



Visual Culture & Gender • Vol. 9 • 2014

an annual peer-reviewed international multimedia journal

Karen Keifer-Boyd & Deborah Smith-Shank, editors • published by Hyphen-UnPress

VEILING AND LOOKING, UNVEILING AND HIDING (EDITORIAL 2014)

KAREN KEIFER-BOYD AND DEBORAH SMITH-SHANK

The act of looking ... is loaded—with power, with desire, with guilt, and with hope—and takes place within a complex and dynamic web of social rules and behavior. In particular, the look is embedded in relations of power. (Lau, 1993, p. 193)

We see the world not as it is, but rather like a palimpsest through the complex lenses of our cultural experiences, sometimes partially erased and of-ten veiled in ways that obscure and codify our understanding of the objects, people, and images we encounter. As Lau (1993) notes, these experiences are loaded with relations of power. In each of the articles in this year's volume, authors consider ways of looking and understanding themselves and others within the contexts of visual culture and gender. Clearly, their work conveys that "[t]he way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe," as John Berger's 1970s BBC series and influential book *Ways of Seeing* emphasized. These articles expose veils and unveil multiple and timely issues. They trouble the taken-for-granted and give us opportunities to reconsider our own participation in hegemony. Vincent Lanier (1982), an arts educator whose legacy brought attention to contextualized renderings of cultural meanings of everyday aesthetic experience, identified nine veils that filter how we perceive visual culture.

The mesh of the veils screens out as well as lets seep through interpretations based on our prejudices and biases formed from our experience and knowledge. Systemic ignorance is a societal veil that filters what we know and don't know. Feminist studies of epistemologies of ignorance ask why something is known through seeking to understand the practices that account for not knowing, which are "intertwined with practices of oppression and exclusion" (Tuana & Sullivan, 2006, p. vii). The veils we wear and the ways we unveil reveal our enforced, inscribed, and selected identities situated in socio-cultural landscapes.

In Marshall McLuhan's terms, the veil functions as both an "extension" and an "amputation" of the human body; furthermore, the veil provides the body with protection from the outside world, and it serves "as a means of defining the self socially." (Baer, 2007, para. 2 quoting McLuhan, 1994, p. 119).

Sarah Abu Bakr directly confronts the veil. She troubles non-Arab understandings of veils, weaving together two narratives of the hijab, one from a conducted interview and the other from memories, confronting her own and her respondent's memories of living with and challenging oversimplified notions of the hijab.

Each of the four male authors in VCG's volume 9 considers the notion of maleness, masculinity, and how male representations in culture and media impact our understanding of maleness.

[W]hereas the "natural" or default gender of a human being is man or masculinity, the prototypical gender for the image is generally perceived as feminine. As a consequence, sexuality can be seen as doubly gendered or overdetermined as female through its reification in "feminine" images. To construct an image as masculine, queer, or androgynous entails supplementing, obscuring, and dis-

torting a base-level feminine image so that it displays the characteristics of another gender. Thus if images are implicitly gendered as feminine, they can be altered and explicitly sexed as hyperfeminine or as transgender or butch, and so on. (Gentile, 2010, pp. 6-7)

In his article, **John Derby** provides an historic overview of how representations of mental disability in Western cultures rely on multiple and overlapping types of oppression. He unveils how patriarchal codification of disabilities, what he terms animality-patriarchy, implies an absolute difference between disabled and non-disabled people and is used to rationalize oppression.

Sharif Bey considers ways men use bodybuilding/posing/posturing as a veil in his autoethnographic study. He explores aesthetic experiences, both formal and performative, in order to deconstruct the visual archetypes of bodybuilding and their impact on formative notions of maleness.

Photography veils and unveils sexuality in **Joe Festa's** visual essay analyzing Wolfgang Tillmans's portraiture for *BUTT* magazine. Festa expands upon socially constructed notions of masculinity and femininity and illustrates how Tillmans's images represent a contemporary portrayal of gender.

Gary Johnson unveils the complexity of gendered images in superhero comics. In his study of perceptions of masculinity among 169 college male and female freshmen, ages 17-25, he demonstrates the omnipresent nature of graphic novels in male identity formation and conformation to a hegemonic perspective or expectation of masculinity.

At the beginning of the 20th century, W.E.B. DuBois's wrote of the metaphoric veil of Black people in the United States that renders their experiences invisible to White people, yet enables Black people a "second-sight" or "double-consciousness" in seeing their experiences from both behind the veil and through the veil with a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (1903, p. 31). This notion of veil as double-consciousness, of being able to see through race, ethnic, and

gendered lenses of lived experience that challenge socially dominant expectations of self, relations, work, research, and knowledge production, is addressed through 21st century art and research practices explored in two articles in this volume of VCG by Rodríguez-Cunill and Staikidis.

