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CSW Update Newsletter

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Oral Interactions, Phantom Bodies, and What's Food Got to Do With It?: Three Thinking Gender 2011 Panel Reviews

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Publication Date

2011-05-15

PANEL REVIEW BY LINDSEY MCLEAN

Oral Interactions

CONVERSATION, ETHNOGRAPHY, ORAL HISTORY

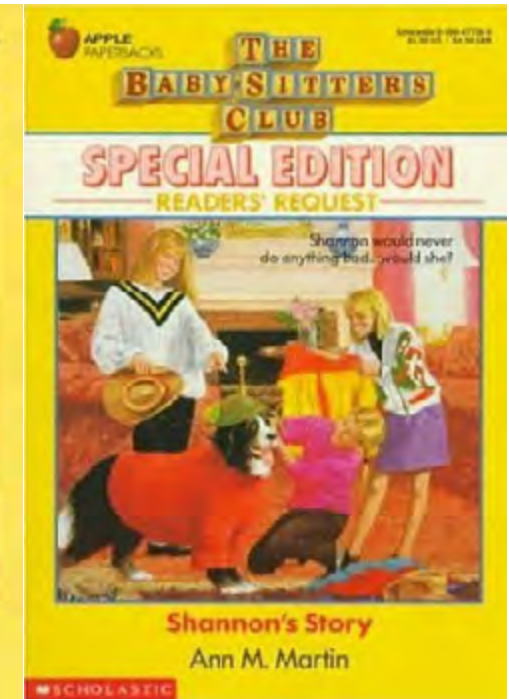
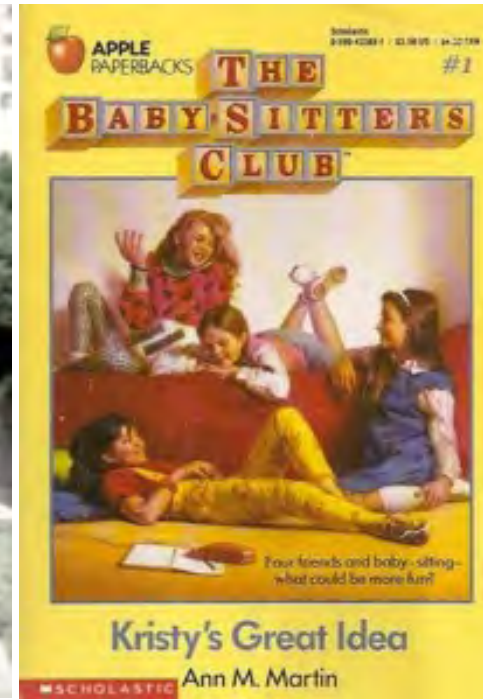
THE PANEL TITLED “Oral Interactions: Conversation, Ethnography, Oral History,” moderated by Devra Webner, Professor of History at UC Riverside, included presentations from Diane Yu Gu, UCLA; Kate Wood, UC San Diego; and Emily Crutcher, UC Santa Barbara.

Gu, in a presentation titled “Female Doctoral Students’ Interactions with Faculty and Their Aspirations to Pursue Academic Careers,” discussed her research in the student-faculty relationship, and how this relationship affects both the socialization and formulation of academic career goals in female engineering students. Gu began her presentation by noting that, while enrollment of female students in

graduate school is greatly increasing, women only make up about six percent of full professor positions. She became interested in how relationships with faculty members supported or limited female engineering students’ aspirations for a career in academia. In her research, Gu discovered a stressed relationship between female students and their male advisors. She noted that some female students felt that they had to work longer and harder for funding in comparison to their male counterparts. Additionally, her research found female students felt that tensions may arise if they pursued a friendly, informal relationship with their male advisors and the risk of those tensions dam-

pered the female student’s desire to seek out those kinds of relationships. Gu also discovered that while female students harbored anxiety over their ability to have a family as well as an academic career, they were far less likely to discuss these issues with a male advisor. Gu concludes that adjusting organizational practices surrounding the advising relationship and counseling services for female graduate students along with an increase in quality female professors would positively benefit the mentoring and academic success of female graduate students.

