

Speaking Into Sight: Articulating the Body Personal with the Body Politic

ALISON KOOISTRA

ABSTRACT

In this paper I work with the subset of identity politics that focuses on the embodied identities of racialized, gendered, sexualized, and (dis)abled persons. I create an overarching metaphorical structure within which the connections between individual and society may be understood. Identity politics works to articulate the “body personal” within the “body politic” through the tropes of seeing and speaking. This anatomical articulation—the “membering” of distinct parts to form a larger whole—is accomplished through a verbal articulation—speaking out, claiming a label or banner, or constructing a coherent narrative. Community membership is accomplished through both visual and linguistic modes of communication, and I argue that these two modes are hierarchically organized within identity politics. I look at the ways in which these modes are differentially accessible and differently accessed by subjects whose identities are necessarily visible (e.g., people who require wheelchairs) and those whose identities are not necessarily visible (e.g., people who are queer). I analyze the tactics that minorities in general use to politicize their identities as *proclaiming* and *claiming*, and the tactics that non-visible minorities use in addition to these as *announcing* and *negotiating*. I conclude by arguing that the primacy of the visible, as an exnominated part of our social code, is paradoxically invisible: it, too, needs to be spoken into sight to become part of the critical theoretical core of identity politics.

“Identity politics” is an ambiguous concept that is invoked more often than it is referenced, and a phenomenon that is summarily dismissed more often than it is seriously theorized.¹ The borders of the identity politics umbrella are ever-expanding and have come to include almost every protest movement since the late 1960s: from second wave feminism to environmental groups, from hippie sit-ins to the disability movement, from gay and lesbian activism to the “new right” agenda, from ethnic separatism to New Age spiritualism (Johnston, Laraña, and Gusfield 1994:10, 26–27; Patton 1995:225–226; Ryan 2001:1–2; cf. Kooistra 2005).

ALISON KOOISTRA graduated with a Master’s degree in social-cultural Anthropology from the University of Toronto in 2005. She is currently working as a freelance writer and editor in Toronto.

As I have argued elsewhere, “‘identity politics’ can never be understood as one entity, with one mandate, and one coherent ideology, in the way that, perhaps, a union or a political party may be understood”; but this does not mean that it cannot be theorized or that certain broad conclusions cannot be drawn from it (Kooistra 2005:50). In this paper I work with the subset of identity politics that focuses on the embodied identities of racialized, gendered, sexualized, and (dis)abled persons. I create an overarching structural metaphor within which the connections between the individual body and the body politic may be understood. Community membership is accomplished through both visual and linguistic modes of communication, and I argue that these two modes are hierarchically organized within identity politics. I look at the ways in which these modes are differentially accessible to, and differently accessed by, subjects whose identities are inevitably visible (e.g., people who require wheelchairs) and those whose identities are not inevitably visible (e.g., people who are queer).

I begin with a discussion of the *articulations* of identity, or the ways in which people claim membership in particular communities, and the *definitions* of identity, or the ways in which identities are externally imposed upon particular individuals or communities. I discuss the role visibility plays in legitimizing and policing identities throughout the paper, and I conclude with a discussion of why it is important to theorize the primacy of the visible.

I analyze the tactics that minorities in general use to politicize their identities as *proclaiming* and *claiming*, and the tactics that non-visible minorities use in addition to these as *announcing* and *negotiating*. All four of these tactics are discursive strategies to make identities visible on a political stage or in personal life: they speak identity into sight. In so doing, they reinforce the primacy of the visible and reinscribe the idea that recognition is the ultimate objective of identity politics. The problem is not that visibility is given a privileged position; the problem is that since it is permitted this pride of place without question or reflection, it generates new oppressions even as old oppressions are overcome. It is critical that an understanding of the role that visibility plays in determining whose claims are legitimate and whose lives are authentic—and whose are not—be incorporated into political awareness and grassroots community-building.

The Body Politic and the Body Personal

Articulations: Asserting and Revaluating Identities

Identity politics works to articulate the body personal—an individual’s physical appearance, sexuality, life experiences, abilities, style of dress, sense of self, political commitments, consumer tastes, ambitions, cosmological understandings, and so forth—within the body politic—the wider community constituted by societal institutions and regulatory

regimes—through the tropes of seeing and speaking. This anatomical articulation—the joining together or “membering” of distinct parts to form a larger whole—is accomplished through a verbal articulation—speaking out, claiming a label or banner, or constructing a coherent narrative.²

These “articulations” work within and against “definitions.” The hegemonic power structure discursively *defines* embodied identities through its medical, legal, and social institutions, both in the sense of clearly delineating the outlines of an object and in the sense of establishing its precise meaning. Identity politics works to reevaluate these meanings and redraw these lines through a process of *articulation*—both in the sense of joining together and in the sense of speaking out—in an effort to gain recognition.