Inmaculada Rodríguez-Cunill unveils her own experience of contemporary workplace harassment and the transformation that came from her artmaking practice. She shares her experiences with psychological violence, surveillance, isolation, and harassment and the artworks that emerged as an unforeseen byproduct.

In the video and essay by **Kryssi Staikidis**, the third in a series of reflective scholarship featured in VCG, she uses decolonizing and indigenous research methodologies to unveil ways that long-term research within indigenous communities can conceptualize the presentation of relational experience in collaborative ethnographic work. Through video and text, she illustrates the nuanced dynamics of mentor-based instruction as a research model.

What can a veil enabling intersectional consciousness of race, gender, sexuality, and other positionalities or politics of identity unveil about one's own epistemologies of ignorance? Like the authors in VCG volume 9, we have asked this of ourselves as we reflect on our year since volume 8, identifying experiences we both had in which we could see from behind and through and at our layers of veils. We both traveled to New Zealand on different occasions in the past year and we use New Zealand as a shared context for two stories, one from each of us, that attempts to critically unveil a gendered experience of visual cultural awareness.

The authors in this year's VCG give us ways to think about the culturally or self-imposed screens, curtains, and veils we use to obscure, protect, and negotiate how we fit into and understand the worlds we inhabit. These articles take us on a journey of memory and geography as we reflect on the year that has passed.

Mothering Veils

When I (Debbie) was a little girl, my mother and other devout Catholic women wore veils on their heads when they went to church except at Easter, when it seemed that all women and girls wore (mostly) new and beautiful hats. Many of these colorful hats had small veils sewn on them to lightly touch their brows. I can't remember where or when I learned that it was a rule that women must wear something on their heads to enter the church, but when I grew from being a child to a young woman, my mother bought me a beautiful lacy mantilla to wear with my Sunday clothes.



Figure 1. The [website \(Faith, 2010\) linked to here](#) explains how to make mantillas such as this one.

I have been very fortunate to travel throughout the world and visit holy sites from many religious traditions, and, echoing my early training, I regularly bring a head covering in my backpack to use when needed to fit into the local cultural traditions with respect. But head coverings are not the only types of real and metaphoric veils I continue to wear.

In autumn 2014, I watched the first episode of the new [Dr. Who television series](#) and was enchanted by the lizard woman Vastra, a Silurian detective who shares a house with Jenny Flint, her former maid and current wife, in Victorian London. Vastra wears a veil that seems to vanish when the people with whom she engages forget that she is so very visually different. Vastra reminded me of the many faces I wear when I am with different groups of people. My mother/grandmother visage is different from my professor face; my backyard gardening face is far different from the one I wear when I am negotiating for funding for our department; but when I feel comfortable, my self-protective persona-veils seem to shift to allow the various parts of me to engage with the others.

As a researcher and a teller of tales, my job is to engage with metaphors and unpack their mysteries, starting with my own oftentimes veiled understanding. Engagement with multiple geographic sites and cultures has been an important component of my work and my joy, and this year was no different. The World Congress of the International Society for Education Through Art (InSEA) met in July 2014 in Melbourne, Australia, and I felt both a visitor and a participant engaging with this amazing international metropolis. My daughter, Bridget, and her husband, JD, accompanied me on the long flight into adventure, and when they were very busy stalking penguins, I was listening to the latest international research in art and culture education. The mom-me was barely present during this week of intense sharing of art education ideas. But mom-me quickly emerged as we made our way toward New Zealand for a week of holiday adventures.

Among our many adventures, two stand out for me. The first was our visit to Rotorua, which is known for bubbling mud pools, shooting geysers, natural hot springs, and Māori culture. As first-time tourists to the coun-

try, we participated in every tourist event we could find. In our attempt to understand the land and culture, we also had several opportunities to dialogue with local people, and we didn't want to leave Rotorua—but as huge fans of *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1994) and *The Hobbit* film trilogies (and, of course, the books), we really wanted to find the hobbit enclave!

Hobbiton is set in one of the most iconic and picturesque parts of New Zealand. It is located on a private sheep farm with real live sheep! We experienced the movie set in a fascinating two-hour guided tour during which we visited Bilbo's house and the Green Dragon Inn. We didn't see any hobbits in the shire, but our imaginations were thoroughly engaged.



Figure 2. Debbie in Hobbiton, New Zealand, July 2014.

Away from work obligations, and within a thoroughly magic landscape filled with adventures, I found myself having many long-silenced conversations with my adult daughter that helped me understand myself a little better and the multiple ways that our sometimes stormy relationship has shifted and changed over time. It was the gift of time together without the pressure of work, with amazing adventures and many, many conversations, that allowed us to become reacquainted with each other as adults. I cherish having had these opportunities to enable the veils to vanish.

Veils of Choice?

