



Visual Research and Social Justice – Guest Editors’ Introduction

NANCY COOK

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Traditionally, the sources of data in qualitative methodologies have been overwhelmingly linguistic, relying on the written and spoken word (Crang, 2010; Holliday, 2000; Pauwels, 2010). Ethnographic research in particular has seldom incorporated visual methods of data collection and analysis, although anthropologists and geographers have long used photographs, maps, sketches, and paintings to portray “Native Informants” (Spivak, 1999), “the field,” and the practice of fieldwork (Crang & Cook, 2007; Edwards, 1992). Margaret Mead (2003), for example, used visual “salvage anthropology” as a mechanism for “preserving” vanishing cultures by producing a permanent photographic record of them that scholars could study once those cultures disappeared entirely. Perhaps this hesitance to engage with visuals in qualitative methodological repertoires is related to the crisis of representation, specifically to epistemological critiques of visual knowledge that foreground the role the “visual gaze” played in colonial appropriation and other projects of domination (Gilman, 1986; Gregory, 2003; Lewis, 1996; Said, 1993). It may also be linked to overdrawn claims for the representational facticity and verisimilitude of visual materials, for the “obviousness of vision that allows one to imply a transparency about the world and picture, that can suggest the visual offers ‘raw data’ as if bypassing troublesome issues of constructing knowledge” (Crang, 2010, p. 212).

The imperialist histories of visual knowledge and disputes about its epistemological status have, until recently, clouded our sense of how visual methods might be put to *critical* use in qualitative research as a way to understand and make sense of various aspects of social life. Because visual

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representations have the potential to communicate important dimensions of people's everyday lives and depict significant life events, they can be framed as engaging forms of seeing that create intimate representations of the social (Pink, 2007; Rose, 2012). And because visual awareness and engagement feature prominently in people's everyday lives, qualitative researchers also have come to understand the importance of attending to the visual organisation and saturation of social life.

Consequently, as leading visual researcher Gillian Rose (2014, p. 24) has noted, "one of the most striking developments across the social sciences in the past decade has been the growth of research methods using visual materials" that offer such analytic advantages by operating in a critically reflexive register. Indeed, visual research methods (e.g., Emmel & Clark, 2011; Margolis & Pauwels, 2011; Mitchell, 2011; Pauwels, 2010; Rose, 2012, 2014; Spencer, 2011; Tinkler, 2013) and visual ethnographies (e.g., Harper, 2003; Pink, 2007, 2008; Winddance Twine, 2006) have flourished during this time period, employing a diverse range of visual materials for exploring research questions. They now constitute rapidly emerging subfields within the vast field of qualitative methodologies. These subfields embrace exciting creative, affective, epistemological, ontological, and methodological entanglements that emerge from research that explores photographs, film, memories, digital stories, and other visual artefacts (e.g., Doucet, 2015; Kuhn, 2007; Kuhn & McAllister, 2006; Langford, 2008; McAllister, 2011, 2012). The growth in these subfields is demonstrated by the steady rise of conferences, scholarly associations, publications, journal special issues, journals themselves (e.g., *Visual Studies*, *Visual Anthropology*, *Visual Anthropological Review*, *Journal of Visual Culture*), and handbooks on visual research methodologies, mainly in the United States and the United Kingdom, but also across Europe and Scandinavia, and more recently in Canada.

We set out to explore visual research through our role as organising team members of the 2016 meeting of the Annual Qualitative Analysis Conference (also known as "The Qualitatives"), which is attended annually at different Canadian universities by Canadian and international qualitative researchers. The conference theme was "Visual Research Methods and Visual Ethnographies." It was the first major research conference in Canada to highlight creative intersections between qualitative research and photographs, filmmaking, visual artefacts, and visual representations, and to illuminate research outcomes that feature documentary films, photographic exhibits, and digital storytelling. Presenters also explored transdisciplinary methodological, epistemological, and ontological issues in visual methodologies. We are grateful for a SSHRC Connections Grant and funding provided through Brock University's Social Justice Research Institute, the Centre for Research in the Social Sciences, and the Internal SSHRC Research Grant system that allowed us to launch such an initiative.

We had four objectives for the conference: (1) to expand Canadian capacity

in the burgeoning transdisciplinary and international fields of visual methodologies and visual ethnographies; (2) to establish a national, international, and transdisciplinary network of scholars and non-academic practitioners in visual research methodologies; (3) to mentor newly established and novice researchers in visual methods, visual ethnographies, and qualitative research practice; and (4) to produce high-quality peer-reviewed publications that offer Canadian and international scholars, students, and non-academic qualitative research practitioners guidance on, and examples of, innovations in visual research methodologies and ethnographies.

