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**Postmodern Social Work
Reflective Practice and Education**

Ken Moffatt.

New York: Columbia University Press, 2019, 248 pages.

Ken Moffatt, a professor in Ryerson University's School of Social Work and the holder of Ryerson's Jack Layton Chair which *inter alia* promotes the arts for a greater understanding of our damaged world, takes us on a captivating journey, both intellectual and personal, of teaching social work from a reflective postmodern point of view. The book glows with radiance and sparkling intensity and is a wonderful antidote to the poverty of imagination that all too often characterizes social work scholarship, research and writing. Steering Moffatt's analysis are two concepts: we do not possess a fixed identity and truths are not fixed but fluid. His approach can be portrayed fittingly as *unfixed*. It is worth noting that for the philosopher Gilles Deleuze and his colleague Felix Guattari, whose work Moffatt incorporates adroitly, philosophy is the invention of concepts. One of the marked achievements of the book is that it brings the somatic and the intellectual together, thus healing the Cartesian error of the mind/body split. Here Moffatt opens a wide and welcoming gate for an intricate rethinking of social work thought, education, and practice.

In an introduction and seven finely crafted chapters, Moffatt illuminates the current context which he describes as "the speeded-up processes of capitalism, and the onslaught of omnipresent technologies." Fully on display is Moffatt's astute grasp of neoliberalism, new managerialism, and technology, as a confluence of forces creating the contemporary world. The chapters are bookended, the beginning and the end, with penetrating analyses of precariousness, now an even more unsettling presence with the Virus circulating globally. He suggests that precariousness presses in on us at the broadest social levels as well as on how we construct ourselves. Moffatt puts forth his startling position as an educator: "I ultimately argue for a self that is open to precariousness that is experienced as *coming undone*." It is within this context that the central theme of the book unfolds: postmodern reflective practice. This necessitates, Moffatt informs us, bringing to our understandings questions of vulnerability, marginalization, colonialism and exploitation.

Early in the book, Moffatt outlines the contribution of philosopher Donald Schon, as providing a formative framework in the development of professional reflective practice. Schon's 1980s books on the reflective practitioner point to reflective artistry over technical rationality. Throughout, Moffatt draws into the ambit of his discourse a number of key postmodern philosophers: Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Butler, Bauman, Kristeva. He is impressively at ease with these complex thinkers, which adds a richness and multilayered consideration to all he writes about and the book provides a Northrop Frye educated imagination for social workers. Where so much of social work education is still rooted in an eighteenth-century Enlightenment view of what constitutes knowledge, with its adornments of rationalism and empiricism, Moffatt leads us away from Weber's iron cage of modernity to what the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls liquid modernity. In liquid modernity, Bauman writes "all social forms melt faster than the new ones can be cast." Surely, Bauman had in mind Marx and Engels' comment in the 1848 Communist Manifesto, "all that is solid melts into air." Interpreting Bauman, Moffatt notes that with all in constant flux "the impact of economic and social uncertainty is unevenly distributed according to one's gender, race and nationality."

Julia Kristeva's work brings Moffatt to an inspired exploration of images in urban capitalist settings and he builds on her observation of commercial imagery that hurtles toward us at a fragmented breakneck speed. These images even invade his classroom through the window in downtown Toronto. He reflects on how these onslaughts affect his psyche and the psyche of his students. He muses, along with Kristeva, that two major threats to the growth of psyche are presented: "the widespread distraction of banal imagery" and scientific knowledge that chooses biological interpretations of mental health over other explanations, hence blocking a quest for healthy expressions of the self in other ways such as artistic expression. Moffatt's discussion of psychic life, psychic spaces and student engagement in psychic space adds immeasurably to an expanded view of postmodern pedagogical practices in the context of meaning making in our image-saturated culture.

One of the outstanding and unique features of *Postmodern Social Work* is the incorporation of key concepts from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and their use in teaching: the planar, assemblage, and rhizomatic change. Their work is notoriously difficult and requires a particular kind of philosophically attuned mind to decipher and elucidate. Moffatt is more than up to the task. The **planar** as a concept avoids binary thinking and instead imagines how elements of discourse are placed beside one another and in relationship. As Moffatt explains it by proceeding in this manner we entertain multiplicities and are less likely to categorize. **Assemblage** is another valuable concept for rethinking the classroom where "elements combine to create productive relationships."

He fully lays this out and shows us how assemblage as a way of thinking can bring even to the classroom flickers of experience and affect to life. A third concept explored by Moffatt is **rhizomatic change** which disassembles the idea of thought and knowledge as hierarchical, objective, closed, static and abstract. Instead, rhizomatic thought, as an inversion of usual Western approaches, opens up vistas that allow for the subjective, politicized, mystical, cosmic, imminent, open and dynamic to fully emerge. He illustrates how rhizomatic framing as a way of reimagining the class as an atmosphere of mood and tone can profoundly alter the teaching of a queer theories class. Reading Moffatt on Deleuze and Guattari is invigorating and exciting, as new possibilities bloom.

In the chapter “The Dispossessed Self”, Moffatt turns his attention fully to the reflective educator as someone who is open to vulnerability and converses with the reader on masculinity, performativity, whiteness, social engagement, loss, mourning, and suffering where *becoming undone* is ever present. Teaching is emotional for Moffatt since he does not try to hide that his presence in the classroom is one of both mind and body and all that entails; he affectingly talks about his weary emotional state at the end of each term and he wonders if this is some form of dissolution of the self as a “self that is tied to a wide range of affects, emotions, relationships, and components.” He continues this pondering in a luminescent chapter on arts-based reflection which allows for affect and emotion to be a crucial feature of social work in all its manifestations and that runs counter to positivist and managerial approaches to knowing.

Postmodern Social Work is scholarship at its finest, rare and beautiful. We can imagine Moffatt’s voice saying to his students and to us, “I don’t know, I’m not sure, I’m still thinking, I’m still working”, as he shines a light in what is so often a dark world.

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