

Transcript for “On Studying Visual Politics, Decentering euro-american Centric Notions of Visuality, and Jugaar (Being Resourceful): An Interview with Rohini Singh.” From *Doing Digital Visual Studies: One Image, Multiple Methodologies*.

<https://www.ccdigitalpress.org/book/ddvs/chapters/singh.html>

Laurie Gries:

Thank you, Dr. Singh, for being here so much. I really appreciate you participating in this project and we're so excited about the perspective that you're going to bring to digital visual studies, not only in terms of what it means to do international or transnational or global research in this area, but also if we were going to take you know kind of a neocolonial perspective or a de-colonial perspective--what would that look like. I'm eager to get into all of those conversations with you, but I'd love to begin by you just telling us, you know, introduce yourself to us, tell us some of the projects you've worked on in relation to visual studies, and perhaps what you're working on now.

Rohini Singh:

Sure. Thank you for having me here. This feels a little bit like a talk show when I say something like that. Thanks for having me, Laurie.

Hi viewers and listeners, maybe, out there. My name is Rohini Singh. I'm an assistant professor of communication studies at the College of Wooster, and some of the research that I've done that relates to visual studies has covered, for example, a key area of my research--that is the visual politics of Asia, and, most recently, there has been work on India, though I will be the first one to say that, of course, Asia has many other countries as well. For example, I have written on visual analyses of U.S. news images of India's first prime minister, and we might get into this later in our conversation about how that was, I think, a very traditional approach, which I do not mean to cast aspersions on at all. I am a fan of tradition, but it was a traditional approach and as far as visual studies goes, I think, in that it looked at *Time Magazine* covers, which I actually got out from the library and hard copy and thumbed the portraits and looked up the painters who had created the portraits, and got the hard cover of the magazine and matched it to the article inside, right. It was about India, but it was based from a U.S. perspective because *Time* is a U.S. news publication, and that for me was a little safe, in the sense of, saying that, well, I'm not going a whole hog and studying India yet. So I'm going to start by doing the soft on-ramp of looking at the U.S.' views of India as my first initial foray into doing work that is not based in your own country.

I was in the United States, and I was studying perspectives of a country outside of it and that's something I would actually suggest. I know in terms of thinking about hey, if you're someone who wants to study another country, who wants to do work that looks beyond U.S. borders, but you want to be really cognizant of not trying to speak for, perhaps, a group of people or a nation with which you may not have a lot of familiarity, you could consider something like this. Has there been work that's maybe on U.S. views or Western views of that country that you could kind of start with? So that's where I started.

Most recently I worked on, and I have a piece coming out next month on a totally different thing, it's also on India, but it's on a mascot who I theorized as a type of avatar, a corporate avatar, a mascot of an advertising campaign in India that is the world's only advertising campaign to have run uninterrupted for 60 years and to frequently comment on social issues and politics through their advertisements. They were being woke before Nike decided to be woke for a long time. They do so through this very interesting cartoon character mascot who dresses up as politicians and who dresses up as the public and who issues all these very biting satirical comments while selling a product. That was a very different project because it required looking at a lot of digitally accessed images. This research took place during the pandemic, and it meant not being able to go to India, not being able to speak to and go into the offices of the advertising company to gain access to their billboards, to their images, so I had to scrape things online. I had to do something that the Indian digital humanist by Padmini Ray Murray refers to as *jugaar*, meaning to be resourceful and to make do with what you have, which I think digital visual studies encourages you to do. I even created a website just trying to catalog the 500 images and deciding how to tag them and talk about them. So that's kind of been the sort of the start in a sense of trying to do work on India with images and where that ended up, and looking forward, I'm either going to either if I'm not tired of this avatar and she really is – to spend hours and hours of your day staring at this image, it can really get to you.

Laurie Gries:

Believe me, I know how that feels.

