THROUGH A LENS OF CONNECTION

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ABSTRACT

A paradigm shift within academia, and visual anthropology in particular, calls researchers to attune their lenses of human connection—vis-à-vis their digital lens and epistemologies. This paper will argue the potential of contemporary visual anthropology—employed as a community-based research methodology, form of knowledge mobilisation, and pedagogical tool—to challenge hegemonic asymmetrical power dynamics in dominant discourse and praxis. Through personal anecdotes conducting participatory research alongside counterparts in Peru and Panama, I will illuminate the ways in which applied visual anthropology bridges academic-public divides and cultivates intentional relations through its transdisciplinary, collaborative, and transformative agendas.

INTRODUCTION

The ways in which we as humans view the world and build connections are informed partly by our epistemological and ontological lenses (how we come to know and exist) as well as by images presented through digital lenses (i.e. photographs and film). Knowledge production, dissemination, and mobilization are actively situated between powerful systems of meaning, where the narratives, norms, and images of dominant members of society are overwhelmingly represented (Clifford and Marcus 1986). As indicated by Nicholas Dirks (2002), representations in narratives have been used to assert dominance over marginalized groups by generating a singular 'truth' in knowledge production, conjuring false images of places far away, presenting them as facts, and privileging the position of the 'scholarly researcher' over that of the public or participants. In these positions of power, members of the functioning intellectual groups have the potential to become 'deputies' exercising social and political hegemony, while groups on the margins are systematically excluded from or misrepresented within discourse and imagery (Gramsci 1971; Spivak 1988).

Historically, ethnography and visual anthropology—the study and production of film, photography, performance art, and multimedia to analyse, communicate, and interpret deeper meanings of human and non-human behaviour (see Society for Visual Anthropology 2020)—has reinforced such asymmetrical power systems through techniques of 'Othering' (Dirks 2002). However, when employed within transformative agendas of community-based participatory research (CBPR), visual anthropology has the ability to attune our epistemological and image-making lenses to support and illuminate the vast array of human connections around the world. By recounting experiences of engaging in interdisciplinary and visual anthropological practice in Latin America, I will illustrate the importance of widening visual anthropology's represented narratives and audiences to propel societal and policy change.

How we formulate or represent the present, which eventually becomes the past, shapes future understandings and views of particular groups

of people (Said 2012). Therefore, one must be historically attuned, recount the conditions in which anthropological knowledge has been produced over the years—recognizing the ethnographer's position as shaping and shaped by their historical social experience (Dirks 2002)—and learn from the successes and shortcomings of past visual anthropologists. I will therefore begin by following the paradigm shifts in visual anthropology to date, offering critiques of hegemonic approaches to research, academic discourse, and image-making techniques. Differing from non-ethnographic documentaries, I will detail how visual anthropology—and particularly ethnographic film—has used images to represent and explain theoretical and methodological concepts as they pertain to the study of humans and societies, past and present. Personal anecdotes conducting CBPR in Peru and Panama will then demonstrate visual anthropology's contemporary ability to provide "open-ended space[s] for an expansive encounter between" participants, ethnographers, and audiences, through which forms of understanding emerge (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015: 265). To conclude, I will call for a paradigm shift within and beyond academia that centralizes activist scholarship, challenges dominant narratives, and strives to transform everyday lives.

PARADIGMS IN VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Before a visual anthropologist engages in filmic or textual ethnography, they must reflect upon the purpose and responsibility of their scholarship. Drawing from Kim Fortun's analysis of James Clifford and George Marcus' 1986 *Writing Culture*, scholars must "recognize how discursive forms, including those of ethnography, stage, direct and limit, what is said and not said, who is heard and benefits, who and what remains subaltern, outside articulation" (Fortun 2012: 448). At the intersection of aesthetic and scientific meanings, Michael Fischer (2018) argues that both textual and filmic forms of ethnography have consistently reinvented themselves to portray existence, reality, becoming, and relational being.