Hierarchies of Seeing and Speaking

Yet if the objective of articulation is predominantly, if not exclusively, recognition (Combahee River Collective 1982:16; Taylor 1994; Fraser 1995; Patton 1995:234), the trope of seeing gains a privileged place over the trope of speaking. This hierarchy operates both horizontally and vertically. In the former instance, speaking and seeing are organized in a linear progression, where expressing oneself is the means to achieving the end goal of visibility. In the vertical hierarchy, visible identities are privileged above non-visible identities because they are seen as more “authentic” (Walker 2001:5–6, 201; Patai 2001:42), or as solid evidence of a particular political commitment (Patai 2001:41; Walker 2001:206; cf. Butler 1990), or as incontrovertible proof that the subject is not fraudulently demanding access to scarce resources or special treatment (Patai 2001:40; Samuels 2003). These hierarchies of speaking and seeing have problematic consequences for members of disadvantaged minority groups who do not carry obvious marks of belonging. People with non-visible disabilities, people of colour with ethnically ambiguous physical features, femme lesbians, or people with some combination of these identities, all share the same problems of not quite fitting in to the dominant culture and yet not being recognized as members of their self-identified communities.

Identity is formed in relation to others (Taylor 1994:32–34; Bucholtz and Hall 2004:492–494; cf. Butler 1990). Identity relies on “identification”: first, the subject’s identification with a certain group; and second, that group’s identification of the subject as a member. If this identification does not occur through immediate visual recognition, it must be discursively negotiated. If the non-visible subject is unable to achieve acceptance as a member, she is disarticulated from the social body she seeks to join; and, without a community to relate to, his identity claim is inarticulated. (I use “inarticulate” in this paper as verb as well as an adjective to indicate that subjects may not only be inarticulate, but may also be made inarticulate.)

Doubled Invisibility

Thus certain marginalized individuals are doubly invisible: they are unrecognized on a political level by the dominant society, and they are unrecognized on a personal level by other members of their self-identified community. Both groups rely on speaking up about and speaking out against personal experiences of oppression as a way of becoming visible to a larger social whole. This is extremely difficult, as Audre Lorde (2001) notes, because effaced minorities must first overcome their fear—“fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgement, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation”—but, more than all of these, the fear of that which is most desired—“the visibility without which we cannot truly live” (42).

However, speaking the invisible is different from rearticulating the already all too visible. The latter case is the paradigmatic model of identity politics: the oppressed person must join together with others like her so that they may rearticulate their *personal visibility* (e.g. skin colour) as a *political visibility* through group consciousness-raising, lobbying the government, and disseminating written work to further expand their imagined community (Young 1990:153; Combahee 1982:20–21; Farley 2002:39).

While invisible minorities too must try to come together with a community, speak out, and make a claim for political recognition, they do so without the same foundation of identification. According to Ellen Samuels, this means that they must either “search for a nonverbal sign” that does not accurately represent their sense of self or their abilities—for example, the adoption of a white cane by a partially blind person who does not actually need one—or they must “resort to the ‘less dignified’ response of claiming identity through speech” (Samuels 2003:241).

Discursive tactics are seen as “less dignified” because to announce an aspect of your identity is to place yourself in the structurally inferior position of asking for acknowledgment and making yourself vulnerable to critical judgement. When an observer can “see for himself” that you are queer, or disabled, or a person of colour, she unquestioningly stores this first-hand information as fact. When your appearance does not “speak for itself,” however, you must persuade a questioning observer to accept your story as fact. Further, there are very few social occasions at which it is appropriate to announce non-visible aspects of identity, yet not to talk about them publicly may be interpreted as misleading or even fraudulent behaviour—if you do not look like what you are, you are a Trojan horse. For example, it is difficult for a man to announce “I am gay” to his hockey team or for a woman to announce “I am black” to the old boys’ club at her workplace, because it makes one aspect of identity a mark that separates the subjects from the rest of the group and invites a reassessment of their memberships. However, not to proclaim “I am gay” or “I am black” may be perceived as disguising your “true” self and obtaining your acceptance to a group under false pretences.³ If you are recognizably black or homosexual, the group has already decided to accept you or reject you, and you know where you stand.

Discursive Strategies

For visible minorities, speaking is a re-vision of an identifiable identity and their speaking strategies are *proclaiming* and *claiming*; for invisible minorities, speaking is an enunciation of an unclear identity and their speaking strategies are *announcing* and *negotiating*.

Proclaiming and Claiming Identity

I define *proclaiming* as the valorization of a stigmatized identity: in proclaiming one's ethnicity, or queerness, or disability, one accepts the definition one has been assigned but rearticulates it with positive values. The Black Power movement's proclamation that “Black Is Beautiful” is an example of this, as is lesbian and gay activists' transformation of the homosexuality label from a medical pathology to a source of pride.

