A triangular trade in gender and visuality: the making of a cross-cultural image-base
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Acquiring a visual grammar

Visuality has moved the methods of understanding gender from those of theoretical discourses involving psychoanalytic and linguistic deconstruction to challenging our senses and inviting us to learn a visual grammar of gender. In coupling gender with visuality in this respect, I refer to gender as the ongoing construction of masculinities and femininities and the power imbalances between and among men and women as these are made evident through images. If the feminist project is that of the reconstruction of knowledge – making the invisible visible by reconfiguring histories and narratives of the past and present into discourses that are liberating rather than suggestive of victimhood or absence – then the critical use of images might make this happen more quickly. It is not that these discourses have not already begun to move us from victimhood to agency (especially among enlightened academics and many professionals who work directly with various disempowered groups), but we need to accelerate this process so that it reaches a wider audience through means which are more accessible, and which might have more immediate impact, perhaps through a parallel visual discourse rather than only text-based reconstructions.

One might ask the question, "Why has the visual image 'returned'"? Human beings are visually stimulated from birth onwards. The sight of the mother is the first "knowing" of a child. We learn to be unseen, we are trained or conditioned not to see, we develop mechanisms so that we will not be seen or noticed, effacing ourselves when necessary (a range of occupations require this; for instance, a waiter in a restaurant, who must be seen and yet unseen). These processes are sometimes a necessity, enabling survival. But as a result, we unlearn to trust our eyes and what we know, in favour of scripted words, which with the increasing advent of the "book" and the written text, take on the mantle of greater authority. The reading of images, therefore, calls for a

heightened political consciousness of the material to ensure that we do not replicate past paradigms. We cannot read either image or text blindly.

In the business of communication, language is credited with major power – hence diminishing the value of our visual intelligence. For example, we might be persuaded by the oral presentation of a good speaker or smooth-tongued politician – the relationship between what we hear and what we see is not a settled one. So by considering the area of visuality and challenging our visual intelligence, perhaps we are integrating academic and popular consciousness. What visuality allows is another site for struggle and resistance, empowerment and liberation.

The return of visuality as a means of knowledge creation and dissemination has re-occurred because of the proliferation of images in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century; images in the media, on the world wide web, in music videos, and so on. We need to make sense of these images, but as we each bring a different set of baggage to what we view – in the words of Sadan Jha, "each representation register demands its own integral space" (2004) – we must also devise ways of sharing similar or related sets of grammars and lexicons.

There is an additional burden placed on the new methods by which we investigate gender through the visual image. We face the same research dilemmas in new form; the question of how to arrive at more rigorous truths (understanding truth itself to be a slippery customer) – a truth which in the academy is assumed to be "objective". Arriving at a shared grammar and lexicon requires us to devise what Michelle Rowley refers to as an "ethics of articulation" (2004). This invites us to allocate agency to the subjects we scrutinise rather than further objectifying them. Many of these images are drawn from the "same poisoned wells"[1] that were part of the project of visualising empire (see, for example, Ryan, 1997; Wood, 2000). Even if they were not, the new visualisation of self and other, if it is to add to our insight and compassion, should produce different ways in which we continue to interrogate gender. In the project of visuality/visualisation, it is not clear that the paradigms of visual practice are shared between art practices and the academy. When using visual sources as data, we are faced with many methodological challenges. The most formidable of these is the rigour required in research when attempting to cross or straddle different disciplines.

In this profile, I discuss some of the processes, concerns and contributions of such a project of visualisation as they have been and continue to be constituted around a gender image database entitled *Cultural Crossings*, a collaborative

effort to build a gender database production by two researchers, one based in Atlanta in the US (who has carried out work in West Africa) and the other based in the Caribbean.[2] Large proportions of the populations of the Caribbean and the United States were originally drawn from the west coast of Africa. The proposed publication of the image-base on the world wide web,[3] which will allow researchers and students alike to search and make use of the visual data uncovered by these researchers, provides an new triangular trade. This phrase is used to describe moments in colonial expansionist history, referring in the first instance to the period between the 17th and 19th centuries when slaves were transported by Europeans from Africa to the Americas in what was termed the *middle passage* across the Atlantic. It was called the triangular trade because it was usually made up of three different voyages, which formed a triangular trade pattern. The term "triangular trade" is also used in a related context to a pattern of trade in the 18th century between the West Indies, New England and the west coast of Africa. The commodities involved were principally sugar, rum and slaves. If commodities and human bodies were traded in the past, in this new age of information technology, I suggest that the sharing of images across the US, the Caribbean and Africa creates a triangular trade of another sort, one designed for empowerment rather than exploitation.

