

Collage: A participatory visual methodology for reflexive research

Katie Hamill
University of New Brunswick

In order to conduct respectful research, researchers must consider how they are positioned in relation to their participants and the research context overall (Tilley, 2016). Queer, feminist, and post-structural theorists argue that research can never be objective. Rather, researchers should instead focus on reflexive approaches—which refers to techniques that critically consider how their positionality impacts their ability to conduct research (Packard, 2008). When researchers fail to recognize their positionality critically, they may be making assumptions that their lived reality is natural and that all individuals experience society in the same way (Tilley, 2016; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). The inclusion of positionality is now commonplace—yet often times the research is not informed by feminist or decolonial approaches—which then renders a statement of positionality a hallow-claim (Tuck & Yang, 2012). This is what Tuck and Yang (2012, p. 11) call “settler move to innocence”—characterized by the use of strategies to relieve feelings of settler guilt, without giving up privilege(s), such as ignoring how settlers continue to benefit from the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and lands.

My research focuses primarily on human rights education and calls to question who can claim and who can access rights. Positioning myself within the research is very important when researching human rights because it situates my privilege in relation to the more complex problem of who is granted permission to claim humanity (and who is not). Growing up white and female in the Maritimes—on unceded and unsurrendered Wolastoqiyik and Mi’kmaq territories—my worldview was profoundly shaped by settler colonialism, and I failed to recognize that my experiences of this territory were not universal. As a direct result of my access to privilege, I was able to attend university, and only there did I begin to challenge my assumptions. As a researcher, it is essential that I do not forget where I come from. With the added complication of working, living on, and benefitting from stolen land, it is equally essential that I incorporate an anti-colonial theoretical framework (Green, 2007; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2016) in all of my work to ensure that I highlight multiple ways of knowing while calling to question singular truths and notions of universal solutions to human rights abuses. In this article, I call to examine how research may be conducted reflexively throughout the process of data collection and analysis—through collage (Culshaw, 2019). I explore the link between collage as a participatory visual methodology (PVM) and the importance of reflexivity by analyzing two collages produced in response to the complexities of researching on stolen land as a white settler. I ask: how might collage-based data be collected and analyzed reflexively? How might collage as a method encourage researchers to engage in reflexive praxis?

Literature Review

Participatory Visual Methodologies (PVM)

I draw from the work of Culshaw (2019), who studied teachers and reflexive participation through collage, Mitchell, de Lange & Molestane (2017), who studied participatory visual methodologies

in research for social change, and the theoretical framework of Tuck & Yang (2016), whose decolonial methodologies heavily influence my research practice. I also draw on the work of Rose (2001), who provides guidelines for analyzing visual data and highlights how we attach meaning to the visual—based on our positionality and lived experiences.

Participatory visual methodologies (PVM) are a manner of data collection that highlights' participants as knowledge producers—it is a manner of conducting research *with* people rather than *on* people (Drew & Guillemic, 2010; Packard, 2008; Mitchell, de Lange, & Molestane, 2017). PVM works with participants to share what they know through a visual approach and provides them with space and time, and materials to respond to a prompt or research question posed by the group or by the researcher during the research process. Additionally, PVM provides participants with the opportunity to express their lived realities through self-reflection and non-verbal communication because it gives time and space to make their experiences visual. Likewise, the process of creating visual products calls for reflexive practice as participants conceptualize their lived experiences through images (Victor et al., 2016).

PVM and reflexivity

There is a deep link between PVM and reflexivity (Mitchell, De Lange, & Moletsane, 2017). For example, according to Mitchell, De Lange, & Moletsane (2017), reflexive research practice refers to research that allows for reflexive thinking towards confronting power dynamics that exist prior to research. Reflexivity is generally considered in relation to the researcher, but participant engagement with reflexivity is also important because it allows participants to reflect on their own lived experiences (Mitchell, De Lange, & Moletsane, 2017). While traditional forms of data collection do not allow for deep and reflexive engagement, PVM works to highlight lived realities that are typically silenced during the data collection process and is rooted in the understanding that knowledge includes lived experiences (Culshaw, 2019; Yuen, 2016).

Interpreting visual data

Rose (2001) provided guidelines for interpreting visual data—arguing that interpreting images is just that, interpretation, not the discovery of *truths*. Vision refers to what we can physically see, whereas *visuality* refers to how we attach meaning to what we see (Rose, 2001). Researchers must consider how and why they construct certain narratives based on positionality and call to question how positionality impacts their ability to see/unsee (Rose, 2001). In doing so, researchers might challenge the presumption that all individuals conceptualize the world in the same way (Rose, 2001). When analyzing visual data, researchers must recognize how visual products take on a different meaning to each observer based on how their positionality and lived experiences inform their *visuality* (Rose, 2001).

When engaging with visual data, researchers must remember the circumstances in which the visual product was created (Rose, 2001). When looking at how an image is produced—we must consider what materials were used to create the image, how the image was created, and the economic, political, institutional circumstances that inform the image (Rose, 2001). When looking at an image, a researcher creates categories based on genre and looks for recurring themes

throughout (Rose, 2001). Rose (2001) provided the following potential considerations: content, colour, spatial organization, light, and expressive content. Researchers must also consider the social modality by asking: Who made the piece? Why was the piece made? In what location was the piece made (Rose, 2001)? I now describe the findings from my collage-based study on reflexivity and positionality.

