

## Exploring Participatory Visual Research Methodologies with Queer, Trans, and Non-binary Youth in a Research for Social Change Framework

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### What is Research for Social Change?

This article is an adaptation of a keynote that I gave at the Atlantic Education Graduate Student Conference in Fredericton in July 2019. I'd like to begin here as I did in the talk: by engaging in feminist citation practices (Ahmed, 2013) where I list some of the scholars who have influenced my scholarly work and anchored my methodological practices (Figure 1). Feminist theorizing is central to participatory visual research within a research for social change framework (Mitchell, 2011).

#### Some scholars who have influenced my thinking...

Ehaab Abdou, Lee Airton, Funké Aladejebi, Lynda Barry, Billy-Ray Belcourt, Christie Belcourt, Gwen Benaway, Michael Burawoy, Jenny Burman, Alice Chan, Tina Chen, Aziz Choudry, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Lauren Cruikshank, Ashley DeMartini, Sarah Desroches, Andrea Doucet, Alicia Elliott, Sarah Flicker, Paolo Freire, Roxane Gay, Jen Gilbert, Sandra Grande, Jan Gube, Rosalind Hampton, bell hooks, Liz Jackson, Fatima Khan, Naydene de Lange, Sabine Lebel, Patricia Leavy, Danielle Lorenz, Katie MacEntee, Kathleen McKittrick, EJ Milne, Claudia Mitchell, Lyndsay Moffatt, Relebohile Moletsane, Kate Pahl, Dave Perley, Imelda Perley, Adele Perry, Alecxis Ramos-Pakit, Sherene Razack, Matt Rogers, Jennifer Rowsell, Roger Saul, Max Schlessler, Vivek Shraya, Audra Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Josh Schwab-Cartas, Jianne Soriano, Jen Thompson, Amelia Thorpe, Zoe Todd, Eve Tuck, Chelsea Vowel, Shannon Walsh, Caroline Wang, Clyde Woods, K. Wayne Yang

*Figure 1.* Beginning with Feminist Citation Practices

Research for social change (Mitchell & Burkholder, 2015; Mitchell, de Lange & Moletsane, 2017; 2018; Schratz & Walker, 2005) involves working with research participants in order to address issues of community concern—to work with those most affected by the research as co-producers, co-analyzers and—central in my work—as co-disseminators. Participatory visual research methodologies center on research with participants vs. research on participants (Margolis & Pauwels, 2011; Mitchell, 2011; Schwab-Cartas, 2016). Central tenets of participatory visual research for social change includes working with participants and communities to co-produce knowledge, to engage in reciprocal research relations, and working together to take the research findings and put them into action—to move, for example, policy makers to make policy change that affects community members by engaging with a short film, a powerful visual exhibition, or participatory map (Mitchell, 2011). Through collaboration, participatory visual research methods encourage researchers and participants to interrogate community and individual-identified questions and issues through visual means (Luttrell & Chalfen, 2010; Schwab-Cartas, 2016; Schwab-Cartas & Mitchell, 2014). Researchers look to the visual to “speak back” to systems and structures with participants to make policy and systemic change (Mitchell, de Lange & Moletsane, 2016; 2017; Walsh, 2016; Wang, 1999). However, as Claudia Mitchell, Naydene de Lange, and Relebohile Moletsane (2017) caution in their discussion of research for social change:

The populations who typically are involved in participatory visual research occupy a marginal position and so their visual productions may also be marginalized...The question that we ask...can no longer be limited to “Who gets to speak?” We must also ask, “Who is heard and to what end?” (p. 7)

Thinking through issues of participation, equity, transparency, reciprocity, throughout the research (e.g., who gains and who is heard and to what extent? Who is excluded and to what extent?) is essential to theorizing participatory visual research for social change (Burkholder, 2017; Cardinal, 2019; Literat, 2013; Schwab-Cartas, 2016).

To engage in research for social change in a reciprocal framework, I think it is paramount to acknowledge the context where I currently undertake this work—Wolastokuk, unceded and unsurrendered Wolastokiyik territory. In 1725, the Peace and Friendship Treaties were signed between the Abenaki, Mi'kmaq, Passamaquoddy, Pnobscoot, Wolastoqey nations and the British Crown (Paul, 2020). These treaties set out to establish relations between these nations, and did not cede or surrender land. The treaties have not been honoured by settlers in this territory, and the tensions between directly benefiting from settler colonialism (as I do) and engaging in ethical research practice (as I seek to do) are worth making clear. If one of the key components of participatory visual research is ethical and reciprocal research relations, it is important to think about settler colonialism and unequal benefits of research undertaken on unceded land by settlers—even critically minded ones. An example of critical participatory visual research for social change in Tkaranto, Sarah Flicker's work with non-Indigenous undergraduate students in a course on Health and the Environment at York University, she introduced her students to the toolkit "Violence on the Land, Violence on our Bodies" (Konsmo & Pacheco, 2016). As an assessment, students were asked to respond to the toolkit through a cellphilm (cellphone + film production). In an article reflecting on cellphilm as a pedagogical practice, Flicker et al. (2018) acknowledge, "the process of making cellphilm encouraged students to move beyond representing the 'damaged' relationships between lands and bodies and also point to

the possibilities for new actions and reactions (the cellphilm already being one)” (p. 10). As a response to settler colonialism, and as a pedagogical move away from putting forth damaged centered ideas about lands and bodies, working with the visual provided students and researchers a way to respond to the violence of the colonial project and call for change.