Following this, Kate Wood presented her research concerning adult women who par-



participate in online forums dedicated to the young adult fiction they read as adolescents and continue to read as adults; specifically the *Sweet Valley High* and *The Babysitter's Club* series. Wood recognized that there are many studies examining the effects of media images on young girls, but she was more interested in the long term effects and negotiations that occurred in adult women looking back on the media images of femininity they were confronted with as young girls. For her research, Wood interviewed 47 adult readers who read and participate in online groups dedicated to these series of books. Wood's research uncovered an ongoing and dynamic negotiation with hegemonic gender identities presented in

these books. Specifically Wood discussed the "bargain" these adult women make with the books by cherry-picking parts of the text with which to take issue and rationalizing these parts by claiming "any smart girl can tell the difference." In many cases, the adult readers of these books, as young girls, recognized that the world that they inhabited was quite different than the world the books portrayed. In many cases the books presented a world that was far more white, wealthy, heterosexual, and simple than the real world the readers occupied. Yet, these adult women still cherished the books and took the time not only to read them (if only for a "guilty pleasure") but to participate in online forums about the books. Wood

concluded by asserting that cultural objects can be used in different and dynamic ways to construct gendered identities.

The third presenter in this panel, Emily Crutcher, decided to take on the provocative and sensitive subject of reactions and responses to two different types of pornography: traditional and sex-positive, "feminist" pornography. Her research looks at how people process and assess this sexually explicit material. She began her presentation by covering the existing literature in academic and feminist debate about pornography, specifically addressing the argument of whether pornography is anti-feminist and promotes violent imagery against women or if pornography can be created to advance

images of sex positive femininity. Crutcher decided to do an empirical investigation of how young people assess the authenticity of the female orgasm in the two distinct types of pornography previously mentioned. She organized focus groups consisting both male and female college students to view and assess the female orgasm in these two distinctly different kinds of pornography. Within these focus groups, Crutcher aimed to assess the ways people discuss pornography, sexuality, and gender norms with others. She observed what she calls a “moment-to-moment construction of normative sexual subjectivities” in the discourse of the focus group participants.

What connected these presentations is the methodology that Gu, Wood, and Crutcher used to research their topics. Each used a form of interview to produce more in depth and contextualized material than quantitative analysis. Much of the discussion after the presentations focused on the techniques the presenters used to elicit better and more thoughtful information from their participants. Gu noted that she had to negotiate the role of researcher/interviewer and sometimes turn off her tape recorder or go off topic to establish trust and a more open line of communication between her and the person she was interviewing. Crutcher noted that, because of the sensitive material, she acted as more of a participant

than leader or interviewer. This established trust and comfort with her focus group participants. Wood, for her methodology, preferred to ask open ended questions because she found these types of questions lead to deeper discussions about the books and the reader’s history with them. Each of the presenters used interviews and conversation as the foundation for their research on gender constructions that inhabit the professional, sexual, and leisure life of women.

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PANEL REVIEW BY LINDSEY MCGLEAN

Phantom Bodies

MODERATED BY Rachel Lee, Professor of English and Women's Studies at UCLA, the Thinking Gender panel entitled "Phantom Bodies" included presentations from Oluwakemi Balogun, UC Berkeley; Corella Difede, UC Irvine; Patrick Keilty, UCLA; and Guadalupe Escobar, UCLA. Each of these presentations used frameworks surrounding the body as an integral part of displaying the diverse topics each of the presenters approached, from representations of the female body in beauty pageants in Nigeria as an indicator of feminine national identity to the language used in academic discourses concerning "disembodiment" in digital culture.

