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Thinking Through the Photographic Encounter: Engaging with the Camera as Nomadic Weapon

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Abstract

This paper considers the photographic act as an affective and affirmative encounter—a reflexive, embodied, and relational community engagement that may produce a rupture in our habitual modes of thinking. The author uses the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of the nomadic weapon to consider how the camera may become an affective trigger for self-reflexivity, catalyzing the potential of nomadic thinking in a participatory frame. By transposing uses of photography as visual research method across cultural geography, visual anthropology, sociology, and arts-based educational research, the author discusses shifts in the function of photography from a practice emphasizing image production to an embodied and performative approach to community engagement. Using a photographic encounter with a local taco stand as an example, the piece considers the pedagogical potential of engaging with unfamiliar spaces as a participatory and reflexive photographic process.

The Taco Stand

It was a Tuesday afternoon. I had to pick up the kids in an hour, but I hoped I might get in two more categories for my scavenger hunt assignment. The assignment was to photograph thirty places in the Dallas-Forth area, and they were pretty general categories: a single family home, a park, public space, water use, good and bad design, and vacant architecture, to name a few. In the end, we would create a typology of the suburban landscape. One category on the list stood out as my favorite: improvised use of space. There was a taco stand right off the highway, about a mile from my house—it seemed like a perfect example.

I had driven past it a hundred times since we moved in. There was a small white trailer parked next to an old building that looked like it might have been a chapel at one point. Between the trailer and the building was a makeshift seating area with plastic tables and chairs. They were covered by a tarp attached to metal poles. I never stopped because it always seemed vacant, although the yellow posters with *Tacos* and *Tortas* written in black marker seemed relatively new. It reminded me of places I'd seen in Mexico.

As I left my house that day, I assumed I would simply drive up, take the photograph, check it off my list, and move on. That had been the process for all of the other categories. I mean there was some time spent considering how to construct the image, considering lighting, focus, perspective, but that was about it. As I neared the taco stand, I realized this was going to require something else. The shots I wanted were not going to come from a passive engagement with this site. My choices were to pull off the road right in front of it or stand across the highway. There was no other place to park. To park in front of the stand meant I would have to photograph it close up, which also meant potentially photographing whoever worked there. I drove about a hundred feet down the road past the taco stand, and stopped the car. I really wanted to use this site, but I wasn't comfortable photographing it up close without addressing whomever was there. I also didn't want to order food and then photograph it either. Why was I freaking out about this? I knew the food would be good, and I regularly went to local taquerias in town.

I felt a bolt of adrenaline and a sense of dread. I wasn't scared in terms of danger—it was the embarrassment of standing within a few feet of the trailer and taking photographs of a person as they tried to earn a living. All the sudden I felt like it was some bourgeois art project, examining the life of *others*. Up to this point, all of the sites represented my view of the suburbs, but I was drawn to the taco stand because of its difference.



Figure 1. Taco Stand, First visit

In the end, I parked across the highway and waited until a moment when no cars passed between me, and the taco stand. Even there, I felt strange, like I was surveilling the place. I took the photo quickly, got back in my car, and drove away (Fig. 1). As I continued to photograph sites on my list for the scavenger hunt over the following weeks, I recognized how my cultural position as a lower middle-class, white woman seemed to dictate where and with whom I felt comfortable. The sites became nodal points through which an understanding of power relations and cultural context emerged. Something had changed at the taco stand. Initially, I approached the project with a sort of cliché tourist desire, photographing spaces with Sontag's *ray gun* in hand, where, "travel becomes a strategy for accumulating photographs" (Sontag, 1973, p. 19). I eagerly checked off my list of categories and focused my attention on producing an image. After that experience, I began to consider how and why some spaces produced an affective response. How were they different? What assumptions did I have about them? How might the photographic encounter become an opportunity to understand them differently?

