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Examining the Multiple Sites of Meaning in a Participant Photography Project With Black Male College Students

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Abstract

Participant photography is a visual method that has been widely used in research to elevate the voices of historically marginalized populations. Although much has been written about the nature of the visual method, including its benefits and challenges, less is known about how meaning is made of the visual images as they move throughout the research process. To this end, this article draws upon data and the methodological notes from a research study examining Black masculinities and employs a critical visual methodology to examine the different sites of meaning-making in a participant photography research project with Black college men. First, the participant reflections on the visual methodology will be used to examine the image production process, which includes the men's decisions regarding photographic tools and their image-making strategies. Then, select images from the project and the corresponding narratives will be shared and situated within the social context in which they were produced. Finally, this article will discuss practical and ethical considerations regarding the circulation and audiencing of the project images and conclude with a discussion of the lessons learned in using a critical visual methodology to explore how meaning is made in a participant photography project with Black men.

Keywords

photo elicitation, photo narrative, methods in qualitative inquiry, critical theory, photovoice

Introduction

Participant photography is a visual method in which participants are encouraged to use cameras to visually document aspects of their lived experience or social issues of concern to them. Through photo elicitation methods, the participants then reflect on their photos and share narratives with the researcher which provide meaning to the images (Carlson et al., 2006; Strack et al., 2004; Wang & Burris, 1997). By asking participants to take photographs and share the meaning of their images, the method attempts to situate participants as collaborators in the knowledge creation process and can be empowering for historically marginalized communities whose voices are rarely heard in popular discourse (Singhal et al., 2007; Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Often referred to and employed as photovoice (Carlson et al., 2006; Wang & Burris, 1997), the method has largely been used in research to bring attention to the lived realities of marginalized groups and how individuals and communities might negotiate these realities (Kaplan, 2013; Luttrell & Chalfen, 2010; Roxas & Gabriel, 2017). The method has also been used by communities to self-represent and participate in

meaning-making practices (Q. Allen, 2012; Joanou, 2009; Tinkler, 2008).

Participant photography has been used as a collaborative research practice that attempts to level the playing field, to some degree, between researcher and researched and takes an emic approach to exploring the lived realities of marginalized groups using visual narratives. In other words, as opposed to a research relationship where the researcher solely determines the nature of the project and collects data from the participant, a participant photography project turns over the data collection process to the participants, which enables them to shape the nature of the project through the types of data that they collect. The method has been most commonly employed and documented in the health professions, particularly as a form of health

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assessment. However, the method is widely used across disciplines, and participant photography projects have been conducted in a variety of international context and with a diversity of human populations (Daniels, 2003; Ho et al., 2014; Joanou, 2017; Kaplan, 2013; Killon & Wang, 2000).

Most participant photography projects tend to be critical in nature and are designed to mobilize communities into action. Many photovoice projects, in particular, draw upon Freirean and feminist epistemologies (Wang & Burris, 1994; Wang et al., 1996) and are utilized as a critical pedagogy that supports marginalized communities in developing a critical consciousness and a plan of action regarding important issues in their lives (Carlson et al., 2006; Freire, 1970; Lykes, 2010; Roxas & Gabriel, 2017). Many of these projects lead to some type of direct action, though not all critical participant photography projects lead to such immediate social action. For instance, some participatory visual projects are similarly rooted in critical approaches but instead use the method to bring about a general awareness of an issue through the participant-generated photos and stories, with the intent that the data will be used to inform future social change (Q. Allen, 2012; Joseph, 2017; Sahay et al., 2016; Samura, 2016). Furthermore, some participant photography projects are not necessarily critical in nature but draw upon the participants' photos and stories to generally describe a phenomenon of study without any obvious intent toward social action (Allan, 2010; Benavides-Vaello et al., 2014).

