The Art of Seeing: Visual Anthropology as a Road into Experience

by Luci Fernandes

Visual anthropology is premised on the belief that cultures can be understood and represented through the visual symbols that they use, based on an analysis derived from long-term participant/observation of the community.

Ethnographic photography or ethno-photography uses photography to study the traditions, customs, daily life, ceremonies, and people of particular cultures. It has been in practice since the 1890s. Franz Boas, and later Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson all pushed for greater use of photography, which was often brushed aside by critics as "fluff" of the researcher's toolkit. Most anthropological fieldworkers have produced images of the people they studied but are often not incorporated in their research. Photographs taken in the field, like written fieldnotes, help reconstitute events in the mind of the ethnographer.

This article was originally published by *Community Works Journal* and is shared with a reciprocal agreement. www.communityworksjournal.org (*Some revisions have been made for republication, eds.*)

In the 1990s, experiments with multimedia-hypertext technology opened up the promise of a future with computer-generated pictorial ethnographies—a new kind of text producing a different type of learning experience. Photography has been increasingly used to improve conventional ethnographic narratives. As a result, photographs are no longer mere illustrations of written text. Images can help create a context for written narratives. They can, however, also be collected into photo-essays that depict events, behaviors, people, cultures, or social forms. The ethnographic use of photos involves description, analysis, and interpretation. Each stage can increase our understanding of human social phenomena.

Cultural photographs and films seem to be objective; however, we need to remember that taking or making them is highly subjective. Images captured and narrated by members of the community being observed are actually ideological constructions that shape (and are shaped by) cultural and social environments. And we shouldn't forget that the photographers or filmmakers, even if they are anthropologists, are taking the photos or making the film through their own cultural lenses that shape perceptions of reality. Images can embody personal and societal narratives. Incorporated within cultural processes, they can have a significant influence on socio-cultural systems.

Illustrations from My Research in Ecuador and Cuba

When as an anthropologist/ethnographer I use photos as documentation, I feel that I am opening a window onto daily life or a cultural event I am observing. I began using visual anthropology techniques when I was doing dissertation research among the Kichwa Indians of Ecuador. There I documented the community development project Kallari, which offers alternative economic options

to people living in the Amazon Basin. The Kichwa create distinctive handcrafts such as necklaces and baskets, grow coffee, and make chocolate. Each of these activities is time consuming and involves hard work. I wanted to show these processes in all their complexity and difficulty. The Kichwa use materials from their natural environment, not only the coffee beans and cacao, but also string, beads, and canes. To make the string they must harvest the plants, scrape them to expose the fibers underneath, wash them in the river, lay them in the sun to dry, beat them on rocks, weave the fibers into strands, then start to string the beads. The beads themselves are seeds that must be processed. I photographed every step. Not knowing it at the time, those pictures became invaluable to the Kichwa as part of their recorded history and for internationally marketing their wares.

My work in Cuba has led me to use visual anthropology techniques extensively. Over the past 12 years, I have lived in Cuba for periods of time and conducted ethnographic field research, documenting various aspects of Cuban culture. Cuba is a visually stimulating place that many people from the U.S. know only from negative or romantic coverage by the U.S. media. I would like people to experience it as I have

experienced it. I decided that it would be easier to convey daily life in photos and videos than to describe these aspects in words. You can see things in Cuba that you can't be seen anywhere else, not only the 1950s cars that everybody knows about, but, for example, strange inventions for making do with little, street professions that are both ways of earning a living and sources of amusement, extreme poverty, and exuberant joyousness.

My current research focuses on resource distribution and social networks. I analyze how people make ends meet despite scarcity of goods and restrictions on trade and business. I also investigate the social relations that guarantee the allocation of goods and services. I collaborate with a colleague from Denison University, Anita Waters, and we analyze the government representation of the 1959 Cuban Revolution, the commemoration of the attack on Moncada Barracks in 1953, and the recording and display of history through museum exhibits and monuments. For this research, we took over 1,000 photos along with film and audio recorded interviews of docents and other museum employees. When I moved to North Carolina, I started exhibiting some of the photos that I had taken in Cuba. I didn't want only to exhibit my own photos, I wanted my students to learn to use photography and video as means of understanding cultural groups better.

Classroom Application: Visual Anthropology Strategies for Students

Introduce students to unfamiliar communities through photos and videos.