Gender and visualisation as a tool for teaching and learning

What do we have to gain by combining the two areas of gender and visuality in scholarship and practice, by juxtaposing two frames of reference, each with their own theoretical and methodological concerns? *Cultural Crossings: A Gender Image-base* attempts to pool collected image-data from an extensive range of sources that include libraries, archives, galleries, and personal site visits to different territories, along with relevant bibliographic references. The rationale for the generation of this database is part of the wider intellectual project that investigates the increasingly "visual" character of modern society. It intervenes to ensure that visual material facilitates classroom learning, enabling the development of a critical visual literacy among students who are persistently bombarded with global messages through media and film. In this new conceptualisation of the triangular trade, we hope the database will assist with regional or ethnic cross-cultural comparisons of the past and present and demonstrate specificities, while allowing those using the data to examine correspondences and differences between peoples and cultures.

The project draws primarily, but not exclusively, on the research of two scholars from the University of the West Indies at Kingston/St. Augustine and Emory University in Atlanta. As a pan-Caribbean scholar, since 1996 I have been systematically collecting historical and contemporary images in and of the wider Caribbean, from an extensive range of sources that include libraries, archives, galleries and personal site visits to different territories. A manuscript entitled *Imaging the Caribbean: Culture and Visual Translation*[4] has been produced, and a documentary film series entitled *A Different Imagination* is also in the making.[5] The project has collected a large number of images needing to be identified, stored and made accessible to a wide range of users; only a small proportion of these found their way into the book, or the documentary film series, for that matter.

Professor Edna Bay, an historian, has carried out doctoral and post-doctoral research in Benin and West Africa, has worked in the southern US, and has also held a Fulbright fellowship at the University of the West Indies on the Mona Campus in Kingston, Jamaica. As a member of the Association of Caribbean Historians, she is familiar with the resonances of Africa on the Caribbean landscape, and the continuities and discontinuities of various African cultural icons. Bay has also carried out work in the area of iconography and the social history of art forms.

The project germinated as a result of a joint research visit to Haiti by myself and Bay during her Fulbright exchange. Our collaboration enhanced the interpretation of the material on hand, as well as sharpening the possibilities for ongoing exchanges in research, with the obvious impact this would have on teaching. Both of us share an abiding interest in the image as an aesthetic production of culture, imbued with symbolic meanings of identity. We also share a disciplinary interest in women's studies and gender studies, and their capacity to transform scholarship and initiate new ways of seeing peoples and cultures.

The idea was that these images would be pooled in a user-friendly searchable database and be made available on websites, at first to students and scholars of the two universities. Since the value of such a project lies in fostering teaching and research, more contemporary images are constantly being added to create a basis for comparison across both space and time. The database remains open to the creators to add and amend entries, and for users to offer suggestions or submit new entries. The image-base is thus envisaged as an expandable and malleable gender classroom tool that will be used by students and faculty to create presentations, do gender analysis and research, and as a continuing

source of data for student projects. In addition, the use of this tool also aids the development of technological skills, and ensures that we use the visual material not only to develop a critical visual literacy, but to gain familiarity with the current technologies for teaching and learning. Both faculty and students benefit from the latter. The twenty-first century manifestation of globalisation, exemplified by the spiralling use of Internet and computer technologies, challenges students and scholars to adapt to technological innovations.

Presenting the image-base

Apart from displaying the actual images collected, each entry in the database is accompanied by the provenance and relevant descriptions of the image, along with related references for further reading or research. To facilitate its placement on the web, an appropriate format was created using the software File Maker Pro, with care taken to ensure that the descriptions, provenance and search categories selected would embrace a range of images, as well as covering different cultural contexts. For example, each of the categories used, of which more than one may be applied, allows the searcher to access a range of images defined according to these categories. The keywords considered for each record are Arts, Body adornment, Children, Education, Family life, Feminism, Health, Forced labour, Leader/Official, Leisure, Man, Religion, Sexuality, Travel/Tourism, War, Woman and finally Work. Procedures for browsing records and the search interface include the use of keywords, but users can also browse according to a file number, a category or any combination of words, as well as numbers such as dates, as long as they are comma-separated.

For example, the data entry shown in Figure 1 is a sketch by Isaac Mendes Belisario, a Jamaican-born painter, published in 1837.

Figure 1: Queen Maam of the Set Girls
(Courtesy of National Gallery of Jamaica)

The entry for this image provides details about the image, including its creator, publication or production data, and it is cross-classified by several keyword entries, among them *woman*, *feminism*, *leisure*, *body adornment* and *sexuality*. The following description, excerpted from a relevant source, is included in the entry:

> This woman acted as a conductress of a lively and graceful band of female dancers, denominated Set Girls, in the Jonkunnu celebrations held during the Christmas holidays. As their queen, she is invested with absolute authority which she exercises with unsparing severity, as may be inferred by the Cow-skin whip borne in her hand. She is adorned with blue ribbon bows of imposing dimensions, and feathers tipped with the same colour. The ornaments displayed are probably the loan of her mistress.