A great body of the participant photography literature discusses the nature of the method, which often includes descriptions of the visual project procedures, the researchers' analytic reflections, or the benefits and challenges of the method (Cook, 2015; Drew & Guillemin, 2014; Llamas & Pascual, 2013; Tinkler, 2008; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). And though much has been written about the nature of the method, there are still important gaps in the literature. For instance, interpretations of visual materials generally occur across four sites—the site of the image production, the site of the image itself, the site of its circulation, and the site of its audiencing. This means that visual materials can take on varying meaning depending on the site in which they exist. However, examinations on how meaning might be made across these four sites are rarely discussed in the reporting of participatory photography projects (Dockett et al., 2017). Additionally, less is known about how the participants in the project make meaning of the visual method itself as few studies report on these types of participant reflections (Burles & Thomas, 2014). Furthermore, while participant photography research specifically with Black males does exist in the literature (Fisher-Borne & Brown, 2018; Mamary et al., 2007; Ornelas et al., 2009), none of the current research examines how meaning might be made of visual materials across the four sites in such a visual project with Black male students.

To this end, this article will draw upon a critical visual methodology to examine the different sites of meaning-making in a participant photography project with Black college men in the United States. First, the participant reflections on the

visual methodology will be used to examine the image production process, which includes the men's decisions regarding photographic tools and their image-making strategies. Then, select images from the project and the corresponding narratives will be shared and situated within the social context in which they were produced. Finally, this article will discuss practical and ethical considerations regarding the circulation and audiencing of the project images and conclude with a discussion of the lessons learned in using a critical visual methodology to explore how meaning is made in a participant photography project with Black men.

Method

The participant photography project is part of a larger study examining college Black men's conceptions of race, gender, and sexuality. The study included 23 Black men between the ages of 18 and 30, and using purposive and snowball sampling methods, Black men were recruited from colleges and universities in the Western United States (Goetz & LeCompte 1984; Merriam, 1988). The men in the study completed two interviews, including one semistructured interview that examined their understanding of their raced, gendered, and sexualized identities as Black men. In particular, the men were asked about how they thought about race and their racial identity within the current social and political context of the Black Lives Matter movement (Garza et al., 2016). They were also asked about how they understand and negotiate their raced, gendered, and sexualized identities in contexts such as school or the workplace. The second interview was conducted at the conclusion of participant photography project in which the men were asked to visually document the issues of importance to them as Black males. The purpose of the visual project was to build upon the first interview and gain a more emic understanding of how Black men make meaning of their intersectional identities and to understand how their identities might inform what issues are most important to them.

The Participant Photography Project

Prior to starting the visual project, an initial meeting was held where students were provided photo consent release forms and where cameras were distributed to participants who desired them. During this meeting, the men were briefed on when consent was needed and how to gain consent before photographing. They were also advised to consider the dilemmas of putting themselves in harm's way to capture a photo or in photographing any illegal activities. At the conclusion of this initial session, participants were asked to begin the visual project by spending the next 4–5 weeks taking photographs of issues or topics of importance to them as Black men. After students completed the visual project, an individual meeting was scheduled to complete the photo elicitation interview. This interview began with asking the students to discuss their overall experiences with the method and how they went about completing the project, then continued with eliciting narratives on

the images that were created. Images were discussed individually or in thematic groups created by the participant.

Critical Visual Methodology

This article examines how meaning is made of the visual materials produced in the project and draws upon Rose's (2016) critical visual methodology framework. Rose's framework is useful in analyzing the multiple sites of meaning-making in a participant photography project, which is a way of examining how the visual materials in a research project might be interpreted across different sites. Rose outlines four sites as part of the framework. The first is the site of production, which includes how the image is made, the technology used, and the purpose of the image making. The second is the site of the image itself, which includes its visual content and its social meaning. The third site is of an image's circulation, that is where it travels, through what means, and for what reasons. The final is the site of audiencing, which is who sees it, where, why, and how it might be interpreted. Examining each of these sites allows for a better understanding of how visual materials are interpreted, the social conditions that may inform an image, and the implications for research design and the distribution of results.

