


Shifting the Frame: Theoretical and Methodological Explorations of Photography in Educational Research

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Abstract

In this article, I focus on the relationship between photography and educational research, situating this conversation at the interstices of fact/fiction, indexical/imaginary, and art/data. I ask: How has our understanding and use of photography, the camera, and the photographer been shaped by the field of qualitative research? What possibilities exist for reimagining the role of photography in educational research and practice? Drawing on a diverse body of theoretical, empirical, and artistic works, I respond to the questions by looking at three key elements shaping image-based visual research: the ontology of photography, collaboration and photography, and thinking with art/photography. Across these three key elements, I interrogate taken-for-granted assumptions about the camera, photographs, and the relationships between the photographer-photographed in the context of educational research and articulate some shifts that help reframe our understanding of photography and how it is used within educational research and practice.

Keywords

visual methodology, qualitative research, arts-based research

In 2015, the artist and writer Teju Cole began assembling photos from other Instagram users and reposting them as a series on his own feed. For example, in one series, you see multiple photos offering a birds-eye view of the Roman Forum (See Cole, 2018). In another series, we see photographs of the stairwell at the New Museum in New York all taken from the same vantage point. Cole's reposts, often a stream of photos depicting the same place, serve as visual essays showing a common theme across people's photographs: "People don't merely go to the same places or take photographs of the same monuments and sites; they take photographs of the same monuments and sites in the same way" (Cole, 2018). Scrolling through Cole's Instagram feed made me think about photography in our contemporary world. At a moment when more people have access to cameras than ever before, why are we all making similar images? The answers for Cole are rooted in, among a plethora of other factors, how the tourist space is structured through the use of sidewalks, gates, and looking points. This spatial structuring, according to Cole, influences the photographs we make of the location. The endless repetition of images on Instagram and the resultant grid of images compiled by Cole is a poetic meditation on the medium of photography and also offers insight into the human condition. And at the same time, Cole reminds us that a majority of the photographs made of a site are only from some limited points of view. But the possibilities for other points of view, at least in theory, are limitless.

I take inspiration from the grid of images created by Teju Cole and question given understandings of photography and photographic practice in the context of educational research. In this article, I travel across a landscape where educational research meets visual methodologies. Rather than constructing the same images of this landscape, I move to various corners and share snapshots that help us see this landscape anew, from various other vantage points. Taken together, the images I construct here offer alternative viewpoints that help us reconsider photography as a methodological approach, object of study, and medium of "reporting" in educational research.

Ultimately, the goal of this article is not to critique or dismiss any particular theoretical or methodological approach. Instead, it is, what Paris and Alim (2014) call, "a loving critique" rooted in a position of "deep respect" (p. 85). In the following sections, I trace the origins of visual methodological approaches such as photovoice and photoelicitation. I make a "turn," that is not invested in notions of gaps or shortcomings in these approaches, but in

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gratitude and a recognition that these methodologies and the individuals who have championed them have been pivotal in helping me “to think and write and dream of what we might do, could do” (Ulmer, 2016, p. 456). I make this turn, this minor gesture, by tracing an intimate relationship among photography, art, qualitative methodologies, and educational research to offer possible new visions and directions for visual research. In so doing, I enter a conversation around photography and educational research that is at the interstices of fact/fiction, indexical/imaginary, and art/data. I ask: How has our understanding and use of photography, the camera, and the photographer been shaped by the field of qualitative research? What possibilities exist for reimagining the role of photography in educational research and practice?

I respond to the above-mentioned questions by looking at three key elements within visual research. The first is the ontology of photography, in particular how our understanding of photographs and cameras have shaped our approach to visual research. Drawing on the work of Azoulay (2015), I indicate how the traditionally framed binary of the photographer-photographed (and subject-object) limits our understanding of photographic practices and our readings of photographs. Second, by building on the disruption of the traditionally framed binary of photographer-photographed, I examine how current approaches to collaboration in visual research are largely limited to creating opportunities for participants to make photographs or to interpret/analyze them. Drawing on the works of Campt (2017) and Drake (2014), I discuss ways to collaborate using photography/images that draw on material, gestural, and aural practices. And third, through a close reading of the photographic works of Hồng-An Truong, Huong Ngo and Keith Secola Jr. I examine how photographs can help us feel/think/theorize within the field of educational research by attuning us to the material and affective dimensions of photography.

Across these three key elements, I interrogate taken-for-granted assumptions about the camera, photographs, and the relationships between the photographer-photographed. These considerations, informed by our theoretical/conceptual frames, methodologies, and practices, shape how we engage photography and photographic methods.