The encounter then operates as a rupture in our habitual modes of being and thus in our habitual subjectivities. It produces a cut, a crack. However this is not the end of the story, for the rupturing encounter also contains a moment of affirmation, the affirmation of a new world, in fact a way of seeing and thinking this world differently. (O'Sullivan, 2006, p. 1)

In the quote above, O'Sullivan (2006) describes the potential for encounters to produce affirmative ruptures in our habitual ways of seeing and thinking—an opening up to new futures. As I sat in my car that day, wondering how I might photograph the taco stand, a

rupture had formed. It changed my way of thinking about photography and looking at my community. This paper considers the potential of the photographic act as affirmative encounter—a reflexive, embodied, and relational community engagement that may activate new ways of seeing our everyday environment. I will discuss the potential of focusing on the process of affective engagement as pedagogical and participatory encounter. Using Deleuze and Guattari's (1980/1987) concept of nomadism, I will position the camera as nomadic weapon, to consider the affirmative potential of the photographic act. My argument is not concerned with the photograph as document, but instead the production of affect through the reflexive and performative process of engagement. In this approach, the photograph as document becomes a byproduct, where the embodied encounter is privileged to consider the aesthetics of experience.

My experiences with the taco stand revealed the potential for the camera as an apparatus of desire, but not in the colonizing way it has been argued in the past (Sontag, 1973). Although the well-trodden theories of the photographer's gaze will be addressed (Mulvey, 1975; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001), I would like to reconsider the imperialist and objectifying views of the camera as a tool for representation. Instead, I will engage the camera's potential as an affective apparatus—a nomadic weapon that may recompose our approach to the everyday. In this light, photography becomes critical and affirmative, as my experiences at the taco stand triggered a process of becoming other rather than representing other.

As a way of better understanding how this process could function pedagogically, I review a range of uses for photography as reflection and documentation in social science research. By transposing the camera's function across cultural geography, visual anthropology, sociology, and arts-based educational research, I will discuss shifts that pushed the function of photography from representational practice to an embodied and performative approach to community engagement. My experience at the taco stand may illustrate the pedagogical potential of engaging unfamiliar spaces as an intersubjective photographic process. Place-based research directed at intersubjectivity and community-building have been investigated through a variety of approaches in art education (Hutzel, 2007; Powell, 2008, 2010; Trafi-Prats, 2009; Trowell, 2010). My work applies the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of the nomadic weapon as a frame to consider how this theory might become activated for learning through community engagement.

Camera as nomadic weapon

Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) suggest that the nomad “operates in an open space throughout which things-flows are distributed, rather than plotting out closed space for linear and solid things” (p. 361)—it is the space of process, time, and affect. The nomad exists in relation to the molar or royal science, where nomad “sees all things in relation of *becoming*,

rather than implementing binary distributions between ‘states’” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 352). Engaging the world as nomad reveals our potential to recognize conditions of the royal science, where forces have become normalized, coded, and captured.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) differentiate between the tool and weapon on the basis of each one’s usage or context. The nomadic weapon is positioned in the domain of *free action*, (p. 397), while the tool has a designated movement of purpose. The weapon’s force or its function is derived from the assemblage that constitutes it. “Assemblages are passionate, they are compositions of desire” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 399). The tool is characterized as interpretive, representative, fracturing; associated with the sign, feeling, introspection, gravity, and being (all of which reside in the domain of representation). This in contrast to the weapon, which is described as active, engendering, and traversing; associated with potential, free action, affect, projection, speed, and becoming (a more performative and process-oriented domain). In other words, the weapon recomposes reality through creative forces, rather than a tool that reconstitutes a predetermined set of conditions. The weapon’s purpose is derived from the forces of its constitution – meaning its function is always in relation to its specific conditions of emergence.

Positioning the camera as nomadic weapon suggests that its purpose is derived first from the subjective engagement of the operator and recognizes the act of *doing* photography (camera as weapon) as an affirmative encounter. Moreover, in this scenario, the camera’s nomadic force is one of action and process, rather than capture and production. The camera as tool functions in its more common representational frame.