This methodological article examines these four sites of meaning-making in a participant photography project with Black college men. The site of production is explored by examining the participant decisions regarding the use of particular photographic tools and the strategies utilized to produce their images. The site of the image will be examined by focusing on the types of images taken in the project, the visual stories conveyed by the participants, and the social conditions that inform the image itself. Finally, this article will examine how the images produced in the project were circulated within and after the study was completed and the implications of the types of audiences that consume the images in various contexts.

Researcher Reflexivity

In his seminal work on researcher positionality, Milner (2007) suggests that researchers should make transparent how their racial and cultural identities might influence the research process and the participants they work with. A review of the literature on participant photography projects shows that very few studies acknowledge the researchers' positionality and its effect on the participatory relationship (Barlow & Hurlock, 2013; Barndt, 1997; Carlson et al., 2006). This type of reflexivity is important because it makes clearer how power is distributed between the researcher and the researched and how the researcher's positionality creates both barriers and opportunities within the research process. For instance, I am a cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class, middle-aged Black male academic, among other identities. The intersectionality of my identity presents both opportunities and challenges when conducting participatory projects with other Black men. On the one hand, my positionality provides me some degree of insider status.

Considering the historical legacy of exploitative research on Black men by White researchers (e.g., Tuskegee syphilis experiment), it is possible that my own identity as a Black male allows participants to trust me in the research process. Certainly, my knowledge of the research literature on Black men and my own personal experiences allow for some common understandings between my participants and me. Furthermore, I make it clear to participants my own political advocacy and activism on behalf of Black men and how the results of the project can be used toward improving the conditions for Black men in school and other social contexts. This allows participants to see the potential end result of the study and hopefully affirms their involvement in the project and their trust in me as a researcher. On the other hand, my positionality might be a barrier in the research process as my insider status might blind me to various interpretations of the data or cause me to take certain ideas for granted. Additionally, though I might share racial and gender similarities with the participants, my identity might diverge from the participants due to my age, sexuality, where I'm from, and/or my institutional position as a researcher. All of these intersections of my researcher positionality have the potential to limit my ability to completely understand the cultural experiences of the men in this study. Thus, I attempted to address some of these issues by making my own positionality known to the men early in the project and by asking them to speak to their own specific positionalities and localized context in their interviews. Additionally, transcripts of the interviews, preliminary findings, and a summary of the final findings were provided to the participants for member checking and as a way to improve the reliability of the data (Babbie, 2013). Nevertheless, as Clifford (1986) asserts, I acknowledge that what I present in this text is a partial truth, in that researchers can never truly capture the totality of the cultural phenomena of exploration.

The Site of Production

Attention will now be paid to an examination of the site of production as a location of meaning-making in a participant photography project. This includes an examination of the types of photographic tools used by the participants, the reasons for their choices, and the image-making strategies they employed in producing their visuals.

Photographic Tools

Students were given the opportunity to either use a digital camera with video capture capabilities that would be provided to them or use their own devices. In an earlier participant photography study that was conducted (Q. Allen, 2012), camera phones were not as readily available as they currently are, and providing some type of disposable or digital camera was almost necessary. In the current study, though digital cameras were made available to all participants, only four of the students requested to have a digital camera provided to them. Some who requested the digital cameras did so because the

issued camera was better than their own camera, while others requested the camera because they wanted to demarcate the photography project from their personal picture-taking practices. The remaining participants all chose to use their own digital cameras, which were typically their camera phones. They explained that it was easier to use their own camera phones as it was a natural extension of their personal image-making practices. Access to cell phones with cameras has become ubiquitous across the world (Macentee et al., 2016), and certainly working with adults in participant photography projects increases the likelihood that they will have access to, and thus prefer to use, their own digital technologies as opposed to the one provided by the researcher. Thus, the democratization of cell phone technology works to further shift the power balance between the researcher and researched in participant photography projects as participants are no longer dependent on the technologies provided by the researcher and the expectations that might come with using a “borrowed” technology. Furthermore, the accessibility of personal cell phone technology and the proliferation of image-making applications might reduce the need for researchers to spend time training participants on how to use cameras for a participant photography study, particularly if participants are using their own devices to complete the project.