However, as Lisa Walker (2001) notes, “the need to reclaim signifiers of difference which dominant ideologies have used to define minority identities negatively” often results in a privileging of the visible (209). Once a group has proclaimed itself, it often insists on visible markers as signs of allegiance. This tactic enables people to build community and to trust each other in situations where they are in the minority and feel vulnerable; however, it can also engender new systems of marginalization and exclusion (209–210).

Mary Bucholtz's (1995) work on ethnic passing reveals several examples of how the borders of ethnicity and gender are policed. In one section, a woman named Ursula who is of both African-American and European-American parentage, overhears a conversation between two men sitting behind her on the bus. An African-American man explains to his companion that he wears an Islamic style of hat and scarf because “I feel it's part of my culture and part of my heritage, and I just want to say that I'm identifying with that and I'm not buying into the white culture.” The man then points to Ursula, saying “you see that girl sitting in front of us, she's obviously not in touch with her roots,” because Ursula is not dressed in “Black”-coded clothing (Bucholtz 1995:365). In this way, articulating and proclaiming a visible identity can help a group to confront one kind of oppression while reproducing a new kind of oppression.

I define the second tactic, *claiming*, as demanding one's rightful place in society and equal access to community resources. This often results in new institutional policies or government legislation, as with the American Equal Pay and Civil Rights Acts in the 1960s and the ensuing affirmative action quota system for university admissions, or the Canadian Employment Equity Act of 1995 and government policies focused on removing barriers to the hiring and advancement of minorities within the public and private sectors (USDS 1996; CHRC 1997; USEEOC 1997; DOJC 2005).

However, just as the tactic of proclaiming emphasizes the visible, so does the tactic of claiming. As Nancy Fraser notes, redistributive remedies for social inequalities often have the effect of “mark[ing] the most disadvantaged class as inherently deficient and insatiable” (1995:85). Though the members of this group remain on the lowest rung of the

social ladder, they are resented as having special access to resources and receiving unmerited preferential treatment from the state (85).

Samuels suggests that this backlash rebounds even more strongly onto non-visibly disadvantaged persons, who are rendered “hypervisible” as the subjects of intense “social scrutiny and surveillance” (2003:247). They experience “harassment, discrimination, and economic repercussions” because their disabilities are interpreted as fraudulent, “minor or imaginary” (246–247). For example, non-visibly disabled people who attempt to park in a reserved handicapped spot are frequently called to account by passers-by (247). The wheelchair symbol that marks the special parking spot, rather than being a shorthand mnemonic indicator of a range of disabilities, becomes the reductive metonymic definition of disability itself. Even as efforts are being made to overcome oppression – the reserved parking spot is intended to remove a barrier to handicapped people’s ability to participate in society – new oppressions arise as the visible markers of an identity become the definition of that identity and exclude all those who do not appear to fit.

Announcing and Negotiating Identity

While non-visible minorities also *proclaim* and *claim* their identities, these two acts must be preceded by *announcing* and followed by a perpetual process of *negotiating*. If proclaiming reevaluates what is already known, announcing makes public something that is unknown. The term “coming out,” once used exclusively to refer to the process of revealing a queer sexual identity, is now used to refer to the process of announcing any non-visible identity. However, there are important distinctions to be made between identities that are *expected* to be invisible prior to coming out—e.g. homosexuality—and identities that are expected to be visible and not require a coming out process at all—e.g. being a person of colour or having physical disabilities.

As Samuels (2003) points out, “coming out” as disabled is often described as “the process of revealing or explaining one’s disability *to* others,” rather than being “an act of self-acceptance facilitated by a disability community” (239). Further, one’s claims to resources or recognition are perpetually contested since the evidence of one’s minority status is not immediately apparent, and so one must face “the daily challenge of negotiating assumptions” (239). Here, asserting a label is frequently not enough: non-visibly disabled people often feel obligated to provide an explanatory “extended narrative” detailing the particularities of their physical condition and capabilities (239).

Announcements may range from explicit statements to more subtle linguistic cues. Samuels gives the example of Deborah Peifer, a lesbian who became blind later in life and felt compelled to make awkward declarations of her sexual identity: while grocery shopping, she announces, “As a lesbian, I wish to buy these peaches”; while at the drugstore she confides, “As a lesbian, I wish to explain that the yeast infection for which I am purchasing this ointment was the result of taking antibiotics, not heterosexual intercourse” (Samuels

2003:242). At the other extreme, Mary Bucholtz (1995) notes that when a person’s ethnic ancestry is not visibly obvious, the person may use a certain language or register of language to legitimate her claim to her identity. For example, some of the mixed-race women she interviews take courses in their family’s traditional language in order to construct themselves as more ethnically “authentic” (362–363, 366).

