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EDITORIAL: VISUAL CULTURE OF PRECARIOUS FUTURES

KAREN KEIFER-BOYD

The 42nd Rainbow Infantry Division, joined by others, liberated Dachau, a concentration camp of terror, torture, and genocide near Munich, Germany on April 29, 1945 (Goldenberg, 2020). Heroic relief turned to horror as the WWII soldiers witnessed prisoners about to be freed grab the fences still charged with electricity and suddenly die after surviving months of inhumane imprisonment. The Rainbow Division, my father included, decided to retrace their loss and trauma during WWII with their families to collectively grieve and vow to never again let the seeds of hate grow toward groups of people and their allies: Jewish, Gay, Disabled, Black people—all those not of the fictitious “Aryan race,” a core racist ideology (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2020). I was 12 years old. Never again, would this happen, never again could this happen, I believed. As a young girl, hearing the bravery of people we met in villages, who hid those being persecuted, and feeling the heartbreak of widows on the tour in search of where their love died, radicalized me toward peace and justice for all, against racism, against discrimination. In 2007, I returned as an adult to Dachau, now a memorial and museum, and entered the long building into the third chapter of the narrative that ended with liberation, in which my father, who had died in 1998, played a crucial role in 1945. With deep sorrow in my heart and filling my eyes, I slowly moved through the long building asking why, why, why, why humans

tortured humans. The Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial and Museum is organized in three historical chapters or phases from 1933 to 1945 of the camp as a terrorist instrument of Hitler’s SS. The SS began as his personal bodyguard unit and became a militia “without regard for legal restraint” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, The SS, 2021, para. 1). Control of the media, of the narrative, and production of a visual culture, was the first phase to “eliminate the political opposition and to persecute so-called ‘community aliens’” (Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site, para. 5). Since 2016, and especially with the January 6, 2021, insurrection encouraged by the U.S. President in final days of office, and subsequent disregard for justice by the Republican political party, my beliefs of never again such domestic terrorism could be possible are broken by the reality of violence and hate toward anyone who does not hail the man impeached twice and voted out of the U.S. presidency.

In the year since the journal *Visual Culture & Gender*’s 15th anniversary with its annual publication each September 15th, domestic terrorism has escalated in the United States, and other countries, fueled by racist rhetoric of White supremacists’-controlled media. Black lives, Asian lives, Trans lives, among others in the U.S. who speak truth to the power of greed, hate, and authoritarian weaponized control, are at stake, along with democracy—the means toward human rights and liberation from domestic terrorism. Since the former president 45’s racist rhetoric in support of White superiority, hate crimes against Asian Americans have increased since the beginning of the pandemic. The New York Police Department reports an increase of reports of hate crimes against Asian Americans from 4 in 2020 to 104 in the first half of 2021 in New York City (Hutzler, 2021). There are numerous excellent anti-racism resources helpful to educators, artists, and students to counter racist, sexist, ableist culture, which are visual, spoken, and textual enactments fueling hate crimes, discrimination, and complacency. See, for example: *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* by Cathy Park Hong (2020); *Global Consciousness through Art: A Passport for Students and Teachers*

by Alan Richards and Steve Willis (2020); *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (2014); *How to be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi (2019); and *Stamped (For Kids): Racism, Antiracism, and You* (Cherry-Paul, Reynolds, & Kendi, 2021). Explore the art of [Angélica Dass](#), [Jason Reynolds](#), [Anna Tsoularakis](#), and collective art activism such as the work of [Sins Invalid](#) and [Radical Visibility Zine: A Magazine and Resource Celebrating Disabled Queer Joy!](#) (Sky Cubacub, 2019).

Jingyi Zhu and Mindi Rhoades, in this volume 16 of *Visual Culture & Gender* contribute to this growing body of literature with their article, “Little New Year’s Revolutions: Examining Small Queer Spaces in Chunwan.” They studied queerness in Chinese New Year televised galas referred to within Chinese cultures as Chunwan, and to outsiders as Chinese New Year. Families watch the annual Spring Festival Gala produced by China Media Group; although now, often on separate devices rather than gathered around a screen. Fascinating deep queer analysis of select scenes tease out how “Chunwan’s performances simultaneously reinforce, disrupt, and potentially provide spaces for changing dominant discourse around queer identities” (Zhu & Rhoades, 2021, p. 9). Queer openings in hegemonic gender expectations offer openings for changing discourses about other ways gender roles can be oppressive.

