



EDITORIAL: BODY & GENDER POLITICS IN VISUAL CULTURE

KAREN KEIFER-BOYD & DEBORAH SMITH-SHANK

Dear VCG readers,

This year has been a year of change for me, in large part due to my care of family members in dire health predicaments, a move to a new house, my role as professor-in-charge of the art education program at Penn State, and the political activity in the United States in preparation for the presidential election on 4 November 2008. All of these personal events in my life, as are the events in your life, have political significance when understood as conditions of a time and place that are shared with others. I believe that everyone should have quality and timely health care services, housing, education, and most importantly, leadership that enable the well-being of every BODY. When then is the personal political? It is when your subjective experiences are interpreted from the local within worldwide and systemic situational standpoints.

This summer in Kyoto, Japan, I experienced a journey into and out of the womb of Buddha. Several weeks later I learned that the dark underground revelatory experience was indeed intended as metaphysical birthing. At an international conference on e-learning an audience member asked the presenter "what is a live course" in its relationship to the "master course." The presenter tried to explain that the "live course" was an offspring of the master course with students participating in the course. The audience member, whose first language was not English, thought for a few

moments and responded, "I see, then the master course is dead." The presenter responded that he does not see that the master is dead. I interjected: "Is the live course in the womb in what you refer to as the master?" My personal experiences as mother and living in a world of master (narratives, bedrooms, authority) re-shaped the conversation to a perspective of a learning space that nourishes life (womb) compared with a prototype of excellence intended for duplication (master).

The outrage I feel when my friend was accosted in the first week of September 2008 with a racist threat—yelled at her in a shopping center parking lot as she was unlocking her car—is personal yet also enmeshed in the socio-political climate in the United States at this historical moment when Obama, the son of a Black Kenyan father and a White Kansas mother, is a promising contender for serving as the next President of the United States. Does the ignorance of the young man's rant that he hates Black people, ignorant in his sweeping dislike of people he does not know, differ from the "boxes of waffle mix depicting Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama as a racial stereotype on its front and wearing Arab-like headdress on its top flap ... [which were sold] for \$10 a box from a rented booth at the [Values Voter] summit sponsored by the lobbying arm of the Family Research Council" in the same week of September 2008 (Lowy, 2008, ¶ 1)?

Dear VCG readers,

This year has been a year of travel and discovery. During my yearlong research-based sabbatical, I was fortunate to visit friends in Korea, Brazil, Australia, Japan, and even Columbus, Ohio, U.S.A. I made new friends, pursued my research projects, and had lively discussions about ideas. I entered Second Life® and traveled virtually to equally amazing locations. I am grateful to my old and new friends for helping me in many ways, but

especially for providing me with a venue for discovering insights about visual culture, global gender issues, and myself. Acting as a cultural tourist in many locations, teaching a variety of courses in institutions other than my own, and learning from diverse colleagues and students, my experiences led me to re-examine my own positionality in the game(s) of research.

Consideration of appropriate representations of Others, and the possibilities of post-colonial voice and representation in United States' art classrooms focus my thinking. After incredible adventures in Australia, I became particularly interested in working through the issues related to teaching my students about Aboriginal art and culture. As an educator of pre-service art teachers, I am challenged to explore ways to sensitively teach my primarily White middle class students about Aboriginal visual culture objects, stories, and histories. This is difficult. I have been at a loss. I have been lost. In the words of Patti Lather (2007), "In theorizing distinctions between loss and lost in working toward research practices that take into account the crisis of representation, how can writing the other not be an act of continuing colonization?" (p. 13).

To work through this complex self- and other-directed process, I have revisited the notion of story telling in my own research. I use Vladimir Propp's (1928/1968) Morphology of the Folktale as a template and metaphor for understanding my immersion in Australian Aboriginal culture and for the dissemination of my research. Folk tales and myths are important to most Indigenous cultures as touchstones for passing knowledge to others, and it seemed appropriate for me to revisit Propp's methodology in order to position the tale as a primary signifier of cultural issues. In the tale, I situate myself as seeker. I leave home on the quest for acquisition of wisdom, and epistemologically situated myself a-la Lather (2007) as curious and unknowing:

In postfoundational thought, as opposed to the more typical sort of mastery project, one epistemologically situates oneself as curious and unknowing. This is a methodology of "getting lost," where we think against our own continued attachments to the philosophy of presence and consciousness that undergirds humanist theories of agency. Methodologically assuming no privileged signifier, no exclusivity, no priority or predominance, here is where the journey of thinking differently begins: moments in the politics of truth. (Lather, p. 9)

Using Propp's morphology as a template as I found myself a visitor to many skin groups, and I recognized many of his structures: I received well-intended interdictions, "Don't go there by yourself!" "Be very cautious!" and like the protagonists in many of Propp's folk tales, I violated these interdictions, was tested, met donors, acquired talismans, was led to the objects of my searches, and was marked physically and emotionally by my experiences.