Of course, a further complication is that non-visible minorities are at times able to choose whether or not to announce, proclaim, claim, or negotiate their identities with others. In short, they often (though not always) have the ability to “pass” as able-bodied, or as heterosexual, or as an ethnicity other than their own (paradigmatically, though not necessarily, white, as Bucholtz [1995] discusses).⁴ As Samuels explains, this confers “both a certain level of privilege and a profound sense of misrecognition and internal dissonance” (2003:239). Members of the marginalized community with which the subject identifies may regard her with suspicion as liable to betray them (Walker 2001:xv).

The Primacy of the Visible

“Inner” and “Outer” Selves

The conflation of identity with appearance insists that what is supposedly one’s “inside” be marked on what is supposedly one’s “outside.” In the case of sexuality, visibility may be given a moral weight—by “choosing” to expose oneself to the negative attention and surveillance of a heterosexist culture, one affirms one’s political and ideological commitments (Walker 2001:202). Thus the butch is the “authentic” lesbian who is dedicated to challenging patriarchal norms (Walker 2001:202–203; Chrystos 2001:72), while the femme is perceived as a heterosexual woman on vacation (Walker 2001:203, xvi). According to Lisa Walker, the femme becomes visible to, and granted legitimacy by, the lesbian community, only on the arm of the butch (184, 199–201).

Yet while some queer people may display their sexuality through cross-dressing or wearing rainbow buttons, these kinds of codes may not always be possible or desirable. For example, femmes may feel stifled by a mandatory dress code (Chrystos 2001; Walker 2001; Samuels 2003). Further, these kinds of non-verbal signals may not be available to other kinds of non-visible identities, such as people who are afflicted with chronic illnesses like CFIDS (Chronic Fatigue Immune Dysfunction Syndrome) (Samuels 2003:238, 240–241). In the absence of visible markers, many non-visibly disabled people find ways to perform their disabilities. As Megan Jones, a woman who is deaf and partially blind, notes, this often (ironically) involves faking an accident like bumping into a wall to prove that one’s claim of blindness is not fraudulent, or making incomprehensible hand signs so that one’s deafness may be made intelligible to others (Jones 1997; see also Samuels 2003:247).

Performing Identity

Academic attention has increasingly been given to the ways in which identities—both visible and non-visible—are performed. Judith Butler (1990), one of the major theorists of performance, sees identity as “a normative ideal” and not “a descriptive feature of experience” (16). Identities are performed within a “matrix of intelligibility,” and “‘intelligible’ genders,” for example, “are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire” (17). The performance of sexual identities—whether heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual—may undermine this coherence and intelligibility by disarticulating these cohered categories (135).

Butler theorizes the conflation of appearance with identity by erasing the “inner” self entirely. She insists that while “acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance,” they do this

on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means (1990:136).

If the inner self exists only as it is inscribed on the body, Butler’s account does not adequately theorize non-visible identities. The femme, for example, remains marginal to Butler’s discussion, useful only in her contextualization of butch identity. In fact, Butler’s focus on visibility, Walker notes, reproduces the very “intelligibility” she seeks to deconstruct. Butler’s discussion of drag queens and butches equates radical consciousness with radical appearance: cross-dressers are seen as intentionally parodying and destabilizing heterosexual gender norms. Femmes and gay men who do not indicate their sexual orientation with their clothes must therefore be orthodox and traditional (Walker 2001:205–206).⁵

Further, Butler takes the male-to-female drag queen show as paradigmatic of cross-dressing as a whole. The playfulness of this theatrical spectacle leads Butler to focus exclusively on “the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance,” and thus theorize drag as a parody that “fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (137). What this formulation misses is that drag is not always a spectacle performed for the transgressive thrill it brings its audience, but is sometimes also—and sometimes instead—a daily lived reality that is taken quite seriously by its performers. As Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall point out, people who dress in drag are “at least as interested in constructing their own identities as in challenging the identities of others” (2004:501). Rosemary Hennessy (1995) distinguishes “gender parody” from “passing,” and shows that the heteronormative requirement that one’s body (the visible) align with one’s sexual orientation (the non-visible) leads many lesbians and gays to experience drag not as a “playful subversion” but “as a painful yearning for authenticity” (151).

Walker notes that the scholarly attention given to “visible performances of difference does not always attend to issues of intent” (2001:9). She sees “drag” as a theatrical form of dressing-up that anyone can do (with varying degrees of success), but insists that this should be differentiated from the signifying elements of identity that would be either impossible or prohibitively difficult to alter. For example, a butch may have a deep voice, or feel uncomfortable in a dress, while a femme may find herself incapable of sitting in the masculine way with her knees apart (10). Walker sees these embodied identities as “expressive of a core or interior self—in a word, as essential” (10).