When I (Karen) married in 1976, it was socially expected for a woman in the United States to change her surname from her father's to her husband's surname as passed to him from his father's surname. Moreover, if married in a Christian church, it was considered proper to wear a veil to show respect and to symbolize subservient status to her husband, since scripture assigns to the husband the role of head of the household. Also expected was the repeating of vows that emphasized subservience to the husband and church. At birth, I was given my mother's surname for my middle name, and when I married, I decided to add my husband's name with a hyphen to the last name (my father's last name) I had grown up with, as it seemed part of my identity. I refused to wear a wedding veil, wrote my own vows, and planned an outdoor wedding.

In November 2013, my spouse and I had the great pleasure of attending our son's wedding in New Zealand. My son and his spouse were both dressed in tuxedos that they had had tailored in China where they met, fell in love, worked, and lived. They kept their birth names, wrote their own wedding vows, and did not veil their love for each other as they danced, held hands, and kissed in a seaside public area in the city of Wellington. From a balcony lining the apartments overlooking the sea, as the handsome couple danced, there was cheering and applause.



Figure 3. Ovid and Lunji dance after their wedding in Wellington, New Zealand, November 25, 2013.

Back in China, their married status was veiled in most contexts. Fortunately, on June 26, 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court repealed the misnamed 1996 Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), since it was really a defense against marriage of same-sex couples, so my son and his spouse are now legally recognized by the U.S. government as married and can lift their veil and come out as married in the United States. With the repeal of DOMA, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that all married couples, gay and heterosexual, must receive the same federal health, tax, Social Security, and other benefits in states that allow same sex marriage. DOMA's repeal not only legalizes gay marriage, but also allows married couples to legally live in the U.S. together, thereby, bring about immigration reform. A U.S. citizen now has the right to sponsor a same-sex spouse for a green card. At last, my son can live in the United States with his spouse. In September 2014, my son and his spouse moved from China to Oregon. My son was born and raised in Oregon and now returns from exile to his homeland with his spouse.

Like Debbie with her daughter and daughter's spouse, we, too, visited Rotorua and learned that in the 20th century, European settlers displaced Māori people and their way of life from the area. A portion of the Wai-o-Tapu area of the Taupo Volcanic Zone in Rotorua was made into a prison camp. The prison laborers were surprised when they first encountered the Pohuto Geyser, in which water erupts as high as 100 feet for 15 to 20 minutes, when they did laundry in a hot pool. The reaction of the soap triggers the geyser to erupt, a process used today for tourists who know to arrive at a specific time to see the spouting geyser. Veiled by the splendor of the geyser is a history of ecosystem destruction and disregard by European settlers of local knowledge of place. For example, chemical treatment of pasturelands in New Zealand for growth of grass to graze cattle and sheep raised for human consumption contributes to water pollution that risks both human and animal health (Smith, 2013).



Figure 4. As tourists, Karen and her family experience the Pohuto Geyser at Rotorua, New Zealand, erupting at its predicted time.

Veils, hopes, dreams, habits, cultures, and a lifetime of experiences inform the ways we engage with others and understand our multiple selves. It is our belief that this issue of VCG will facilitate some veil-lifting on issues as (seemingly) innocent as comic book heroes/demons and as difficult as workplace harassment.

References:

Baer, Nicholas (2007). Veil. *The University of Chicago :: Theories of Media :: Keyword Glossary*. Retrieved from <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/veil.htm>

Berger, John. (1972). *Ways of seeing*. London, England: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, Ltd.

DuBois, W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt). (1903). *The souls of Black folk*. Chicago, IL: McClurg.

Faith, Katherine. (2010, October 8). Sewing tutorial: How to make a lace chapel veil. [Blog Post]. Retrieved from http://ponderedinmyheart.typepad.com/pondered_in_my_heart/2010/10/how-to-make-a-lace-chapel-veil.html

Lau, Grace. (1993). Confessions of a complete scopophiliac. In Pamela Church Gibson & Roma Gibson (Eds.), *Dirty looks: Women, pornography, power* (pp. 192-206). London England: BFI.

Gentile, Kathy Justice. (2010). *Sexing the look in popular visual culture*. Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars.

Hunter, E. Anne. (2008-2014). Catholic church hair covering etiquette. *Opposing Views*. Retrieved from <http://people.opposingviews.com/catholic-church-hair-covering-etiquette-2970.html>

Lanier, Vincent. (1982). *The arts we see: A simplified introduction to the visual arts*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

McLuhan, Marshall. (1994). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Smith, Huhana. (2013). Rae ki te rae/Face to face. Essay accompanying Huhana Smith's art exhibition *Rae ki te rae/Face to face*, City Gallery Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand. Retrieved from <http://www.huhana-smith.com/peer-reviewed-books/visual-projects/rae-ki-te-rae-face-to-face>

Tolkien, J. R. R. (John Ronald Reuel). (1994). *The lord of the rings: The fellowship of the ring*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Tuana, Nancy, & Sullivan, Shannon. (2006). Introduction: Feminist epistemologies of ignorance. *Hypatia*, 21(3), vii-ix.