The few participants who were issued the digital cameras were encouraged to use the camera as if it was their own and to take photographs freely. Participants were not held liable for loss or damage to any of the loaned cameras. As has been written elsewhere (Q. Allen, 2012), this type of liability can be a deterrent to participation and holds the potential to undermine the “leveling” aspect of participatory research, in that liability places the participant in a potentially marginalizing position.

Participant photography projects have historically relied on the researcher to decide on the technologies of production (e.g., disposable cameras, digital cameras), to train participants on the use of such technologies, and to hold participants liable for the technologies. Each of these aspects of a participant photography project holds the potential to exacerbate the relationship between researchers and participants in ways that undermine the “leveling” possibilities of the method. However, with the accessibility and democratization of image-making technologies, the potential for a more equitable distribution of power within the image-making process is made possible.

Image-Making Strategies

Decisions regarding technological tools are important to the production of images, which is also true in decisions regarding how and when to take photos. In this section, the image-making strategies employed by the men will be described, and the particular conditions and strategies by which their photos were produced will be highlighted. In the current study, the composition of the participants’ image production was informed by the context and guidelines of the project as well as the different approaches they took in capturing their images. The participants were given few guidelines other than they were asked

to take photographs that documented or represented issues or events that were of importance or of concern to them as Black men. And while these guidelines are generally broad, they still influenced how the images were produced and guided what students would and would not take pictures of (Barker & Smith, 2012; Wiles et al., 2012). Additionally, how the men went about completing the project contributed to the composition of their images. For instance, participants like Khalil, a cisgender heterosexual male majoring in sociology, approached the project by planning out their photo shoot in advance and identified where and what they wanted to take photographs of before starting the project:

I’m a brainstormer. I brainstormed. I just started doing bullet points. So, I started thinking about everything that was important to me. Then I started thinking about images or video that I’ve seen that spoke to that kind of theme. I wanted to draw from personal experience because I know this is very personal and I viewed it from a personal thing. I was like, “Well yeah. You know I want to raise awareness. What are ways that I’ve raised awareness?” Well, these are the things [images]. Let me pull just from those things [images].

Similarly, Ryan, a cisgender gay man attending a private university, explains his approach to the project and his decisions regarding the use of still images or video:

Well, when you gave me the prompt, I kind of thought about how I do all my YouTube videos. I didn’t know if I was going to do pictures or video or combine them both. There’s life to video, I guess. When you take a still image, you’re just getting that one second. When you’re making videos, you’re getting a lengthy amount of time. It’s easier to explain visually . . . A picture speaks a thousand words and a video speaks a million.

Ryan was the only participant to use video for the project and his approach was intended to tell a story using the multimedia capabilities of video. Participants who chose to preplan their visual project explained their intent in constructing a specific message that directly responded to the research guidelines and, in the case of Khalil, was intended to educate the audience. While this approach lent itself to well-organized and intentional image capturing, participants taking this approach sometimes described their frustration when they couldn’t achieve the shot they had planned for. Thus, the types of images that were produced or not produced depended on the specific message being sent and the ability of the participant to capture the image that fits the narrative they were visually constructing.

Other participants took a more organic approach to the project, choosing to just capture images as opportunities arose. This approach was usually intended to show their everyday lives in a more documentary style. This allowed the participants to show how their everyday lives were experienced at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality. This approach is also most similar to the image-making practices of people with access to modern cell phones and social media feeds, both of which encourage

documentary-style photography and videography methods. Tyson, a cisgender gay male majoring in acting, explained:

I take a lot of pictures already anyway. I pretty much took pictures as I went along in life because I knew I was doing the visual project, but it was also like, “oh this is a good moment,” you know what I mean? Like, this is a cool moment, taking pictures sort of kind of as regularly as I usually would, and then just looking back and I’m like how certain moments were more important to me or made more of an impact on me that I felt related to this particular project.