Depth of Field: Photography and Qualitative Research

In the first volume of *Studies in Visual Communication*, Becker (1974) wrote an article titled, somewhat simplistically, “Photography and sociology.” His argument was much more complex though. He was able to tie together the works of photographers like Lewis Hines, Robert Frank, Margaret Bourke-White and other (mostly white-male) photographers of the times with the pressing questions that sociologists were asking. Poring over the work and working methods of

photographers and sociologists, Becker (1974) was asking each to learn from the other’s practice, style, and ethics; essentially to be in dialogue. Since then the social sciences writ large has taken up the visual in compelling ways and developed its own approaches to visual methodologies and research. And at the same time, contemporary photographers have adopted research intensive practices to their work. However, Becker’s vision for conversations across the fields is still somewhat wanting. I trace some of the developments in the field since the 1980s, issues and possibilities that Becker (1974) gestured toward and others that have emerged through contemporary artistic and scholarly works.

Historically, photography has played an important role as a research tool in sociology and anthropology. The development of the camera toward the end of the 19th century and its subsequent ubiquity in the early 20th century made it an important device within field work practices (Edwards, 2015; Pinney, 2012). The camera has primarily served as an instrument for recording information, a tool for data collection, identification, and categorization of people, cultures, and places. In the study of “other” cultures, the camera served as a device offering additional proof, a visual certainty to what was being described by the ethnographers. The initial obsession with the mimetic functions of photographs artificially limited the role of photography to representation and data collection. Tracing this early history, Pinney (2012) asks if photography, “is to be understood as a transparent objectification of a photographer’s intentions, a mere device for the capture of surface evidence?” (p. 56). The simple answer to that question is: no, but.

Alongside other visual scholars, I take the position that the camera has never been merely a passive device. Along with the photographer it is always enmeshed in power relations: “photographs mark not only the photographer’s standpoint but a point of view of those in front of the camera, even if that moment is asymmetrical. Subjects are never passive—they think, they experience” (Edwards, 2015, p. 241). Over the past few decades, scholars across many disciplines have created methodological approaches that try to address the asymmetries of power between the researcher and the researched (Ewald et al., 2012; Luttrell, 2010; Pink, 2012). These broader questions on qualitative methodology and the asymmetries in power between the researchers and the researched have also translated into visual research and the use of the camera within these contexts. The development of participatory methodologies such as photoelicitation and photovoice have transferred the instrument of data collection (the camera) or the object of study (the photograph) over to the participants (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wilson et al., 2007). By creating opportunities for community members to create their own photographs and/or to articulate their readings of photographs, participatory visual methodologies center the voices of research participants. These methodologies attend to some of the obvious asymmetries of

power in visual research, that is, who wields the camera? Who reads/interprets the images? How do we understand the visual from the perspectives of the insiders? However, despite these significant shifts, questions remain about how these ideas are taken up by researchers (see Evans-Agnew & Rosemberg, 2016) and about the “(im)possibility of empowerment” (Higgins, 2016, p. 681). Even with these shifts toward participatory approaches, the possibilities of photography in educational research remain largely untapped (Tinkler, 2008).

Three key assumptions about photography and its use in the research process are evident to me in existing participatory approaches such as photovoice and photoelicitation. First, the process of photography is reduced to two elements—the making of images and the reading of images. While these are important aspects of photographic practice, we can also consider other elements of the photographic process such as viewing images, writing with images, curating images, and so on. Through my collaboration with Urja, a young photographer, I learned how photographs and text can work together and against each other to foster unique framings between space, time, memory, and identity (see Vellanki & Davesar, 2020). Second, the process of coding and thematic analysis of images is a representational approach that is often used to offer an understanding of the image. The perspective of the photographer (research participant) or the researcher or both are mobilized to direct viewers on how to understand the image and to interpret its meaning. In other words, the work of the viewer is often done for them by offering a definitive reading of the image. Shankar (2019) through his work with young children in rural India, demonstrates how a shift away from definitive readings of images toward a practice of “listening to images” might foster multiple understandings, reinventions, and refusals to make “unexpected connections that bring into focus the very specific and mediatized landscapes” within which we all live. Third, some researchers argue for the separation between the aesthetic and the mimetic. For example, discussing the ways participants can be oriented to photovoice research, Latz (2017) writes that participants “should also be reminded that the aesthetics of the photographs are much less important than the meanings assigned to them” (p. 76). While this approach might work for some studies, the separation between the aesthetic and the descriptive elides the complicated ways in which we relate to and engage with photographs. In her study with young children, Templeton (2018) illustrates how aesthetic choices are in fact central to understanding the photographic practices of young children. She argues for an analysis that attends to the internal narrative (analysis of the contents of the photograph) and external narrative (interviews/gestures around the photograph) to comprehend the “performance of the photograph” (p. 7). By adopting this approach, she shows how Jaylen’s “perspectival shots looking up at adult torsos depicting the bigness of

the world for them, sit in contrast to city photos by adult photographers” (p. 7). Jaylen’s photographs depict an aesthetic choice that is closely connected to the narratives and meanings imposed onto the photograph. Therefore, while one might want to separate the aesthetic and the narrative aspects of photographs for research purposes, they are deeply entwined.