Through giving voice to her experiences of misrecognition and oppression, Walker is working to achieve both personal and political visibility for the femme—just as her activist forebears worked to rearticulate the figure of the lesbian within the dominant discourse. Thus, as the tactic of proclaiming becomes that of defining and the ideological structures of oppression are reproduced, so their remedy—recognition through articulation—is reproduced in turn. If this cycle is to be broken, the hegemony of the visible needs to be acknowledged and actively explored in any community-building or political exercise.

Multiple Axes of Identity

So far I have constructed my argument according to two apparently distinct kinds of identity: the visible and the non-visible. I have used these two ideal types as a heuristic device to explore some paradigmatic differences between strategies of self-presentation, practices of identification, and claims to resources. However, as the examples I have used throughout this paper show, the visible and the invisible are never mutually exclusive. Identity is always constructed along multiple axes of belonging, including (though not reducible to) class, age, race, ethnicity, gender, able-bodiedness, and sexuality (Bucholtz 1995:364–366; Butler 1990:143; Combahee 1982:13, 17; Hull and Smith 1982:xviii, xxx; Lorde 2001:114–123; Young 1990:153).⁶ Indeed, the concept of “identity politics” was introduced in the early 1970s by the Combahee River Collective, a group of African-American feminists who were dissatisfied with sexism in Black liberation movement, with racism in the feminist movement, with the bourgeois attitudes of the emerging Black feminist movement, and with the lack of feminist or anti-racist theory in the socialist movement (Ryan 2001:4; Combahee 1982).

The inevitability of complex and multiple subject positions means that any one individual will have both non-visible and visible identities. Depending on the context of one’s living environment, the regulatory mechanisms of one’s government, and the normative requirements of one’s social circle, certain identities will become more salient than others. Some of these may be fairly fixed, while others will shift according to context. And again, the expression of identity relies on the four axes of self-articulation outlined above: proclaiming and claiming visible identities and announcing and negotiating non-visible

identities. For example, the visibly Black, visibly female, founders of the Combahee River Collective found it very difficult to “announce” their non-visible feminist identity in certain contexts (Combahee 1982:18).

The Authenticity of the Visible

As this point, along with several of the other examples discussed in this paper, shows, oppressions along different axes of identity cannot be separated from each other: each influences the others and comments on the others. For example, Cherríe Moraga’s lesbianism allowed her to connect with the maternal Mexican heritage she felt alienated from because of her light skin and “anglocized” upbringing:

It wasn’t until I acknowledged and confronted my own lesbianism in the flesh, that my heartfelt identification with and empathy for my mother’s oppression—due to being poor, uneducated, and Chicana—was realized. My lesbianism is the avenue through which I have learned the most about silence and oppression.... What I am saying is that the joys of looking like a white girl ain’t so great since I realized I could be beaten on the street for being a dyke. If my sister’s being beaten because she’s Black, it’s pretty much the same principle (2002:26).

Although Moraga insists on the destructiveness of ranking oppressions throughout this article, she still implicitly organizes them hierarchically according to visibility. Walker shows that skin colour—typically the most visible marker of identity—remains “the privileged signifier” that lesbianism is made analogous to in Moraga’s account (Walker 2001:198, 190). It is also interesting, I would add, that Moraga privileges her (non-visible) Chicana heritage as her “roots” (2002:29). She sees her identification with her white father and with white, English-speaking educated, upwardly mobile America in general, as less authentic than her identification with her oppressed, illiterate, impoverished, Spanish-speaking, “brown mother” (25–26, 29). Nevertheless, she is prevented from proclaiming and claiming her Chicana identity because it is not visibly evident. Thus her lesbianism becomes the avenue through which she can legitimately claim her ethnic identity.

As Moraga’s story shows, the very concept of a multiracial person “passing” for white is problematic.⁷ Once again, the hierarchy of the visible is reproduced, where “white” people are the unmarked category, perceived as lacking colour and thus ethnicity. Interestingly, if a person of “colour” passes for “white,” or if a “white” person passes for a person of “colour,” this is seen as a fraudulent external expression that betrays their “real” identity. The same is true for disabled people who can pass for able-bodied in some contexts. However, when a female lesbian “passes” for male, or at least adopts the physical and sartorial signifiers of masculinity, she is seen as being more, not less, authentically homosexual (Walker 2001). While these expressions of identity may at first seem to be policed in opposite ways, they both conform to the hierarchical privileging of the visible. Whatever you “are,” you are expected to display it on your body.