With roots in the early 20th century, Fischer claims that the initial role of ethnographic film was to portray a modernist sense of 'being there,'

there being a specific locale in time composed of a particular group of people. The scope and objective of a study were narrowed to capture a particular skill (e.g. hunting, boat building, weaving) or cultural institution (e.g. religion, kinship, subsistence strategy) 'before they disappeared.' Referred to as process film, this "literal or descriptive documentation of technological or cultural practices" became a means of systematically archiving groups of people in a way that bridged science and film (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015: 258). The aim of film as a means of scientific inquiry emphasized indexical recording capacities over the fluidity and dynamic nature of cultural processes and peoples. This objective was most poignant in Tim Asch and Napoleon Chagnon's film series on the Northern Amazonian Yanomami. In the pursuit of understanding social behaviour in terms of genetic relatedness, Asch and Chagnon violated cultural taboos and ethical protocols of informed consent for the 'sake of science' and their own professional prestige (Homiak 2012).

The mono-sited, static temporality of salvage anthropology is mirrored in textual ethnographies produced during this time period, which were often set in relatively small communities in an 'exotic, far-off' place (e.g. *Coming of Age in Samoa* by Margaret Mead, *The Nuer* by E.E. Evans-Pritchard). Whether through text or film, archival ethnography as a methodology tended to produce reductionist, inauthentic and homogenous categories of people, conflating the many 'others' into a singular 'Other' (Dirks 2002). Although the 'Other' was increasingly more visible in Western films, photographs, and manuscripts, it was still an external researcher who controlled what narrative was being told, the language in which it was delivered, and the portrayal of the community members. Racialized and exoticized representations often resulted in the perpetuation of problematic stereotypes and further isolation of communities from expansive globalization (David and Craven 2016). Misrepresentations, by way of camera or pen, can potentially disempower or even endanger people when decontextualized sound bites are taken as facts. "The camera generates data about events and activities that are then juxtaposed with explanatory frameworks that originate outside the unfolding cultural moment itself...conceptualizing filmmaking as about data production results in the amplification or modification of established

understandings rather than a questioning or subversion of them" (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015: 262).

During the mid-to-late 20th century, both textual and performative approaches to anthropology took an ontological turn as they began integrating multiple voices and spaces to portray the plurality of the 'human condition' (Fischer 2018). Analytic and visual retrospection and restudies, self-reflexivity, feminist critiques, and comparative analyses were emphasized through emerging forms of experimental ethnographic documentary, particularly *cinéma vérité* (translating to "truthful cinema") and Third Cinema. Emerging leaders in *cinéma vérité*, including, but not limited to, Ricky Leacock, John Marshall, David MacDougall, and Jean Rouch, were critiqued and admired for their novel approaches to visual anthropology that stripped down embellishments to centralize realism.

Third Cinema, which originated in Latin America, catalysed a postcolonial critique of hegemonic productions of knowledge and power through their use of documentary footage and dialogic narrative. Triangulated methodologies were argued to more accurately reflect the dynamic nature of cultural assemblages, ontologies, and stories. Overarching, elaborate frameworks and explanatory categories for data collection were abandoned, as *ciné-transe*—a theory linking cinematic ontology with trance—and event film—footage capturing short daily interactions—became exploratory processes of moving through the world and its dynamic and improvisatory flows of unfolding relationships and states of consciousness (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015). The camera became a mobile extension of the senses and body, generating knowledge between the participants, filmmaker, and world through these unfolding relations, as opposed to through "pre-existing interpretive frameworks provided by the anthropologist" (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015: 264). A key argument among filmmakers of this time was that ethnographic films should be produced by people about their own cultures and communities to foster endogenous cultural critiques, thematic analyses, and sociopolitical positionings. Filmmakers began relinquishing their privilege and control over the filmmaking process

while taking up a partial, situated position as a facilitator among community counterparts.

The repositioning of visual anthropologists within content creation, and intersubjective engagements of phenomenology—the philosophical study of the elements of consciousness and experience—are central to the reconfiguration of dominant narratives in discourse (Bernard 2017; Clifford 1983; Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015). Dána-Ain Davis and Christa Craven (2016) challenge ethnographers to unveil the untidy and improvisatory process of fieldwork, the stories of failure, and a deep reflection of their own role and positionality in the process of research. Referred to by Tim Ingold as the 'minor key' within knowledge production and dissemination, presenting partial truths (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and genuine experiences "can afford a freedom that is real rather than illusory" and can lead us "out of structures of authority that are manifestly unsustainable" (2017: 37). Further on in this paper, I will recount how deeper cross-cultural exchanges between myself and local digital storytellers were strengthened when I acknowledged my limitations and stepped back from the camera or pen. What now appears so blatantly obvious was the realisation that the stories of my fellow community researchers were best told in their terms, languages, and culturally situated modes of communication.