Pandemic Breasts

Societal pressures, including violence, have forced motherhood on some girls and women, as well as limited careers. Familial and societal norms expect mothers to care for babies, children, teens, spouses, elders, among others, Art such as [Kate Kretz’s Motherhood 2000-2019](#)¹ series¹ and [Catherine Opie’s “Self-Portrait/Nursing”](#) deconstruct cis-gendered, heteronormative visual culture surrounding motherhood and breastfeeding. Bodies transform when pregnant and giving birth. Maternity involves breastfeeding, the focus of the next article in volume 16.

Visual culture is filled with breasts performing in erotic enticement or objectification of women’s worth based on size measurements. Breast imagery is

¹ Kate Kretz’s presentation of art concerning motherhood, *The Last Taboo*, includes art by many artists and is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84BK4VFRE5w&feature=youtu.be>

often the focus, sometimes without the rest of the body visible. Yet, breasts are a taboo, or even disdained sight when breasts perform feeding a baby (Haller, 2018). It was not until 2018 that breastfeeding in public is protected by law in all 50 states in the U.S., although “women are still being shamed for breastfeeding in public” (Haller, 2018, para. 1). Courtney Tyler’s article, “Becoming ‘Mother’: An Autoethnographic Study through Paint and Prose,” in volume 16 of *Visual Culture & Gender*, is a visual essay of her self-reflective analysis of her paintings created during the year she transitioned into motherhood and breastfeeding. She weaves into her visual and textual narrative her struggles with dominant cultural norms as well as strategies she uses in her teaching art to foster counternarratives about motherhood. She concludes her essay by asking, “How might the very process of creating transform the creator?” (Tyler, 2021, p. 30).

Creating art can transform self-guilt and shame into a sense of agency by countering internalized oppressive dominant narratives. Art can also help draw attention to injustices that require societal change such as how many mothers grapple with unaffordable childcare, unsafe working conditions, low wages, in-person work requirements, even during the pandemic, and the inconsistency of health and unemployment insurance (Denham, Telford, Van Dam, 2021).

While approach, impact, and identities vary, feminist art concerns gender-based injustices, hegemonic social structures, and lived experiences of women. Zena Tredinnick-Kirby and Linda Hoepfner Poling bring to this volume 16 of *Visual Culture & Gender*, vivid and creative embodied examples of feminist art criticism at a feminist art exhibition during the Fall 2018 semester at The Pennsylvania State University. Their article, “Encounters with Feminist Art and Feminist Art Criticism,” introduces to feminist art criticism strategies such as handwritten letters to the art that formed personal relationships with the work and studies the impact of feminist art criticism in developing critical consciousness toward upstander behaviors.

Precarity in Conversation

As editor of *Visual Culture and Gender*, I invited seven art educators to contribute a maximum of 500-words, written from a dialogue/conversation with themselves and/or another (who may be included as co-author), along with an

image/photo/art for a coalition-building article, “Precarity in Conversation,” to be published on this volume 16 of the *Visual Culture & Gender* (VCG) journal. I asked that the essay and image concern precarity they have experienced during this past year since VCG volume 15 was published Sept. 15, 2020. I guided the project, precarity in conversation, with an overview of ways to think about precarity (Kasimir, 2021), yet encouraged any framing of precarity from lived, witnessed, or other modes of learning/knowing of ontological conditions heightened for days, months, or ongoing since September 2020.

Yen-Ju Lin begins the conversation in her essay, “*The Colors of Our Resilience*.” She notes how the pandemic’s political battlefield escalated violence toward people whose features appear to have genetic heritage from people living on the continent of Asia, the largest continent on Earth, home to many different cultures and nation-states. Yen-Ju creates safety and strength with her family unit of spouse and two young sons by being together in what she calls “color play.”

Yiwen Wei, who has immigrated to the U.S. from Taiwan, continues the conversation with her essay, “Experience in Times of Precarity.” She describes to her partner, “precarity is a state of persistent uncertainty and powerlessness experienced by a person exposed to disadvantaged situations, including those involving health care, employment, or home security” (Wei, 2021, p. 42). During her teaching experience of the past year many students, who she describes as financially disadvantaged and living in predominantly Black and Brown communities, lost family members and peers due to gun violence and the coronavirus. Recognizing her teaching must respond to the precarious times, she finds inspiration from a middle school art teacher in Taiwan whose art project provided a caring and safe learning environment.