While this approach seemed most natural to many of the participants, some also explained that this approach sometimes led to missed photo opportunities because they had simply forgotten to capture an image of the moment. Ezekiel, a cisgender gay male attending a state university, explained:

I think I was able to accomplish most of what I wanted to accomplish but I think there were some things I didn’t think about until after the fact. I was like, “oh why didn’t I do this?” It wasn’t even a thought. It was an afterthought like, “oh I could have recorded that” or, “I could have took a picture of that.” It just did not hit me at that moment.

Similar to men who planned out their project, what was or was not photographed depended not just on the influence of the research guidelines but also on the type of intentionality of the participants taking the photos. That is, how they strategized their participant photography project, and what they thought was the best way to capture images, informed what types of visuals were actually recorded. This in turn informs not only how the images will be interpreted but also what images will be available to be interpreted.

The Site of the Image: Meaning-Making and the Visual Stories of Black Men

This section focuses on a select few images produced in the visual project to highlight some of the participant meaning-making of the images and the visual stories the men wanted to show. In general, the types of images taken in the project were of their communities, including neighborhoods, schools, work, and places of spirituality. They also captured images of friends and family, hobbies and interests, and successes and achievements. The images they captured can be categorized into two major groups: (1) images about social issues of concern to them and (2) images that visually reposition the participants.

These two major categories of their photos should not come as surprise, considering the research guidelines for the project and the intentions behind their image production practices. For instance, in describing social issues of concern to them, Blu and Dap captured images that represented the policing and divestment in Black communities (see Figures 1 and 2). Dap, a cisgender heterosexual male majoring in education, explained that the photo of a marijuana bud, shot from a close-up angle, was taken to be “a wake-up call just for people to see what is taking



Figure 1. Dap’s photograph of marijuana.

our young men and women away, or what’s incarcerating them.” In the United States, Black communities are targets of drug policy and policing, and Black men are disproportionately arrested and incarcerated for the possession, use, and sale of the drug, even as the drug gains legalization across the country (Alexander, 2012; Carson, 2018). Similarly, Blu, a cisgender heterosexual man attending a state university, took photographs of liquor stores near his home and, during his interview, described his recent realization of the lack of investment in his community:

I know I live by a bunch of liquor stores, but it’s not something I really think about, right? I took probably, I think two pictures of liquor stores and they were the ones that were closer to my house, but I lost count of how many there are actually on that street. It would be nice if maybe there was less liquor stores and more libraries, and stuff like that.

The liquor stores that Blu photographs were similarly shot from his position as a driver navigating his neighborhood during his regular commute home. Most of the liquor stores he photographs look the same and are depicted against a backdrop of urban decay. The liquor store was a ubiquitous aspect of the neighborhood until he was asked to reflect on his conditions as part of the project. This is the potential of participatory visual methods as a critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; McLaren, 2003), in that through problem posing, image making, and reflecting on one’s conditions, participants can develop a critical consciousness and a visual literacy that names their oppression and articulates an alternative reality (e.g., more libraries). For Blu, his recognition of the proliferation of liquor stores and the problems such conditions create for his community led him to articulate a suggestion for community investment.

Furthermore, many of the images involved the visual repositioning practices of Black men. Responding to dominant assumptions of Black men as cisgender, heterosexual, hyper-masculine, and deviant (Dukes & Gaither, 2017; Smiley &



Figure 2. Blu's photographs of liquor stores near his home.



Figure 3. Snapshot of heart in sand from Ryan's video of queer affirmation.