These three aspects are not inherently problematic for they offer a *particular* understanding of and an engagement with photography. These assumptions approach photography as a medium of data collection, analysis, and reporting that can be molded to fit into existing logics of qualitative and representational research. To be clear, any particular method is not the issue. Rather, it is, what Springgay and Truman (2018) call, the “logic of proceduralism” that has foreclosed an exploration of inventive and aesthetic possibilities for photography and photographic practice in educational research. Several researchers have taken approaches like photovoice and offered significant re-articulations (Luttrell, 2010; Shankar, 2016). However, I am interested in a different intellectual exercise. Rather than thinking about how photography can fit existing logics of representational qualitative research—collect, validate, codify, represent—I am interested in exploring the affordances of the photographic medium and its practice that possibly go beyond what photovoice and other representational qualitative methods have offered, and engage it on other artistic, aesthetic, and conceptual registers. I look for inspiration and flights of thought in literature, art, and research outside the field of education and engage with the work of scholars and artists who explore the plurality of photographic practice and understandings.

Frames of Reference

In exploring artistic and inventive possibilities for photography in educational research, I want to pay homage to and join scholars who have pushed our understanding of what does and does not constitute research. In particular, my own thinking and practices have been influenced by the works of arts-based and humanities researchers like Anzaldúa (2015), Campt (2017), Greene (2000), Kimmerer (2013), Kumar (2000), Sharpe (2016), Sousanis (2015), Trinh (2011), and Tuck and Yang (2014) to name a few. I want to steer clear of collapsing these scholars/artists and their works under a singular umbrella. However, across their works I found a resounding emphasis on challenging preordained disciplinary logics and procedures about why, how, when, and what kind of research to embark on. The works of arts-based researchers and humanities scholars listed above denaturalize traditional qualitative approaches by exploring the relationship between form and content; between aesthetics and meaning. Traditional qualitative research largely treats form and content as two separate entities. For example, photographs and photography might form an important part of the

data collection and analysis process in a traditional qualitative study. However, the findings and analysis are often rendered textually. The content and the meanings of the images/works are explored through the print-based medium. In Tina Campt's influential work on vernacular photographs and diaspora, *Listening to Images*, we see an approach to engaging, reading, and listening to images on a different register. She draws on a wide range of works—artistic exhibitions, archival materials, literary analysis, vernacular photographs, and government documents—to articulate an approach of listening to images, rather than simply viewing them, thereby unsettling given understandings of vernacular photographs and what they (don't) do in our everyday lives.

In exploring possibilities for photography in educational research, I embark on, what Loveless (2019) calls, an “unpinning [of] our allegiance to discipline” and “to work noninnocently from *within*, and nurture the nodes of curiosity necessary for any true pedagogical research practice to develop” (p. 69). Moving away from disciplinary allegiances opens up the possibility to see, feel, and hear anew. In subsequent sections, I draw on a varied range of theoretical, conceptual, and practice based understandings of photography. These connections, which to some might seem as unusual ties, open the possibility of “denaturalizing methodologies and analyses” endemic to visual research within education. Sharpe (2016), in her book, *In the wake*, writes that Black academics are forced to adopt the very methods that have been deployed as destructive forces. She asks scholars to “become undisciplined” and to turn to the works of artists, poets, writers who speak to the contemporary world through the aesthetic, affective, and other registers of knowing/being (p. 13). Therefore, to imagine other possibilities for photography in education, I build on the works of artists, scholars, and writers. Photography, then, is not understood merely as a tool for data collection, but also as being deeply connected to the artistic, scientific, and everyday histories and practices within which it is already embroiled.

Throughout this article, I move between artistic works¹, theoretical arguments, and empirical studies to articulate visions for photography in educational research and practice. The intention here is to blur the lines between form *and* content, theory *and* practice, to attend to both simultaneously. This move shifts attention from the known and knowable toward the “aesthetic, and excessive dimensions of knowledge” and understandings of photography (Loveless, 2019, p. 39). This approach is intended to “foster dissonance and discomfort with conventional practice[s]” of working with photographs and photography in educational research (American Educational Research Association, 2009, p. 482). Therefore, in subsequent sections I slide between the works of artists and anthropologists; curators and critical theorists; historians and educational researchers, situating them on the same plane of immanence. I offer

three key ideas (Ontology of photography; Collaboration and photography; Thinking/feeling with photography) that unsettle existing frameworks that have shaped much of photographic/visual methods and theory in educational research. This is a snapshot of “other” possibilities, an invitation to explore what else visual research could be and do in the field of education.

The Ontology of Photography

From their early creation, photographs have always been linked to a material recording of reality. Their mimetic quality has often been associated with an objective representation of reality, a truth claim. Early anthropological and ethnographic works used photographs to offer veracity to field observations. Over the years, qualitative research has treated this aspect of photography with curiosity and also disdain. In the late 20th century, scholars from various fields (Sekula, 1986; Sontag, 2001) demonstrated how the claim that photographs are objective, neutral records of reality is fraught with various tensions rooted in their creation, circulation, and usage. Morris (2014) in his book *Seeing is believing* examines historical and contemporary images that have gathered a life of their own within the popular imagination. Through a thorough analysis, he demonstrates that the truth claims of these photographs are not easily verifiable. Morris argues that all images are partial, they include some things and exclude others. In their capturing of reality through the medium of light, there is often, beyond the edge of the frame, “an epistemic shadow” (p. 55).