Complex familial expectations of daughters coupled with the former U.S. president’s travel bans, which impacted university students with immigration status from Iran, is the focus of Elham Hajesmaeili’s essay, “Precarity Estrangement.” Riding a roller coaster metaphor of hope and fear, Elham shares her personal experience in trying to visit her family in Iran and then return to her doctoral studies in the United States.

Xalli Zúñiga joins the conversation from Mexico with her essay

“*Interregnum Art Concerning Pandemic Affects of Migration Precarity*.” Referencing political theorist and activist Antonio Gramsci’s concept of the *interregnum*, a period of crisis between the collapse of the familiar and the uncertain future, Xalli situates herself as a Millennial, “where the very structures of desire and support that are meant to secure our development and wellbeing are the causes of our wearing out in work and life” (2021, p. 44). Her community drawing project at an artist residency in Querétaro, Mexico, resists capitalism, a system producing precarity for many, exacerbated during the pandemic. Xalli’s drawing included in her essay is a rich rendition of the rhythms from her conversation with dancer Greissy Vecchionacce, a Venezuela refugee who migrated to Mexico.

The bright dawn of 2020 for Indira Bailey turned dark. In her essay, “*Pandemic Precarity of Women of Color: Healing Uncertainties through Art*,” Indira recognizes that her own precarity as a Black woman in the United States is due to systemic injustice. Women of color have suffered economic and health disparity due to impact of the pandemic. Painting calmed her anxiety, as she created a watercolor from reflecting on a woman’s livelihood, she recorded in a photograph she took during her artist residency in Portobelo, Panama. She wondered how the pandemic affected life in a rural village in which most women clean and cook for tourists for meager wages.

Preservation, storage, and organization of 100 six-ounce storage bags of breastmilk, tenure promotion files, and seeds as well as escape with her infant son from California wildfires in 2020 are elements in Veronica Hicks’s essay, “*Separating Grains from Husks*.” Meditatively, she wrapped coil baskets, creating forms to protect life-giving grains, a practice of her Cherokee ancestors.

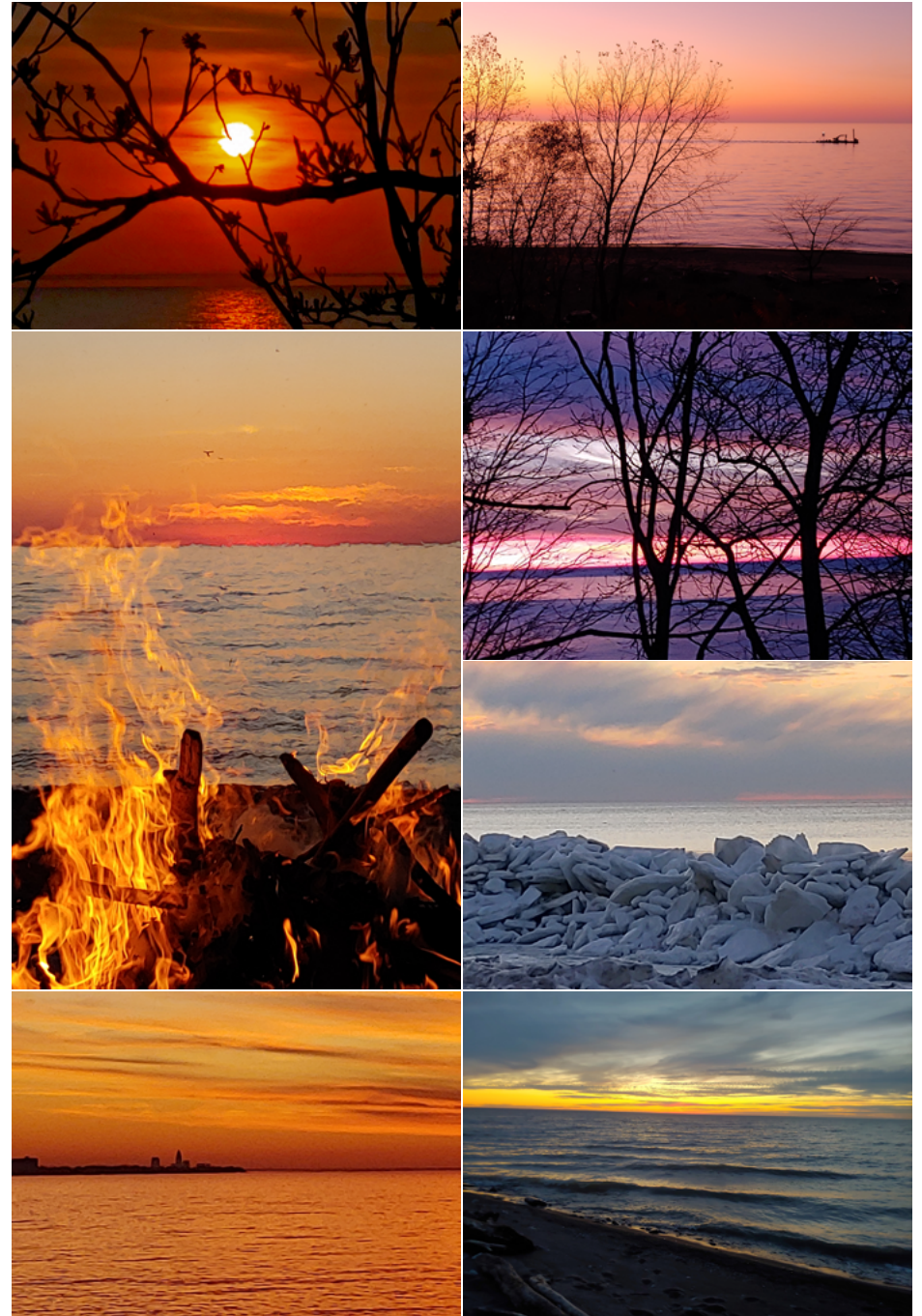
Precarity in Conversation concludes with Leslie C. Sotomayor II’s layers of personal geography, history, and land in her pandemic painting and poetic riff titled, *In the name of...* The ellipses throughout signal omissions, while the hyphenated distancing and connecting of self in the visual presentation of text unsettle certainty.

