Visual Culture Tapestries and Woven Voices: Mothers and Mothering and More

Smith-Shank—Keifer-Boyd

Woven Voices: Hyphen-UnPress Editorial

Every year new advances in user-friendly technology allow us to expand the limitations of traditional print journals. Volume 4 offers an "architecture of participation" (O'Reilly, 2004, ¶ 1), i.e., a new space for exchanges among the readers of *Visual Culture & Gender* (*VCG*). You are invited to record or write text to share with others concerning the issues raised by authors in volume 4 of *VCG*. We would like to hear your response to the articles, as well as what areas are of concern and interest. Your ideas will guide submissions, criteria for reviewing, and our editorial decisions. We have created the warp and weft for you to weave your voice to form a varied and intricate *Visual Culture & Gender* tapestry using a Web 2.0 application, *VoiceThread*.

Visual Culture & Gender, volume 4, *VoiceThread* at
http://www.emitto.net/visualculturegender/vol4_toc.htm

Below is how to participate in visual culture and gender woven voices:

1.   **Register** with *VoiceThread* at http://voicethread.com with an email and password, add an image if you'd like. It is free to register and to use *VoiceThread*.

2.   After you register with *VoiceThread*, go to http://voicethread. com/#u438826.b613345.i3265625 or click on the **comment button to sign** in the *VoiceThread* on the *Visual Culture & Gender* (*VCG*) volume 4 webpage.

3.   Click "comment" and then the **"record" button** to record your voice message.

4.   You can listen to your recording before you decide to save or cancel. If you **save it,** you can also delete it later.

5.   If you have **questions** email Karen at kk-b@psu.edu. There are instructions at *VoiceThread* to record with your telephone if you do not have a built-in mic in your computer. It will take a few minutes for your icon to show up on the *VCG* webpage. A **refresh** to your browser, or quit and reopen, will be a fast way for your icon to show up for you and others to click on it and listen to what you recorded.

6.   Begin your recording with your name, the article or issue you are responding to, and the date of your recording. We offer prompts related to the articles in *VCG* volume 4 to generate stories and to stimulate dialogue amongst readers of *VCG*. We encourage you to **share stories** about visual culture and gender from a feminist perspective.

- Share a story about aging, especially one that is different from stereotypes of aging and exposes issues of power and privilege.
- Share a story about becoming, or of constructing subjectivity, or of intersubjectivity.
- Select a family photo and share a story of family.
- Share a story about mothering, especially one that is different from stereotypes of mothering.
- Share a critique of patriarchal visual culture.
- Share a story about masculinity, especially one that is different from stereotypes of masculinity.

Hyphen-UnPress Editorial

In volume 4, we open our editorial with excerpts from some of our email exchanges over the past year, because it's important to us for our readers to have access not only to content, but also to the methods we use to think through the content and possibilities that are available to us as editors of a unique online journal.

Editorial Exchanges on Mothering

Hi Deb, *It is interesting that there seems to be several cfp* [call for papers] *about mothering, as well as a surge of books and artworks concerning mothering. The focus seems to be on mothering as an action rather than motherhood as a static identity. Recently, a Penn State MFA alumnus sent me her essay about her artwork in which she created a baby out of a box and pillows. The long-term performance/installation artwork began on impulse when Erika Swinson "saved" a box teetering on a dumpster. Her action generated reflection on why she had the impulse of caring about the box as if it was a baby. This was the moment that Karen baby was conceived, although not born and named until later. Erika was invited to write a chapter for a forthcoming book by artists whose work addresses mothering. Her chapter is titled,* In Search of Mother, *and is about constructing Karen Baby's identity, as well as her own changing identity in playing good and bad mother in caring for a fictional baby.*

Debbie: *Here's one I got yesterday. What's going on????*

Karen: *Maybe it is a baby boom thing in which many of the baby boomers now have adult children and are writing about their past 20+ years of mothering.*

Debbie: *I wonder if there is a new paradigm in parenting? I'm sure that Morgan is doing it differently and certainly better than I did.*

Karen: *The issues and perspectives, such as Jennifer Eisenhauser's* (M)othering [2009, in volume 4 of VCG], *are very different from the Dr. Spock how-to-be-a-good-mother manuals that baby-boomers' mothers read and either followed or felt guilty for not following the advice of Dr. Spock (1946). How do we respond to our nurturing (or lack of it) from our own mothers? What do we elect to include in our own parenting and what do we avoid like the plague as we reflect on the lifelong emotional scars our upbringing incised?*

Debbie: *Time. The time to reflect.*

Editorial Voice: *This editorial literally captures Hyphen Un-Press exchanges of Debbie and Karen, Smith-Shank—Keifer-Boyd. Over the past year, we noticed many call for papers, conference themes, and publications in process concerning mothers, mothering, mother identity, and locational mothering. For example,* Femspec, *an interdisciplinary feminist journal dedicated to science fiction sought submissions for "Kick *ss Moms," a special issue dedicated to women who balance lives of adventurer and caregiver. Demeter Press will publish an edited collection by Jasjit Kaur Sangha in 2011 on South Asian Mothering.*