Findings

I draw my findings from a visual analysis (Rose, 2016) of two collages that I created in December 2020 as a reflexive approach to consider my positionality as a settler-researcher who studies the issue of human rights on the unceded and unsundered territory. The collages were made from recycled materials—primarily magazines donated to me for my personal art practice. As a visual artist, I have accumulated a wide variety of materials. Access to resources influences my collages because I was able to use images I knew I had to convey a specific message. My previous experience as an artist also influences my collages because I have gained a comfort level in showcasing my work and visually expressing myself.

Figure 1



Note: In Figure 1 I chose a background image that displays an uninhabited coastal landscape reminiscent of Atlantic Canada. I then pasted a cut-out black and white photograph of two white women sitting at a set of tables that appear to be at a café. The women are drinking coffee—and one is writing on a notepad while the other woman watches. I then cut and pasted images of colourful flowers at the women's feet and an image of chocolate-covered strawberries. With this piece, I wanted to convey settler claims of Indigenous lands and highlight how settler life has developed on stolen land. I chose to include this image of two women because it may depict settler-researchers collecting data in extractive ways. The image might also display how participating in research is vulnerable—as it appears to have one woman watching the other works. I included the image of bright pink flowers to highlight how settlers have altered the environment and chocolate-covered strawberries to express the use of natural resources to fulfill settler desires.

Figure 2



Note: In Figure 2, I chose to use a background with a magazine image of a large brick building covered in vines that are various hues of red. The image reminds me of an Atlantic Canadian university campus in the fall semester. I then cut and pasted an image of a white woman holding

a camera and images of flowers and coconuts to the bottom of the page, which cover the majority of land in the background image. I created both Figure 1 and Figure 2 with the intention of displaying traditional forms of data collection. In Figure 2, I chose to include an image of a woman taking a picture to demonstrate that visual data can be extractive when it is not conducted in a participatory manner and from a decolonial perspective. I was looking to communicate the ways in which settler-researchers often depict the world around them while they are protected by academic institutions and privileges. The images of flowers and fruit at the bottom of the page depict settler influence on stolen land. With the image of white women writing and taking photographs, I hope to highlight my positionality as a settler-researcher working on stolen land and how this positionality informs the questions I ask and how I conduct research.

Engaging with collage allowed me to think reflexively in several ways throughout the research process and provided me with the time and space to make my experiences visual while thinking critically about which images best represent my positionality. In doing so, I asked myself, what images can I use to best convey my experience to others? In describing the content and revisiting the pieces, I was able to reflect further as I attached a verbal description to the visual product. As I explain why I selected specific images and how they work to make my positionality and lived experiences visual, I engage with the visual product in new ways and attach a verbal description to sentiments I might struggle to otherwise conceptualize. Additionally, creating a collage feels less intimidating than other forms of visual expression because it does not require technical skills or previous experience. In that way, collage allows me to express myself fully and allows me to think about my positionality reflexively because it provides an opportunity to make my experiences visual through accessible art practice.

References

- Culshaw, S. (2019). The unspoken power of collage? Using an innovative art-based research method to explore the experience of struggling as a teacher, *London Review of Education*, 17(3), 268-283, doi.org/10.18546/LRE.17.3.03
- Green, J. (2007). *Making space for Indigenous Feminism*. Fernwood Publishing.
- Guillemin, M., & Drew, S. (2010). Questions of process in participant-generated visual methodologies, *Visual Studies*, 25(2), 175-188, doi: doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2010.502676
- Lowman, E., & Barker, A. (2015). *Settler*. Fernwood Publishing.
- Mitchell, C., de Lange, N., & Moletsane, R. (2017). *Participatory visual methodologies*. Sage Publications.

- Packard, J. (2008). 'I'm gonna show you what it's really like out here': The power and limitation of participatory visual methods, *Visual Studies*, 23(1), 63-77, doi.org/10.1080/14725860801908544
- Rose, G. (2001). *Visual methodologies*. Sage Publications.
- Tilley, S. (2016). *Doing respectful research*. Fernwood Publishing.
- Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor, *Decolonization, Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1), 1-40.
- Tuhiwai Smith, L. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies*. Zed Books.
- Victor, J., Linds, W., Episkenew, J., Goulet, L., Benjoe, D., Brass, D., Pandey, M. & Schmidt, K. (2016). Kiskenimisowin (self-knowledge): Co-researching wellbeing with Canadian first nations youth through participatory visual methods, *International Journal of Indigenous Health*, 11(1), 262-278.
- Yuen, F. (2016). Collage: An arts-based method for analysis, representation, and social justice, *Journal of Leisure*, 48(4), 338-346, doi.org/10.18666/JLR-2016-V48-I4-6922

Katie Hamill is a doctoral student and visual artist living, working, and playing on the unsundered and unceded traditional lands of the Wolastoqiyik peoples. In all of her work, she seeks to understand how art practice can create identity and belonging through self-expression while simultaneously demonstrating the intersectional ways in which we experience our surrounding environment. Katie Hamill can be reached at katie.hamill@unb.ca