

Films for the Feminist Classroom

Films for the Feminist Classroom

[Issue 8.1-2, Fall 2018](#)

- [FFC home](#)
- [journal issues](#)
- [editorial staff](#)
- [call for proposals](#)
- [FFC contact](#)

SheWrite. Directed by Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar. Mumbai: Centre for Media and Cultural Studies, 2005. 55 minutes.

Against the Grain: An Artist's Survival Guide to Perú. Directed by Ann Kaneko. Blooming Grove, NY: New Day Films, 2008. 65 minutes.

Reviewed by Karen Keifer-Boyd

Art Activism Creating Spaces for Herstories

The films *SheWrite* and *Against the Grain* can be useful pedagogical tools to raise awareness about the mechanisms and hierarchies of power and privilege and to show how artists have attempted to transform them. *SheWrite* specifically focuses on the ways that patriarchy can control women's agency, sexism in art professions, and how women have responded to sexism by creating feminist spaces through art to explore and acknowledge their body and lives on their own terms. The suggestions below on ways to facilitate pedagogical activities before and after film viewing are recommended for high school writing and visual art courses; university women's, gender, and sexuality courses; and undergraduate and graduate courses in literary and visual arts.

A description of the film *SheWrites* cannot convey the affective dimensions of hearing a poet recite her poem while entering her private living and working spaces. Four Tamil women poets of India are introduced one by one through their poetry, auditorily layered on close-ups of the visual culture of their confined quarters. Salma's poetry subverts her isolation from public life by amplifying the intimacy of the artifacts she surrounds herself with in the circumscribed territory of her home. Next, the film introduces Kuttirevathi, whose poem "Breasts" intertwines female sexuality and desire with the everyday experiences of having breasts. The solitude of her private living space is the source of creativity, while, as we learn in the film, her published poems have elicited hate mail, obscene violent phone calls, and public threats of death. Malathy Maitri, a founding member of Anangu, a collective of women poets and artists, is the third poet featured. Similar to how Anangu mobilizes resistance to sexist restrictions, harassment, and censorship, her poems convey the feminist power of collective spaces. And, finally, in her poems Sukirtharani celebrates female sexuality as transcendent empowerment. Altogether, the film weaves together themes of entrapment, creative escape, and collective resistance.

The poetry in *SheWrite* is rich with metaphors of women's bodily experiences that in a feminist classroom could be compared to those in movies, computer games, advertisements, comics, and other media that circulate in students' lives. To develop a critical perspective in such a comparison, educators and facilitators may assign feminist philosopher Nancy Tuana's research on medical diagrams and descriptions of women's bodies in health textbooks, in which she calls attention to an epistemology of ignorance that constructs and purposefully maintains the suppression and erasure of "bodies of knowledge concerning women's sexual pleasures."¹

A productive classroom dialogue could be sparked by placing *SheWrite* in conversation with visual artist Judy Chicago's monumental installation, *The Dinner Party*, which was criticized by US politicians and the art world as obscene and pornographic, regardless how innocuous or beautiful it is. And similar to these Indian poets' work, Chicago uses representations of women's embodiment to signify broader social issues: the symmetrical butterfly vulva-like openings in three-dimensional elaborately glazed ceramic plates are symbolic of particular women, the social obstacles they experienced as women, and their accomplishments in the sciences, arts, medicine, and humanities.² [The Dinner Party Curriculum Project](#) offers pedagogical ideas that could be adapted to encounters with the stunning and complex *SheWrite* video images (e.g., home still-life arrangements and male and female dolls agitated in a washing machine) juxtaposed with the poets' voices.