Thus, the individual’s body, which has been discursively defined and materially regulated by the body politic, must be (re)articulated through the tropes of seeing and speaking. This articulation is made possible only by the joining together of members in a particular identity group, who, through sharing their personal experiences with each other, recognize their problems as political and communal rather than personal and private. As Lorde explains, political effectiveness requires unity—but not homogeneity—and the “mobilization of...joint power” (2001:119, 117).

Making Sense: The Cultural Production of Visibility

The Irrationality of the Invisible

So far I have discussed articulation as a tactic, as a way to express a distinction and to establish membership as part of a larger whole. “Articulate” is both a verb and an adjective, however, and to be articulate is not simply the ability to speak clearly: it is also the ability to participate in rational discourse. And in the West, rationality, objectivity, and the real are all defined in visual terms, as Iris Marion Young (drawing on Luce Irigaray) points out:

In the logic of identity... rational thought is defined as infallible vision; only what is seen clearly is real, and to see it clearly makes it real. One sees not with the fallible senses, but with the mind’s eye, a vision standing outside all, surveying like a proud and watchful lord... The knowing subject is a gazer, an observer who stands above, outside of, the object of knowledge (Young 1990:125).

The “proud and watchful lord” is the embodiment of what Lorde calls the “mythical norm,” which, in North America, “is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian [sic], and financially secure” (2001:116). According to Young, the gaze of this lord enacts a kind of “cultural imperialism” in which he projects his “own values, experience, and perspective as normative and universal” (1990:123). Anyone who does not share the lord’s perspective is rendered invisible and her or his experiences and interests are negated (Young 1990:123, 136; Lorde 2001:116).

Thus those who are structurally invisible are also inarticulated—made inarticulate—because their attempts to speak about their oppression do not fit the dominant logic. “When we complain,” Young notes, “we are accused of being picky, overreacting, making something out of nothing, or of completely misperceiving the situation” (1990:134). These responses have the effect, not only of silencing dissent, but also of making “oppressed people feel slightly crazy” (134). This word recurs time and again in the literature on identity politics: before individuals become aware of the communal and political dimensions of their problems, they feel “crazy” (Combahee 1982:15; Hull and Smith 1982:xviii, xxx; Moraga 2002:28; Samuels 2003:246). Speaking out, then, is a move toward making visible the unspoken norms and “articulating other versions of reality” (Farley 2002:44).

Controlling the Codes

The cultural frameworks for the “production and reappropriation of meaning” (110) are what Alberto Melucci (1994) refers to as “codes.” Control over such codes constitutes the foundation of power in our information-based society (112–113); social movement activists, therefore, must effectively manipulate these codes in order for their message to penetrate (123, 125). Charles Goodwin (1994), in his discussion of the ways that the “coding schemes” of a particular field or profession can shape how and what one sees in a given context, offers the useful concept of “highlighting.” Highlighting creates a figure–ground relationship to mark the salient points of an object, and what is relevant is determined by the particular coding scheme (609–610, 616). In the context of this paper, I bring Goodwin’s concept of coding schemes more into line with Melucci’s codes; that is, I use it not only in reference to particular professions, but also to broader social, cultural, institutional, and informal ways of organizing knowledge. Here, coding schemes are the hegemonic structures that generate identity definitions, while highlighting is a tactic for actors to use in defining, articulating, proclaiming, claiming, announcing, and negotiating aspects of identity.

In this I follow Bucholtz and Hall (2004), who expand Goodwin’s application of highlighting beyond physical vision “to include any semiotic act that brings to salience some aspect of the social situation” (495). However, while Bucholtz and Hall’s reinterpretation of the term is useful, Goodwin’s emphasis on the visual should not be ignored. It is important to theorize highlighting as a general-use semiotic tool or process, but the purpose or end-product of highlighting is to “guide the perception of others while further reifying the object” (Goodwin 1994:610–611).

Rearticulating the Visible

Theorizing visibility is important, not because this reification can be avoided, but because its boundaries can be read as contingent rather than definitive. As discussed above, both the activist goals of recognition and redistribution reproduce the emphasis on the visible; the strategies of proclaiming, claiming, announcing, and negotiating do the same. The problem with visibility is not that it holds a privileged position, but that it is an exnominated part of the social moral code. The visual emphasis is paradoxically invisible; it needs to be spoken into sight if its dominance, along with the oppressive outcomes of this dominance, is to be challenged.

Lifestyle Politics and Consumer Culture

But it is not just “the visible” as a reified object in itself that matters; it is also, as Hennessy explains, “how visibility is conceptualized [that] matters” (1995:142). If failure to acknowledge the hegemonic sway of the visible can lead to the exchange of old oppressions for new oppressions, failure to theorize and strategize different kinds of visibility can lead activists to fetishize visibility as an end in itself. This can result in a “politics of lifestyle” that, rather than turning the body personal into an active politicized subject, sees self-transformation as all that is required for social transformation (Kauffman 2001:31).

