

Viewing as Text: Theorizing Visual Literacies in Introduction to Gender and Women's Studies

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Abstract

This paper examines the critical role that visual literacies often play in the introductory course to Gender and Women's Studies. Drawing on transnational feminist scholarship, the author argues that theorizing visual literacies can provide a valuable entry point into considering the material and ideological stakes of feminist knowledge production.
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Résumé

Cet article examine le rôle critique que joue souvent les compétences médiatiques dans le cours d'introduction aux Études sur le genre et les femmes. En s'appuyant sur des recherches féministes transnationales, l'auteure soutient que la théorisation des compétences médiatiques peut fournir un point d'entrée précieux pour aborder le contenu et les enjeux idéologiques de la production du savoir féministe.
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Introduction

In the first Gender and Women's Studies (GWS) course I took as an undergraduate student, visual texts featured prominently in the curriculum. During the class' exploration of global human rights violations, we watched documentaries about rape culture, female genital surgeries, and the relationship of advertising to body image. Though exposing students to visual culture was not an explicit aim of the course as articulated by the professor or the syllabus, I remember noting that visual texts seemed to be significant to the class. While I entered the course expecting to learn about the histories and experiences of "women" as discrete entities, I realized the field considers and critiques institutions through which ideas about gender circulate. As a student, I did not originally connect the production, dissemination, and interpretation of visual culture to the ways in which it is implicated in the circulation of gendered ideologies as well as the assertion of and resistance to power (Mirzoeff 2011). However, in thinking back to my own introduction to the field, I maintain that processes of interpreting visual texts could themselves have been something to interrogate in relation to the feminist praxis my classmates and I were learning at the time.

Years later, in planning to teach my first Gender and Women's Studies introductory course, I included several contemporary feminist artworks I found compelling as an undergraduate student. I was excited to incorporate visual art into my syllabus because I found it engaging and I thought it would enable discussions of visual complexity that were missing from the course that introduced me to GWS, in which the visual texts on the syllabus were more closely aligned with "truth-telling" genres such as "photojournalism, testimonials, documentary cinema and theatre, editorials, ethnography, and academic scholarship" (Hesford 2011, 19). Whereas the discussion of the aforementioned documentaries centred around their content, I imagined that teaching texts such as Carrie Mae Weems' (1987-1988)

Ain't Jokin' series and Judy Chicago's (1971) *Red Flag* could serve as exciting and evocative entries into discussions about the process through which artists raise a multitude of feminist concerns such as internalized oppression, embodiment, racism, sexism, and power. At the time, I felt that attending to the process of producing visual art might provide students with insight into the ways in which artists have explored feminist praxis, which could, in turn, inspire their own. While I still maintain that feminist visual art can provide a helpful point of entry into discussions of power and difference, I have also come to think that it is not just the texts themselves, but also the ways of looking at them, that can function as critical sites of interpretation within Gender and Women's Studies.

A helpful example of the kind of skill set that an introduction to the discipline might enable is available in Lisa Cacho's (2012) analysis of media coverage of post-Katrina New Orleans wherein she interprets how photojournalistic images of the hurricane's aftermath are bound up in racial discourse. Specifically, Cacho reads journalist descriptions of white survivors as "finding" loaves of bread while black survivors "looted" them as evidencing a broader set of politics that make said interpretations possible. Noting rather than disputing this discrepancy, Cacho's concern is with what ideas and assumptions lend credence to these forms of legibility—that is, what ways of seeing and knowing conflate blackness with criminality and whiteness with lawful survival. To be clear, her line of inquiry hinges not on discerning "correct" from "incorrect" interpretations, but rather on considering the ideologies that render any interpretation possible. Cacho's analysis offers a rich example of the kinds of theoretical work that could take place in Introduction to Gender and Women's Studies. Instead of establishing interpretive frameworks that endow visual texts with inherent meaning, students might consider "visuality" as a constant flux of ideas, stakes, and material effects bound up in processes of interpretation (Mirzoeff 2011).