If images don't speak for themselves, then who does? Over the years, social science researchers have tried to answer this question in many different ways. In one instance, researchers tried to situate and understand images in the context of the social, political, and cultural landscapes within which they are created and circulate. Through a thorough visual analysis of the image and the contexts surrounding its creation/usage, researchers sought to offer robust understandings of how photographs are created, how they function in society, and the meanings that they convey. Tagg's (1993) *Burden of Representation* demonstrated how photography was co-opted by various institutions (government, police, research, etc.) to serve their purposes. Tagg argues that this usage of photography was not because of any inherent quality of the medium but instead an orchestration facilitated by various institutions. Lutz and Collins (1993) in their book *Reading National Geographic* argue that photographs were used by media outlets to convey particular understandings of people, politics, and culture. The meanings and the influence of these images could be deciphered through a careful analysis of the image that attended to the internal narrative (story of the image) and external narrative (context of production and viewing) of the image (Pink, 2003).

In one sense, the sovereign reading of an image is held together by an idea of who is behind and who is in front of the camera. However, Azoulay (2015) writes that photography “is made up of an infinite series of encounters” (p. 26). Instead of viewing the photograph as the sovereign frame of the photographer, we can consider the photograph and what it inscribes “as resulting from an encounter between several protagonists that might take on various forms” (p. 12). In essence, Azoulay is arguing that the sovereignty over the images that is usually ascribed to the photographer/photographed is something to question and investigate:

What is written in [photographs] is always excessive with regard to any sovereign representation that one side or another—be it the photographer, the photographed person or the person in charge of the ‘arena’ in which the photograph was taken—wishes to impose on it. (Azoulay, 2010, p. 10)

For several contemporary scholars and artists, this ambiguity and multiplicity of photographs make them a source of creation and investigation. Using mugshots, family portraits, and other images, Campt (2017), for one, debunks the idea that any image can be read in a singular manner. Even in these images, some of which are created under conditions of dispossession and subjugation, she finds compelling narratives and reminds us that photographs are “neither wholly liberatory vehicles of agency, transcendence, or performativity nor unilateral instruments of objectification and abjection” (p. 59). Photographs, for Campt (2017) as well as other artists and scholars, are ambiguous and contain an excess which is not simply seen or read but also has to be heard, felt, and touched.

The ambiguity and excess in images that Azoulay (2015) discusses is something that has been flattened within some approaches to photography in educational research. Issues of power, voice, and agency are central to all photographic practices and have been acutely raised in the context of social science research (Edwards, 2015; Prins, 2010; Sontag, 2009). However, I suggest that the transferring of the camera to research participants or asking them to read images does not necessarily resolve issues of power, voice, and agency. Rather, it offers a temporary closure to the meanings of photographs by transferring the responsibility of deciphering/coding/analyzing images onto research participants (Vellanki & Davesar, 2020).

Allow me to share a more personal example: The passport photograph is a common identification document, a visual object that I return to repeatedly in my own artistic practice. Over the years, rules governing passport photographs have shifted. In these photographs, one can’t smile or wear anything that covers the head. The distance between the face, the monotone backdrop, and the edge of the photograph has to be precise. One might consider the passport photograph to be a flat document. It is read by authority figures as a representation, as a means of identification,

matching the likeness of the person in front to the person in the photograph. At the airport, at the bar, the person guarding the entrance always holds up my passport photo to my face, trying to establish a similarity. This is a particular type of an encounter with the passport photograph. As I try to think of what else the passport photo does, I am reminded of my father’s wallet. In it, he always has a passport photograph of my mother. A photograph that is probably several decades old at this point. He looks at it longingly. In that same photograph, which some of us might read as flat and emotionless, my father seems to find different affective intensities, conjuring memories, visions, and relationships to whom the image portrays.

Building on these considerations, I conceptualize photography as a series of encounters beyond the acts of photographing or viewing images. The possibilities of these encounters, as I indicated with the example above, are never simply determined by the photographer, the photograph, or the photographed. Instead, they are also subject to contexts, personalities, and the particular moments of encounter created in the process of engaging photography and photographs. To put it another way,

photography provides a productive interface—as site where haptic and optic coincide and where a confluence of feelings, not to mention fields of inquiry, collide—for investigating the implications of the convergence of sensation and perception. (Brown & Phu, 2014, p. 21)

For example, in describing her research with young children and their photographic practices, Templeton (2018) argues that it is important to attend to the varied resonances of images in the lives of young people. Templeton (2018) makes a shift by closely attending to the visual, sensory, gestural, and spatial in young children’s photographs of New York City. She writes: Until I looked at their photos, I had not considered the city a significant space for the young children in this study, yet one affordance of children’s photography is that their pictures present new focal points and ways for adults to think about children’s lives in ways we had not” (p. 13). Furthermore, Templeton (2018) reminds us that to be able to see, hear, think, and feel photographs on these varied registers we could try and move past our habitual, adult-ways of reading and interpreting images.