I am currently working on a project with queer youth to investigate their experiences in schools. In writing about the work, I use the word ‘queer’ as an umbrella term to refer to a range of sexualities and gender identities. Since December 2018, I have been doing research with queer, trans, and non-binary young people (aged 13-17) to address issues of erasure and exclusion within schools through art production.

### **Context: Working with Queer, Trans and Non-binary Youth in a Research for Social Change Framework**

Since December 2018, I have been collaborating on a project with UNB PhD candidate Amelia Thorpe and with six queer, trans, and non-binary young people (aged 13-17) to make art in response to their experiences in schools and society. To recruit participants, I first reached out to the amazing activist and artist coyote watson, who created a poster (Figure 2) that represented the ways that I imagined the initial workshop, and shared this poster across Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Supporting artists, activists, and the communities within which I work through research is a kind of ethical practice in this research for social change framework.



*Figure 2.* Call for participants poster.

In the project, I seek to learn about the existing and desired supports and barriers for queer, trans, and non-binary youth in schools, society, and social studies through art making and qualitative interviewing. I work with participatory visual methodologies with these youth, by engaging with art production in response to their experiences in school and society. By producing and disseminating the artworks—stencils, zines, cellphilm, embroidery, drawings and more—that we produce (online, in presentations, at professional learning sessions with teachers, at academic conferences, within pre-

service teacher education, etc.) we seek to make change to New Brunswick to affect change in schools for queer youth from their perspective.

We meet on Sundays, once a month and have so far collaborated on the creation of cellphilm (cellphone + film production), zines (short DIY print productions), drawings, collages, embroidery; and in November 2019, we created short video games. Each of these art practices has sought to encourage a reflection that speaks back to existing policies, systems, and structures, and we are working collaboratively to disseminate the findings as well. Through film festivals, online archives (YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram), and the development of a website where our materials, lesson plans, reports, and toolkits will be shared with teachers and members of the public (in-progress). As a collective of youth and researchers, we are looking for multiple ways to share the knowledge that we produce, including cellphilm, conversation guides, zines, stencils as well as through reports, articles, and through social media. Because we seek to make change in our schools and communities, it is necessary for the findings to be shared broadly with schools and communities.

As an example, I offer a short zine (Figure 3) that I produced in a zine-making workshop with these youth participants in January 2019. In the workshop, we held a discussion that followed the screening of a short cellphilm that we had produced, *Nackawic Needs a GSA Now!!* (Squires, Scott, Hartley, Thorpe, & Burkholder, 2018). The cellphilm was developed in response to a participant-identified challenge: they had experienced gender based violence in a middle school in Nackawic, New Brunswick, and although they had asked for a GSA (gender-sexuality alliance) to be created, they had been told that it was not currently possible as there was not a need (see also Burkholder & Thorpe, 2019). In response to their experiences, we created a cellphilm that sought to elaborate

on the ways in which GSAs can provide support for queer, trans, and non-binary youth and allies within schools. In a follow-up workshop, where we produced zines, I sought to understand more about participant-identified safe spaces within schools. One participant stated, “we want safe spaces beyond a GSA” while another responded that “some schools have GSAs, but the spaces must be made to accommodate many needs. Quiet spaces. Spaces to talk. Supported by teachers. With snacks. A place to do things sometimes and a place to chill sometimes.” I employed both of these quotes in the zine, made copies that I shared with those in the workshop, and also have continued to share the zine online, in professional learning opportunities, and outside my office door.



*Figure 3.* Zine disseminating findings on safe school spaces for queer youth.

We are also sharing the knowledge produced in traditional academic channels, including conference papers and academic articles. We have disseminated through film festivals (the Pink Lobster LGBTQ+ Film Festival and the Fredericton Feminist Film Collective's Cellphilm Festival), and through professional magazines and newsletters that are shared with teachers. Looking ahead, we are looking to build bridges between our communities here in Fredericton and those across the Maritimes—a way to forge solidarities between youth, and to identify commonalities and tensions in queer youth experiences in schools across the Maritimes. We are currently working on developing a week-long art-making and curating workshop (Summer 2020), where we can activate queer youth networks across the Maritimes (bringing queer-identifying youth to UNB from other cities in New Brunswick, as well as Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island).

### **Concluding Thoughts and Lingering Questions**

As I continue to work with queer, trans, non-binary youth, pre-service teachers, and in-service teachers to engage in research for social change, I am drawn to thinking about the work of Sara Ahmed (2017, p. 2), who asks (killjoy) feminists to think about world building and re-building:

If we become feminists because of the inequality and injustice in the world, because of what the world is not, then what kind of world are we building? To build feminist dwellings, we need to dismantle what has already been assembled; we need to ask what it is we are against, what it is we are for, knowing full well that this is not a foundation but what we are working toward. (p. 2)

In researching, writing, collaborating and building solidarities with communities, I am drawn to thinking about the ethical implications of participation, representation, voice, and



visuality in co-researching, in particular within my work with queer, trans, and non-binary youth. Returning to Claudia Mitchell, Naydene De Lange, and Relebohile Moletsane's (2017) questions "who gets to speak" and "who is heard and to what end" (p. 7)—these questions help anchor my work with queer, trans, and non-binary youth in participatory visual research inquiry. Youth experiences of school and society are not often heard or taken seriously, and I am pushed to continue to disseminate the work with participants—to make visual queer young people's experiences with school and society—youth to audiences both friendly and resistant.

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i coyote watson is a visual artist and activist from Toronto, Ontario. Their Twitter page, <https://twitter.com/coyotewatson?lang=en>, offers some of their art and activist practices.