Because all visual texts require the deployment of some kind of visual literacy, whether explicitly acknowledged or not, pedagogical approaches to visuality need not necessarily revolve around selecting "good" texts over "bad" ones; rather, instructors and students might foreground an interrogation of the relationships between seeing and knowing as central to femi-

nist praxis. In developing this line of inquiry, and as I will demonstrate through the visual texts I selected for this essay, it is important to note that interpreting visual texts depends on being attentive to their genres and learning how to trace patterns in the treatment of visual texts across genres. Human rights documentaries and contemporary feminist artwork, for example, emerge in different contexts that inform the frames available for interpretation. At the same time, the ways in which those in power maintain authority by insisting on and enabling certain kinds of knowledge production may transcend visual genres. Thus, I argue that increasing the capacity for critical approaches to visual literacy involves not only developing nuance around form, but also an attentiveness to the interpretive processes that exceed them.

Further, a critical theorization of visual literacy carries the capacity to unsettle another desire I first noticed as a student—the idea that if I could only become more completely informed about the state of oppression of women around the world, I would be able to present a compelling case for a feminist education. I remember thinking that if, through the texts and discussions I encountered in class, I could assemble a comprehensive picture of the ways in which people's oppressions were connected transnationally, the products of my learning in Gender and Women's Studies could prove to be the most useful. I saw these connections as especially crucial to understanding and confronting suffering, which I understood to inform both the origin and purpose of the field.

Reflecting back, years later, I wonder why this desire to "see all" was one so firmly associated with my fantasized imperative to enact feminist praxis effectively. On the metaphorical level, the impulse toward complete and encyclopedic knowledge bears troubling resemblances to the *modus operandi* of imperialist praxis that maps and taxonomizes land and life to enact oppression (Haraway 1984; Mirzoeff 2011; Willinsky 1998). Considering the role of visuality described here, it seems especially important to interrogate how visual texts help us to understand and address global problems using feminist frameworks. While it is possible to frame documentaries about the experience and victimization of women across the world (such as the ones I watched in my own introduction to the field) as a way of knowing and possibly linking geographically

disparate oppressions, a critical theorization of visuality as a discourse can help to illuminate what is involved in understanding and framing these texts in the first place as well as considering whose interests and systems of power particular interpretations might serve. Through this kind of praxis, Gender and Women's Studies instructors and students might reflexively consider how the practice of viewing as a mode of interpretation actively shapes feminist knowledge production.

Transnational Visualities

To offer an example of where a richer, more complex framework for considering visuality might have been useful, I return to a moment during the introductory course I taught several years ago. I assigned Shirin Neshat's 1996 photograph *Speechless* along with the accompanying caption from the feminist art textbook in which my copy of the photograph appeared (180-181). The photograph is a black and white close-up of a person's face, only half of which is visible in the frame. The subject's expression does not convey tears, a smile, a furrowed brow, or a grimace—to me, it has always appeared to be emotionally ambiguous. To the right of the face is a veil and an object, which can easily be mistaken for an earring, but, upon closer inspection, is revealed to be the silver barrel of a gun. It is unclear who is holding the gun, but it is unmistakably pointed out toward the viewer. As it developed, Neshat overlaid the photograph with Persian script.

On my introduction of this photograph in previous classes, most students expressed concern that they were not able to read the writing, yet they remained confident in their ability to make sense of its content. On their visual reading, the photograph clearly depicted a woman who was “being oppressed”; the evidence, they claimed, was her sad, somber expression. When pushed to elaborate, many of these students cited the presence of the veil as additional evidence of her oppression and speculated that someone else was holding the gun as a way to threaten the woman, even though the barrel is pointed at the photographer/viewer.

Perhaps predictably, these interpretations bear notable similarities to those that Frantz Fanon (1967) critiqued within the context of French concerns about women who wore the veil in colonial Algeria. Fanon explained that French colonists of Algeria framed the veil as problematic because it obscured their ability to gaze

directly upon women's bodies rather than the garments covering them. From the vantage of colonial epistemologies, the visibility of women is equated with freedom. Within such a colonizing logic, the qualities of freedom are not only determined by those who do not experience them, but those same qualities are configured according to what is visually available to those looking at bodies that are not their own. In this dynamic, the imperative to see in a particular way stands in for the capacity to see at all and this universalization of a specific visuality functions as an both an expression of power and a means through which seeing subjects constitute themselves *as* selves in relation to the “others” that they see. Because the justifications for this dynamic are tautological, the “dialogic processes of looking and being seen” remains uninterrogated (Hesford and Kozol 2005, 11).