In addition, the following entries are provided for further reading or reference on the image. These range from historical sources to contemporary references:

1. Isaac Belisario, "Sketches of Character: An illustration of the Habits, Occupation, and Costume of the Negro Population in the Island of Jamaica" (Jamaica: Belisario, 1837) No 1;
2. Michael Scott, "Tom Cringle's Log" (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1833);
3. Natasha Barnes, "Body Talk: Notes on Women and Spectacle in Contemporary Trinidad Carnival" in *Small Axe* 7, March 2000;
4. Pamela Franco, "The 'Unruly Woman' in Nineteenth-Century Trinidad Carnival" in *Small Axe* 7, March 2000.

The database contains many others from this series of sketches executed by Isaac Mendes Belisario in the early nineteenth century, and together they provide a body of material which is useful in envisaging the conditions of work, life and leisure of the class of people he illustrated. If these are compared to similar sketches found for populations elsewhere, parallels might establish similarities in the processes which have shaped society and gender relations in different parts of the world. While not all the images are comparable, given the variety of sources, they enable us to build up a visual picture of the creativity and lives of the women who predated us. For instance, Figure 2, one of the images provided by Edna Bay for West Africa, is an art object produced by women in the nineteenth century.

Figure 2: Appliqué cloth dating to the nineteenth century that shows women soldiers of the army of Dahomey capturing enemies and fighting a lion (cloth owned by the Musée de l'Homme in Paris)

Contemporary images comprise a good proportion of the database, dealing with gender in its multi-dimensional sense of masculinity and femininity, work relations, sexuality and so on. Another example is shown here.

Figure 3: Young women at the Regional Consultation on the National Gender Policy for Trinidad and Tobago (Photo courtesy of Patricia Mohammed)

The description that accompanies Figure 3 is as follows:

> The photo captures a group of young women from the East/West Corridor in Trinidad as they participated in a regional consultation for the National Gender Policy and Action Plan in 2003. Many of the women were engaged in farming and geriatric care. Some of the issues for discussion included unemployment, health-care, transportation, housing and domestic violence. The consultation raised as its core subject the problems of gender inequity and inequality that still persisted in the society and required that participants outline their concerns as well as solutions.

This image appears in searches using the keywords *Woman and Work*, *Education* and *Feminism*. Likewise, Figure 4 (below) will appear in a search of the categories *Woman* and *Work*, as well as the date of the image. Figure 5 will appear in a search of *Man*, *Leisure*, *Body adornment* and *Sexuality*, cross-classified by the time period in which the image was generated. Other search categories comprise the medium of the image, and its originating country or region. For instance, one can narrow a search by limiting the categories to those that show only photographs of the twentieth century, or paintings and sketches of the eighteenth century.

Figure 4: Woman selling fritters in Benin (Photo courtesy of Edna Bay)

Figure 5: Young men on the streets of Chaguanas, Trinidad
(Photo courtesy of Patricia Mohammed)

On entering the site, the user is introduced to the range of rules and guidelines that help to make the database user-friendly. Students and teachers are free to use the images for research projects and educational purposes, but the images themselves are presented in online resolution so that hard-copy publishing resolution requires permission and access to the original images used by the creators. The restrictions on copyright are similar to those of other published material on the web. The creators have drawn a balance between making the base accessible to a wide range of users, and the usual restrictions placed on copyrighted material. As far as possible, many of the images published on the database are owned or have been taken by the researchers themselves, or they have themselves obtained permission to publish these images on the web.

The traffic in images

The construction and use of the image-base *Cultural Crossings* raises questions which are most relevant – if not seminal – to the feminist project. To understand the strengths and weaknesses inherent in different data sources with regard to the images, we need to know when an image was made and why, by whom, under what circumstances, what the limits of the chosen media

