

Canadian Social Work Review Revue canadienne de service social



Social Work Artfully, Beyond Borders and Boundaries,
Christina Sinding and Hazel Barnes, Editors. Waterloo: Wilfrid
Laurier University Press, 2015

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Volume 33, Number 1, 2016

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1037099ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1037099ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Association for Social Work Education / Association canadienne pour
la formation en travail social (CASWE-ACFTS)

ISSN

2369-5757 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Moffatt, K. (2016). Review of [*Social Work Artfully, Beyond Borders and Boundaries*, Christina Sinding and Hazel Barnes, Editors. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015]. *Canadian Social Work Review / Revue canadienne de service social*, 33(1), 153–155. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1037099ar>

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Social Work Artfully, Beyond Borders and Boundaries

Christina Sinding and Hazel Barnes, Editors. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015

Often when the link between art and social work is considered, the two fields remain distinct and separate. The discussion is taken up as if art is a technique to aid in interpersonal helping relations or social workers aid artists to better understand the social significance of their work. The interdisciplinary nature is such that the relationships are simple and each field stays fully intact, not sully the other. In 2010 Christina Sinding met Hazel Barnes while attending the Africa Research Conference in Applied Drama and Theatre in South Africa. From that meeting an international workshop was held and the book *Social Work Artfully* was born. In this book art and social work no longer remain distinct realms. At times as a social worker I am surprised at how close the interventions of the arts are to the purposes and nature of social work and inversely how artistically rendered social work practice can be. This is not a book about art as a method or a technique, instead it is about imagining a way forward for social work while remaining true to our roots of social justice.

The purpose of the book is to engage the reader in imagining through the arts a conceptual and pragmatic renewal of social work. This renewal is contextualized within neoliberal globalization as well as enduring historical relations of domination and subordination in both South Africa and Canada. After an introductory section that provides context for each country, the text is divided into four sections: art for conscientization and re-storying selves; art for community and cultural healing, sustainability and resilience; art for transforming social relations; and art for social care practice.

The broad themes that structure the book are examined through recounting of direct artful interventions with communities as varied as young refugees and migrant children in South Africa, persons with intellectual disabilities in Canada, Indigenous people living with HIV and AIDS, as well as Canadian and South African social work students, social workers, nurses, and academics. The focus on the arts unveils a wide array of social practices, some of which we may take for granted or have forgotten altogether in a neoliberal context that values efficiencies and reductive measurements of labour. Other practices we have not imagined within the field of social work at all.

Canadian Social Work Review, Volume 33, Number 1 (2016) / Revue canadienne de service social, volume 33, numéro 1 (2016)

In a short review, I cannot do justice to the intricate reflections on community involvement through interventions that interweave art and justice in each chapter. Instead I have chosen to list some of the ways we can reimagine practice with the help of the authors. A sample of the practice concepts offered include: safe space, thicker stories, subordinate story lines (Pretorius and Kellen); deep listening, quietness and stillness, weaving of stories (Jackson et al); safe play, iterative practice and use of metaphor (McGillcuddy and Pretorius); new subjectivities, psycho-political interventions, the dialectic between agency and structure (Smith and Nathane-Taulela); social identity, critical analysis of tragedy and myth, imaginative space (Gumede); communal existence and value, playfulness, physicalization (Barnes); creative imagination and stories, poetic strategies as distancing technique (Chinyowa); self representation, critical reflection (Fudge Schormans) improvisation, embodied understandings of relationship (Paton) and in-between spaces, co-remembrance (McGillcuddy et al). Although not an exhaustive list of practices, I list these techniques and concepts to show a plethora of new possibilities for social work practice. The authors illustrate that social influence of art need not be obtuse or abstract. At the same time, the practices are open so that they contribute to evoking, imagining, and practicing re-humanized social relations and cultures that are open to social justice and hope. This lifts us from the narrow confines of storylines constrained by managerialism and shallow definitions of scientific practice.

One of the advantages of art-based approach to well being, social welfare, and helping/caring relations is that it can help persons to render, tell and perform rich stories, or what Pretorius and Kellen characterize as thicker stories. Jackson et al. discuss the weaving of stories that involves complex narratives including Indigenous knowledge. These stories are revelatory as they contextualize emotions and well being in webs of social and political relations. The stories are filled with complexity, including emotional affect, politics, economy, history, identity, and the self. As I read *Social Work Artfully* I am reminded that the field of social work is filled with such rich stories. At the same time, we can benefit from an excavation and reimagining of these stories to create new cultures of social work.

Social Work Artfully is remarkable for its refusal to treat art as a release, a catharsis, or an escape that leads to avoidance. Rather, through the arts, we stare down the gross inequities of global capital, the intense insecurity and risk of those who have to cross both conceptual and physical borders, as well as the horrifying legacy of colonialism and racism shared by both countries, albeit differing in historical development. This book is intellectually rigorous, politically astute, and creatively pragmatic. One is reminded while reading *Social Work Artfully* that social work is a complex endeavor that includes improvisation, intuition, emotional care, historical and cultural awareness, as well as openness to diversity. The authors illustrate how social work can integrate the broadest concerns

of social justice and global social, economic, and political relations with the smallest gesture of practice, and that is a beautiful, artful enterprise.

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