In assigning Neshat's photograph, I was well aware that my students' responses might mirror the dynamics Fanon describes. I expected them to be well-schooled in what Wendy Hesford and Wendy Kozol (2005) describe as “the representational politics of pity” that render veiled women as automatically oppressed and in need of saving (1). Anticipating such visual interpretations as a starting point, I hoped that, through discussion and reflection, students might learn to contextualize their own understandings and enactments of visuality in relation to imperialistic solipsism and also speculate on what it may entail for meaning to be inaccessible to them as people who expect to be able to access all cultural meanings through a dominant and uncritical lens. Through facilitating conversations about the relationship between knowledge production and the interpretation of visual texts, I intended to draw from the work of scholars who interrogate the ways in which both the production and reception of visual texts functions within a broader ideological system in which modes of viewing are historically contingent. For example, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994) provide examples of the role of both documentary and narrative cinema within broader nation-building projects during European imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (2003) also attend to this historical context by tracing the ways in which visuality operates within traditions of ethnographic cinema that established a Eurocentric perspective as neutral and non-Western bodies and

practices as exotic and “other.” Wendy Hesford (2011) shares a set of concerns regarding the ways in which deployments of such visualities can re-entrench problematic power dynamics within human rights discourse, casting the viewer and viewed as savior and victim respectively. With access to texts such as these, I prepared to trouble any connotations of femininity or other-ness with oppression and to encourage students to consider how their understandings of themselves related to the interpretations they made.

On the day that my class discussed this photograph, however, one student raised his hand and clarified that the text covering the woman’s face was Persian, not Arabic, as the art textbook asserted. He did not translate the text into English or offer any input otherwise. The moment of his intervention presented an ideal opportunity for reflecting on visual literacies that, in retrospect, I wish I had been more prepared to facilitate. At the time, however, I became stuck in the disjuncture between the visual interpretations I expected my students to make and the intervention of this one particular student. I originally hoped that Neshat’s work would enable a discussion on Islamophobic interpretations, particularly why it is important to consider the ways in which access to cultural meaning is always limited given imperialist traditions that presume absolute knowledge. Yet, in the moment, I encountered considerable challenge regarding my own limited ways of seeing and what it might mean for someone who is supposed to perform “expertise” in her field to demonstrate incomplete knowledge as a praxis rather than failure. What meanings could have emerged, for example, from a contextualization of that moment as exemplary of the shifting and incomplete nature of visual literacy? What questions might have emerged if I had been prepared to explicitly frame the moment as representing both ethnography and an effort at its deconstruction? For even within my desire to generate an environment in which interpretations of the visual are always up for debate, my pedagogical stance at the time depended on my students’ ability to read (or not read) in ways that were both predictable and coherent to me. In the moment when my student challenged the description of the script in Neshat’s photograph, the gap itself—between not only *what* but also *the ways* in which my student could see that I and many of his classmates could not—presented a valuable site for deconstruction of the means through

which subjects arrive at knowledge of themselves and others.

Incompleteness in Critical Visual Praxis

As is evident in my recounting of teaching Neshat’s *Speechless*, an important aspect of developing a critical approach toward visual literacy is noting the impossibility of fulfilling the imperialist project of being able to see, and therefore know, all. John Willinsky (1998) describes this imperative as an “encyclopedic urge” that reflects both literal imperial practices of attempting to gather comprehensive knowledge and also the belief that it is possible and beneficial to do so (73). In countering tendencies that frame knowledge production as ever able to “encompass the known world,” a commitment to incompleteness can call attention to imperialist solipsism and the ways in which multiple modes of knowing can co-exist (73). To be clear, I am employing incompleteness as a critical concept in several ways: 1) as a descriptor of the *means* with and through which students produce knowledge; 2) in reference to the enactment and theorization of educational praxis; 3) as a way of referencing the construction of subjectivities in relation to and as mediated by visual literacies; and 4) as a way of describing elements of visual literacies and texts themselves. A commitment to incompleteness allows instructors and students to locate gaps in epistemologies that rely on pragmatism and reason whilst serving as complicit extensions of empire. As Trinh T. Minh-ha (1990) puts it, “On one hand, truth is produced, induced, and extended according to the regime in power. On the other, truth lies in between all regimes of truth” (76). Her suggestion that power produces truth at the same time that truth exceeds power not only locates truth as multiple, but also troubles the coherence of any claim to absolute truth.

