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## **Visual and Cultural Identity Constructs of Global Youth and Young adults: Situated, Embodied and Performed Ways of Being, Engaging and Belonging: A Review Essay**

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Presented as a collection of research-stories that center on the many "youth and young adults' strategies for engaging with the world, becoming a someone, and belonging" (Blaikie, 2021, Abstract, para. 2), this edited book focuses on expressions of sensibilities in worlding and identity construction. It emphasizes how one becomes *with* and transforms *through* visual cultures, art making, encounters and memories.

The volume is divided into three sections of four or five chapters each. Part 1, *Contextualizing embodiments of space and place* is followed by *Making and engaging*, while Part 3 centers on stories of *Becoming and Belonging*. Topics range from boys relationships with each other and places in and around school (O'Donoghue), teenage girls subcultures and their expression in art (Blaikie), young LGBTQ adults in Vietnam (Horton and Rydstrom), marginalized youth and their relationships to neoliberal mainstream community (Gosine); British boys and their memes (Whitehead and Ringrose), South African teenage girls and online porn (Bhana), parent-child interaction with Tik-Tok (Pomerantz and Field), teen identity through material culture and memory (Rowell), and adjudicated girls and their relationship with body images (Ivashkevich). Chapters in the third section explore the politics of college dress in South India (Hebbar and Kaur), living a queer life in Vietnam (Hoang Le), young artists engaged in public art in Amman, Jordan (McLaughlin-Alcock), and translanguaging through poetry with immigrants (Burgess).

The ethnographic methods represented through the chapters range from storytelling as creative nonfiction woven with threads of conversations and observation notes, to conventional ethnographic reporting where approaches to interpretation conceal the author's self-reflexive proximity. This absence, signaled mainly by a scarcity of "I" in the text, resembles a nod to the subject-object traditions of anthropology. In contrast, other chapters are interlaced with intimate relationalities in narratives where participants also become authors or offer rich and complex accounts of youth-selves in becoming through autoethnographic voices.

Writing from the field of socially engaged art and arts-based research where artistic agency and ethical actions often compete, I came to the book as an intentional outsider wondering if the problem of representation of 'others' still mattered today in the scholarship of culture studies, anthropology, and social sciences, and in what ways the ethnographic lens might continue to dictate a reporting style. In his preface to Blaikie's edited book, Wayne Martino (2021) points out that the collection "amplifies the ethico-political relationship between researcher and researched and compels a critical self-reflexivity around the question of representing responsibility" (p. xvi). Conceivably, in the decades since Clifford's (1988) *Predicament of Culture*, a truce, or a resolution (or was it fatigue?) has been reached with ethnography, its interpretive traditions, and difficult extractive positionalities. Here, the

question of stance, privilege, and unease with the neutrality of objective observation appears resolved. Advocating instead for the intersubjective and ever-changing singularity of interpretation, many ethnographers in this edited book offer their texts as liberated and shared voices enmeshed with their informants' performance. A contemporary version of vulnerable presence and destabilized authority appears to reach beyond "paradigms of experience and interpretation ...yielding to discursive paradigms of dialogue and polyphony" (Clifford, 1988, p. 41). The proposition that "in an interconnected world, one is always to varying degrees, "inauthentic": caught between cultures, implicated in others" (p.11) has transmuted into—as the oft quoted concepts and attendant fashionable lexicon of currency elsewhere and in this book suggest—a more recent Deleuzian and Gattarian's rhizomatic and unpredictable version of authenticity, that is always in its remaking, in-becoming, entangled, deterritorialized and reterritorialized, a constant flow of immanent and agential assemblages.

As the work of writing becomes compositional worldling (Stewart, 2016), the collection of texts unfolds as double storytelling where the authors write themselves through listening, watching, and writing the words and worldling of others. A conventional view of ethnography would suggest that texts crafted from field notes and observations of "informants" aim at reporting a certain, if ephemeral, truth. To scholars working with similar methods, Hendry (2007) pleads, "research is not ultimately about interpretation but about faith. Trusting in the stories and the storyteller, we need to move the space to create a place for the storyteller" (cited in Lewis, 2011, p. 506). Although the collection offers the unique experience of texts asserting that the privilege of storytelling can belong to both the researcher and the participants, the manifestation of this exchange fluctuates greatly between chapters, limited either by authorial conventions, a necessary anonymizing of sources, or simply a choice of reporting style. Some chapters are punctuated with fragments of dialogues while others have none. Nonetheless, in several surprising segments, participants and writers meet and blend as creators of shared storylines.