Within the context of educational research, exploring the possibilities for photography entails moving past the binary of the photographer or the photographed toward an engagement with the multiplicities photographs offer in our lives. This includes, but is not limited to, an exploration of the multifaceted role of photographs and photography in our everyday lives, attuning ourselves not only to the loud and extravagant but also to the quiet and quotidian (Campt, 2017). As I argued earlier, visual research within education has largely limited itself to focusing on

who wields the camera and who reads/analyzes/codes images. However, there is room for us to engage in explorations of photography that engage the affective, the visual, the aural, the gestural, and the haptic. An exploration of these elements, as I have demonstrated above, can attune us to aspects of photographic practice that are often overlooked within traditional research.

“If we read images with the same literacy skills as we use to read words,” Fendler (2017) writes, “we will not be able to see what images are and what they do” (p. 751). If one accepts that photography is a series of (infinite) encounters, then one is less interested in deciphering what a particular photograph means or conveys and more invested in exploring “new analytics for thinking—and feeling—photography” (Brown & Phu, 2014, p. 21) that has only recently begun to play a role in educational research. The ontological understanding of photography as a series of infinite encounters moves past sovereign reading of images (whether of the researcher or researched; photographer or photographed) toward considering the multiplicities made possible by photographs. Adopting this orientation necessitates a rethinking of our theoretical and methodological orientations toward photography.

Collaboration and Photography

The shift toward participatory visual methodologies emerged against the backdrop of a critique of traditional qualitative research methodologies which were seen as being extractive, pushing an asymmetrical relationship between the researcher and the researched, and often reported findings only from the perspective of the researcher. Collaborative approaches such as photoelicitation and photovoice emerged in response to these asymmetries. While these methodologies shifted the power dynamics in the process of data collection/analysis, they continue to maintain the authorial position of the researcher and convey a “singular voice” of research participants (Higgins, 2016).

Several artists and theorists have pushed our understanding of collaboration within photographic practice. Drawing on the work of Susan Meisalas and Wendy Ewald, Azoulay (2016) argues that “collaboration is the photographic event’s degree zero” involving several actors (p. 189). While we would often place the person behind the camera in a position of authority, “the photographer cannot a priori claim a monopoly over knowledge, authorship, ownership, and rights” (p. 189). What does it mean that collaboration is the photographic event’s degree zero? Put simply, it is a limitation to assume that the photographer is the subject and the photographed is the object, with the direction of power simply flowing from the photographer to the photographed. Instead, photography is multiply agentive and actions emerge across various encounters and engagement with the process and images.

Over the past few decades, collaborative approaches have been seen as a solution to the extractive and predatory nature of social science research and have been positioned as positive. As I discussed earlier, the idea of collaboration within visual research has taken the form of engaging research participants along the lines of the photographer or the interpreter of photographs. The shift from yesteryears has been that the camera, initially wielded by the researcher, has been turned over to the participants with the hope that the resultant images would not reproduce the ethnographic gaze of the researcher. Thus, it is not only who the photographer is, but the very act of making an image from behind the camera that achieves heightened importance. This particular collaborative approach shifts the power wielded by the researcher by making the subsequent act of interpreting/analyzing images a “collaborative” endeavor. However, despite this shift, the relationship(s) among the photograph, photographer, photographed, and spectator remain underexplored.

While we often see collaboration as a positive engagement, Azoulay (2016) reminds us, that there is an “unavoidable collaborative dimension of photographic practice, regardless of the photographer’s intention or success in engaging with others in a just or hospitable manner” (p. 188). Collaboration is always already present in photography and is not necessarily reflective of a positive relationship (although it can be) between the various actors. Campt (2017), for example, uses ethnographic images of Black South African women from the late 19th century to illustrate that these images are not merely about dispossession and subjugation. To see these photographs as only resulting from the subjection of the women to the colonizers’ gaze would be to ignore their quiet resistance and miss “the visible manifestations of psychic and physical *responses* (rather than submission) to colonization and the ethnographic gazes it initiated” (p. 51; emphasis in original). Instead, Campt (2017) sees these images as emerging from a collaboration, one that is most definitely hierarchical and unequal, that nonetheless visualizes a “tense grammar of colonization and black self-fashioning” (p. 50). Using her method of “listening to images,” Campt (2017) suggests that “we think of self-fashioning in these images as complex articulations of self that resist easy categorization and refuse binary notions of agency versus subjection” (p. 59). The women’s resistance is registered on the image in unheard frequencies. To access these unheard frequencies, we must also hear them to attend to the tensions between the photographed and the photographer that might not be apparent visually but can be brought out by drawing on other analytics.