An example of an introductory text that instructors and students can use to explore incompleteness is Mona Hatoum’s (1988) video installation *Measures of Distance*. Within this piece, Hatoum layers an audio recording of an Arabic conversation between herself and her mother in which they are discussing the making of the piece with a voiceover of Hatoum reading her mother’s letters, which are translated into English. The letters also appear on the screen as Arabic script along with photographs Hatoum has taken of her mother, including many in the shower. The very form of the piece

suggests that no amount of translation will ever be complete, for even those who are able to understand both Arabic and English find themselves unable to access any component of the text in a way that is not always already intersecting with and interrupted by the others. Hatoum's decision to layer multiple visual and audio texts on top of one another suggests multiple points of access to meaning at the same time that it refuses the possibility of a comprehensive interpretation. In a direct sense, Hatoum offers opportunities to think of visual literacies as always partial, incomplete, and contingent on the viewer's relation to the text at each moment of engagement.

While considering Hatoum's refusal to grant a straightforward message may help students to problematize their desires for complete understandings, it is also possible to explore incomplete visual literacies in relation to texts that may be more closely aligned with realism, evidence, or clarity. An example of one such text is Jean Kilbourne's (2002) *Killing Us Softly*, a film often included in introductory courses in Gender and Women's Studies that purports to provide a clear, universal message about the impact of sexist advertising on women. This film offers several opportunities for considering the dynamics of visual knowledge production for it is a text that actively reflects on other visual texts (i.e. print advertisements) and, in doing so, models a mode of visual literacy that frames sexist advertising as detrimental to women. Though Kilbourne at first frames the advertisements as sexist according to her own lens, she quickly generalizes her interpretations to those that all women should share. While screening a slideshow of women in the advertisements she discusses, Kilbourne (2002) says: "The first thing the advertisers do is surround us with the image of ideal female beauty so we all learn how important it is for women to be beautiful, and exactly what it takes" (*Killing Us Softly*). Here Kilbourne implies that the audience of her lecture will understand her critique even before she makes it because it is part of their known experiences. Her use of "us" and "we" links Kilbourne and her audience together in a way that emphasizes a common oppression at the same time that it underscores the purpose of the film—to provide a specific, critical methodology for engaging with visual texts. For students who are watching the film in a classroom, the invitation to share in Kilbourne's interpretation is clear. And yet, despite the film's didacticism, it is

still possible to interpret the images Kilbourne critiques in multiple ways as well as theorize the epistemological processes at play throughout the film. In discussing the film in an introductory class, then, it could prove fruitful to think critically about *how* Kilbourne locates and contextualizes what she sees in advertising as well as how students themselves relate to the critical visual literacy she models. Just as students could benefit from considering what elements render interpretation of some texts difficult, they might do well to think about what makes texts that may seem easier to interpret make sense or require less interpretive effort. In the case of *Killing Us Softly*, this critical approach could involve questioning what assumptions and ideologies make Kilbourne's critique sensible.

If we can think of visual texts along a spectrum of more to less legible and if such intuitive understandings are at work in the very selection of texts we include in our introductory courses, then it is important for instructors to explicitly foster an awareness of visual knowledge production as bearing political importance for feminist struggles for justice. As Mehre Khan (2007) explains, "If racial and ethnic identities are primarily imagined, constructed, theorized, naturalized, and personalized within the realm of the visual, recognizing the slippages and inconclusiveness of visual imagery allows students and instructors to accept the unbridgeable gaps of intercultural understanding" (327). The critical potential of incompleteness Khan references is inseparable from a framing of visibility itself as contested and subject to incomplete interpretations. This epistemological incompleteness operates not as a signal of failure on the part of instructors or students, but rather as a means through which to formulate critiques of systems that produce both "differences" and the means by which they are measured. The "gaps," then, and the ways that they are "unbridgeable" are neither fixed nor the cause for nihilistic claims that knowledge, which cannot be fully attained, is not worth pursuing. Rather, moments in which knowledge seems to be partial are locations for Gender and Women's Studies teachers and students to question knowledge production. As Trinh (2013) posits, "What is 'new' is not so much to be found in new products, concepts, and images but in the possibility of a new seeing... The question is not only 'What do you see?' but 'With what eyes do you see?'" (136). The impulse toward encyclopedic knowledge can register as