Similar to the brave women poets in *SheWrite*, the four Peruvian visual artists featured in *Against the Grain*, have critiqued their government through art and faced brutal consequences for speaking their truths to power. In the film, each artist reflects on how their art conveyed the reality of the times in Peru in the 1980s. Claudio Jiménez Quispe recounts how he fled his village of Ayacucho because of the insurgency of Maoist rebel group, The Shining Path, and yet continued the tradition of making retablos—portable altars of wooden boxes filled with sculpted figures that chronicle this era, including the violent scenes that he had witnessed. Underground punk scene activist, Alfredo Márquez, printed large silkscreened images of Mao with bright red lipstick in the style of Andy Warhol's prints of Marilyn Monroe. He laughs at how his intention was to belittle Mao; however, the state authorities interpreted the image as a tribute and claimed his work an art of treason, sentencing Márquez to twenty years in prison. The third artist in the film, Eduardo Tokeshi, was born in Peru of Japanese parents, and with the downfall of former president Alberto Fujimori, was ostracized for his heritage. His paintings reference the Peruvian flag denoting his intention of identity (re)affirmation. Natalia Iguñiz, the fourth artist, created *The Bitch Speaks*, which involved making posters with the text, "if you wear a short skirt they call you a whore" that she pasted throughout Lima to challenge women's sexual repression through the virgin/whore binary. While not explicitly a critique of the government, her work was censored for disrupting patriarchal control of women's bodies. The film provides political context for the art by the featured artists and includes many examples of art actions such as Peruvians leaving art and protest slogans on the "Wall of Shame," a wall in Lima built to keep people with low economic status living in one neighborhood from crossing into an adjacent, wealthier one.

Filmmaker Ann Kaneko opens *Against the Grain*, asking: "Is freedom of expression a right or a privilege?" This is a poignant question to discuss with a group in relation to *SheWrite* or *Against the Grain*. Other questions that might be useful to explore prior to watching the films are:

- How does patriarchal power affect perceptions of gender norms and ideals?
- How are intersections of other identities—such as class, religion, caste, and ethnicity—affected by patriarchal power?
- What does it mean to speak truth to power?
- Compare peaceful protests in the past to those held more recently in the United States. What are the people asking for in each? How are the arts integral to the protests?

And Naomi Klein's video, *How to Resist Trump's Shock Doctrine*, along with her book, *No Is Not Enough: Resisting Trump's Shock Politics and Winning the World We Need*, would provide students with additional context to explore the power of art to disrupt existing hierarchies of power and privilege.³ With worldwide examples, Klein outlines a five-step plan:

1. Know what's coming.
2. Get out of your homes and defy bans.
3. Know your history.
4. Always follow the money.
5. Advance a bold counter-plan.

The goal of connecting Klein's work to *SheWrite* and *Against the Grain* is to lead students to better understand the role arts activism can have in raising awareness about a global responsibility toward eco-social justice and democracy. These pedagogical strategies can lead to dialogue about the films in relation to students' lives, current times, and a wide range of places and issues.

1 Nancy Tuana, "Coming to Understand: Orgasm and the Epistemology of Ignorance," *Hypatia* 19, no. 1 (2004): 194-232.

2 [The Dinner Party](#) is permanently housed at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. For more on this installation, see Jane F. Gerhard, *The Dinner Party: Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013).

3 Naomi Klein, [How to Resist Trump's Shock Doctrine](#) (New York: The Intercept, 2017); Naomi Klein, *No Is Not Enough: Resisting Trump's Shock Politics and Winning the World We Need* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017).

[Karen Keifer-Boyd](#) (kk-b@psu.edu), PhD, is professor of art education and women's, gender, and sexuality studies at The Pennsylvania State University. She is past president of the National Art Education Association (NAEA) [Women's Caucus](#) (2012-14), NAEA Distinguished Fellow Class of 2013, and 2012 Fulbright Distinguished Chair in Gender Studies at Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt, Austria. She co-founded and editor of the journal [Visual Culture & Gender](#). She co-authored [Including Difference: A Communitarian Approach to Art Education in the Least Restrictive Environment](#) (NAEA, 2013); [InCITE, InSIGHT, InSITE](#) (NAEA, 2008); [Engaging Visual Culture](#) (Davis, 2007); co-edited [Real-World Readings in Art Education: Things Your Professors Never Told You](#) (Falmer, 2000); and served as editor of the *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education*.



Still from *SheWrite* (dir. Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar, 2005). Used with permission.

Design by Joanna Wyzgowska. Copyright © 2018. All rights reserved.