Finally, the nomadic weapon is distinguished by its force of desiring tonality, as affect rather than feeling. By acknowledging my affective response to photographing the taco stand, I began thinking differently about my community and how the taco stand was different. Braidotti (2011) highlights nomadic and activated thinking as embodied, creative, and critical, explaining:

The activity of thinking cannot and must not be reduced to reactive (‘sedentary’) critique, but must also involve significant doses of creativity. Thinking can be critical, if by critical we mean the active, assertive process of inventing new images of thought. Thinking is life lived at the highest possible power, both creative and critical, enfolded, erotic, and pleasure driven. (p. 84)

My encounter with the taco stand produced the “activity of thinking,” as I began to see the potential for my community anew. Rather than simply collecting images through the act of photography, the encounter produced new ways of thinking about spaces which I overlook or

those that have become invisible in my community. The camera acted as a nomadic weapon to recompose my habits of thought and movement. I began to actively look for unfamiliar places in my community and question ways that certain areas felt suspect or abnormal. If we position the camera as a reflexive apparatus, it opens new potential directions for participatory and process pedagogy.

To understand the potential of the nomadic weapon, it is important to address the potential violence of the term. Nevab (2001) suggests, “the violent terminology embedded in the practice and culture of photography betrays a disturbing ideology, full of myths and limited conceptions of the medium” (p. 69). She explains that there need not be anything aggressive or voyeuristic in making a photograph. Nevab positions her photographic practice as a form of collaboration through an act of engagement. Rather than positioning the weapon or the camera in terms of violence, we might consider how the act of photography produces new ways of thinking through public participation.

While the term, *weapon*, suggests a violent act, which is not incongruous with a history of violent terminology associated with photography, such as shoot, take, capture, and burn. To then argue for the affirmative use of a nomadic weapon may be counterintuitive. The nomadic weapon disrupts the structuring forms of representation to produce new ways of becoming engaged with, rather than constituting, the consuming spectator. I will examine both the representational use of photography and ways the social sciences have repositioned the practice as a performative and reflexive method. Examining the camera as a trigger for reflexivity catalyzes potential for active and critical thinking through community engagement.

In relation to photography, active thought lies in the center of a historical continuum of photography’s cultural functions, bookended by the anticipation of capture (by tourist, colonialist, and the male gaze) and the desire to give meaning and interpret (though a focus on the photograph as document). As I researched ways that the photographic act has been interpreted, the photographer is often relegated to the tourist hunter, research re-presenter, or artistic-maker. In each, the product of the engagement is privileged. I would suggest that the camera could become a catalyst for affective engagement. If we focus on the performativity of the encounter, with spaces/students/community members, the emphasis of the photographic act is temporal, in-between, and in flux. Satter (2012) explains that,

Deleuze’s attack is not specifically on photography but on representational modes of thought that conflate the empirical, especially the visual that gives itself to sight as a presentational immediacy, with absolute truth, ignoring the elements of excess revealed through forces of sensation and intensities of affect. (n.p.)

The excess revealed through forces of affect is precisely what was produced at the taco stand. The scavenger hunt project made me more conscious of my environment, as I tried to produce images to fit each category, but the affective excess at the taco stand derived from its difference.

At prior sites, I anticipated ways that I might represent a single family home. I was planning how I could represent structures with which I was very familiar. As I photographed, I would compose formal aspects that might communicate my way of seeing the space to construct a particular image. My focus was not on the space itself but what might come after the production of the image. Meaning was derived from somewhere outside of the direct relation. To use photography as a way of knowing our community differently through direct encounters, we can neither anticipate its outcome nor privilege the aesthetic qualities of the document. In both of those scenarios, we are ultimately representing a set of knowledge obtained elsewhere or considering how the document might be read in the future. Representational thought constitutes both approaches.

Instead, we might consider photography as a mode of nomadic inquiry, where the power of the camera becomes its ability to take us out, to be in proximity, to invite us to be affected if we become open to the experience of being in relation to rather than the product of it. As a pedagogical project, this type of shift requires thinking that is activated and situated to the place at hand. St. Pierre (1997) describes a subjective shift in nomadic inquiry where,

...ethics is no longer transcendental and clearly defined in advance for everyone in every situation. Rather, ethics explodes anew in every circumstance, demands a specific reinscription, and hounds practice unmercifully.... If the self is not given, if there is no core, essential self that remains the same throughout time, if subjectivity is constructed within relations that are situated within local discourse and cultural practice – both of which can be resisted to some extent, then ‘we have no excuse not to act’. (p. 176)

Producing the camera as nomadic weapon requires a situated and relational engagement where the force of the camera is embedded in activated thinking.