both problematic and absurd, for, as Trinh implies, becoming attentive to power involves developing nuanced understandings of that which informs one's own perspective. By developing a more reflexive analysis of the visual literacies employed in the classroom, Gender and Women's Studies students can carefully relate (rather than impose) their processes of understanding to alternative possibilities for seeing and knowing and become more clear about when and why it is difficult to do so.

Theorizing Ambivalences

Developing a critical analysis of visual literacy involves not only becoming attentive to the ways in which people enact dominance through the interpretation of visual texts, but also of the ways in which people have resisted and subverted them. For example, Fatimah Tobing Rony (1996) introduces the idea of "the third eye" as a means of thinking through solipsistic constructions of viewing in which visualities are construed as always in relation to an imperial self (213). As she explains it, the third eye confounds visuality as manifested within a simple subject/object binary, for it "turns on a recognition: the Other perceives the veil, the process of being visualized as an object, but returns the glance" (213). Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011) introduces a similar formulation in the idea of "countervisuality" as "that picturing of the self or collective that exceeds or precedes subjugation to centralized authority" within Western hegemony (23-24). As tools for identifying how imperialist technologies grant or deny subjectivity, these concepts offer a way to consider alternatives to the imperialist gaze that, importantly, are not reifying.

The recuperation of the other's capacity to actively intervene in the interpretive frames that cast her/him as incapable of such a response does not reference a means of resistance that is essentially "other," but rather a reconfiguration of an imperialist apparatus that groups disparate people and experiences as both already similar to one another and also inherently inferior to imperial subjects. In other words, by exercising the third eye or employing counter-visualities, subjects can engage the apparatus of visuality that constructs "otherness" as necessarily inferior and also resist it by returning the gaze in a manner that indicates knowledge of its functions. Notably, such forms of visuality resist the ready assimilation by subjects in positions of dominance, which in and of itself can be a catalyst for

important theorizing around subject-making within the classroom. Additionally, a concept such as Rony's third eye offers a direct way of thinking about epistemological projects as both contingent upon and produced within modes of seeing. If, for example, visual ethnography presumes that the objects of the gaze do not understand the ways they are being portrayed, theorization of the third eye profoundly unsettles the basis upon which such knowledge projects are built.

Hatoum offers another way to consider visual literacies by calling attention to the incoherencies and gaps present in all translation efforts. Midway through her 1998 *Measures of Distance*, Hatoum reads a letter her mother has written to her, reflecting on the way Hatoum's father has reacted to her project. In English translation, Hatoum reads: "I suppose [your father] still can't forgive you for taking those pictures of me in the shower. It's as if you had trespassed on his property and now he feels that there's some weird exchanges going on between us from which he is excluded. He calls it women's nonsense" (*Measures of Distance*). Since Hatoum's audience can see the photographs she took of her mother in addition to reading and hearing the exchanges between them, they become implicated in the intimate trespassing that concerns Hatoum's father. However, because Hatoum's text complicates notions of total interpretation or availability of the exchanges she includes, she also troubles the very idea of attaining ownership by means of trespassing.

In Khan's (2007) analysis of these effects, she suggests that using a text like Hatoum's offers viewers a very direct opportunity to consider both the expectations they have for visual texts to be understood, the means with which they construct and derive knowledge from these texts, and the ways in which those processes are both malleable and contingent. In this respect, Hatoum's piece is particularly valuable because it renders visuality as an inextricable part of knowledge construction—that is, one cannot get past visuality in order to get to the meaning of the text because any potential meaning gets constructed in acts of interpretation and specific literacies inform the modes through which viewers construct knowledge. As Hatoum troubles visual epistemologies that construct narratives regarding Muslim and Arabic cultures, she challenges spectator capacity to see, and therefore know, the ultimate meaning of a text (as if only one, or at least one most important one

took precedence over other possible meanings). In addition to understanding the effect through the lens of incompleteness, then, it may be helpful for feminist practitioners to consider Hatoum's piece in terms of the ambivalence, or flexibility, that viewers can employ in relation to it.