Rohini Singh:

Yeah, exactly, she does all kinds of things, and she dresses up. So, either she's going to become a book with different chapters on gender, for example, in politics, Indian advertising, and commercialism, or I'm going to study my second favorite obsession which is Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar and her many mediated visual representations.

Laurie Gries:

Thank you. I want to ask a couple things. When you say you study visual politics, what does that mean for you?

Rohini Singh:

Thank you! Gosh, you know, I will say that, I say that that's my elevator word or elevator phrase, and I think part of it was born out of taking a graduate course with Cara Finnegan where that was the name of the course, and I thought, yeah, okay that must be what I'm doing. So, part of it was that. So, the graduate students out there, that's totally fine. But I think the other part of it was that I found that when I use the word "visual politics," I'm really thinking about how images are political and how they engage in, for example, either they are indexes of foreign policy, right, and that you can read them as the basis of policy making or that, in this case, the advertising campaign I'm looking at, this literal mascot engages in politics. She comments on, she critiques the government, she takes the public to task when they're being

selfish, so for me, that's why I use that word. I want to make sure the word politics comes alongside the image.

Laurie Gries:

Okay. I want to ask you a few questions about method and then we can move to some other questions. I'm interested in your point about saying you were doing a very traditional approach, and one of the things I've been thinking a lot since I wrote my book, which is, you know, when you write your first book, you're always trying to push back on something and do something new and so you gotta carve out space for yourself and you're like, okay, we're done studying visual representations. That's just like old school news, we're gonna do this other stuff. And much of what I was doing was actually – Cara Finnegan had already been doing. She hadn't been doing it in one big case study, but she had been picking it apart. But, you know, part of that too was an influence from Bruno Latour where I was trying to move away from criticism because we had just been there, done that kind of thing. But the more I think about it, the more almost problematic I feel it is because the study of visual representations in relation to visual politics, as your research is making clear, is still very, very important. So, it might not be the case that we should all be doing that kind of work, but I want to imagine that digital visual studies should very much be involved in that kind of work still. If, you know, in thinking about method, tell us more because I understand the complexity of tracing a single image or a single representation and watching it morph and creating a database. I mean, it's hard work, right, so tell us a little bit more about your research process and the importance of the work you're doing for digital visual studies.

Rohini Singh:

Sure! Gosh, the importance of the work I'm doing for digital visual studies. You know what? I'll answer the first half the question first. I think in terms of method, and I will say a lot of these things hadn't occurred to me when I was working on this advertising campaign until I read this book, your collection of essays, and the thing that really got me was just thinking about how much I was relying on and needing digital approaches in terms of tracing how I imagined audiences were receiving these advertisements. Of course, we're not trying to write analyses that says "oh if we can't track what the audience says, how do we know?" Nothing like that, but when something is a cultural icon, right, or an image, so much of its importance is not its composition or who made it or why they made it, so much as what are people doing with it. In India, in this case, the issue is that India is technologically bifurcated, and so in terms of these ads that I was trying to trace people's reactions to, you know, a lot of these ads are billboards just by the side of the road, by highways, people are zipping right past them. I mean it would cause a major pileup if people stop and look at the ad and think "oh what a biting social satire," right? I mean that's not happening, but it really didn't occur to me until I read the Archer and Collins piece in this collection that gosh, you know, I could have Google-Street-imaged this thing, and these boards are all over India. There's 200 of them, and they change every three days, which is itself a technological feat.

Laurie Gries:  
Wow, interesting.

Rohini Singh:  
They do. It's really an image that started analog but acts digital in that sense of that it gets refreshed a lot, so that sort of a concept of being able to experience an image in its "natural habitat," right, as far possible, is I think something that, as we get more into digital visual studies, will become a central question. Can I put myself, as a researcher who's not in that country or in that space, in that position? But I think also realizing that the natural habitat for a lot of images today is the digital world and how these advertisements are spreading is also on Twitter and so just being able to see it in that way is something I think that digital visual studies helps me to think through as a method--that I should account for that. In fact, I should, maybe, even begin with that. How are people encountering these images?