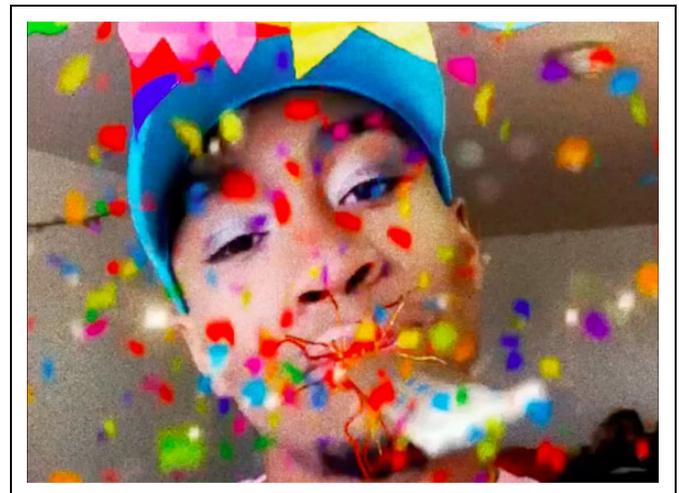


Figure 4. Snapshot of selfie from Ryan's video of queer affirmation.

Fakunle, 2016), the composition of this set of images highlights the participants' attempt to dispel hegemonic notions of Black male identity and makes space for more diverse expressions of masculinity. For instance, Ryan, who was a film major, created the video for his participant photography project (see Figures 3 and 4) and explains the importance of disrupting hegemonic notions of Black masculinity by "queering" narrow notions of Black male gender expression:

Like I said, the Black man stereotype is "you're all masculine," and stuff like that. However, not every Black male fits that particular stereotype. There's multiple types of Black men out there. I'm a Black male, but most likely I don't fit that stereotype that my father

or any other Black male thinks I should. I'm very different from that, and I think we should honestly be open to understanding that there's not one certain type.

The snapshots taken from Ryan's video correspond with his narrative regarding his gender and sexual identity and paint a picture of a more expressive Black masculinity, one which is centered on love and queer affirmation. The image of the heart drawn in the beach sand and the selfie of Ryan wearing makeup and using a celebration themed image filter are the representations of gender performance that push against traditional expressions of masculinity. Other men in the study captured similar images that repositioned themselves, doing so by focusing on documenting the diversity of their gender and sexual

identities, their academic abilities as students, or their activism in their communities. These types of images might be considered acts of resistance and agency, where Black men identified and understood the larger conceptions of their identity and used the visual project to respond to such images by visually repositioning themselves in ways that disrupt hegemonic ontologies of Black masculinity. These repositioning practices are not uncommon in participatory visual projects, and while in some cases, self-representation poses the dilemma of participants producing images that reinforce larger stereotypes, in other cases, self-representation allows historically marginalized and voiceless communities the opportunity to nuance and complicate conceptions of their identities (Joanou, 2009; Schwab-Cartas & Mitchell, 2014; Tinkler, 2008).

Thus, the images that were produced in this project, the content of these images, and the meaning given to the images by the men should be understood as products of the economic, political, and social realities of many Black men in the United States. The image production and meaning-making of the images also points to the agency of Black men in telling their own stories in response to their realities.

The Site of Circulation

It is also important to consider the site of circulation in the meaning-making of participant-generated images. This involves thinking about how the images from the project move and are distributed during and after the research study, and how meaning is made throughout this process. In most participant photography projects, the image circulation process began when participants returned the cameras to the researcher who then printed out the photos to be returned to the participant (Donoghue, 2007; Johansen & Le, 2014; Werremeyer et al., 2016). The way images circulated in earlier projects, particularly when the researcher supplied the technology and developed the photos, often brought forth questions about who actually had ownership of the photos (Guillemin & Drew, 2010; Miller & Happell, 2006).