As an example of ambivalence, Kobena Mercer (1997) explains his shifting interpretation of Robert Mapplethorpe's (1980) *Black Males* photographs. While Mercer initially interpreted Mapplethorpe's work as reinforcing racialized sexual fetishization that establishes the white male photographer as the dominant subject capable of objectifying the racial "others" that he is photographing, Mercer later revises his perspective. In reconsidering, he entertains alternative visualities that consider the way that Mapplethorpe's sexuality has the potential to reconfigure his relationship to his subjects. Given Mapplethorpe's subordinate queerness in heteronormative culture, which informs how one reads his relationship to the subjects of his work, Mercer suggests that Mapplethorpe's representations can be interpreted in several ways—for example, as eroticizing a racial "Other" and/or as homoerotic and desirous. Mercer (1997) argues that Mapplethorpe leaves the problem of interpretation open "since his aesthetic strategy makes an unequivocal yes/no response impossible. The question is left open by the author and thus thrown back to the spectator" (246).

Utilizing his own interactions with the photographs in *Black Men* as an example, Mercer describes his emotional identification with the men in Mapplethorpe's photographs—that is, he identifies with their masculinities and their blackness and becomes angry that Mapplethorpe has objectified them as black men. Further into his analysis, however, Mercer (1997) admits that his initial interpretation relies on a "reductive dichotomy between good and bad...and thus fails to recognize the ambivalence of the text" (247). Utilizing his own black queerness as a means of examining multiple positions in relation to the investments that inform his interpretations, Mercer produces multiple questions in his visual engagements: Does he desire to be looked at as the subjects of the photographs are? Does he desire to look at the subjects? Is his subjectivity in a position of rivalry with the object of desire? Does he share a position with Mapplethorpe, the white gay artist? Mercer's conflicting positions reflect the fraught nature of evoc-

ative sites of meaning. Furthermore, Mercer demonstrates the potential to derive multiple meanings from the same text; he calls not only interpretations of representation into question, but also interrogates investments in maintaining certain interpretations as more meaningful, realistic, or "true" than others.

In considering the implications of Mercer's questions for an introductory Gender and Women's Studies classroom, his insistence on engaging Mapplethorpe's work from multiple levels of interpretation is a helpful way of understanding representations as themselves in constant negotiation. When Mercer engages the photographs in *Black Men* with ambivalent openness, he is able to theorize not so much *what* he sees, but how what he *wants* to see is inseparable from what he formulates as his objects of sight. Similarly, in *Measures of Distance*, Hatoum (1988) invites viewers to reflect on their desires to understand the meaning of the multiple texts within the piece. This approach is markedly different from enabling viewers to access each text as somehow separate from their desire to see it. The distinction in each of these pieces between meaning and reality is one that Trinh (1990) draws attention to when she claims:

Truth and meaning: the two are likely to be equated with one another. Yet, what is put forth as truth is often nothing more than a meaning. And what persists between the meaning of something and its truth is the interval, a break without which meaning would be fixed and truth congealed. This is perhaps why it is so difficult to talk about it, the interval. About the cinema. About (77).

It is within the interval that Trinh locates much of the potential of theorizing visual literacies, particularly within disciplines whose promise it is to produce knowledge around certain subjects (Wiegman 2012, 37). If one is to interpret the "truth" to which Trinh (1990) refers to mean ideas that are regarded as valid knowledge, then the processes through which meaning gets determined are not separable from the structures that grant their recognition and reproduction. Inasmuch, processes of education in Gender and Women's Studies are profoundly implicated in producing knowledge as well as privileging particular knowledges as inherent truths within the field.

For example, a dominant reading of the women in *Killing Us Softly* casts them as both victimized by and potentially resistant to Western advertising within popular women's magazines. Similarly, a Eurocentric

interpretation of *Speechless* enables an uncritical viewer to understand the photograph's subject as victimized, but incapable of liberating herself. When Gender and Women's Studies practitioners privilege these kinds of interpretations as especially instructive for contemporary feminist praxis, they risk reifying engagements with visual media that follow a delimited form of critique (e.g. looking for very specific understandings of sexism). In this model, the privileging of certain kinds of victimization and resistance presupposes particular relationships to sexism and resistance as manifested in viewing, hence presuming that visual literacies themselves will produce consistent responses to what gets constructed as the important points of the text. Trinh's idea of the "interval" can help to keep the construction of meanings and their alignments or misalignments with "truth" open to constant interrogation (Chen, 1992) in Gender and Women's Studies classrooms. This openness also generates a space to ask questions regarding elements of desire that exist within the interval—for example, the wish to render visual texts as recognizable in ways that a viewer might easily assign meaning.