Oluwakemi Balogun, in her presentation titled "Traditional vs. Cosmopolitan: Idealized Femininity and National Representation in Nigerian Beauty Pageants" looked at two beauty pageants in Nigeria and the conflicting ideas about the feminine body and its performance based on different criteria in the construction of feminine national identity. In this presentation, Balogun notes how the two beauty pageants, Queen Nigeria and The Most Beautiful Girl in Nigeria both set out to represent "true Nigerian womanhood," yet assemble the idealized notion of femininity quite differently. The MBGN competition is part of an international association of pageants and the winner of this

pageant is allowed to compete in the Miss Universe pageant, whereas Queen Nigeria is a strictly national competition. Balogun describes the criteria for the MBGN pageant as relying on a more cosmopolitan ideal of femininity; its competitors represent a more international (western) standard of beauty, while the Queen Nigeria competitors display much more traditional ideals of Nigerian womanhood. Balogun sees the two competitions as constructing a national feminine identity for two different audiences. The MBGN competition looks to incorporate Nigerian womanhood in a global discourse of femininity while the Queen Nigeria competition seeks to establish a

much more traditional construction of Nigerian femininity for its feminine national identity.

In Corella Difede's presentation "From Anatomic Spectacle to Informatics: Bodies...The Exhibit, and the Trouble Posed By the New Universal Body" she argued that the Bodies exhibit displays a new trend that universalizes the body from a medical/anatomical perspective. She explained how the exhibit strips away race, gender, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences and looks at the anatomy of the body from a strictly informational lens. She finds this problematic because while the exhibit highlights a universalized body it obscures the complex

situations such as class, race, gender, etc. that produced the plasticized body in the exhibit. These complex situations arguably affect the physical bodies in various ways, and limiting information surrounding these circumstances diffuses the effects of life experiences on the plasticized body also limit the audience's ability to contextualize these bodies. She explains how, originally the bodies used in the exhibit were unclaimed, undocumented Chinese laborers. Difede argues that the "de-subjectified" bodies that create raw information for those in the medical or biotechnology fields are problematic because the subjectivities of the

body affect the physical nature of the body and removing those subjectivities to create a "universal body" for informational purposes dilutes the effects of the lived experience on those bodies. Difede also notes that the only female body in the exhibit displays the female reproductive system and in no other situation is a female body used, making the female body different from the "universal" body in the rest of the exhibit.

Patrick Keilty in his presentation "'Disembodiment' in Electronic Culture" approached the language used by academics in discourses surrounding embodiment when analyzing digital culture. He argued that there are two camps regarding the rhetoric of disembodiment in electronic culture, those that feel electronic culture is robbing the physical body of importance and those that see interaction in electronic culture as conflating that culture too closely to the "real" world. Keilty finds both of these arguments valid, though he finds the language problematic. In his presentation, he advocated for the use of the term "diffusion" when describing involvement in electronic culture instead of "disembodiment." Keilty argued that, though participating in electronic culture is dispersed and destabilized within the digital cultures, participants are still very much grounded in their physical bodies. He believes previous work on the subject of electronic

disembodiment to be grounded in the notion of an existential crisis of the body, a notion he finds fatalistic and inaccurate.

To conclude this panel, Guadalupe Escobar discussed the constructions of the body politics in her presentation titled, "Principles of Pleasure: 'Body' Politics in Giaconda Belli's *The County Under My Skin: A Memoir of Love and War*." Escobar analyzes the text of this

memoir from the perspective that Belli, with her involvement in the revolutionary Sandinista movement to combat US involvement in Nicaragua, constructs the female body as a site of objectification, patriarchal control, and a form of agency. Escobar notes that in Belli's memoir, trauma is not at the core of the war narrative and, rather, sex is. Escobar discusses how sexual liberation was invaluable to Belli's

experience in war because "women's bodies are a critical site to practice gender politics." Escobar described how, in taking control over her own sexuality and pleasure, Belli regenerates her body after war based on her own criteria.

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PANEL REVIEW BY LINDSEY MCLEAN

What's Food Got To Do With It?

Women and Disordered Eating

MODERATED BY Abigail Saguy, Professor of Sociology at UCLA, the panel "What's Food Got To Do With It? Women and Disordered Eating" included presentations from Feng-Mei Heberer, USC; Roxanne Naseem Rashedi, Georgetown University; Jessica M. Phillips, UCSB; and April Davidauskis, USC. Each of these presentations focus on disordered eating in women from diverse standpoints, from assessing on campus support for female college students with eating disorders to establishing critical theory surrounding representations of the feminine disordered body in performance art.