These are still legitimate concerns, though new technologies have shifted how images are circulated and thus how ownership is established. In the present study, the majority of the participants used their own camera phones or cameras in producing their images. After production, images were kept by the participants, and digital copies were emailed to me or transferred to the research computer via a USB drive. Participants who borrowed a digital camera downloaded their images to their personal computers and then shared their chosen photos or video when the camera was returned. This means that ownership of the image began with the participant and then was shared with the researcher (Guillemin & Drew, 2010).

Once images were transferred, they were prepared for use for the proceeding photo elicitation interview. Like other visual projects (Joanou, 2017; Roxas & Gabriel, 2017), photographs were either printed out as 3×5 photos to be reviewed in the interview or were displayed on a large video projector or monitor. Ryan's video was also shown on a large video monitor.

The use of digital technologies allows for an image viewing experience that differs from participant photography projects using disposable cameras. For instance, there is a difference between reviewing a stack of 3×5 photos in an interview than reviewing photos or video projected on a video projector or monitor. With the 3×5 photos, the participant is able to hold the photo, move photos around in stacks, and generally engage in a tactile manner with the image. When reviewing the photos on a video projector, the photos were typically projected one photo at a time and enlarged greatly to see the details of the photo. The ability to review large high-resolution photos is certainly an asset, though participants lose out on the opportunity to engage with the print of the photograph in a tactile manner. Each of these ways of interacting with visual materials might influence how the image is interpreted, explained, and made meaning of in the interview setting.

Meaning is also made in how the images are circulated after the photo elicitation interview. In many projects, the participants decide in collaboration with the researcher, how and where the images will be used in order to bring about awareness and change on an issue (Roxas & Gabriel, 2017; Wang et al., 1996). The images might then be circulated via public exhibitions, websites, or presentations toward this end. Additionally, the researcher might circulate the images through publications in journals, books, and conference presentations as a way to bring awareness of an issue or to provide details on the project's method. This is the case in the current study as the images are largely being used in academic journals, presentations, and a research website.

Assuming that they own their photos, participants also have the ability to share the images through their own personal modes and networks, which then circulate the images in ways that might create a new meaning for the photos and videos. In the current study, the photos that were produced under the guidelines of the project, and for the purpose of research, were reappropriated by the participants for their own personal purposes and circulated to audiences that were unintended by the research project but ultimately served the intentions of the men in the study. For example, the video that Ryan created for the study was also used for one of his class projects, thus his images were circulated in ways that were not initially intended at the beginning of the study. Moreover, most of the students posted their images to their personal social media networks. In sharing the images through their networks, the photos become subject to an eternity of circulation as they are used and reused digitally and remain in perpetuity on the participants' social media platforms. This type of circulation via social media also means that the images are placed in different contexts that render the photos to a range of audiences and interpretations.

The Site of the Audience

The last site of meaning-making to be discussed is the site of the audience. At the beginning of the project, participants were informed that the results of the study were intended to be used to inform educators and policy makers and that the data could

be presented at conferences and published in journals and books. These scholarly outlets made up the initial audience that the participants captured images for. Additionally, it is possible that as the researcher, I too was an intended audience for the participants as they collected images based on the research guidelines I provided them. Furthermore, since the participants could use the images for their own purposes, it is possible that the men captured images with other “imagined” audiences in mind (e.g., friends, family; Luttrell, 2010) and for reasons beyond the initial aims of the research project. Each of these audiences will come to interact, consume, and interpret the photos in different ways depending on the social context in which the images are viewed. For example, researchers viewing the images and their corresponding text in a journal article will interact with and interpret the images differently than a friend of the participant who sees the same image on Facebook without the research context and corresponding narratives. Similarly, different meanings might be made of Ryan’s images when his video is audienced in an interview versus being shown in a classroom of teachers and peers. As Barthes (1977) explains, images are polysemous in that they have multiple meanings and how they are understood will depend on the identity, social context, and history of the audience.