This year it seemed that we were also overwhelmed with invitations to submit articles about mothering. We may have noticed the plethora of new books and journals on this topic because, as mothers of adult children, we are personally and culturally immersed in roles that juggle daughterhood, motherhood, and for Debbie, grandmother-hood. Or, as we mentioned in our e-mail communication, it could be that the baby-boomer generation finally has the time to reflect on parenting. Or perhaps it's simply time for a new look, with *hoods* removed, at a very old practice. "Mother" doesn't have to be a gendered term. Many men have picked up the challenge of mothering and we want to include them in this editorial as we reflect on the joys and tears associated with this role. Mothers often find themselves at different life stages and with unforeseen challenges with little, if any, preparation scrambling for advice. Turning to popular child-rearing books is a popular pastime for many mothers.

By the early 1950s, Benjamin Spock's (1946) psychoanalytic

revelations about child-rearing practices, published in his book *Baby and Child Care*, became very popular. By 1998, the book had sold more than 50 million copies and had been translated into 38 languages. This one book was a touchstone for more than one generation of parents and teachers! Karen remembers seeing this book on her mother's bookshelf and with her brother's help, interviewed her mother to see what effects it had on her family dynamics. The audio excerpt from the interview (click on the image below to hear the audio) also includes one of many narratives about Karen by her family on how she could not be confined as a baby, while her older brother stayed within the confines of even a blanket spread on the ground. The story of Karen escaping the baby buggy is included in the audio, but there are many other stories with the same theme such as literally dismantling her playpen by taking the bars off. Her older brother referred to this as a jail-break.

Similarly, **Mindi Rhoades** (2009), in this volume 4, provides examples of her own, and other educators and artists, who reconstruct family narratives with digital technologies for self-reflection on the stories of self by others that in one way or another profoundly impacted their subjectivity. Similar to Bernadette Flynn, whose use of hypermedia to deconstruct, as discussed by Rhoades (2009), the audio below creates "another story in the background unsettling any unified family narrative" (Flynn, 2002, p. 11). Click on the image below and listen for Karen's mother's interpretation that she followed Dr. Spock's advice of loving the child but also leaving the child alone, which was a controversial idea of permissiveness in the 1950s. This perception is challenged by her brother's memory that parental oversight did not provide the permissiveness those opponents to Dr. Spock's advice feared.

While Spock's ideas had an unprecedented influence on child rearing during our lifetimes, many mothers continue to explore other avenues as they set out on their parenting adventures. Church teachings, family lore, as well as loving and horror stories from parents, grandparents, and in-laws inform parenting practices, yet these well-intended interdictions are not always effective, nor are they always heartening.

Where then, do we turn as we maneuver the labyrinth of parenthood, adulthood, and our inevitable aging? Many of the authors in this volume share life journeys and we believe that their stories can inform our own as we continue to develop our life stories.

Helping Older African American Women Who are Homeless through Visual Images and Creative Strategies describes a participatory action research project. The authors, **Olivia Washington, Holly Feen-Calligan, and David Moxley** share their *Leaving Homelessness Intervention Research Project*. Through interventions of visualization, new representations of self, and other creative strategies for empowerment and agency, the story of ZoAnne provides a depth of insight into one of the most challenged populations in the United States at this time; older African American women who are particularly vulnerable to homelessness.

Real life grandmothers are finding a second life in virtual worlds. **Christine Ballengee Morris**'s arts-based narrative inquiry uses a conversation/play format to interrogate her relationship with her *Second Life* avatar. She plays with notions of time, aging, and the ideal self through social presence theory (Egoyan, 2007) and virtual aesthetics as theorized by Lev Manovich (2005). Christine "glances at the clock and realizes that this self-exploration must end," using an afternoon in a rocker in front of her computer as a real time and place literary device for readers' self-reflection on the passing of time and social assumptions about aging (p. 30).

Jennifer Eisenhauser's *(M)othering* is a one-year visual diary that begins with the birth of her daughter, she later adopts from China, to introspection about herself as m/other, and to speculation about her daughter's birth-mother. A woman's identity changes when she becomes a mother. Her focus narrows as it also expands. For a time, the label *mother* dominates other potential ways of self-knowing and this identity

is reflected in the eyes of others as they see her as not only a female person, but as Mother; patriarchal perceptions place her in a special category that is more than (or no longer) simply *woman*.