The conference presentations charted new directions and highlighted transdisciplinary approaches to visual research mainly from the social sciences, but also from the humanities and life sciences. Conference contributors embraced a wide number of visual methodological approaches: digital storytelling, photovoice, autophotography, filmmaking, video inquiry, archival and historical photographs, arts-informed narrative inquiry, and theatre. And their thematic foci included indigenous communities, masculinities, disabilities, HIV/AIDS, social housing, families, memory, urban spaces, mental health, refugee and immigrant women, eating disorders, marginalised youth, schools and education, and teaching with art, music, and film. This range of topics demonstrates the strong link that scholars are establishing between visual research and social inequalities; over the last decade they have increasingly employed, in critically reflexive ways, visual methodologies that explore a broad variety of social inequalities from the perspectives of socially marginalised and excluded groups (e.g., Delgado, 2015; Gubrium, Krause, & Jernigan, 2014; Joseph, 2017; Mannay, 2010; Mitchell, 2006; Sensoy, 2011; Shah, 2015; Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006; Zehle, 2015). Many of these scholars claim that beyond their empirical and theoretical benefits, participatory visual methods, like photovoice, politically empower subjugated research subjects through a shift of representational control from researchers to participants (for a critique of this claim, see Butz & Cook this issue; Kothari, 2001). Despite this deepening connection between visual methods and the analysis and subversion of social inequalities, little work has been published that explicitly relates visual research, methods, and ethnographies to social justice theorising (but see Garber, 2004; Keifer-Boyd, 2011; Kurtz, 2005; Powell & Serriere, 2013).

This special issue of *Studies in Social Justice* (SSJ) emerges from the 2016 Qualitatives conference as a contribution to qualitative studies in visual research, but also as a reflection on transdisciplinary conversations about the relationships between visuality and social justice in its theoretical, epistemological, methodological, and substantive forms. It focuses, therefore, on visual research that explores a range of intersections among filmmaking, photography, graphic novels, and social justice processes and interventions, including the issue of epistemic justice in visual ways of knowing. Like the content of all SSJ volumes, this special issue consists of three types of

contributions: standard peer-reviewed research articles; Dispatches, which are shorter commentaries about social justice praxis related to research activities, social movement experiences and practice, and social justice events from the vantage point of academic and non-academic practitioners; and Creative Interventions that explore social justice issues in an aesthetic (in our case, visual/textual) register.

The article section of this special issue includes four research-based papers. Matt Rogers focuses on participatory media production by secondary school students as a critical pedagogical tool in social justice education. As the coordinator of the New Brunswick school-based participatory filmmaking project *What's Up Doc?*, Matt has organised the production of over 60 student films since 2009, which have raised institutional critiques, troubled inequitable discourses, and addressed a wide range of social justice issues that students relate to their school experiences. He notes that participatory media practices such as these are usually heralded in the academic literature as social justice intervention strategies that necessarily empower marginalised groups within the larger student population. However, his experience with the *What's Up Doc?* project suggests that a critical analysis of the visual/discursive representations that organise student-produced participatory films is required to achieve a more robust understanding of their complex social justice outcomes. His discourse analysis of seven films that were screened during the 2012 iteration of the project shows that many of them perpetuate as well as challenge marginalising social narratives and visual representations. For example, he demonstrates how sexist, racist, and heteronormative discourses organise these films, producing ambivalent participatory media texts that complicate and often undermine the social justice goals of the project.

Courtney Donovan and Ebru Ustundag develop a connection between visual research and social justice theorising by focussing on graphic novels. They claim that graphic novels are an innovative visual/textual mechanism for representing socially marginalised subjectivities and experiences, especially experiences of trauma, which provide new insight into social justice theorisations. In contrast to legal or clinical approaches to trauma that focus solely on textual testimony and therefore limit insight into the complex, multifaceted nature and experience of trauma, the combination of visual and textual representation in graphic novels, they argue, provides a platform for communicating trauma experiences that are usually “unreadable,” unrecognisable, and inaccessible through text alone. They contend that graphic representations of trauma produce an opening to more complex and inter-relational understandings of trauma, offering social justice possibilities beyond legal and clinical institutions, and shifting the institutional emphasis on the politics of redistribution to one of *recognition* at various social scales.

David Butz and Nancy Cook situate their visual research contribution in the critical mobilities literature, particularly the debate about effective methods for mobilities research. Many mobilities scholars are turning to a

critical use of visual methods as a means of apprehending mobile cultures, practices, and meanings. The authors focus on how they used a specific visual/narrative method – autophotography – in a study of the social implications of road construction in Shimshal, a northern Pakistani mountain community, offering an assessment of its usefulness for mobilities research. The starting point for this assessment is rooted in the concept of epistemic justice, in which ethics and epistemology are mutually constitutive. They argue that a method’s effectiveness needs to be assessed on both of these grounds, in the specific research context in which it is employed. They develop the notion of an “autoethnographic sensibility” as an appropriate epistemological framing for their transcultural research context in which the persistent effects of colonialism systematically impede epistemic justice. Autophotography, they demonstrate, meets the ethical/epistemological requirements of an autoethnographic sensibility, but it also allows them to understand how mobilities are socially instantiated and emplaced in Shimshal, making autophotography an empirically and theoretically productive, as well as epistemologically ethical method for mobilities research.