If we consider collaboration to be photography’s event zero, then how do we think about engaging in other forms of collaboration that move past the role of creating/analyzing images or the binary of the photographer-photographed? Azoulay, Meisalas, and Ewald examined over hundred

photography projects to chart out eight different clusters to illustrate the various ways in which photography can be collaborative. One of the clusters they examined is called “Coarchiving.” In this cluster, they discuss collaborative projects in which, instead of a traditional museum or archivist, the “community performs its right to archive” (p. 197). The category is used to explore collaboration by examining the various relationships that are formed through photographic practice (across the spectrum of production, storage, and circulation of photographs) and the ways in which people engage with it. Phu et al.’s, (2017) *The Family Camera Network* is another example of community archiving that has demonstrated ways to collaborate beyond the binary of photographer-photographed. By crowdsourcing photographs from families living in Canada, this project shows “how photos are produced and move and create meaning within a family” (p. 159). The process of archiving and community analysis, aided an exploration of family photographs in “multisensory ways” and “lays bare the influence of the nation-state in constructing ideas about family at the same time it illuminates the transnational dimensions of visual kinship” (p. 159). Through this project, the researchers were able to collaborate with community members to share compelling stories, visual and otherwise. *The Family Camera Network’s* practice of collaborative archiving pushes forward “the ideas that photography is not a record but a site of action, and that revisiting its history is not sealing it off but opening it up for others to engage with its findings and pursue them further” (Azoulay, 2016, p. 198). A part of the collection has been made available online through the The ArQuives: Canada’s LGBTQ2+ Archives and the Royal Ontario Museum (see www.familycameranetwork.org). These imaginative approaches to collaboration attune us to the multiplicity of meanings, resonances, and feelings that reside in photographs and photographic practices.

As a photographer, I am interested in thinking about ways of collaborating beyond asking research participants to become photographers. “Collaboration in photography cannot be limited to the question of how to engage others in the event of photography but must also ask how the photographer herself engages with the act of photography” (Azoulay, 2016, p. 191). In the context of visual research, this can be paraphrased to ask how the researcher themselves engage with the act of photography. It is for this reason that the cluster of projects from Azoulay’s (2016) typology that caught my attention most strongly is titled “The photographer seeks to reshape the traditional authorial position through the photographed person’s collaboration.” Azoulay (2016), Meisalas, and Ewald argue that the capturing of an image is “only one aspect of photography, which should be considered alongside other procedures such as sharing the camera, collecting photographs; sorting, sharing, showing, viewing, and archiving them; as well as writing on them and through them” (p. 195). This articulation

reminds me of Carolyn Drake’s (2014) book *Wild Pigeon*. For this project, Drake photographed the Uyghur community in China. She grappled with the ethical question of being an outsider who is photographing a community that is hyper-surveilled and persecuted by the Chinese state. She wondered if her photographic perspective adequately represents the Uyghur experience and asks “what, if anything, did the pictures I was taking mean to the people in them?” She responded by inviting collaborators to manipulate the images she created through a process of writing, collage, and other forms of manipulation. The result is a complex body of work that disrupts traditional understandings of the roles played by the photographer and the photographed in the process of creating an image. In the traditional framing, the photographed is mostly seen as being passive and subjected to the gaze of the photographer. The image is seen as a creation of the photographer and the credit is all theirs. How many remember the name of the woman sitting in Dorthea Lange’s *The Migrant Mother*? However, in Drake’s work we see a significant disruption to this understanding. While we don’t always learn the names of her collaborators (a deliberate choice by Drake to protect the identities of her collaborators), she invites them to visualize the relationship between the photographer and photographed through a physical manipulation of the image. As a spectator, I am invited to view Drake’s photographs through the traces and inscriptions created by her collaborators.

Drake’s process of collaboration challenges traditional understandings of the role of the photographer and the photographed. The photographs are made by her, but her collaborators transform them in big and small ways. They hide some things, add words and phrases, cut out whole pieces of the image, or bring different images together to make something else. This particular practice of collaboration challenges dominant understandings of the role of the photographer and photographed. Most importantly, it visualizes collaboration as pushing the limits of the photographic medium.

Drawing on the work of artists and scholars, I have indicated above the possibilities for us to reimagine collaboration beyond the act of being a photographer in the community or inviting others to engage in the practice of being photographers. These “new” collaborative practices push us to explore the ways we can, as artists/researchers/educators, invite collaborators to write with, think with, and manipulate photographs. Ultimately, these imaginative collaborative practices, which often emerge from the work of artists, create opportunities for us to understand the multifarious roles photographs play in our lives and in reimagining the role of photography in educational research.

Thinking With Art/Photography

I argue that to tap into the potentiality of photographs to help us think/feel/theorize, we have to move past the idea

that photographs and photographic works are merely data that need theories and analysis applied to them. Despite the efforts to consider photographs as a way to move beyond print-based text as data, much of the analysis grates images into textual fragments—codes, themes, narratives—that are strung together to form print-based textual descriptions. The materiality and visuality of photographs is flattened into print-based text.