The ontological turn in ethnographic and visual anthropology centring marginalized voices occurred towards the end of the 20th and into the early 21st century. The challenges and dynamics of groups were no longer analysed in isolation but were brought into the fold of multi-temporal and multi-scalar structures of power and positionality. No longer were visual images simply aids to ethnographic insights, but didactic modes of knowledge production determined by the participants and community researchers (Davis and Craven 2016). Postcolonial, transnational, and capitalist relations, as well as environmental concerns and structural inequalities, were at the forefront of participatory and action-based ethnographic film, performance and theatre, and art and exhibition (see Figure 2). The diverse pedagogical modes of communication in recent experimental ethnographies "play up and down the entire scale, from ground to

theory, policy to reality, and across globalized, distributed, or value chain processes, from locus to locus" with the intent of cultivating alternative responses to social change, and building future worlds (Fischer 2018: 44).

This shift—referred to as public anthropology—strives to bridge the gap between academia and community, whether that be our global network or the spatial communities in which we live and work. By building a "constituency of support," scholars can harness their research for transformative agendas by directly improving conditions or by advancing knowledge that in time will benefit others (Borofsky 2019: 216). When applying anthropological knowledge, theories, and methods, however, it is essential to do so in collaboration *with* people *for* their own utilities. Fischer (2018) argues that this can be accomplished through a 'horizoning', or broadening, of analyses that interact with local, national, and global industries and processes. Differing from historical approaches in ethnography—that were *of* and *among* peoples in physical environments for the use of philosophizing and comparative criteria—visual anthropologists must articulate deeply situated narratives alongside potential breadth of locality to elicit collective mobilisations and social transformation.

In this section I have demonstrated that visual anthropology has become more participatory and less positivist over time, with greater consideration of non-hegemonic ontologies. Next, I will recount my own visual anthropological fieldwork to exemplify practices that are illustrative of the ontological turn and are grounded in principles of community-based participatory research. This will provide evidence for my conclusion that community-based participatory visual anthropology, which privileges a broad non-academic audience, can support societal and policy change by attuning our image-making and epistemological lenses.

COLLABORATIVE METHODOLOGIES THAT FOSTER HUMAN CONNECTION

An approach to collaborative visual anthropology that is gaining momentum is community-based participatory research (CBPR),

which involves the distributed knowledge of all partners in the research process and works towards social change identified by the participants (CCHD 2017). When visual anthropology is implemented as a methodology within the framework of CBPR, it will have a higher capacity to support and make visible communities' transformative agendas, encourage positive self-perception and self-empowerment among trained citizen researchers, and help to break down racial, ethnic, and class barriers (CCHD 2017). There is no restriction for who can be involved in CBPR, but generally, it includes people most affected by the identified issue, other members of the affected population and community members at large, decision-makers, public agency staff, and academics— such as myself— with an interest in the issue. Lengthy and frequent collaborations among the entire research team will facilitate more opportunities for relationship and capacity-building, deeper analyses and understandings of the issues at hand, and an increased potential for long-term impacts.

The first time I engaged in knowledge mobilization and community engagement via visual anthropology was during my University of Delaware undergraduate thesis fieldwork with the Ese'Eja Nation of the Southern Peruvian Amazon. Translating to the 'True People', the Ese'Eja are one of the few extant foraging societies of Peru. In their origin story, Ese'Eja Elders impart how their nomadic ancestors came down from the Sky World on a cotton thread into the Madre de Dios region thousands of years ago. Community Elders can still recall this exact spot in the Tambopata National Reserve (declared a reserve in 2000), as well as many other significant ancestral places that used to span across the region into Northern Bolivia.