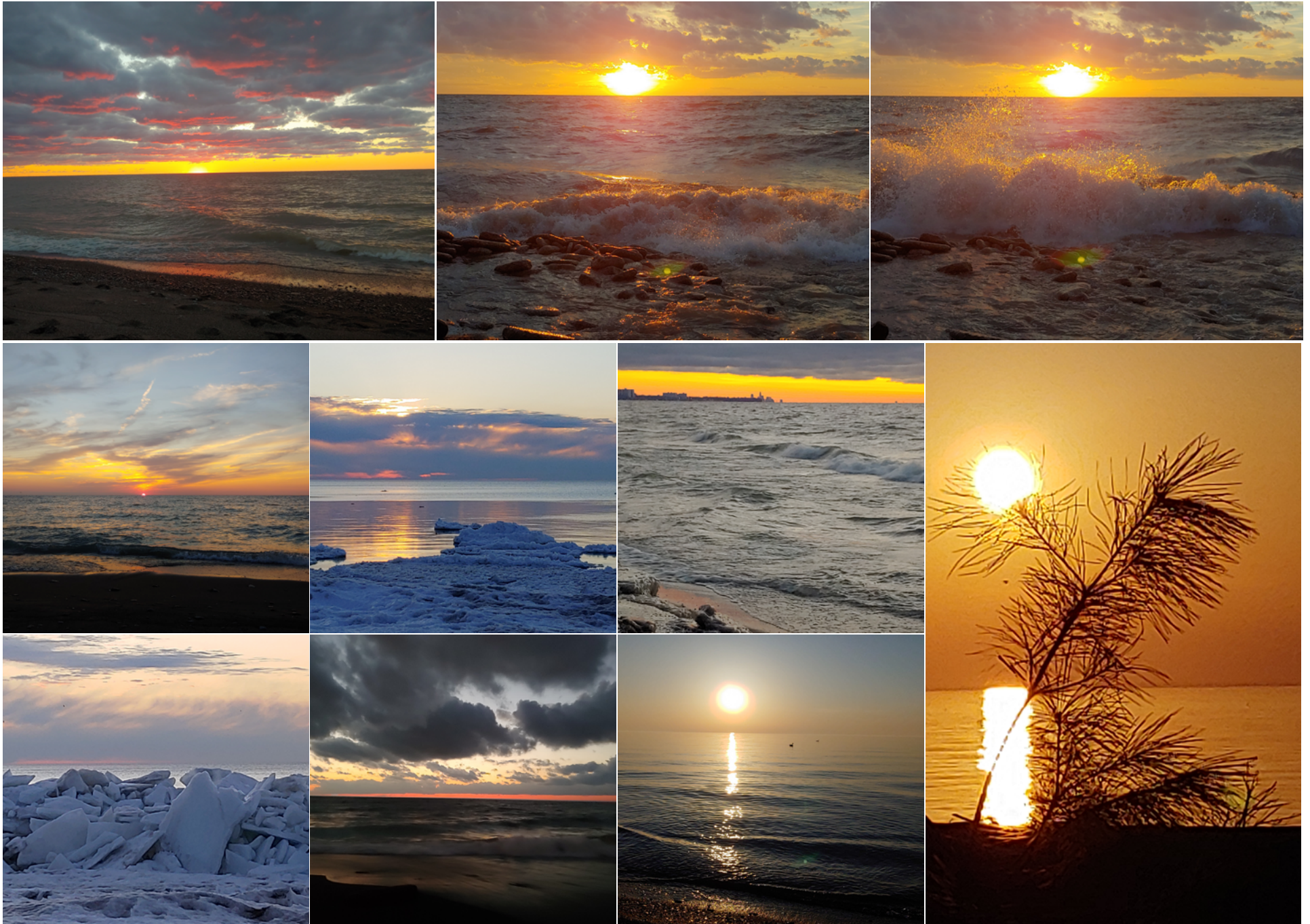
I found comfort in sunsets and walks on the shoreline of Lake Erie east of Cleveland where I spent the year weathering loss and heartbreak while working