I remember the first time I saw Hồng-Ân Trương and Huong Ngo's *The Opposite of Looking is Not Invisibility and the Opposite of Yellow is not Gold* at MoMA, New York. In this work, the artists looked at their family albums to find vernacular photographs of their mothers, who had moved as refugees during the U.S. war in Vietnam. These images, which depict their everyday lives, are juxtaposed with transcripts from congressional hearings in the 1970s about Vietnamese refugees. While the photographs are printed on lush, velvety paper, and mounted on golden-yellow backgrounds the transcripts are laser engraved and exhibited behind a highly reflective glass. As a viewer, I quickly identified the images, but I had to look closely to read the court proceedings. I often only gleaned snippets.

Drawing on this work, as an example, I ask, how can we use art/photography to think? To theorize? To analyze? I see artistic/photographic practice as holding the potential to push theorizing and help us engage the contemporary world in multitudes. I think that the ability for art to do this repeatedly lies in its willingness to engage multiple senses, affect, reason, memory, and a plethora of ways in which all of us come to know, sense, and be in the world. On the contrary, much of qualitative/representational research has limited itself to rationality, reason, and words.

Hồng-Ân Trương and Huong Ngo's juxtaposition of the domestic (photographs) with the public (transcripts of congressional hearings) is not just a discursive move but a material one too. The laser engraved text creates a new relationship for the viewer. Together, they push the viewer to see how "the invisible histories of Asian American families and the broader national imperative in which war, the economy, and labor are bound up with each other" (Ngô & Trương, 2018). Long after I left the museum, I thought about their work and how they used their family photographs to theorize a relationship between the state and the refugee, between the personal and the political, and between women, domesticity, and nationalism. These elements exist alongside each other and collide with each other discursively as well as materially—the lives and desires of the women, their families, and communities sit alongside the rancid bureaucracy of the state.

In trying to think, feel, and theorize with art/photography, I am interested in two elements. The first is to examine the ways artists are pushing our understanding of photography itself and articulating new ways to read, analyze, engage, and understand photographs (Brown & Phu, 2014; Camp, 2012; Huang, 2019; Mani, 2010).

Hồng-Ân Trương and Huong Ngo's work achieves this by taking the overdetermined genre of family photographs and repositioning them as quiet yet bold responses to the state's imagination and treatment of refugees. This visual, material, and affective treatment offers a new vantage point for viewers/educators to consider concepts/ideas that have been discussed within (educational) research (Bajaj & Bartlett, 2017; Coe, 2010; De León, 2015).

Hồng-Ân Trương and Huong Ngo's photographic work engages several ideas at once and bridges the divides between the academic/non-academic by utilizing the affective, material, and visual registers of photography/art. It pushes past the dominant idea that "words are the only tool of thought" (Sousanis, 2015). The overreliance on print-based text within educational research "marginalizes, excludes, and negates alternative ways of being (ontology) and knowing (epistemology)" (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). The work of artists/photographers, like Hồng-Ân Trương and Huong Ngo, "offer new lenses through which to look out at and interpret the educative acts that keep human beings and their cultures alive" (Greene, 2000, p. 4). As educators and researchers, we could consider ways to engage these "other" ways of knowing and acknowledge "how *form* makes *worlds*" too (Loveless, 2019, p. 102; emphasis original). The question of form has particular import for researchers/artists who consider "the aesthetic, excessive dimensions of knowledge" and the ways in which this shift in the process and output of our research-creations can lead to the emergence of new pedagogical encounters (p. 39).

The field of arts-based research has consistently challenged the divide between art and research. For a long time, arts-based researchers have argued for the inclusion of artistic practice in the paradigm of research. Borrowing from Greene (1977), I am interested in exploring what the artistic-aesthetic can do for curriculum as well. If art is not merely something that needs theory applied to it, then how can we think of art as also offering a space to theorize, to grow and to un/learn? Tuck and Yang (2014) write, "using art to think/feel through theory—to decode power and uncode communities—trains our intuition" (p. 814). Artistic practice has a crucial role in shifting research practices away from its damage-centered orientation toward a desire-based engagement.

Keith Secola Jr. created a series titled *Postcolonial Revenge*. This project includes family photographs that are then screen printed onto "historical" publications and textbooks that condone the settler-colonial legacy and the ongoing erasure of indigenous cultures and lives. The photographs that make up Secola's works are from his family's archive, made between 1800 and 1950, and passed onto him by his mother. Secola's pieces are "a focused critique of text, images, and persuasion throughout history" (Metcalf,

2019). *Postcolonial Revenge* has deep resonances for the field of curriculum studies. In particular, the area of textbook studies which has been concerned with examining the gaps, silences, and erasures of particular peoples, histories, and cultures within school textbooks. Secola offers his own interpretation and conceptual analysis to these erasures. It is an interpretation and critique that is, both, deeply personal and political; conceptual and material. By superimposing his family photographs onto the covers of books, Secola is asking us to consider what these erasures mean for his family and community. More importantly, his work raises some pertinent questions—What do we miss out on when we study erasures/silences in textbooks only using the textual? How does this affective/material intervention shift our understanding of erasures/silences in textbooks and its impact on individuals/families/communities? How do we, as educators and researchers, shift away from a damage-centered approach toward a desire-based approach to researching textbooks? And finally, building on that last question, how do we, through our research and teaching, center the lives, desires, and histories of the very communities that are affected?