Laurie Gries:  
What about the ar--? Before we go on to that latter part of the question, what about the archiving process of you creating that website? I'm interested in what you did, what you found were the complexities in doing that, what it maybe afforded for you.

Rohini Singh:  
Yeah, you know, a lot of it – it sounds naive honestly – but a lot of it I did not anticipate would hinge around issues of copyright. Because I was working with my digital research librarian as we all should make use of that our life at our institutions, and I said I want this to be open access because the thing I found is that everybody has a favorite ad. The company's name is Amul. I'm going to keep saying Amul. So everybody has a favorite Amul ad. I've grown up hearing about it from India, but they're not neatly archived anywhere, right? There's like a website that the company keeps, then there's a coffee table book for their 50th anniversary that I've like scraped some images off, I've got some old newspapers that I looked up, like old historical *Times of India* archived newspapers, but I want to have them all in one place, and so I know I need a website. But I know that there's people who've taken photographs of the billboards that aren't on Google Images, and if I just put out a call, right, through like listservs, maybe I could get people to come and upload it and make like a, you know, like an archive of the comments?

Laurie Gries:  
Right, crowdsourcing.

Rohini Singh:  
Yeah, like exactly, you're really changing how we're thinking about, you know, curation. And she was very kind and polite. You could see her sort of being like, *okay the researcher is excited*, and she said "have you asked the company if you can do this? And you don't own these images, and the people who upload this don't own these images, so are you going to give them a password to access the images?" And I was like "no, it's just like you just click," and she's like "so it's like a wiki thing?" I was like "is it a wiki? I don't know. Oh god." So, I kept it locked. I

didn't do the crowd source just because I wanted to get this one article out the door. But it really made me realize how much more I could still do because so many of these images were born, as I said, pre-digital, right, and I don't have access to them.

Laurie Gries:

Right. The copyright issue is really big when it comes to digital archives. I was running into the same issue because I originally wanted to create a database of the Obama Hope image on something like omeka.com or something.

Rohini Singh:

Yeah, that's exactly what I used.

Laurie Gries:

Right, it's so exciting, but then all of a sudden when they start asking about the copyright issues, I started thinking... *oh no!* I mean I had to find, I went and located, well got like 88 permissions for my book *Still Life with Rhetoric*, and that took me at least six months, at least.

Rohini Singh:

Laurie, May I just say that that makes me feel much better hearing that because I spent a sabbatical tracking down the ad agency on Twitter like a stalker, found his email address, and said "can I get permission?"

Laurie Gries:

I know, I know, it's so difficult. So what we ended up doing as you might have seen with that database for the Obama Hope image is we just kind of made the actual spreadsheet accessible with the links to all of the--either like the JPEGs of the images themselves and/or the URL links right, and that was a way where I could at least make the data public, but it still raises the issue -- like one of the things about Sarah Beck's chapter, which I don't know if you had time to dip into, where she used the Pinterest board to create her own kind of personal archive. Now, I don't know, I'm going to just admit this and say "well, you know, Pinterest kind of seems built on just dragging images off the Internet into the personal board," and so what's interesting is that we seem -- we feel--like we didn't have to really deal with the copyright issue, but what it afforded, which is nice when you have a visual archive, is that you can actually do the comparison and the contrast of the compositions because the compositions, while they're not everything we want to focus on, they still do matter especially to some studies more than others, right? They allow you at the very least to ask new questions and to follow new leads and stuff. So it's interesting when we think about digital archives and their role in digital visual studies because, in one sense, we can think of them as a presentation or a curation of the data that we find, and in another sense, we can use them as actual part of our method and our practice, and that they're presenting the data so that we can identify trends and patterns and, in that sense, the method sense, I really want to push back on the whole copyright stuff because I'm just -- right? So, I don't know. I don't know. I want to talk more about this, I mean especially when you're dealing like you say with doing research from one country to another

country, and especially if we think about how many people might not have access to the language or say in India – I mean how many languages are in India?