The book introduction welcomes the reader with a concentrated inventory of contemporary theoretical positionings that anchors the aspirations of the book and announces the differing lenses espoused by contributors. The reader is met with long lists of terms and concepts embedded into rich enumerations that describe intersecting and overlapping theoretical positions as well as anticipate the multiple applications and changing (unfolding and evolving) dimensions of materiality and ideas. For example, [The collection] contemplates, attunes, and complicates youth and young adults' multiple situated ways of knowing, experiencing and performing, where ideas and manifestations distill into singular and collective expressions, leading to distinctive forms of engagement and belonging, shaped by popular culture, visual and material culture, social media, collective expressions of gender, sexuality, race, class, and culture, dis/connecting private and public

lives, families, institutions, countries, and the world. (Blaikie, 2021, p.2)

Evoking the first chapter of the book as preamble to the theme of youth efforts at belonging and becoming, the introduction underscores the importance of place, materiality, and spaces in the construction of adolescence and gendering. Spaces and places function as a connective concept throughout the chapters, offering contextual nuances that are defined by geographical, personal, virtual, or metaphorical sites of significance. The introduction also leads to a whimsical series of vignettes about gendered representations of objects and spaces, where decors constructed for the camera as living environments for mid-century films and television call attention to the relevance of place-making in visual culture. With humor, the stories point to the materiality of living spaces as structures that echo the personalities and screen performance of the characters. Most television shows or movies mentioned, dating from a few decades ago, would not be common knowledge to the young participants represented in the chapters. Through this strategy, one is made aware of the book's intended readership.

Contributors to the thirteen chapters of the book include scholars from the Global North (Canada, United States, United Kingdom, Sweden) with contributors from India, Vietnam, and South Africa (Deevia Bhana's profile does not appear in the list of contributors), working in various disciplines. One of the goals of the book—as is now common practice in contemporary academic social science publications—is to challenge the epistemic hegemony of a Global North and to enrich knowledge production and its dissemination by including stories and cultural manifestations from the Global South which have historically been ignored by the "narrow framework of academic expression" (Manzaderani, 2019, para. 3). Although this effort at decoloniality is a welcomed and necessary step in contemporary socio-cultural studies, in early efforts at decolonizing knowledge such as this volume represents, the pattern of inclusion and the model of scholarship departs only minimally from the vocabulary and styles of established research methods and epistemology. To be fair, the book does not lay claim to decentering conventional forms of knowledge with strategies directly involving voices of resistance. Rather, situating itself in the diversity and inclusion currents of our times, its strength resides in inviting reports on inquiries that welcome a widening geography of researchers' narratives, with the potential of quietly fragmenting and disintegrating the hegemony it begins to challenge through the freedom of storytelling styles.

The overall linguistic choices and the chapter's application of current theoretical concern such as affect, new materialism, posthumanism, gender and queer theory, to name a few, positions the book as a collection of interdisciplinary texts that inform an audience of scholars whose diversified practices may include cultural and media studies, gender studies, art education, education, anthropology, sociology, gender studies, child and youth studies, visual culture, and communication studies.

As was alluded to above, the approaches to research are qualitative, using methods for the collection of data that involve differing levels of formality in observations, conversations, interviews, and focus groups with participants. The scholars' reflexivity and presence in the text, as they report their process of inquiry and observations, varies from one chapter to another. Readers may notice that some authors make no effort to position the context of their encounters and the motivation behind their cross-cultural inquiry with the information gathered (Horton and Rydstrom). Other chapters emphasize the specific qualities of the physical spaces and conversational modalities that witnessed and supported their exchange with participants, drawing on subtle strategies to infer the relational qualities of their encounters with the youth they interview and its reverberations on the findings (O'Donoghue; Blaikie; Rowsell; Burgess; McLaughlin-Alcock). Some contributors openly point to their positionality as a source of potential impediments in obtaining unself-censored information (Whitehead and Ringrose; Bhana) while others conceptualize theirs as a generative source of meaning (Pomerantz and Field; Gosine; Ivashkevich).