With limited or denied access to these lands—due to centuries of colonization and territory restrictions—cultural practices and oral histories tied to their subsistence strategies and nomadic way of life are increasingly challenged. Environmental threats from logging, mining, large-scale agriculture, and infrastructural projects include polluted waterways, a poisoned food chain, loss of habitat biodiversity, soil erosion, and loss of plants for Ese'Eja medicine and material culture. To preserve their long-held customs and conserve their ecosystem, Ese'Eja Nation leaders partnered with the Amazon

Center for Environmental Education and Research (ACEER), the National Geographic Society, and a team of interdisciplinary researchers from the University of Delaware to gain rights and access to their ancestral lands. While employing a multi-pronged methodology, our team conducted a cultural mapping initiative to document Ese'Eja language, histories, practices, beliefs, medicinal plants, and material culture items. Created in partnership with the Board of the Ese'Eja Nation, the objectives of this initiative included cultural and historical preservation, environmental conservation, educational programming, and support for a sustainable future.

The core method that supported film and photography was participant observation, a technique involving first-hand intensive interaction with the people with whom the ethnographer conducts research (Bernard 2017). As an ontological commitment, participant observation acknowledges that we can come to know the world only because we are a part of it (Ingold 2017). The more I participated in daily activities, such as gathering *tamshi* vines for basketry and pounding *yanchama* bark for traditional clothing, the more I understood the multidimensional cultural meanings embedded in the practices and relationships with the land.

Further inquiries were carried out during semi-structured interviews, which allowed for a depth of understanding of the reasons that motivate the choices made by individuals in relation to their cultural practices. During interviews, photographs previously taken by community members were reviewed in a visual data collection process called photo-elicitation, wherein interviewees described their thoughts, feelings, and actions upon seeing each image (Collier and Collier 1986). These techniques were complemented with material culture cataloguing, plant voucher specimen cataloguing, mapping of ancestral sites using geographic information systems (GIS), map drawing, and digital storytelling of oral histories.

This initiative culminated in the publication of a photojournalistic book, *Ancestral Lands of the Ese'Eja: The True People* (Cox and Martínez 2017), which was developed by the team's leaders in partnership with an editorial committee of Ese'Eja Elders. A traveling

exhibit with over 70 material culture items also reached wider audiences across the United States and Peru. Proceeds from the book, exhibit, and donations go into the Ese'Eja Community Development Fund managed by ACEER. Funds are then divided among the contributing communities in support of initiatives they choose, which thus far have included a Community Culture Centre, educational resources, and an Indigenous Rights Lawyer for access and control of their ancestral lands. Through a CBPR process, the community research team—in partnership with local non-governmental organizations and academic researchers from anthropology, art, education, and plant sciences—determined the issue, structured the research activities, carried out the plan, disseminated the results, evaluated and reflected on the process, and continued the research process endogenously (CCHD 2017).

Upon graduating from the University of Delaware, I carried with me a zeal for public anthropology as I began a two-year service with the United States Peace Corps. As an Environmental Health Extensionist living in a rural Ngäbe community in Bocas del Toro, Panama, I harnessed my training in ethnography and visual anthropology to facilitate CBPR capacity-building initiatives geared towards improving water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) at the grassroots level. Expanding beyond a WASH framework, a wider cross-cultural exchange of knowledge fostered invaluable human connections. For instance, drawing upon the interdisciplinary methods taught to me in Peru, I supported Ngäbe Elders in the creation of a Botanical Manual from local plant voucher specimens of medicinal and cultural flora (Figure 1). Visual anthropology techniques, including photography and videography, were relied upon to collaboratively develop a visual archive of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) for future generations.