Rohini Singh:

So many. Too many for me. I only speak one of them not too well.

Laurie Gries:

Right? So, I mean the complications of doing this kind of research, I fear that it just feels overwhelming to some people because of that--because of the labor but also because the ethical complexities.

Rohini Singh:

The ethical complexities are multiple, right, and I think, you know, for me doing visual work is always the complexities of it are always meshed up very closely with the ethics of doing work on Asia and doing work on India. For me, I cannot separate those things, right? So it's that I'm trying to you know look at these 500 images on one screen, not possible right, so then, you create little galleries, fine, but while I'm doing that, you think "ah there's also language right on every one of these ads and they're part in Hindi, some all Hindi, so then you have that one level of translation because otherwise the image doesn't make sense in context right, so you translate and then you realize that even when you translate and you know the meaning of the word, you may not understand the purpose of the slogan itself where you can understand the individual words, but why is that important? And, you know, I will speak to the sort of cultural privilege in a sense that I had in this case which is that, you know, I stopped living in India when I was five which is very awkward for me because everyone sees me and my last name and they're like "she must be very Indian." So I'm dealing with my own set of like – I'm trying to be better at this, and I would just have to ask family, "what is this phrase that the Amul girl keeps saying? It it has nothing to do with what Modi did last week but it's clearly a political ad," and they're like "Oh she's quoting a song." Oh, she is? "Yeah, you've got to know it. It's from like the 50, an old Bollywood movie." I'm like "Oh my god, I'm gonna have to watch a Bollywood movie from the 50s." That's a methodological challenge in and of itself, and I think I remember, I think it was Collins in the piece that had images from Italy, and they spoke about entering words into Google Translate.

Laurie Gries:

Archer and Collins.

Rohini Singh:

Right, yes. I remember doing that too, right, in Hindi as well, and so I think digital work helps you with the first few initial steps that would have been very difficult if you didn't have a translator, but beyond that, I think you have to rely on other people. You've got to say "Hey, I managed to translate this, but I don't know what it means, if anything at all." You gotta talk to someone who's there on the ground somehow, which is just why I really think it's cool that

visual studies really get so much richer when there's more people in each project, right, and that's what I've never done, and I need to do more of.

Laurie Gries:

Well that's...even when I was tracing the Obama Hope image in a U.S. context, I still felt like, even with, say, the political cartoonists, I still felt very reluctant to just impose my interpretation on what they were doing with the image and why they were doing what they were doing with the image, and so I ended up sending out a lot of questionnaires and holding a lot of interviews and really supplementing iconographic tracking with qualitative research methods, or making qualitative research methods part of iconographic tracking for this very reason, which I think is even more important when you're talking about these doing research across these transnational lines.

Rohini Singh:

Right, and also because what gets posted digitally in terms of, say, a reaction to or a remix of a particular image is also self-selected. Like the people who are really strongly responding to a very controversial ad from the Amul girl are like people who are virulently against it or virulently for it, right, and a lot of what they're saying – it's there. There's a lot of it on the Internet. You can go and find any amount of people on Twitter who like hated her latest ad or loved it, but not a lot of it is usable because you can't ask questions of those Twitter comments. So, yeah, I think needing to follow up with them is something that if I end up writing this as a book, I'm gonna have to talk to humans.

Laurie Gries:

Let's move on to a different question. I was thinking about – I was just reading some of your literature and you use the word “neocolonial perspective” and I want to ask you about how – so I'm thinking about we're going to have other respondents who are going to talk about how we might imagine doing digital visual studies from a post-colonial perspective, we have some speaking into what that looks like from a de-colonial perspective, but if we were going to imagine doing digital visual studies from a neocolonial perspective, what would that – what does that mean? What would that entail? What does that require? What are the responsibilities?