In the first presentation by Feng-Mei Heberer titled "Performing the Bulimic Body," she

discussed her analysis of an experimental film called "Gina King's Video Diary." The filmmaker, Gina King, used this project to express the difficulties of physical and emotional belonging, frequently using staged personas relating to the reproductive female body, as well as her own eating disorder in the film. It was Heberer's intention to, instead of separate the staged personas from King's bulimic body in the film, look at how the two performances are intertwined. Heberer, in her presentation, discussed the questions of origin and reproduction in the performative, sick feminine body. In her analysis of King's work, she looks at how King materializes her body and how, in doing so, displaces



and reappropriates her own body, which has become alienated through disordered eating. Heberer recognizes that while King is reappropriating her own body in the film and examining the personas of daughter and mother, she is also, through her disordered eating, producing a

conflicted female body. While much of Herberer's presentation focused on King's examination of the female reproductive body she noted that King's bulimic practices conflict with these personas. Herberer argued that the practice of bulimia is contradictory to the representations of the female reproductive body in that, it "reproduces the female body to the maternal body which then "aborts" the maternal body with the practice of bulimia."

In Roxanne Naseem Rashedi's presentation titled "Disordered Eating, Agency, and Self Autonomy: Class Identity in Elaine Mar's Paper Daughter," she argued that the disordered eating Mar describes in her memoir stems from a class inferiority complex and ethnic difference as an Asian American immigrant in the United States. Rashedi discussed how the disordered eating in the memoir is based on the Mar's need to assert control over her life as well as a way to belong to the middle class, white, so-called "normal" class of American population. Rashedi deconstructed the disordered eating Mar presented in her work which was centered on establishing some control over her life, engendering a sense of belonging with her peers, and using her body to show her American identity. Ultimately, Mar finds other ways to assert her independence from her family and value her body and ethnicity rather than using disordered eating as a way to reject them, however the memoir and Rashedi's analysis of the disordered eating within the narrative pres-

ent an alternative outlook from the more typical "western beauty standards" on the causes of disordered eating.

Jessica Phillips' presentation discussed her work with university clinicians about treating disordered eating with diverse groups of women. She began her presentation by asserting that most of the research done about disordered eating has focused on one particular demographic: white, middle-class women. She argues that while this research is important, it does not easily translate to diagnosis and treatment of disordered eating in women of color. Phillips continued by discussing a variety of reasons diverse groups of women develop eating disorders such as a form of rebellion against strong religious influence or as a way to assimilate to the "normative culture" of the white middle class. Phillips argues that as more and more women of color seek out higher education and attend universities, the university clinicians should attempt to focus their treatment of eating disorders with a mindset that encompasses a wide range of body image issues, disordered eating, and distinctive experiences with gender based on factors regarding race, ethnicity, and class.

The final presentation in this panel, "Your Food Obsession is Not as Endearing as You Think it is: Lorelai Gilmore, Liz Lemon, and Other Hungry Women" by April Davidauskis, looked at the presentation of hungry women in popular culture. Davidauskis focused most of her presentation

on analyzing the two main characters from the popular television shows, *Gilmore Girls* and *30 Rock*. She discusses how in both of these shows the hungry woman is a funny, endearing character and her obsessions with food are framed as positive qualities in each character. Davidauskis made clear, though, that the almost gluttonous relationships with food displayed by these characters remain funny and endearing because the characters themselves are traditionally beautiful women: thin, white, girl-next-door types. Davidauskis argued that the eating habits of Liz Lemon and Lorelai Gilmore, along with their beauty and charm, enhance the audience's attraction to the characters. She described this phenomena as the "new normative of constructed femininity" and discusses the problems inherent in the endearing quality of a woman with a large appetite for food, but only if that woman fits into the western notion of beauty: thin and light-skinned.

Each of these presentations tackled an aspect of disordered eating in women. They also approach disordered eating with a perspective of diversity, in that the each of the presentations discussed disordered eating in women of varying ethnic, racial, and social backgrounds from a variety of different mediums.

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