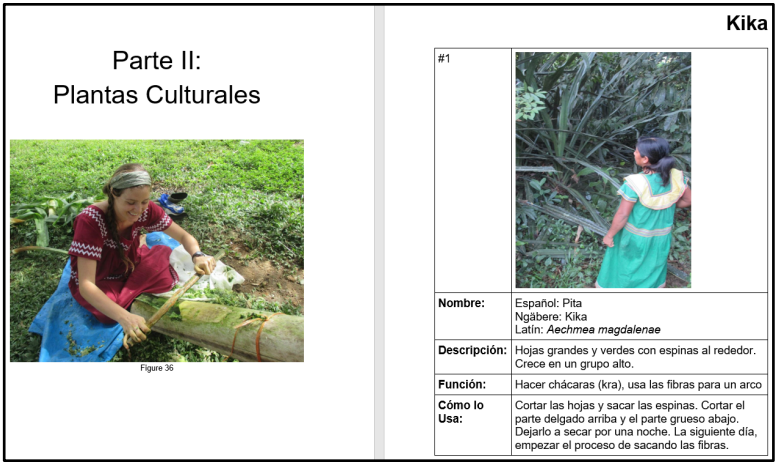

Figure 1: Part II of the Botanical Manual- Cultural Flora. Photo Credit to Chelsea Klinke (2017).

One culturally significant plant, *kika*, that is utilized to make Ngäbe material culture items, such as a *kra* or woven bag, is increasingly deforested due to external extractive pressures. Customarily made by females, the *kra* holds both a utilitarian and cultural significance. It is used by women, men, youth and elders as a burden basket, symbol of Ngäbe identity, and artisan craft adding to the informal economy. The *kra* is central to the daily practices of most Ngäbe families in Bocas del Toro, including foraging, fishing, and farming. From birthing ceremonies to coming of age rites, the *kra* is also representative of larger social narratives and shifting Ngäbe identities. To demonstrate this interconnectivity visually and to disseminate distributed knowledge to wider audiences, I handmade a tangible curated photo essay for 2019-2020 University of Calgary graduate student conferences (Figure 2). Situated against a traditional Ngäbe dress, the *nagua*, a prose narrative warps and wefts the resiliency and adaptive nature of community members in preserving cultural customs in the face of contemporary pressures.

Figure 2: Ethnographic Photo Essay of the Kra. Photo Credit to Chelsea Klinke (2020).

These experiences highlight the interdisciplinary nature of visual anthropology, which can be utilized in conjunction with a myriad of other methodologies. They also illustrate the importance of engaging wider audiences—via film, photography, photo essays, and performances—which in turn can propel effective changes in public policy that benefit communities (Borofsky 2019). To truly make a difference beyond the academy, Luke E. Lassiter (2005) argues that researchers must integrate theory and practice, objectivity and advocacy, engage wider publics within and outside of academia, emphasize subjectivity and dialogue, and from the onset, employ collaborative methodologies that foster human connection.

A PARADIGM SHIFT BEYOND ACADEMIA

Robert Borofsky, in *An Anthropology of Anthropology: Is It Time to Shift Paradigms?* (2019), argues for the creation of a new institutional paradigm in lieu of resisting the existing one. Instead of searching for 'alternatives' and looking 'at the margins,' we need to develop new norms and constitute new centres of inquiries (Dirks 2002). The hegemonic structures within academia shape its productions of

knowledge as well as the approaches to, and dissemination of, research among those who work within the institution. Even the ways in which faculty productivity is measured are often heavily skewed toward quantifications of publications, funding, and citations, as opposed to the impact of the research process on the larger society. In addition to fostering new forms of faculty accountability and addressing power imbalances in publishing and tenure-track hiring, the role of citations in pedagogy, according to Nicholas Dirks (2002), needs to move beyond a perpetuation and institutionalization of the enshrinement of disciplinary theoretical guides. Rather, scholars should accept and naturalize citations as doxic—of, relating to, or based on intellectual processes—that build off intellectual precursors while stressing historical discontinuities, and cite those who continue to be marginalized (Clifford 1986; Davis and Craven 2016).

Who speaks, listens, records and valorizes what is said is constructed in historical processes and institutionalized socially through political and economic influences (Trouillot 1995). The cyclical processes of knowledge-making and codification of normatives continuously shape our social hierarchies and positions of power (El-Haj 2008; Foucault 1990). “The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism” (Said 2012: xiii). Furthermore, the jargon-heavy language in which these narratives are told often obfuscate the research objectives and outcomes, which hinders its accessibility to wider audiences outside of academia and within other disciplines (Davis and Craven 2016).