Rohini Singh:

I suppose for me, the work that I did with *Time Magazine* was the one where I sort of attached that phrase, that perspective. So, the way that I use that phrase, the way I think about it is not so much to adopt a neocolonial perspective but to recognize it when it's there and to critique it for what it is. Certainly, for example, right, and I think anybody who's done the history of *Time Magazine* – I'm certainly not special in that regard, Dana Cloud has done that as well – will tell you that you know the view of other countries particularly countries in Asia – her work on Afghan women and my work on India – it's a very particular lens on Asia that, while not colonial, is colonial-ish. There is a lot of “oh look at that that Indian prime minister who's like a yogi, who's just wants to like dream about the world instead of taking pragmatic action the way

an American would.” For me, when I say taking a neocolonial perspective, I should probably alter that to say exposing neocolonial perspectives and pushing back against them. I think that in that case, there is a ton of work that is available that people could do in visual studies and then with that in digital visual studies. To say, “how do we view the rest of the world?” I mean we in the United States, for example, and how are the lenses through which we are viewing the rest of the world still kind of shaped by older patterns through which we think about. For me, a touchstone is like, an oldie and goody, right is Harold Isaac's images of Asia. Just like interviewing American people and being like, what do you think of India? And a lot of the things they say are visible in news images of India as well. So that's where I'm coming from when I say neocolonial. It's something not to adopt but as something to expose.

Laurie Gries:

And do you also find it important – I'm thinking about notions and phenomena such as internalized racism or internalized sexism. I mean, do you think there's work to be done in studying the internalization of neocolonial perspectives when you're studying visual politics?

Rohini Singh:

Yeah. I think a lot of this – and I will say this about myself as a researcher and it has been pointed out to me as well by kind generous people--that I am very object oriented, so for me, my answer to a question like that would be, yeah. We could do that. All we'd have to do is find the right image, or the right case study, and the right set of images to study because I think that there are many examples of movies and television programs, just, for example, in India even that show many types of internalized racism that are specific to India. I'm saying India all the time, but you can use that for other countries as well, so I think that there's a lot that we can do. My constant struggle with doing visual work but visual work in other countries about images that were born in other countries is wondering how much of the theories of visuality that that we learn in the United States, what approach do we take, when we do international work? Do we say “Hey, you know, Gunther and Kress, you know Kress and Van Leeuwen, let's do this. Let's take your grammar visual design and then just pop it on to this like temple image in India and be like the idol is looking at me. It's a demand image,” and go with that, right? Sure, I mean that's one thing, but then, you know, that you'll inevitably get the conversation of “but shouldn't we be learning theories of visuality and theories of looking that were born overseas?” In looking at these ads over here, I've tried to use Indian principles of looking, the principle of *Darshan* and sort of the holy image that looks back. But I'll be honest, I feel nervous doing that because I'm not a historian of Indian religion, for example. I feel nervous reading theories of Indian religious praying and worship and how “being in the presence of the god” means being viewed by the god. So, I do understand that people who sort of are like “hey, I'm not – you know like, I'm white, so if I go ahead and start studying India or using these theories, can I?”

Laurie Gries:

Right. It's interesting because it's kind of similar to the conversation where one of the big arguments that early visual rhetoricians were making is that we can't just take theories about rhetoric based on our studies of print and pose them onto images, and now you're making this



really profound point which, you know, I admittedly have not thought through nearly enough, and I'm really kicking myself now, because I was asked to write this chapter for this Sage research methods collection on visual rhetorical criticism, and I didn't bring up this point. This is a brilliant point. I should have, dang, called you and had you consult. But I mean it's a really difficult, but I think ethically really provocative, claim to think about, yeah, okay, so what happens if we acknowledge that different cultures and communities have different values, different rituals, different theories about visuality, about vision, about visual rhetoric, and how do we--what is our ethical obligation to tap into those as much as possible and to try to consider thinking about the image in its context through that lens. I mean that is super tricky work going back to for all the reasons we've already talked about and probably more about the language barriers, the distance perspectives, the cultural dissonances.