The following sections will review a range of approaches to photography as a representational tool in social science research. I will consider how each has privileged the camera’s ability to represent a predetermined set of knowledge; even as postmodern critiques produced shifts in each discipline from an objective view of the medium to an awareness of its always-subjective nature. Finally, I will consider how conceptual artists, arts-based educational researchers,

cultural geographers, and those in tourist studies have looked beyond photography as representation to its potential as performative and reflexive apparatus.

Camera as representational tool

Photography emerged, in part, from 19th century colonialism, where the camera symbolized both the objective truth of a positivist science and the imperialist's eye (Edwards, 2006; Wells, 1997). The camera was regarded as a scientific tool that could accurately produce the evidence of research, building archives of foreign lands to be placed on view for western viewers. Photography was an important tool for early anthropologists travelling to colonized territories, such as India and Africa to examine *exotic* populations, in the 19th century. Images brought back could be shown at colonial expositions to bolster the belief in civilized imperial nations.

Over one hundred years later, photography was argued to serve a similar purpose, but through technological advancement, mainstream accessibility to cameras broadened the use of photography to the tourist-cum-colonialist. Sontag (1973) suggested that, "To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation with the world that feels like knowledge—and therefore, like power" (p. 4). Sontag (1973) examines the exploitative and consumptive nature of photography, specifically in terms of the tourist:

Most tourists feel compelled to put the camera between themselves and whatever it is that they encounter. Unsure of other responses, they take a picture. This gives shape to experience: stop, take a photograph, and move on.... Photography has become one of the principal devices for experiencing something, for giving an appearance of participation. While others are passive, clearly alarmed spectators, having a camera has transformed one person into something active, a voyeur: only he has mastered the situation.... It is an event: something worth seeing—and therefore worth photographing. (pp. 10-11)

How similar Sontag's words sound to the description of my process. As I read her description of the tourist's intentions, I asked myself if I simply acted as tourist, and if so, what does that mean?

Theories of the gaze suggest that the camera is always objectifying, creating a power relation between subject and spectator (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). The photographer is positioned behind the camera, mediated by its lens, waiting for the next object to capture (Sontag, 1973). In this frame, the photographer is always tourist, who comes from somewhere and relates to the scene from a representational and identarian frame, symbolized by the camera. The

camera is the tool that will produce the object of desire: an image representing the experience of the hunt. For Sontag (1973),

The camera...is a device that captures it all, that seduces subjects into disclosing their secrets, that broadens experience.... The camera is a kind of passport that annihilates moral boundaries and social inhibitions, freeing the photographer from any responsibility toward the people photographed. (p. 41)

Sontag's critique is almost too simplistic today because of the complexity of participatory photographic engagement. At the same time, her argument is almost truer now, as cultural events are witnessed by a sea of hands with cell phones raised in the air to record, at times, replacing active engagement. While photography can be an act of violation focused on capture; if approached, instead, as an ethical engagement, the practice can elicit entirely new ways of seeing the everyday.

My argument does not assume that the camera will intuitively trigger reflexivity. With the ubiquity of contemporary digital technology and the use of cameras as surveillance and participation, it is important to understand that I am not arguing that the camera produces reflexivity ad hoc. As Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) aver, "nomad existence necessarily effectuates the conditions of the war machine in space" (p. 380). We must become nomads first. The use of cameras does not necessarily imply activated participation, and often just the opposite. The increased access to photographic devices has had the adverse effect, of limiting authentic engagement, where photographing an event replaces active participation. In contrast, the experience I propose is one of photographic praxis where the camera becomes nomadic weapon through activated and reflexive engagement.

While my scavenger hunt used photographs to document my experiences in unfamiliar spaces, the experiences were not positioned as spectacle or a voyeuristic act. Instead, the photograph documented moments of becoming, and the camera catalyzed awareness. The shift here was one of ethics, as St. Pierre described in the quote above. The distinguishing characteristic is what the operator values in the role of participant. Taking photographs made me present, as I became aware of the affective elements of sites of encounter. My intention was initially to collect a set of images that might illustrate my local community, which fits with Sontag's description of the active voyeur. Through the process, though, my camera became an affective apparatus. The photographs became an archive of moments of awareness. They acted as traces of my presence. I recognize, though, that even if the camera intensified my reflexive engagement with spaces, it still acted as interlocutor in my experience of the sites. Like representation, research and documentation framed and coded the encounter, even as I attempted to see differently.