I think that visual anthropology offers significant ways for getting to understand communities better. People viewing the products of visual anthropology, whether photos or videos, can be exposed to communities with which they are unfamiliar and maybe will never come into contact with in their lives. Consider how unsatisfying dance ethnography texts are without photos or videos; they can be just dance steps on the page. Many dimensions of community are highly visual. Photos give a better sense of color and shapes. Videos add motion and sound, bringing viewers closer to being actually with people in the community. Sounds, facial expressions, tones of voice, body language: the only thing missing is smell. Perhaps viewing images creates greater empathy; better understanding is gained on a visceral level. The interpretation of photos may be more guided by the choices of the photographer in terms of framing or selection of images. When photographers are part of the culture being photographed, the photo may even be a projection of themselves, of a portion of their cultural identity.

Encourage students to use photos in interviews to elicit reactions and information from community members.

Both in Ecuador and in Cuba, I have used photos I have taken to elicit reactions or information from participants; the photos help open a dialogue between myself and those I am interviewing. I even incorporated myself into the photos and thus became a part of my own observations and entered into the reflexive process. The images can guide the discussion. The person pictured (or the person/people from the pictured world) interprets the images, giving me an opportunity to listen. People respond differently in interviews using images and text than they do in interviews using words alone. Images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words, so photo-elicitation interviews draw out a different kind of information, perhaps deeper, certainly more interesting, than do ordinary interviews. It unlocks a flow of vivid memories in the mind and I have found elicit more detailed explanations of a ritual activity or event.

Allow students to turn the camera over to community members so that they can "speak in their own voices" through photos.

Another visual ethnographic process that I like is to allow participants to speak in their own voices through photos that they take themselves. I give them the camera and ask them to take pictures. They describe what to photograph and why they should take particular photos. This photo-voice technique gives participants the means of identifying what is significant to them. It is particularly important when participants belong to groups that have been marginalized, silenced, overlooked, or rejected. This technique can also be used to identify a societal problem or a topic that needs to be discussed within the community but is considered taboo. It can lead to community discussion, mobilization, and even action.

In his work with marginalized and oppressed groups, for example, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire argued for the importance of creating opportunities for people to visualize their social problems

and to use this visualization as a basis to stimulate collective introspection, discussion, and action. In 1973, while conducting a literacy project in a barrio of Lima, Peru, Freire and his team asked people questions in Spanish, but requested the answers in photographs. When the question "What is exploitation?" was asked, some people took photos of a landlord, a grocer, or a policeman (Boal 1979, 123). One child, however, took a photo of a nail on a wall. It made no sense to adults, but other children were strongly agreed. The ensuing discussions showed that many young boys of that neighborhood worked in the shoeshine business. Their clients were mainly in the city, not in the barrio where they lived. As their shoeshine boxes were too heavy for them to carry, these boys rented a nail on a wall (usually in a shop) where they could hang their boxes for the night. To them, that nail on the wall represented "exploitation." The "nail on the wall" photograph spurred widespread discussions in the barrio about other forms of institutionalized exploitation, including ways to overcome those (Singhal and Rattine-Flaherty 2006). I have used the photo-voice method in Cuba to give people the chance to express themselves through the images that they photograph by telling their story directly. This empowers the interviewee to highlight things that they find significant that the researcher may have found insignificant.

Teach students to incorporate multimedia possibilities in their investigations of communities.
As an anthropologist, I want to make my discipline more accessible to students from a range of disciplines in the humanities, the social sciences, the natural sciences, and the fine arts. As a teacher, I think that students need direct ethnographic experiences, not just reading about what anthropologists have done. Today's students are typically more visually oriented because of the Internet; I have found that they are no big readers, except of text messages. As a socially conscious person, I want to get students out into the community, to have them break out of the isolation of their university bubble. Now that digital cameras and video recording equipment are relatively inexpensive, more visual anthropology technology is financially accessible to instructors and students. In my visual anthropology course, I have students choose a community, gain community access and confidence, built rapport and trust with the members they will interview, and then conduct the research, which involves photography, video, podcasts, blogs, and PowerPoint presentations within one semester. As for me, I hope that my discipline comes to value imagery more in the research process and more anthropologists include them in their research.

Luci Fernandes, PhD, is a cultural anthropologist who focuses on documenting daily life through audio and visual media. She is Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Georgia Gwinnett College and is a regular contributor to Community Works Journal*.*

URLS
www.kallari.com
http://www.communityworksinstitute.org/cwjonline/articles/luci_visualanthro/luci_text/luci_introto_visanthro_.html

Works Cited
Boal, Augusto. 1979. *Theater of the Oppressed*. London: Pluto Press.
Singhal, Arvind and Elizabeth Rattine-Flaherty. 2006. Pencils and Photos as Tools of Communicative Research and Praxis: Analyzing Minga Perú's Quest for Social Justice in the Amazon. *Gazette* 68(4), 3130 330. Access at http://utminers.utep.edu/asinghal/Articles and Chapters/singhal_rattineflaherty.pdf.