Limitations also exist within modes of visual anthropology, including its inaccessibility due to the digital divide—the gap or uneven distribution in the access to, use of, or impact of Information and Communication Technologies. Which groups of people cannot access the internet? Who faces digital paywalls or is blocked entirely from accessing content due to governmental restrictions? Depending on the objective and content of the ethnographic film or photographs, an ethical dilemma of confidentiality within research also presents potential risks for participants. What undue harm may arise from participants actively speaking out against the challenges they are facing? For these reasons, it is vital that the risks and benefits of

employing visual anthropology be discussed among the entire research team, so that participating members can make informed decisions regarding their anonymity. Concurrently, ethical concerns that underlie the principles of anonymity within informed consent (e.g. establishing authority by displacing the possibility that details can be refuted by participants) must be questioned (May 2010). Who is really being protected by anonymity? How can participants reflect upon and respond to data if they are removed from it entirely? Shannon May (2010) argues that such ethical concerns limit the development of public reason as they extend beyond research implementation to hegemonic knowledge production.

It is also essential to discuss ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP®) of content created with and by community members. OCAP® is a registered trademark of the First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC) and emphasizes that the "rights of First Nations communities to own, control, access, and possess information about their peoples is fundamentally tied to self-determination and to the preservation and development of their culture." Whether data is disseminated as digital stories or as textual ethnography, a paradigm shift in academia will reposition anthropologists from primary 'scholars' involved in the 'research' to co-authors of a co-conceptualization of data collection and co-production of theory (Borofsky 2019; Clifford 1983; Rappaport 2008). "Once "informants" begin to be considered as co-authors, and the ethnographer as scribe and archivist as well as interpreting observer, we can ask new, critical questions of all ethnographies" (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 17).

Although visual anthropology may not be able to provide the depth of analytic and contextual insights as ethnographic text and has the potential to reinforce dominant narratives in discourse, its dynamic, multi-temporal, polyvocal capabilities can promote a decolonizing paradigm shift within and beyond academia that stimulates human connection. In a dialogue between textual and visual modes of relational knowledge production and dissemination, fluid social processes that are embedded within globalizing occurrences and macro-constructions of social patterns will unveil how peripheries,

semi-peripheries, and centres connect and disrupt one another (Dirks 2002; Marcus 1995). Although Clifford's (1983; 1986) scepticism of the unavoidable hierarchical arrangements of power-laden fields of discursive positionings holds true, contemporary visual anthropology creates spaces for intersectional narratives, provides a pathway for a more intentional academia and self-reflexive researcher, and fosters human connection through broadened epistemological and image-making lenses.

CONCLUSION

I argue that visual anthropology—employed within a framework of community-based participatory research—has the potential to challenge dominant narratives, broaden perspectives within and beyond academia, and transform everyday lives. These objectives are what I also hope to accomplish while conducting community-based visual anthropology throughout my forthcoming graduate fieldwork with llama pastoralists in the Bolivian Andes.

Before going into the field, I seek to critically acknowledge my limitations and positionality as a researcher who is not Bolivian, Andean, or a llama pastoralist. By fostering a self-reflexive, critical awareness of myself (a middle-class, white, female graduate student) I can more acutely reflect upon my enculturated biases, preconceived perceptions, and positions of power that have the potential to affect my fieldwork and partnerships. The visual incorporation of oneself within their methodology and mode of communication offers a path for researchers to transparently situate themselves within exchanges and dialogues that viewers may be interpreting. As a multidimensional modality, visual ethnography is also a way to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities of lived experiences within multi-sited frameworks (Marcus 1995).

Epistemologically humanistic, visual anthropology offers a way to deepen our understanding of human connection through polyvocal and dialogic textualizations of partial truths that yield multiple and divergent interpretations (Bernard 2017; Lassiter 2005; Tsing 2015). As a pedagogical tool, it can serve to "expand the scope of this

dialogue; to make a conversation of human life itself," and to open paths of growth and discovery (Ingold 2017: 58). Through its ability to explore dynamic assemblages of knowledge (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015), the multidimensional lenses of visual anthropology not only render culture a fluid process of unfolding relations, but support and illuminate the vast array of human connections around the world.

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