As our bodies' age and our children grow, our perceptions of ourselves and others' perceptions of us change. Moving from the joys and struggles when our children were tots, to the maturity of being mothers of adult children, we often find it poignant to reflect on the circuitous pathways of the past and the roads ahead. We take great joy in our children's wise choices and hope that we've given them strategies, tools, and the confidence to weather life's storms. The terrible twos and threes and fours were struggles, but from Debbie's vantage as a grandparent, those sometimes terrifying and often awkward moments are joyous memories. It's much easier from the distance of time to smile at bed wetting, episodes of public vomiting, and the powerful word "no!" but we still get goose bumps remembering the high fevers, broken bones and hearts. We remember the disquiet we felt as our children moved from our care into school and the co-parenting with teachers as we were challenged to teach our children respect for self, property, and authority, with the caveat to avoid strangers and other sites of postmodern danger.

We often cringe just thinking about the dangers our children encountered as teenagers. **Maria Robinson-Cseke** reminds us of those days in her exploration of a Deleuzian notion of subjectivity as a continual sequence of becomings in the relational aggressive behavior of high school girls in the popular film, *Mean Girls* (Michaels & Waters, 2004). She theorizes how the film characters enter stages of becoming animal, monster, and woman as they mature. She shows us that becoming mean is especially visible with girls in the micro-society of the school environment.

As mothers of grown children, we struggle with guilt as our children cope with difficult relationships in and out of school, suffer depression, run away, are imprisoned, addicted, attempt or are successful at suicide. What could we have done differently and better? When bad things happen to adult children, we question our methods and parenting behaviors. Guilt leads to reflection as we pour over photos and memories to find reasons for our children's dysfunction. Guilt also may lead us to find caring professionals who ease, but never fully erase, the burdens of

guilt. Birth, babies, and motherhood are universal concepts, although each relationship carries its own special challenges and joys, and they vary tremendously. We learn that there is not a book, tale, or family story that can be used as a magic wand to fix, mend, or satisfy each situation.

From a deconstruction/reconstruction process of arts-based narrative inquiry, **Mindi Rhoades** juxtaposes dominant discourses of ideal families with family narratives that are perhaps more representative of the diversity of family dynamics in her re-reading/re-writing of her family photos for what is absent and unspoken. Rhoades calls our attention to the theatrical staging of many family photos of events and vacations/travel, and argues that the staged moment for the photo becomes ritualized and assumes naturalization into *the family*. She takes readers behind the stage to learn hypermediated strategies used by artists Jo Spence, Bernadette Flynn, and Glen Ligon to deconstruct family performances.

Alice Lai and **Lilly Lu**, in their interrogation of an online course on patriarchal images of women from The Paleolithic Period to the Roman Empire, offer us strategies that can be used in feminist pedagogy. We feel that they may also be used to reflect on and critique ways that we understand mothering, that is by (a) sharing and comparing ideas, (b) recognizing cognitive dissonance, (c) co-constructing knowledge with others, (d) assessing these proposed constructions, and (e) applying newly constructed knowledge. Lai and Lu interpret their case study from third wave feminism and feminist pedagogy perspectives, interfused with an interaction analysis model developed by social psychologists, Gunawarden, Lowe, and Anderson (1997). We hope readers will use *VCG's VoiceThread* to not only share mothering stories but also to use these techniques in order to develop the discourse and construct new knowledge.

Judy Chicago and **Donald Woodman** gave us permission to republish an article with a beautiful picture of Judy as Eve (with the tools of her trade). The story of censorship that accompanies the article is provocative and gives us ideas for future articles, artwork, and editorials. We wonder if the censorship is due to the age of the model, her partial nudity, or the photo's metaphor. It certainly was not due to the outstanding skills of the photographer.

Finally, reminding us that this journal considers other genders,

Stefan L. Brandt reviews Monika Pietrzak-Franger's (2007) book, *The Male Body and Masculinity: Representations of Men in British Visual Culture of the 1990s*. He points out that despite an emphasis on the male physique in contemporary culture, the male body has remained "a *terra incognita* as far as the depth of analysis in academic literature is concerned" (p. 71). Pietrzak-Franger's analysis of masculinity as a social construction in the representations of the male body in the British visual culture of the 1990s draws on media theory of transtextual intermedial relations, which views potential for confining constructs at the borders of the confines where the system of representation is unstable and the dynamics of intersubjectivity lives. One group of works discussed in the book and book review "seek to dissolve not only the dichotomies of gendered thinking but also the imagined unity of the body itself" (Brandt, p. 73).

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Top photo: *Lee Smith and Her Daughters*. Debbie Smith-Shank (center) with her sister, Susanne Smith Roley (Left), and mother, Leona Spoltman Smith (right) at a family reunion in Sidney, Ohio, 2009.

Bottom photo: *Lenore Keifer and Her Daughter and Son*. Karen Treat Keifer-Boyd (left) with her mother, Lenore Treat Keifer (center), and brother, Roy L. Keifer (right) at Lenore's 88th birthday party in Ohio on August 9, 2009.

Lee Smith and Her Daughters

Lenore Keifer and Her Daughter and Son

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