This journey in Australia and other visits to First Nations people in Canada, to people in Brazil, Korea, and Japan are navigations across cultural and racial identities that cause me (and others) considerable epistemological and ideological conflicts. The use Propp's morphology results in a methodology that speaks initially through my voice, yet illuminates insights related to the intersection of my positionality with my sisters throughout the world. Autoethnographic methods fit naturally within this construction.

Ellis (2004) defines autoethnography as "research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political. Autoethnographic forms feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection portrayed in dialogue, scene, characterization, and plot" (p. xix).

The juxtaposition of many dialogues, scenes, characters, and plots over the past year have informed my thinking, teaching, and consequently, my research. One of the most significant events in my life this year was the shooting at NIU. I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to VCG readers all over the world who responded to the February 14, 2008 shooting tragedy at my home institution of Northern Illinois University with their e-mails, phone calls, and in-person hugs. While the tragedy was a local act of seemingly random violence, I have come to realize how the effects of such acts affect us globally.

Politics are at the center of most discussions in the United States as this journal goes to press (or should we use the term “unpress” when it’s a digital, online journal?). There isn’t a day that goes by without a flyer on my doorknob or an e-mail sharing the attributes of one of the candidates for president or vice president. This is an important election for the United States and the world is watching. The many feminist issues at the forefront of this U.S. election include abortion rights, sex education, equal pay for equal work, freedom of press and expression, and many others. This is the first time in the history of this country when a woman was considered for the presidency and the vice presidency. I am grateful to both of these pioneering women, Hillary Rodham Clinton and Sarah Palin for their courage to stand for election and thereby opening themselves to interrogation by the media, other politicians, and the public. Our questions to both parties are about their response to feminist issues and support for our sisters and brothers throughout the world.

Debbie

Hyphen-UnPress

As many of us can attest, we move through our lives with multiple identities; sharing a facet of ourselves with one group and a different facet with another. Our hyphenated-names signify many things and we should probably have several hyphens instead of only one. Our choice to hyphen our names was terribly important as an indicator that we are not losing our identity but rather always in the act of becoming our self. The hyphen indicates transition, self in the making. We were unwilling to give up our last names when we married because we identified as feminists, and for us the hyphen signified “feminist.” Another equally important reason was an aesthetic consideration – we thought we “sounded” better with at least two syllables instead of one in our last name. To be utterly truthful, however, we were tired of not being unique. Debbie was always one of many Debbie Smith’s in her universes, similar to both Karen and Boyd, which were also too common and made more common when combined. That’s probably why Debbie still uses the hyphen, even after she is not attached to the second part except through her children. Karen’s first name is trailed by her mother’s last name (yes, this was her mother’s father’s name), her father’s last name, and her husband’s last name.

The new sponsorship of VCG, *Hyphen-UnPress* is an attempt to create a signifier (see Figure 1) that honors our multiple un-press-ured and un-ironed selves; our multiple ways of being in the world and the multiple ways we think about ourselves and reveal our multiple selves to others. It acknowledges for Karen and for Debbie our acceptance of our own wrinkles and as cliché’ as it may be, we honor wrinkles as signs that we were successful in getting old enough to have them. We accept them, honor them, but we don’t necessarily have to like them!



Figure 1: *Hyphen-UnPress* logo.

Voice, Authority, and Agency

The possibilities inherent in the juxtaposition of methodologies and technologies, and most significantly, the questioning of epistemologies relating to voice, authority, and agency layered with post-colonial discourse is an important theme in this multimedia-rich issue of *Visual Culture & Gender*. There is self-searching and angst that the *VCG* manuscript revision process evokes, which also involves support and motivation for authors to reveal deep beliefs. *VCG* authors write about areas that are deeply personal, controversial, and political.

Leanne Levy uses text and video to present a collage of girls' voices, the story of *This Is My Body* unfolded from teenage girls brave enough to share meaningful experiences and secrets about what it means to be girls at this time of their lives. Through research and documentary video production, a group of Montreal, Canadian girls turn the camera on themselves and each other to explore issues related to body image, eating disorders, sexuality, cutting, and parenting.

Christine Liao's avatar co-authors with her their metamorphic journey in *Second Life*®. The avatar seeks to be admired and befriended, while Christine tries to disrupt the exaggerated hypersexuality of *Second Life*® adult social life by creating a gender ambiguous avatar.

Michelle Kraft shares her struggle with identifying as a feminist in the Christian culture that she situates herself with deep devotion. She thanked us (the co-editors of *VCG*), in her words, for "holding [her] feet to the fire" in terms of [her] failure to "insert [her]self" into the text." She stated,

I recognize that I was being a chicken. You see, I've asked my students to do a little soul searching on their own views of feminism and Christianity so that I could put them in print, but I failed to go out on that limb myself (sure, I've thought about it, but it didn't go down in print like theirs did). That's embarrassing, especially because I was at least somewhat aware of my own omission at the time--I just hadn't compared it to what I had asked these three women to do. ... There's something in me that made me want to write it in the first place so I have to pursue it, think about it, chew

on it, and do that same soul-searching that I asked of my students in reflecting upon their work. (M. Kraft, personal communication, March 28, 2008).

