



**IMAG**

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...not the epitome of normalcy

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Karen Keifer-Boyd, Ph.D., is Professor of Art Education and Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies at The Pennsylvania State University. Honors include two Fulbright Awards, National Art Education Association's (NAEA) Lifetime Achievement Award and Distinguished Fellow. Her research on feminist pedagogy, inclusion, disability justice, transdisciplinary creativity, cyberart activism, transcultural dialogue, and social justice arts-based research is in numerous publications and translated into several languages. She co-authored four books: *Including Difference* (NAEA, 2013); *InCITE, InSIGHT, InSITE* (NAEA, 2008); *Engaging Visual Culture* (Davis, 2007); and *Real-World Readings in Art Education* (Falmer, 2000); and is co-founder and editor of *Visual Culture & Gender*.

Keywords: intersectionality, decentering notions of normativity, Llano Estacado



Figure 1. ...not the epitome of normalcy  
Digitally manipulated photograph by Karen Keifer-Boyd (2002)

For five years I lived in Lubbock, Texas, a high desert plain, historically and geographically known as Llano Estacado. While there are plenty of wind and dust storms, there are no indigenous trees and seldom was there a cloud in the sky, let alone rain. A few times a year the rain came as torrential downpours and the sky rained mud. Weather reports used numerous terms for the types of winds in the region and expressed great excitement if a cloud was spotted. The land is a high plateau from which one could watch a sunrise and sunset from the same location without anything blocking the horizon. Hidden from view, until on the edge of gashes in the earth, are deep canyons of red and yellow rock. Driving on the wide flat roads from the hub of the city of Lubbock to find a canyon, seeking a reprieve from flatness, I spotted and photographed a cloud as it appeared to touch the earth. Against the blue sky were long straight rows of white cotton from plants that grew in the semi-arid climate. Along with the flat landscape of orderly rows of cotton plants, are social practices that assume the White abled-bodied hetero-male is the epitome of normalcy in which all others are judged as lesser, as abnormal. There is much more diversity of life than is proclaimed on the surface, like the lifeforms that emerge during the rare downpours through the mud cracks of the playa lakes, a mostly dry lake unique to the Llano Estacado and other semi-arid high plateaus.

The gashes in the land hiding stunningly beautiful canyons, seemed to me to echo the painful stories of people hiding who they are in order to survive. Such stories were shared with me in my home and classroom, while in Lubbock teaching at Texas Tech University, where I offered safe spaces to value the differences of each individual. Their perception of being different from others was often first encountered and enforced on entering school, where white male, able-bodied, heterosexual teachings engulfed them. Three wrote testimonials (one anonymously) published as a chapter that I (Keifer-Boyd, 2003) authored in a book titled, *From Our Voices: Art Educators and Artists Speak Out About Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Issues*. One 21-year-old gay White man wrote:

I never interpreted my dislike of high school as relating to a gender or sex problem, it was a matter of being increasingly systematically excluded from things since 4th grade, desiring to be normal and most importantly hating the way young people are treated, as prisoners and not humans, until they undergo enough indoctrination to be sure they will always defer to superiors and not put up much fight. At this point they are allowed to be humans. (Keifer-Boyd, 2003, p. 4)

Students develop feelings of inadequacy when there are no role models who look like them, when histories don't include them, and what is privileged as worthy is impossible to become. The self-descriptors in the testimonies include:

alone, nonexistence, invisible, withdrawn, suicidal, controlled, worthless, miserable, empty shell of a person, catacomb-like state, nonhuman, excluded, something different, desire to be normal, always different, two worlds, solitude, isolation, banished from society, secret lives, lies, and ceased to exist. (Keifer-Boyd, 2003, p. 12)

In plain sight is a double entendre on the high plains of West Texas, in which digital manipulation of my photograph of the landscape situates same-sex partnerships on even plain, visible above ground. Intersectionality is suggested in the use of a gray-scale color palette lit by the non-uniform rays of the sun, which breaks the silence, breaking through the cloud that had at last planted itself asymmetrically on the horizon, decentering notions of normativity. For students with disabilities, students of color, transgendered youth, among other decentered positions, the art classroom can offer a sense of belonging within the environment.

## References

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