Rohini Singh:

I think it's hard additionally because, I don't have answers, I'm just going to make this worse, but I think it's hard additionally because to, perhaps, link back a little closer to our discussion about neocolonialism, right, in that a lot of the things that we now might want to take notice of--if we're telling ourselves "hey, you know, we want to look at other countries" for example, or "we want to study international contexts." So as visual scholars, that might mean learning visual theories about looking that are, say, indigenous to India. A lot of the things that are indigenous to India, for example, in terms of looking were the same things that British colonialists use to say that say Indian people are primitive, right. And that was one of the classic ones when it came to like, "Oh look at how they worship. They actually garland their statues because, my god, they actually think the god is in the image. They don't get abstract thinking. They literally think that Krishna is in this statue," and it was this whole "the heathens" thing. But now we're sort of trying to reclaim that and say "guess what? There's something very profound when you change your relationship with an image to say not just is this an image of Krishna the god but Krishna is residing in this image," and what does it mean for this image to look at us? How is that different from Mitchell's concept of the images being alive and the looking image, and how is that similar but different?

Laure Gries:

Right, Right. Really complex. If you had to imagine future projects, I'm really interested in what kind of other future projects we can imagine in digital visual studies that you think would be particularly important from an international global perspective.

Rohini Singh:

Yeah, you know I think that now –

Laurie Gries:

What do we need to do more of?

Rohini Singh:

One country is not enough to do, Laurie!

You know, I'm gonna then lead on my other research obsession along with visual images which is public policy. I do think – and I will preface by saying that this is just kind of a bee in my bonnet – but I think that there's so much important work, not important solely within the realm of the academy but so much important work that could be useful to people kind of IRL, that could come out of digital visual studies. And so I think a vision for the future would be to embrace the creation of images along with the analysis of them in their circulation. I'm thinking of work – I'm talking about Padmini Ray Murray a lot because I've been reading about her a lot. She's a digital humanist who used to work in the U.K. and now works in India. She, for example, does work like – she's just worked on creating an interactive database of hate crimes against minorities in India, and she's working with Amnesty International India for that. I just think that bringing some of the sensitivities of how do we create right an online archive, how do we create something that's interactive, how do we ethically consider weaving in narratives from people, how do we think about how images circulate in terms of how it affects our privacy as citizens, just moving – not moving away from what we do in digital visual studies because I think what we do is very valuable--but including in the future thinking of ourselves as the creators of images and using some of what we've – what you've done right in this, in this book right here to think could that be the next step, right, where we take our skills kind of to the public, and say here's what we can do, what can we create for you that would help.

Laurie Gries:

Right, I love some of the work where colleagues are getting together as teams and they're doing this kind of work and what's really interesting is when you have a team of really talented people, say, in the digital humanities who either they have cartographic mapping skills, or they have coding skills, or they have tracking skills or they have scraping, whatever, they're able to pool their energy and do such quick work that enables us to kind of make sense of what's going on in the now. So, I'm even thinking of all the mapping that's going on with Covid right now or all of the mapping that that we talk about in the book about immigration detention centers, or I've been working on a project where I've been tracking the uptick of swastikas during the Trump administration. So I'm trying to make that that data public in real life, but it's like, how do we actually do more of that work? Especially, I think, taking your point when it's related to, say, public policy or legislation that's being debated now, so that we have the potential to actually create change in the kairotic moment as things are unfolding.

Rohini Singh:

I mean, voting rights.

Laurie Gries:

Right. Right, exactly.