Mira Reisberg's essay and film explore the work of children's book artist Maya Gonzalez. Juxtaposing images from her personal history, art, and children's picture books, Reisberg shows how children's book artists contribute to the field of visual culture education.

Seija Ulkuniemi shares a photo-installation called *The Presence of the Absent – a Memory Game* (1998). This photo-installation poignantly gives readers glimpses into the multiple roles she plays in her life drama: a woman, a devoted art educator, a researcher, a wife, a friend, and a mother of three children. The result is an exploration of the fugitive borderline between private and public.

M. Pilar Viviente looks at a site-specific art installation in New York called SAVE NATURE-SAVE CULTURE (2006), a public garden maintained by volunteers and discusses issues about housing, graffiti, gender and sexuality. The installation addressed the issue of sustainability of community gardens.

Kryssi Staikidis revisits an earlier article in *VCG* (2006), broadening her original interpretation of the work of Maya artist, Paula Nicho Cúmez. We see Paula Nicho Cúmez talking in her own language about a series of five of her paintings. As Staikidis argues: "Privileging text, as a form for investigation in qualitative inquiry is a knowledge-generating system marked by ethnographic colonialism and Eurocentrism. In this presentation of Paula's work, we use video as a unique visual form and tool for qualitative inquiry. Through interviews and oratory, Paula describes her paintings."

Penelope Collet finds that master narratives of visual culture in Wales continue to exclude women's contribution in historical perspectives. The subtleties of language, as well as overt absences, make all the difference in the writing of history. The discounting of personal achievements and collective contributions of women is indeed political.

Our Vision for *VCG*



Karen and Debbie in Osaka, Japan, 11 August 2008

VCG encourages sharing of personal subjective experiences from a socio-political interpretation that challenges disenfranchisement based on intersections of the politics of gender, race, (dis)ability, and economic social status. *VCG* was envisioned as an accessible research journal and we are very proud of the quality of the articles in the current and past issues that focus on diverse issues of gender considered within cultural contexts. We are awed by the quality and content of the images we are able to share online with readers of the journal. We are delighted with the ways we can use new media to enhance the reporting of research highlight visual research. At the same time, we cannot afford to sit in our easy chairs and pat ourselves on the back (though we do occasionally and it feels good!). In a journal such as *VCG* that claims a feminist positionality, it is especially important to consider the merits and challenges of continuously emergent methodologies that vie for acknowledgment in the rapidly expanding constructions of worldwide research communities and communication technology. New methods of considering, doing, and reporting research as well as reconsidering the value of older methods that have been traditionally used by women are challenging for *VCG*

editors and reviewers. What are the criteria for assessing appropriate methodological techniques, research findings, and standards for emergent and/or technologically changing ideas of criteria? Sheri Klein (University of Wisconsin – Stout) challenged us to revisit these questions and as one result of her challenges, we have revised the Review Form we use for assessing submissions. Below we list the criteria in which three reviewers rate *VCG* submissions from excellent to inadequate

1. Fits the purpose of *VCG*. The purpose of the journal is to encourage and promote an understanding of how visual culture constructs gender in context with representations of race, age, sexuality, social units, and social class.
2. Clarity to an international readership
3. Succinct/Relevant
4. Exposes culturally learned meanings and power relations that surround the creation, consumption, valuing, and dissemination of images.
5. Conceptualization of topic
6. Insights on gender issues
7. Visual culture insights
8. Strength of argumentation
9. Coherence of organization
10. Knowledge of related “texts”
11. Clear research methods
12. Style of presentation
13. Grammar, structure
14. Relevant figures/images
15. APA reference style
16. Other (please specify)

We invite suggestions and comments about the review process as we continue to adjust, adapt, grow, and learn from our immersion in the process. We also invite you to share your ideas with us about the journal and to submit your own work for a future issue. Click on submission guidelines for further information. You can reach Debbie at debatart@niu.edu and Karen at kk-b@psu.edu.

We are very proud of this very special issue of *VCG*. For the first time, three of the articles include videostreaming as either a primary focus or as a supplement to the text. While some bugs have yet to be worked out, we are committed to challenging the limits of the journal form. We have also broken the language barrier that seems to be in place in so many journals. Spanish translations are now available of articles by Kryssi Staikidis in both the current 2008 volume and retroactively in her 2006 article. Her video, presented in this volume privileges the artist's voice in Spanish, and with English subtitles. In this, our third year of publication we are delighted to offer international voices, research, artwork, and ideas, and we hope this is a trend that will continue in future issues of *VCG*.

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