Conclusion

When pursuing critiques of visual culture within Gender and Women's Studies, it is important for instructors to facilitate interrogations of the ways that students are always already involved in constructing meaning from the texts that they see. Without these conversations, critique risks becoming a mode through which to seek, and find, particular kinds of evidence vis-à-vis instruction in feminist vocabularies—the sexism exists to be found and you can see it with your own eyes. According to this praxis, a Gender and Women's Studies education functions as a conduit for revealing problematic images rather than a medium through which knowledge of how and what to see is continuously re-produced. In this elision, between the detection of problems within visual media and the visualities through which Gender and Women's Studies practitioners locate and name said problems, the discipline can continue to draw upon practices implicit in imperialist solipsism.

If, for example, instructors frame texts such as *Measures of Distance* and *Speechless* as those that they anticipate will be difficult for students to "get," they risk

structuring their pedagogical stances around the needs of Western feminists to understand "non-Western" subjects and their needs, thus feeding back into disciplinary frameworks that structure their epistemologies unreflexively around the needs of said Western feminists. Not only does the treatment of a text as "difficult" reify expectations for students to be operating from a dominant subjectivity and employing dominant literacies, it also obscures the potential for Gender and Women's Studies classrooms to be acknowledged as locations in which multiple subject formations might co-exist in ways that complicate, yet do not subsume, one another.

Framing some texts by anticipating "direct" interpretations and expecting students to deploy visual literacies that are somehow universally literal anticipates how students make meaning from these texts; furthermore, it depends on pedagogical investments in particular kinds of texts to convey information in an "accessible" way to students who are reading according to similar conventions. For example, if instructors introduce ethnographic documentaries of gendered subjects (e.g. HBO's 2005 *Middle Sexes: Redefining He and She* and PBS's 2012 *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*) as a means of providing factual information regarding the lives of people in "other" places, then Gender and Women's Studies becomes closely aligned with imperialist knowledge production. When instructors value visual texts because they seem to offer a coherent way to deliver new knowledge regarding the lives of women in "other" places, this praxis reinforces the idea that mediums of representation do not require contextualizing. When approaches to visual epistemologies presume a singular, unified set of interests, then issues of how and through what lenses texts are assembled is profoundly important to interrogating the imperialisms that Gender and Women's Studies scholars so often claim to dispute. Rather than utilizing ethnographic texts to question the nature of shared experiences (the idea that "their" oppression is somehow like "ours"), students might employ critical visualities to note the investments present in claiming such similarities. If Gender and Women's Studies students are to trouble difference, theorizing how dominant methods of interpreting visual media can both assert and foreclose difference could be helpful to their cultivating critical praxis.

To conclude, I am advocating for the importance of continually questioning knowledge production within Gender and Women's Studies, even at the level of the introductory course. My hope is that such active interrogation might include conversations about how students, in the act of learning, are simultaneously producers of knowledge such that their processes of cultivating understanding are meaningful. I see this framework, which I have approached through the explication of a critical visualities praxis, as ultimately advocating for a different kind of introductory Gender and Women's Studies education than the one in which I was exposed to as a student; namely, one in which students and teachers explicitly explore various visualities because they are exercises of power within feminist praxis. Rather than approaching the work of Gender and Women's Studies through tropes of victimization and identification, I am suggesting a pedagogy that directly theorizes the work that students do when they learn through visual texts and that interrogates their very capacity to do so. In approaching visual literacies as ambivalent, shifting, and always incomplete, students can begin to consider the stakes of knowledge production as well as the roles that they play within it. By exploring a pedagogical praxis wherein achieving a unified "recognition" is not the ultimate objective, students and instructors can constantly question why agency, subjectivity, and "facts" become established as coherent at all.

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