Rohini Singh:

That's something that has always – I get, and I'm again not unique in this regard right--but I get really riled up when people say things like “Ah academia, it's ivory tower, da da da, writing to

yourself” and all of that. No, there are a lot of useful tools and skills that people have, and we actually can put a lot of this online. We actually can make a lot of this viewable and searchable by other people, and help give them information that--just as a first step--to have them then maybe crowdsource us. For me, that's my dream. I don't know if I'm allowed to talk about that here, so maybe you can decide that, Laurie, but when Lester Olson and I were sort of working together for a little bit on that RSA institute, that was one of the things we were talking about--was sort of a collaborative center for visual studies and what would that look like. We had a lot of fun thinking about who would staff it and how would collaborative work and how would we push beyond international boundaries and what would we create, what would be the syllabus?

Laurie Gries:

I don't know, but let's write a grant and do it. Let's pool some colleagues from across the country and across the world and just choose something that we all feel really committed to and try to get some projects off the ground. It would be – I mean, I've been thinking about this for a very long time and what's really difficult is pulling that team together and pulling so that you have all of the skills you need to do the work. But also, I mean what I was confronted with – and I've talked about this in public before – is just the fact that these kinds of projects aren't necessarily deemed credible when you're, say, on a tenure track. Right? I think especially, you know, when you're in this – like this is what kills me about the academy--is like assistant professors are like, tend to be the most energetic, the most innovative, the most excited, and yet the tenure constraints that we enforce, it just slowly strangles that energy out. At least, I felt that.

Rohini Singh:

It does make you feel sometimes as though if you're trying to describe exactly what it is you did, that as though you're almost, let's say you didn't do much because you're saying very basic things like “Well, first I found the images.” Right, that was the whole process. “Then I made the website.” Well, that was a whole process. I'm submitting the website for my file, right, but that was a whole thing. You know, when you have to explain it, it loses something.

Laurie Gries:

It does, and it's just that the process – I don't know. I know that there are a lot of institutions that are working on valuing digital projects for tenure, but I feel like we need to do, we need to do more of that work, we need to create more venues for publishing this kind of work.

Rohini Singh:

So, that's the question. That's the question, right, because it's also something Lester and I were talking about. We didn't have an answer, so it's probably good we didn't finish in that sense, but is a separate venue the way to go? I mean, that's a question that that happens in all different contexts, it's not just publishing. Is a separate venue the way to get legitimization? Like, I don't know, the digital visual com journal or something? Or is it like, hey every lead essay in QJS is digital visual studies? Is it that you choose some sort of famous existing thing and you say that “Oh we have a place here” or do you start by carving out something separate?

Meaning should NCA's visual com division have a digital essay award, or should it just allow digital essays to win the regular award?

Laurie Gries:

Right, right. Or is it that the collaborative center for digital visual studies or whatever we're going to call it, publishes its own work open access and then we either write print articles if the scholarly institutions are going to demand it--that we do that--or we just push back and say "Hey this is the work we're doing." I think from a tenured place, that's really easy for me to say now, but I sure didn't feel that way when I was on the track to tenure.

Rohini Singh:

Here is my book.

Laurie Gries:

That's right. Here, take it. It's really thick too.

Rohini Singh:

Very material.

Laurie Gries:

Well, I love this idea and I don't want the idea for the center to end here. That's Irwin, my dog. So, I want to continue this conversation because I'm really interested in it. What is--the digital humanities scholar that you keep mentioning, what is her home discipline? Is she a communication scholar?

Rohini Singh:

It's very hard to tell. It's very hard to tell. She calls herself – I mean calls herself as though she isn't – I'm just saying her chosen, her chosen description of her work is of herself as a digital humanist. Her training, however, is in English literature, but what's interesting is that you can see along the way if you are a stalker and look up her C.V. all the time, that she also has along the way done certificates in in sort of computing and kind of information-type things, and so she seems to have developed the digital aspect of her work along the way while doing work in English literature. But I think since she went back to India even more so, it seems to me that a lot of her projects are about kind of realizing that the opportunities for curating information, particularly information that accesses Indian populations who are maybe not often talked about, right? So, people from India's caste system, people who are classed as lower on that hierarchy, and sort of needing to realize you can't depend on the government to create that information for you, and so she's at the forefront of putting a lot of these projects together.