are, to what extent we may draw conclusions, and so on. One of the ways to guard against errors of judgement and hasty generalisations is to employ the image alongside textually-based data so that different sources of data speak to each other. Longitudinal approaches, i.e., looking at phenomena that change over time, are useful in eliminating bias. The recurrence of meaning across culture and time allows us less room for error in reading the language of the visual. This allows for sensitive and informed readings of visual metaphors that uncover layers of meaning, thus decoding the value of each meaning in order to arrive at logical conclusions. The value of doing this is inherent in the analysis we are engaged in concerning visuality; it indicates that we understand the processes by which symbols and metaphors are reproduced over time and space and (perhaps more so) how ideologies change. The image is a master conveyor of ideology. The traffic in images is therefore also about challenging errant ideologies, which might otherwise be reproduced repeatedly. A good example is the way in which *Cultural Crossings* challenges the meaning of feminism, in order to allow many different definitions of what constitutes feminism. Drawing on a project entitled *The Making of Feminisms in the Caribbean*,[6] the *Cultural Crossings* database incorporates the histories and figures who together participated in the making of feminisms over a century in the region. How we determine feminism over time may be judged through the actions of those we define as contributing to the feminist movement at different historical moments in varied cultural contexts. Such data, for instance, reveals the specificity of the feminist movement in the Caribbean, showing how it evolved differently from movements in Europe and North America, even while there were parallels and common goals.

Building the image-base from two different regions and university sites also raised some of the political issues that challenge scholars who work with both gender and visuality. First among these is the question of which images are to be selected and by whom; second, how do we re-present images so that our subjects are invested with agency rather than re-created as objects of our gaze; and third, how do we read visual images derived from different media and produced for different contexts and times, each with their own rules and history of development and application. The primary intent of the producers of this image-base is not to suggest that these areas are unproblematic, but to invite the user to learn more about the methods and materials that she or he will be drawing on to enhance the cross-cultural understanding of gender. Their and our task is to unsettle deliberately the dominant gaze. Visuality demands

that we work in a mode of continuous deconstruction/reconstruction.

The impact on curriculum development cannot be overemphasised. The discipline of gender is still relatively youthful at tertiary level, in terms of both teaching and research, and there is still much to be done in terms of tightening and rigour. In addition, gender is a discipline that has been particularly responsive to practices. The latter must be constantly informed by the lived realities of men and women, preferably from a comparative perspective, so that the subject matter of gender is not reified into cultural antagonisms between the sexes in one district or society. Thus the exchange of curricula, teaching approaches, methods and materials will serve to enhance and sustain the discipline of gender itself. It is important that the continued development of gender studies is fostered by triangular exchanges of scholarship and activism throughout the globe, fostering equal partnerships in knowledge sharing and concept creation.

One of the immediate goals of the database project as conceived between the two researchers was to introduce Emory graduate students to the Caribbean as a possible site for dissertation research at a fairly early stage, allowing them early access to archival and unpublished material as they prepared proposals for dissertation research. It was also felt that there would be a similar broadening of scope of the vision of students at the University of the West Indies as they shaped their graduate projects. At the same time, faculty at both institutions could develop their networks of collegial contacts for teaching and training students. More importantly, gender studies from non-Western regions, like the Caribbean and Africa, help to diffuse the hegemony of traditionally Eurocentric gender teachings. To teach the construction of femininity in, say, Ghana (as opposed to Europe) to students in the Caribbean expands the possibilities for seeing cultures in new ways.

Finally, one of the important goals of the database is to enhance individual creativity and confidence among students who may excel through a wider variety of means of expression. For instance, they may chose to present essays through digital story-telling as opposed to relying entirely on text-based data. Such methods provide teachers with a way to hold student interest and allow for a mutually shared process of learning in the classroom. Optimistically, such methods may engage students and society in a critical awareness of the use, abuse and limits of technology. In the final analysis, however, it is useful to remember that technology merely provides the tools to aid human creativity and growth; it is not a substitute for learning.

To visualise is to imagine. What the visual scholar needs is to be able to invite their imagination to operate more freely, even while following the rules of "objectivity". This perhaps is one of the main goals of trafficking gender through the combined spheres of visuality and the written text.

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Footnotes

1   Phrase used by Patricia Hayes, one of the organisers of the Gender and Visuality Conference, University of Western Cape, South Africa, August 2004.

2   A series of research assistants have supported the building of the database. Those in the Caribbean have included Kimberly Byng, Shelene Gomes and Michelle Seeraj. At Emory University, technical expert Yvan Bamps has been the major resource on whom the project has depended.

3   The image-base (which is still under construction) has already been published on the websites of both campuses – University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago, and Emory, Atlanta. At a recent meeting between the two researchers, it was agreed that some of the problems of access to a wide range of users would be resolved by placing it on the world wide web. The details including copyright issues for this are being investigated, but it is hoped that by the end of 2006 the database will be accessible on the web.

4   Now in press at Macmillan UK/Palgrave US.

5   Four segments of this documentary series have been completed, with three remaining segments unfinished. The documentary is geared for teaching as well as popular viewing.

6   *The Making of Caribbean Feminisms* has been an ongoing research and activism
     project of the Centre for Gender and Development Studies at the St Augustine and
     Kingston campuses of the University of the West Indies since 1999.

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