These are some questions that came to my mind as I engaged with Secola's work. This list is not exhaustive. However, I hope the works of the artists above highlight how photographic (and other forms of artistic) practices can “offer modes of sensuous, aesthetic attunement, and work as a conduit to focus attention, elicit public discourse, and shape cultural imaginaries” (Loveless, 2019, p. 16). Photographs are not merely data that need theory applied to them, but they also offer us ways to think, question, feel, be, and to imagine otherwise.

What Is Our Vision for the Future?

To insist that contemporary photographic practice — and I mean to include a majority of the international news coverage in newspapers like this one — is generally made (and published) for the greater good is to misconstrue history, because it leaves out the question of “Good for whom?”

– Teju Cole

The camera is a recent invention in human history, its presence in our lives is perhaps equivalent to the blink of an eye when measured against geological time. And yet, the profound impact of cameras and photographs on human (and more-than-human) life cannot be underestimated. In the preceding sections, I argued for us to reconsider and to reimagine the role of photography within educational research and practice. In doing so, I most often highlighted and shared examples of artists and works that use photography to provoke, question, and challenge the status-quo in critical and generative ways. However, if I was to say nothing of the ways in which photography has and continues to

reinscribe regimes of power, domination, and dispossession then I would only be offering you a partial picture.

We are at a moment in human history when more people have access to cameras than ever before. This has enabled us to democratize “vision,” allowing us to see perspectives, people, and places that were unseen before. And at the same time, it has made much more apparent the injustices we are surrounded by—photos and videos of police brutality, the murder of humans trying to migrate, and the toll of war. Cole (2019) makes a grim forecast: “Photography’s future will be much like its past. It will largely continue to illustrate, without condemning, how the powerful dominate the less powerful” (para. 17). As more and more educators and researchers draw on ideas of multimodality, arts-based research, and visual methodologies, to inform their scholarly work and teaching, the time to consider the ethics of image-making and its role in contemporary life is now.

When I was first trained formally in using a camera, I was taught all the basics—aperture, shutter speed, ISO, and so on. My instructor gave me assignments—still life, portraiture, street photography, and so on. The camera made me see differently, it made me curious about life around me. I was driven by an impulse to capture everything and everyone that seemed interesting to me. I was taught to be discreet, unobtrusive, and focused on the photograph I wanted to create. I would often walk up to people and photograph them, asking for their permission verbally, rarely explaining why I was photographing them. To be honest, I had no idea either. My friend Jasmine accompanied me during one of my sessions. She observed my practice and toward the end asked me, “Do you feel no hesitation, walking up to people and photographing them?” Her question, she insists to this day, was innocuous. However, it sent me down a spiral, making me wonder about my own photographic practices. Why was I making the pictures that I was making? What stories was I trying to tell? And what stories was I telling about the people I was photographing? I realized that my photography instructor had taught me how to use the camera but never really helped me consider how to use the camera ethically or responsibly.

Ultimately, our relationship to photographs and photography is mediated through how we view, conceptualize, and understand the camera, the image, and their role in the world. In this article, I have tried to pry open the assumptions undergirding dominant approaches to visual research in education and to offer alternative framings for research and practice focussed on three aspects: what photography is (ontology), what constitutes collaboration, and how we read/understand/engage images. In our contemporary world, inundated with images and cameras, these relationships are already being challenged and transformed. We are currently experiencing rapid changes to the ways in which photographs are created, circulated, and curated. With the advent of Artificial

Intelligence (AI) and its ubiquitous use across web platforms, “the overwhelming majority of images are now made by machines for other machines, with humans rarely in the loop” (Paglen, 2019, p. 24). We are already noticing how these technologies permeate our everyday life—facial recognition, surveillance systems, and social-media algorithms. These technologies are now being mobilized at a large scale to monitor and control citizens. How do our research methodologies and teaching practices attend to this new reality? “Formal concepts contain epistemological assumptions, which in turn have ethical consequences” (Paglen, 2019, p. 27). Our theoretical concepts and methodological approaches could shift drastically and as we examine these new questions, technologies, and modes of interactions we cannot simply rely on siloed disciplinary traditions. Our attention to these changes to our visual culture and practices will determine how the field is framed over the next few decades and more importantly, how photographs, images, and the visual intervene in our everyday life.

Throughout this article, I articulated some shifts that help reframe our understanding of photography and how it is used within educational research and practice. However, there are yet many more turns to be made. I hope this article serves as an invitation for those of us who are interested in the visual to ask more questions, to critically engage our own practices and those of the scholars/artists who are interested in a similar task, and to reflect on the ways in which we invite our research participants and collaborators to engage with the visual. These are uncharted territories, and as Paglen (2019) reminds us, “it is in inefficiency, experimentation, self-expression and often law-breaking that freedom and political self-representation can be found” (p. 27).

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Note

1. Due to copyright and permission requirements I have not been able to include images from all the artists whose work I discuss throughout this article. However, I have included.

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