Laurie Gries:

Wonderful, I'm just thinking about conferences like the International Communication Association, or I know rhetoric has some international conferences, but it would be really interesting to get a group of scholars together to talk about the importance of this work, to

help us think through future directions. So, I'm going to follow up with you and get the you know get the name and the link.

Rohini Singh:

Yeah, I'll email it to you. I've been sort of reading, reading/stalking – really the same thing – for a while.

Laurie Gries:

Well, thank you so much. Is there anything that you want to talk about in relation to the book, anything we haven't talked about that you think is important that came up for you as you were perusing it?

Rohini Singh:

You know, honestly, I was so mad reading it because – no, not in the way you're thinking Laurie, don't worry – because so much of this I looked at it, I mean it's one of those things when you read really good analysis or really good projects where it seems like “That is so obvious, why didn't I do that?” and then, of course, it couldn't have been that obvious because you didn't do that, right? So just reading all of the different methods that people used right to study that same image, which I think is such a powerful way of showing different methodological affordances. Every single note that I took here was “Why didn't I do that for the Amul thing? Why didn't I do a Google Street Map thing to see what those billboards looked at? Or why didn't I go and do a Pinterest board? That would have been so much more sensible in terms of comparing her? How nuts I went trying to look at her five different stances and trying to compare them to each other.

Laurie Gries:

Right.

Rohini Singh:

I used PowerPoint to start.

Laurie Gries:

Right. I know, I know.

Rohini Singh:

I'm embarrassed to say it. What I will say is that all my notes here are ideas for the future, right, or things that I saw linking, even the introduction, about seeing as a political act and witnessing, right. My visual rhetoric class, we were reading about Black witnessing and the age of the cell phone citizen taking videos of police incidents and so on and...seeing as a civic practice. I was like “Yes, yes, must add this next time when teaching that chapter!” So, I really didn't have anything that I thought “Oh gosh, I'm so annoyed that they didn't do this, they didn't do that.” I was much more interested in seeing how each one of the, I think, nine chapters that were there could enhance my work and could make me maybe even bust out a little and try something

different when I study good old Aung San Suu Kyi, who has really experienced a global comedown in PR. To see, how could I study Myanmar? Maybe I can walk down her street, for example.

Laurie Gries:

Right. I appreciate you saying that. I think that the authors will too, in that, it really was experimental, that it was just like “Hey what if I tried this?” Even the chapter on 3d printing, I mean Shannon Butts, and I kept coming back to “So what do we learn about visual studies?” I kept coming back to that question. It's a really cool process, but what did we learn?

Rohini Singh:

You asked the “so what” question, Laurie?

Laurie Gries:

It was not an easy question to answer. It took Shannon a lot of thinking through that, and I think she came to a really kind of profound place that we can all learn from, but I think just the value of just, like you're saying, trying something for the first time and seeing what it might or might not afford, and even realizing that in some senses it may fail but from that process you might get another idea, or it might teach you different path, and so I'm glad to hear that it was inspiring in that way.

Rohini Singh:

Oh yeah, all the tiny excited notes.

Laurie Gries:

Well, thank you so much again for being here.

Rohini Singh:

Thank you, Laurie.

Laurie Gries:

Thank you very much for the conversation, and we wish you all the luck with your projects and I am determined to not let this idea of this collaborative center go and so we're going to follow up.

Rohini Singh:

But let's not let's not call it the center for visual studies, because I've only just realized it'll be CVS, but we'll work on that.

Laurie Gries:

Love that. Plus, you know, Vicki Gallagher would tell us that we have to get more multi-sensory anyway. All right, well, thank you so much.

Rohini Singh:  
You as well, Laurie.

Laurie Gries:  
Bye bye.