Considering the intended and unintended audiences that come to interact with an image, an ethical dilemma worth considering is how to protect participants who may consent to the sharing of their images at the time of the study but may come to regret such photos and their distribution to certain audiences at a later time. For instance, what if a student no longer wants to make certain aspects about their identity public? They have some control over this in their own use of social media but cannot unpublish any research that the researcher may have published. This dilemma was also considered in Guillemin and Drew’s (2010) work where they discuss the potential limitations of informed consent and whether participants truly understand the long-term impact of their consent to share their photos. In this project, the images were largely anonymized, but in doing so, there is an acknowledgment that anonymizing photos can be at odds with notions of voice and visibility that are at the heart of participatory visual methods (L. Allen, 2015; Wiles et al., 2008; Yang, 2015). Namely, by anonymizing the photos, there is a risk of muting an aspect of their visual stories, a decision that points to the ethical tensions between anonymity and visibility that visual researchers have to consider (Lomax et al., 2011; Yang, 2015).

In contrast, though the photos might be anonymized in the current project, the participants, who own the original photos, will most likely not do so when sharing their images. The participant is not bound by the same ethical considerations as the researcher, and as owners of their images, the students in the study had greater opportunity to control the audiencing of their photos or video. This might also be seen as another way that particular approaches to participatory visual methods can work toward leveling the relationship between researcher and researched, particularly when ownership of the photos begin with the participants.

Conclusion

Much can be learned about the different sites of meaning-making through a critical visual analysis of a participant photography project with Black men. For instance, at the site of image production, we learn about the technological decision making among the participants, and how the democratization of photographic tools holds the potential for creating a more level relationship between the researcher and the participants. As communities across the world continue to gain access to personal digital technologies, opportunities are created for participants to engage in participatory research on their own terms through the use of their own technologies. Following this line of thought, it is worth considering how other technologies that are becoming more readily available can level the playing field in participatory research. For example, as geographic information systems (GIS) mapping tools become more readily available, how might participatory mapping activities also lean on the democratization of GIS technologies in ways that give youth and their communities more control in participatory research (Dennis, 2006; Literat, 2013)?

The analysis of the project also draws attention to the different approaches that participants take in producing images in visual research. By gaining an emic perspective of how and when participants decide to take photographs, we come to understand the epistemological foundations of the photographs themselves, which for the participants was a way of describing and understanding the world as Black men. By learning about the intent of their image-making actions, we come to understand how the images were produced at the intersection of their raced, gendered, and sexualized realities. As a critical pedagogy and decolonizing methodology (Cook, 2015; Freire, 1970), the image production process in participatory visual projects are acts of knowledge production that critique modes of oppression and articulate a vision of a more just reality. This was evident in the photographs themselves, images that were produced within particular social and technological conditions, and serve as Black male counternarratives. Moreover, the images that were captured in the project highlighted a collection of Black men’s experiences, meaning-making, and resistance and can be understood as a visual political literacy of Black men and masculinities during the current Black Lives Matter era (Garza et al., 2016; Harper, 2015; Tate & Hogrebe, 2011).

Finally, the critical visual analysis of the project provides insight into the possibilities and ethical decisions regarding the circulation and audiencing of the images, particularly in regard to participants’ potential uses of the images beyond the project. For instance, what intended and unintended audiences might view the images if and when they are posted on social media? How will these images be interpreted out of the context of the research study and how might these images be subjected to technological and/or political manipulation that alters the “voice” of the participant? These issues related to the circulation and audiencing of participant-generated images hold the potential to undermine the voice of the participant and put into jeopardy the intent of participant photography, which is to

elevate the voices of marginalized groups. Moreover, considering the institutional restraints placed on the researcher's distribution of the images and the lack of restraints placed on the participants in their distribution, it is possible then that the images can have a greater "impact" when they are shared widely by the men in the study, more so than the researchers' use of the images in academic journals. It is clear then that more analysis is needed in the circulation and audiencing of participant-generated images to address these issues, though a critical visual methodology provides valuable strategies toward this end.

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