

Digital Frontiers' Social Media and Digital Communities Roundtable and Questions of Belonging

Created by Michael Blair

20th-21st Century Graduate Art History Seminar
AEAH 5813.001, Fall 2012

Dr. Jennifer Way, Professor

On Friday, September 21, 2012, Dr. Jennifer Way's graduate art history seminar on 20th-21st c art attended "Social Media and Digital Communities: A Roundtable Discussion," a session featured at the Digital Frontiers 2012 conference sponsored by the UNT Libraries. The roundtable speakers and titles of their presentations included Jennie Fleming, "Examining Flickr's The Commons: What does creative interaction with digital image archives mean for users and institutions?," Robert Emery, "Telling Stories of The Dallas Way: Finding LGBT History and Creating Community Using Social Media," Heidi J. Wachter , "RevolutionaryAct.com and ExperienceLife.com," and Mariette Papić, "Digital Rights, Media and Practice: The Right to Bear Arms in The Information Age." Spencer Keralis, UNT Libraries' Director for Digital Scholarship, moderated the roundtable.

Students in Way's seminar are studying how recent scholarship on belonging illuminates contemporary and historical art and art history. They are considering how art and culture foster belonging to a place as well as a nation, and the ways that places index belonging, inclusion and exclusion. A primary concern is the way the creation and use of works of art participate in facilitating someone or something belonging or not. There are also questions of what counts as a belonging and how this relates to someone belonging to someone, thing or a place. Ways of facilitating belonging include civilize, salvage, domesticate, diplomacy, accommodate, remember. Examples of forms of belonging include autochthony, citizenship, memory and heritage. Ways of not belonging encompass but are not limited to outsidersness, alienation, dislocation, refugee, and homelessness.

Way charged her students with writing a short paper to explore connections between the roundtable and their seminar studies. What follows is a short paper by graduate student, Michael Blair.

Michael Blair

At the “Social Media and Digital Communities: A Roundtable Discussion,” Robert Emery, Founding Board Member of The Dallas Way, spoke about how the group is using social media to create an oral history archive of the Dallas GLBT community. In an interview with The Dallas Voice he stated the impetus of the project as a “need to focus, (clarify), and collect our history to strengthen our community and to be a source of inspiration for the young.” He is likely suggesting that the prevailing regional histories do not acknowledge the events and accomplishments of the community he belongs to, and therefore there is a need to construct this history as an addition or alternative to what is already available.

It may be insightful to look at this project in terms of Gurminder K. Bhambra’s essay “Culture, Identity and Rights: Challenging Contemporary Discourses of Belonging” in which he discusses the processes of exclusion and inclusion that constitute cultural differences, and the formulation of what he calls “narratives of belonging.” The writing of history, in addition to fostering a sense of belonging, is an inherently political act. And like many of the actions of the GLBT community as well as other minority or marginalized groups, it is concerned with the gaining or preserving of rights. Since Bhambra asserts that in today’s globalized society the question of rights are often framed in terms of culture and identity, we will look at how culture and identity are in this case understood, and how these ideas operate in political discourse.

The GLBT community has an identity constructed around the similarities of its members but defined in terms of a shared difference to another group. The “our history” of Emery’s statement is necessarily defined as distinct from “other” history, that of what Bhambra might describe as a universalized majority. The writing of GLBT history as a process of differentiation, then, figures into current political ideologies of culture. As Bhambra states, “Increasingly, cultures have come to be seen not only in terms of the similarity of the individuals that constitute them or the differences between this group of individuals and that group, but, more precisely, through the *processes* of establishing similarities and differences.” (Bhambra, 37) But Bhambra also points out that politics of culture are often based on the need to recognize an “other”, or a distinct group, in order to protect them and preserve their “otherness”. The problem is that by defining marginal groups by their difference from an imagined universal majority, distinctions between “us” and “them”, whether real or imagined, are perpetrated. What is needed, according to Bhambra, is an altering of the “us/them” paradigm by constructing new communities that cut across established identities and redefine those identities in terms other than difference.

Bhambra, Gurminder K. "Culture, Identity and Rights: Challenging Contemporary Discourses of Belonging." In *The Situated Politics of Belonging*, Nira Yuval-Davis, Kalpana Kannabiran, and Ulrike Vieten, 37. London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2006.

Emery, Robert. “Telling Stories of The Dallas Way: Finding LGBT History and Creating Community Using Social Media.” Presentation at the Digital Frontiers Conference at the University of North Texas, September 21, 2012.