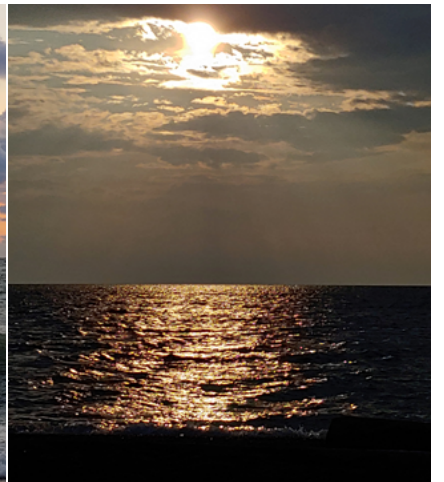
long days via zoom. I share sunset photos (see Figure 1), I took through the 2020-21 pandemic year, which I hope inspire you to make the most of every moment, in whatever ways that you are able.



Figure 1. Karen Keifer-Boyd took numerous photos of Lake Erie sunsets during the 2020-21 pandemic year of isolation. Each sunset witnessed is another day alive and hope that a new day will come. All are taken about 20 miles east of Cleveland, Ohio in the USA from her childhood home built in 1959 on a cliff with a path to the beach and Lake Erie and inherited from deceased parents and sibling. Cleveland is visible to the west. Canada is to the north, which would take about 10 hours to sail from Cleveland to Canada on a Great Lake that can change quickly from calm to up to 9-foot high waves, a metaphor for life—to not take anything for granted.







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Editor Bio

Karen Keifer-Boyd, Ph.D., Professor of Art Education and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at The Pennsylvania State University, co-authored several books: *Including Difference* (NAEA, 2013); *InCITE, InSIGHT, InSITE* (NAEA, 2008); *Engaging Visual Culture* (Davis, 2007); co-edited *Real-World Readings in Art Education: Things Your Professors Never Told You* (Falmer, 2000); and has numerous journal publications. Her research on transdisciplinary creativity, inclusion, feminist art pedagogy, visual culture, cyberart activism, transcultural dialogue, action research, and eco-social justice art education has been translated and published in Austria, Brazil, China, Columbia, Finland, Oman, and S. Korea. Co-founder and editor of *Visual Culture & Gender*, she has received Fulbright Awards (2012 Distinguished Chair in Gender Studies at Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt, Austria; and Finland, 2006) and residencies (Austria, 2009; Uganda, 2010); and several National Art Education Association (NAEA) awards including the Eisner Lifetime Achievement Award and the NAEA Distinguished Fellow Class of 2013.

Contact Karen Keifer-Boyd at kk-b@psu.edu

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