impasse, we would do well to call upon the wisdom, practice, and artwork of artists. It was thus that he turned to the poets for inspiration and direction. McKenzie, Hart, Bai and Jickling do just that in *Fields of Green*. Inspired by an original understanding of *imagination* as both a cognitive/psychological capacity, they consider it also from the standpoint of culture. “Nomadic, it [imagination] flows like symbolic glue between the social and the self, the outside and the subject; the material and the ethereal. It flows, but it is sticky; it gathers on as it goes. . . .” (Braidotti, 2006, p. 86). This becomes the backbone of the book providing guidance to various contributors—authors respond passionately, imaginatively and provocatively. Despite the constraints of book form—linearity and chronology—its title, chapters, and interspersed vignettes provide subtle interrogations. My initial response to the Primer was disorientation, a worthy outcome in its own right. The depth and substance of the chapters call for the periodic respite provided by the interspersed artistic vignettes. The flow and progression of the four sections works well, beginning with *the self*, moving then to *other humans*, and finally considering our relationship with *the environment*. This is recapitulated and summarized nicely within Lucie Sauve’s chapter *Being Here Together*.

Overall, the book’s central thesis, to bring together a multiplicity of views on culture, environment and education, to imagine the possibilities ahead for environmental education, is timely, poignant, and hopeful. In a time when the earth’s capacity to house us and for humanity to dwell within the earth, our socio-ecological future seems uncertain. And while the great modern tendency to call for *solutions* seems irresistible, McKenzie et al (2009) refrain from this, opting for imagery wanderings. The book evokes the image/concept *verwindung*, originally suggested by the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo (1988), meaning to pull through, to twist in a direction unanticipated, to convalesce, as an antidote to modernity. *Fields of Green* does just that. It unsettles, dislodges, pushes gently, returns, rotates, and settles there and yet not-there.

The book is tedious to read for a number of reasons. Large pages and small font are not ideal combinations. The book’s thesis is also potentially its great undoing. Because the authors represent such diverse backgrounds, the reader, at times, is forced to struggle with a range of unfamiliar discourses. While exposing readers to new discourses is

worthy and important, perhaps doing so under one cover was overly ambitious. Some of the contributions were very dense and obtuse, entirely alienating the reader, and would have benefitted through prudent parsing and paraphrasing. The patience of this reader was taxed. At times too, there is undue repetition. I don't know how many times I read indictments about our modern forefathers, Plato and Descartes. While noteworthy, the repetition could have been reduced through more judicious editing.

My assessment of the book's strengths and weaknesses is based on my experience as an environmental educator/researcher and someone who is passionately and personally involved with experiences educating-within-place. The aim and ambition of the book's thesis is timely and worthy and absolutely necessary. McKenzie, Hart, Bai, and Jickling—"we exuberant ones"—bring to the "fields of green" of environmental education a refreshing call requiring us to again beckon our dreams, imagine possibilities, and mingle with the unfamiliar. A question, among many toward the end of the book, captures this sentiment in the following way:

Can we see how these authors have expanded our metaphors and categories to include sensual, embodied, enfamilied dream data, as they write their ways into knowing/being, representing themselves in these ideas, generating relationality without getting lost in interstitial spaces? (Hart, McKenzie, Bai & Jickling, 2009, p. 347)

After reading the book and revisiting several sections, I would have to answer, "Yes" but with qualification. *Fields of Green* certainly expands my metaphors and categories to consider sensual, embodied and inter-subjective dream data, as I come to know and *be*, as I consider who I am as an environmental educator in relation to these ideas, expanding my own repertoire of thoughts and practices. As to whether it is successful in "generating relationality without getting lost in interstitial spaces" I am hopeful that some of its alienating tendencies (i.e., formatting, style, substance, discourse) can be overcome with a patient, receptive, and willing reader who can interpret these aims and responses flexibly and fluidly.

References

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