Here, L. A. Kauffman (2001) shows, political commitments are judged more by “conformity to certain implicit codes of self-fashioning (what one eats, wears, listens to, reads, purchases, etc.) than... by what one does to change existing structures of domination, exploitation, and exclusion” (31). By this reasoning—to return to an earlier example—a lesbian who shaves her head and wears masculine clothing is doing more to change heterosexual structures of dominance than a femme lesbian who actively lobbies the government for same-sex marriage rights.

When visibility seen as an end in itself, identity politics reinforces the socio-economic structures of oppression, rather than challenging them. Minorities gain equality as consumers, but not as political subjects (Hennessy 1995:143). Hennessy links the fetishization of visibility to commodity fetishism, arguing that “alienation of any aspect of human life from the network of social relations that make it possible constitutes the very basis of fetishization” (1995:153). By this she means that the adoption of particular styles of dress to challenge bourgeois sensibilities, or queer activists’ “visibility actions” in malls (160), ignores the labour of “invisible others” (142) in the Third World (and the First-World working class) who create the conditions for consumer culture to exist (173–174).

Conclusion

Critics who condemn identity politics as a mere “politics of visibility” make the same mistake as the lifestyle activists in conflating the body personal with the body politic, and ignoring the ways in which these two articulate with and define each other. More equitable redistribution of resources and opportunities is only possible if inequalities are brought to light by a group making itself known and staking a claim. What is truly needed is the more nuanced approach advocated by Fraser, which acknowledges that “justice today requires *both* redistribution *and* recognition” and theorizes the ways that these two political modes are intertwined (1995:69). One way to do this, as I have tried to indicate in this paper, is to critically examine the primacy of the visible in the ways that identities are experienced and in the ways that politics are organized.

It is important to theorize visibility because what we see is determined not only by what has been coded, but how “literate” we are in “reading” those codes (Hennessy

1995:177). Hennessy notes that “paying attention to how we read and considering its implications and consequences are a key component of any oppositional political work” and if we “ignore this crucial dimension of social struggle,” we are in danger of “reproducing the very conditions we seek to change” (177). Thus any identity-based political movement that does not critically theorize the primacy of the visible faces a double risk of, on the one hand, running campaigns that fetishize image and representation and ignore the underlying exploitive system of production; and on the other hand, inscribing new exclusionary normative standards for belonging and reproducing the system of oppression it hopes to challenge.

Notes

1. Thanks to the anonymous reviewer and to Dr. Bonnie McElhinny for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
2. I use “verbal” in its broadest sense to indicate expression by linguistic means, not to refer to oral communication exclusively. I also intend “speaking out” to be understood in this way, as a protest against oppression that may be either oral or written.
3. See Samuels (2003:242–243) for anecdotal evidence of this phenomenon.
4. For example, people with non-visible disabilities do not always have the option of “passing” when obscuring their identities would deny them access to necessary resources (e.g. obtaining a parking spot near to a building, boarding a plane early, having a hearing device installed on a telephone at work, and so forth).
5. As far as I have been able to ascertain, there is no term equivalent to “femme” for a homosexual man who is physically and sartorially indistinguishable from heterosexual men. It is an interesting question worthy of further investigation why this particular female sexual identity is marked in this way, and the equivalent male sexual identity is not.
6. Butler notes that such lists “invariably close with an embarrassed ‘etc.’,” yet she celebrates this “illimitable et cetera... as a new departure for feminist political theorizing” (Butler 1990:143). It is difficult to see what is new about her discussion of the “et cetera,” however; the complexity of infinitely multiplying subject positions were the starting point for most if not all identity activists in the late 1970s and early 1980s (see the anthologies and compilations by Hull, Bell Scott and Smith [1982], Moraga and Anzaldúa [2002], Lorde [2001], and Ryan [2001]).
7. Bucholtz (1995) points out that those able to ethnically “pass” are usually from mixed race parentage. She discusses new scholarship on the subject that attempts to change traditional judgments of passing as contemptible. Rather than a denial of one’s “true” roots, these authors suggest that neither ethnicity be privileged as more legitimate (360).

