
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, Cassie Phan.
Cassie Phan

Mariette Papić’s presentation titled “Digital Rights, Media and Practice: The Right to Bear Arms in the Information Age” focused heavily on the impact of social media during the Occupy Wall Street protests, which correlates with the chapter “Culture, Identity and Rights: Challenging Contemporary Discourses of Belonging” by Gurminder K. Bhambra. Bhambra writes in regard to the practice of creating others:

Claims for these ‘others’ to represent a ‘place or a ‘people’ is a form of essentialism that has as its corollary, ideas of a discourse which has a centre. In order to avoid essentialising, and thereby marginalizing, it is necessary to see all identities as local and to understand the relations between knowledge communities as dialogues where there is neither external reference point nor essential standpoint. Dialogue, then, can only occur in the absence of a centre, of universals, and thus, through the deconstruction of the center and the universals that are posited. Focusing on a politics of belonging can never get away from questions of inclusions and exclusion and this will inevitably turn on the binary oppositions of self and other which, as I have discussed, are fundamentally problematic.

(Bhambra, 39)

Papić argued during her presentation that our relatively new “State of Images” has allowed for the vast majority of the population in the United States to be “image enabled”, thus allowing for what she referred to as “The Citizen Enabled”. Images of the Occupy Wall Street protests were used to provide support for her argument, as she shared photographs she has taken of citizens utilizing personal smartphones to photograph one another as well as encounters with police. Papić suggests that with the state of social media as it is, for example 300 million photos being uploaded to Facebook each day, there is an “Iconic Revolution” happening. The availability of imagery and the sharing of such imagery provide a new platform for social and cultural activism that has the potential to be more inclusive and more expansive than the previous reliance on organized mass media outlets. Imagery as information in this expansive form thus has the ability to create what Papić referred to as greater cultural singularity, reaching across more traditional boundaries via social media. The implications of “The State of Images”, specifically related to social media, is therefore one aspect of a shift in thought and practice supporting Bhambra’s claim that, “the premises of discontinuity and radical difference that have sustained the fiction of cultures as discrete phenomena occupying discrete spaces are gradually ceding ground” (39). The phenomenon of an image heavy social media is enabling the further degradation of clearly defined spatial boundaries, allowing for larger movements, greater singularity and further shifts within the thought and discourse concerning the process of exclusion and inclusion.

Papić’s presentation serves as a case study in progress of Bhambra’s assertions. Papić argues that the expansive availability of images through social media provides a new arena for public discourse that, through the virtue of information, promotes a more inclusive approach. This is essentially what Bhambra claims is missing from the current discourse: the erosion of fictional ideas of extreme differences. If social media is indeed creating an “Iconic Revolution”, how will the opposition respond? How will the process of exclusion continue, and will it in ways concede to a recognition and acceptance of the fluid and ever-changing identities to which Bhambra makes reference?

Bhambra, Gurminder K. "Culture, Identity and Rights: Challenging Contemporary Discourses of