Jennifer Rowsell and Emmanuel Tabi examine the power and potential of visual methods coupled with sensory-led approaches to ethnographic fieldwork with racially diverse young men across different social contexts. Important to their work are issues central to social justice, such as racial equity and the funds of knowledge that are so often marginalised or invisible when young people apply them in formalised school-based learning. Reflecting on their many conversations with young men, Rowsell and Tabi explore these men’s relationship with literacy, their sense of failure, and the deficit language and framings they have experienced related to their literacy repertoires. Rather than emphasising young men’s lack of conventional literacy skills, the authors focus on the ways they employ alternative literacy practices that are visual in nature, often accompanied by words and moving images. Interrogating their visuals and talking through their stories and agentive qualities in collaborative ways has given both researchers an awareness of young men’s emotional worlds and the ability of the visual to allow for sense-laden, agentive meaning making.

Our issue also contains three Dispatches. The first – by Katherine Boydell, Chi Cheng, Brenda Gladstone, Shevaun Nadin, and Elaine Stasiulis – focuses on the use of digital storytelling (DST) by healthcare professionals and advocates as a participatory visual method that has socially inclusive and just effects, such as engaging marginalised groups in shared experiential storytelling processes that promote social connection among participants, challenge power imbalances, and initiate social change. They draw on a study of rural youth who experience psychosis to develop this argument about the social justice potential of DST, describing how their participation in a DST research project fostered a sense of social inclusion and individual agency that affected their social experiences.

Second, Patti Fraser, Flick Harrison, and Lynn Fels contribute what they call a “video thought experiment” that responds to a question posed to participants at the 2016 *Performing the World Conference* in New York City, in conversation with the *Art for Social Change* research project conducted at Simon Fraser University. It consists of discussions with artists about the relationships among performance, power, and place.

In the third Dispatch contribution, Matthew Hayes reflects on his MA research, which explored the corporate takeover of the North American funeral industry. During the course of his research, he met a funeral director in Vancouver, Tom, who then became the subject of his thesis, which combined textual exegesis with a co-produced documentary film. Tom was already actively resisting the corporatisation of his field, and saw the film as a mechanism for furthering his fight for social justice rather than as an aspect of academic practice. Matthew found his project hijacked by Tom’s political agenda, which produced conflict regarding their aesthetic and conceptual visions for the film. Matthew uses this experience to reflect on the ethical and practical challenges of using visual methods, and on intersections between ethnographic filmmaking involving academic and non-academic collaborators and social justice.

The five Creative Interventions that conclude our special issue include a video called “Water Ethics: Think Like a Watershed” in which Jessica Hallenbeck interviews scholars and artists to develop a framework for the ethical use of water that shifts away from a supply and demand model to one based on ethics, rights, responsibilities, and relationality. Caleb Johnson presents “Downtown Ambassador,” an example drawn from a 2011 art exhibition called *Counter Mapping* that speaks to the ways people are using visual art to creatively disrupt everyday life and imaginatively contest urban spatial design as a material politics and mechanism for the pursuit of social justice. Manal AlDowayan, a contemporary Saudi Arabian artist, contributes “I Am,” a series of photographs that respond to a 2005 speech given by King Abdulla Al Saud that called for all Saudis to unite in building a better country, including improving women’s employment opportunities. AlDowayan’s photographs critically reflect on the conservative questioning of what kind of jobs are appropriate for women by exploring the history of women’s economic contributions to Saudi society, and by representing contemporary women whose paid employment intervenes in debates about the nature and suitability of women’s paid labour. “Unmasking Racism” is the visual/textual product of Bharati Sethi’s combined use of photovoice and poetic transcription. She explores how immigrant and refugee women in Canada experience racism that structures their work opportunities and health outcomes; she does this by inviting these women to document their experiences in diary, pictorial, and conventional interview forms, and then she draws on this material to construct two poeticised photos. Finally, Andrew Zealley presents “Infecting Mbembe,” which consists of visual text panels that deconstruct the biopolitical and neoliberal investments in, and

management of, HIV/AIDS. Using layered visual methods of superimposition and overwriting, he aims to develop more meaningful understandings of the complex mechanisms, regulations, and apparatuses entangled in this politicised field of medicine that produces truths about life, death, bodies, and identities.

We thank special issue contributors for their thoughtful interventions that think through the processes and implications of visual research using various social justice frameworks. Our hope is that these interventions help to chart new directions in and approaches to visibility in qualitative research, and to develop substantive, methodological, and epistemological aspects of social justice theory.

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