References

- Bucholtz, Mary, and Kira Hall.
2004 Theorizing Identity in Language and Sexuality Research. *Language in Society* 33(4):469–515.
- Bucholtz, Mary
1995 From Mulatta to Mestiza: Passing and the Linguistic Reshaping of Ethnic Identity. *In Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self*. Kira Hall and Mary Bucholtz, eds. Pp. 351–373. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith
1990 *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge
- Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC)
1997 Visible Minorities and the Public Service of Canada. Electronic document, <http://www.chrc-ccdp.ca/publications/chap3-en.asp>, accessed May 1, 2005.
- Combahee River Collective
1982[1977] A Black Feminist Statement. *In All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. Pp. 13–22. Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press.
- Chrystos
2002[1980] I Don’t Understand Those Who Have Turned Away From Me. *In This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. 3rd edition. Cherríe L. Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, eds. Pp. 71–73. Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press.
- Department of Justice Canada (DOJC)
2005[1995] Employment Equity Act of 1995. Electronic document, <http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/E-5.401/>, accessed June 26, 2005.
- Farley, Tucker
2002 Speaking, Silence, and Shifting Listening Space: The NWSA Lesbian Caucus in the Early Years. *NWSA Journal* 14(1):29–50.
- Fraser, Nancy
1995 From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a “Post-Socialist” Age. *New Left Review* 212:68-93.
- Goodwin, Charles
1994 Professional Vision. *American Anthropologist* 96(3):606–633.
- Hennessy, Rosemary
1995 Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture. *In Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*. Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman, eds. Pp. 142–183. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hull, Gloria T., and Barbara Smith
1982[1979] Introduction: The Politics of Black Women’s Studies. *In All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. Pp. xvii–xxxii. Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press.
- Hull, Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds.
1982 *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*. Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press.
- Johnston, Hank, Enrique Laraña, and Joseph R. Gusfield
1994 Identities, Grievances, and New Social Movements. *In New Social Movements: From Ideology to Identity*. Enrique Laraña, Hank Johnston, and Joseph R. Gusfield, eds. Pp. 3–35. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Jones, Megan

- 1997 "Gee, You Don't Look Handicapped..." Why I Use a White Cane to Tell People that I Am Deaf. *Electric Edge: The Disability Experience in America*, July–August. Electronic document, <http://www.ragged-edge-mag.com/archive/look.htm>, accessed August 13, 2006.

Kauffman, L. A.

- 2001[1990] *The Anti-Politics of Identity*. In *Identity Politics in the Women's Movement*. Barbara Ryan, ed. Pp. 23–34. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Kooistra, Alison

- 2005 *Essentialism in Text and Context: Identity Production and Protest in Late Capitalist North America*. M.A. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto.

Lorde, Audre

- 2001[1984] *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press.

McElhinny, Bonnie

- 1996 *Strategic Essentialism in Sociolinguistic Studies of Gender*. In *Gender and Belief Systems: Proceedings of the Fourth Berkeley Women and Language*. Natasha Warner, Jocelyn Ahlers, Leela Bilmes, Monica Oliver, Suzanne Wertheim and Melinda Chen, eds. Pp. 469–480. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Women and Language Group.

Melucci, Alberto

- 1994 *A Strange Kind of Newness: What's 'New' in New Social Movements?* In *New Social Movements from Ideology to Identity*. Enrique Laraña, Hank Johnston, and Joseph R. Gusfield, eds. Pp. 101–130. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Moraga, Cherrie L. and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, eds.

- 2002[1981] *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. 3rd edition. Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press.

Moraga, Cherrie L.

- 2002[1979] *La Güera*. In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. 3rd edition. Cherrie L. Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, eds. Pp. 24–33. Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press.

Patai, Daphne

- 2001[1992] *The Struggle for Feminist Purity Threatens the Goals of Feminism*. In *Identity Politics in the Women's Movement*. Barbara Ryan, eds. Pp. 39–42. New York: New York University Press.

Patton, Cindy

- 1995 *Refiguring Social Space*. In *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*. Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman, eds. Pp. 216–249. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Ryan, Barbara, ed.

- 2001 *Identity Politics in the Women's Movement*. New York: New York University Press.

Ryan, Barbara

- 2001 *Introduction*. In *Identity Politics in the Women's Movement*. Barbara Ryan, ed. Pp. 1–16. New York: New York University Press.

Samuels, Ellen

- 2003 *My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming-Out Discourse*. *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 9(1-2):233-255.

Taylor, Charles

- 1994 *The Politics of Recognition*. In *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Amy Gutmann, ed. Pp. 25–73. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

“Speaking Into Sight” • **vis-à-vis: Explorations in Anthropology**

Thornton, Sarah

1996 *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press.

United States Department of State (USDS)

1996[1964] Civil Rights Act of 1964. Electronic document, <http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/laws/majorlaw/civilr19.htm>, accessed June 22, 2005.

United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (USEEOC)

1997[1963] Equal Pay Act of 1963. Electronic document, <http://www.eeoc.gov/policy/epa.html>, accessed June 22, 2005.

Walker, Lisa

2001 *Looking Like What You Are: Sexual Style, Race, and Lesbian Identity*. New York: New York University Press.

Young, Iris Marion

1990 *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Author contact information:

Alison Kooistra
amkooistra@gmail.com

vis-à-vis is online at vav.library.utoronto.ca