Through the great diversity of approaches to research and reporting that illuminates visual and identity constructs of youth from multiple angles, some findings may appear nonetheless predictable. Others provide rich historical contexts, while elsewhere, long and elaborate theoretical positionings risk snuffing out the vibrancy of the story. As O'Donoghue suggests in his narrative, "presenting texts without demanding that one reads them in this manner or another can also result in one coming to think differently about something that might appear already known" (p. 23). The unexpected effects of tones and manner of storytelling is what distinguishes chapters, in my view. For example, *Tik Tok assemblage* (Pomerantz and Feld) delights with a story of parent-child association, where research, communal play and attunement to relations and sensations form the basis of an experimental project where the "participant" takes the lead. Guided by the daughter, who, comfortable in her youthful-mediatized literacy, easily subverts familial power structures, the duo mother and child connect and reflect through practicing moves and dancing together with other Tik Tok users, while video viewing and recording.

Easily the most holistic and poignant stories are the autoethnographies. In these, storytelling conveys more than findings, it shares a self and a soul. Readers come closer and listen deeply. G. Nguyen Hoang Le in *Living a queer life in Vietnam* offers an intimate, detailed, and painful chronicle of his coming of age in a family that would not accept differences of sexual orientation and unconventional gender performance. The deeply subjective account shines as a shared story of queerness that intertwines feelings of hopelessness with compassion, questioning everything that limits and impedes, from religious upbringing to pressures from family members as well as widely unchallenged social traditions.

In Gozine's chapter *Reconciling divergent realms in the lives of marginalized youth*, the autoethnographic reflection leading to his educational advocacy promises to grip the reader. Connecting his experience of growing up in a public housing project with a sense of "sustained fervent neighborhood bond" (p. 78), Gozine, now a doctoral recipient, returns to his roots and reflects on the alienating boundaries that persist between the collectivist spirit that infused the marginalized youth that he remembers and still embodies, as he faced the expectations of individualist, neoliberal mainstream schools that as a graduate student he learned to navigate. Strong in his experience of both worlds, Gozine advocates for a schooling environment that balances the "vertical mobility" of mainstream educational opportunities *with* strategies that foreground social justice values, sustaining the place-based community allegiances so fundamental to marginalized youth.

Community values and politics of belonging are also the main focus of study in the McLaughlin-Alcock story about young artists in Amman, Jordan, whose positions and artforms attempt to negotiate the cultural and historical roots of social constructs that complicate their relations with a general public itself composed of conflicted factions. Amidst the urban conservative patriarchal expectations of Amman, artists discuss the use of their body, works or spaces as political sites of intervention to provoke and dispute, while others wish for more cordial forms of engagement. As the storyteller, McLaughlin-Alcock's familiarity with the terrain comes from years of presence in the community, conversations, observations, and historical research. The struggles and conditions in which these Jordanian artists choose to operate echo with a familiar tone the stories of artists in other urban spaces. In "setting up artistic residencies in popular neighborhoods and staging interventions in public spaces" (p. 229), Amman artists summon a widely shared history of site-specific and locational identity (Kwon, 2002), new-old worldlings that never fail to galvanize rising generations in search of societal change.

It seems befitting that the final chapter by Burgess is about migration and translanguaging. Having traversed a wide array of narratives, interests, and lenses as compiled through the book, we as readers reach the last pages to find stories of transposing selves, for whom, moving, immigrating, and changing place brought forth a certain decoupling or overlapping of place-based identities. Through this invitation to witness and travel along the transmutation of others, I imagine readers echolocating, searching for parts of displaced and partially indeterminate selves. We find our life is like a text, unfolding, translanguaging from words to senses. Through this reader-writer's spontaneous co-constructing of affects and memories, I am reminded of artist Kameelah Janan Rasheed's suggestion that every time one reads a text, one must mentally annotate and respond, collaborate, and create a new text. As such, many stories in the book call for imagined dialogues and responses.

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## About the Author

Rébecca Bourgault is a visual artist, educator, scholar, and community art worker. An assistant professor of Art Education at Boston University, Bourgault holds an Ed.D. from Teachers College, Columbia University, an MFA from the University of Calgary, and a BFA from Concordia University, Montreal. Bourgault's artistic and scholarly research has been presented in the US and internationally. Her published work can be found in edited volumes such as the Wiley Blackwell *International Encyclopedia of Art and Design* (2019) and *Art as an agent of Social Change* (2020). Recent articles appeared in the *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, the *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, and the *International Journal of Lifelong Learning in Art Education*. Current research interests include socially engaged art practices, multimodal experiments in research-creation, and arts-based research.

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