Seeing shifts: From constituting tool to recomposing weapon in visual research

Cultural research engages with the life of communities, often given vitality through music, art, rituals, clothing, and performative practices. Researchers incorporate visual research methods to enhance traditional data sources that have historically been based in text. Written descriptions can be inadequate sources to understand the vitality of a community. While photography's potential to objectify has been acknowledged, cameras are regarded as a valuable tool to supplement researchers' first-hand observations.

Social scientists have negotiated the necessity of a reflexive engagement with research sites in a number of ways as a result of their desire for "authentic" qualitative research. Primary concerns for incorporating photography, in anthropological research, are artistic negotiations of poor aesthetic quality, the inconvenience of carrying equipment, the potential for objectifying populations, and the idea of photographer as always composing a shot rather than objectively documenting reality (Crowe, 2003). Cruickshank and Mason (2003) considered conflicts of authenticity as they worked with anthropologists and professional photographers researching female artists in Brazil. Documentation of the women was needed in order to develop visual resources as art educators. As outsiders, to both the geographical location and the Brazilian culture, the photographers represented the women in ways that revealed a Western perspective. To address the concern for misrepresentation, a shift to autoethnographic methods has become more common (Scarles, 2010). Engaging reflexively with an awareness of the cultural positionality of researcher and tourist is one step.

Other anthropological approaches use photography to better understand the way cultures see. By inviting participants to photograph their reality or describe images from it, culturally-specific values may become better understood (Collier & Collier, 1986). Participatory photographic methods in anthropology or sociology, such as *Photovoice* (Wang & Burris, 1997) or *auto-photography* (Johnsen, May, & Cloke, 2008) use the medium to investigate participants' everyday—inspired by Freire's (1970) use of visual images to enable critical thinking. By eliciting images from participants directly, the research works from the inside to expose lived realities, rather than having an outsider looking in.

Social scientists have worked with professional photographers to teach marginalized populations how to use cameras as a means of giving voice (Ewald, 1985; Hubbard, 1991). Pedagogical approaches to photography, even in *Photovoice* projects, seem to focus on formal techniques rather than a physical engagement. Even if educators deal with issues of perspective and proximity, it is in an effort to produce a "better" image, rather than recomposing the ways that photographers think about their reality.

The shift I suggest goes beyond *Photovoice* to defamiliarize the vision of the photographer. *Photovoice* invites participants to represent their reality, often in circumstances made invisible by the broader society. My intention focuses on affecting the *photographer* (as participant) directly, as opposed to inviting outsiders to see his or her world. Furthermore, producing affective encounters is not simply about representing a community, but also about considering the limitations of visual representation. The camera becomes an apparatus of investigation to create new ways of thinking—it shifts to a focus on the immediacy of the encounter situated in time and place. Graziano and Litton (2007) used *Photovoice* with a group of first-year teachers to investigate potential areas for change within their schools. The use of photography heightened participant awareness of visual signs of injustice, such as run-down facilities or inadequate resources. This type of approach uses participatory photographic methods beyond representation and documentation to heighten the awareness of communities outside of the school; while defamiliarizing normalized injustice for those who experience it (Mannay, 2010).

As an anthropologist researching in Southern Africa, Crowe (2003) examined issues of representation and encounter using photography in visual anthropology. He realized that the actual subject of his photographs was his own self-development, describing how ethnography is always subjective, as he grappled with conflicts about reciprocity and representation. Ultimately, Crowe (2003) concluded that,

My images comment on the nature of my own subjectivity—a perspective that has played a role in constructing not only the subject but also the context that is permitted the subject and has arisen from my own understanding of the social discourse signified by the physical surroundings. (p. 477)

In Crowe's experience, the emphasis was an intensive becoming that produces the potential for the kind of *self-refleXivity* described by jagodzinski (2009) as “exercising a middle voice where subject and object meet in an in-between space.... Where subjectivization happens and change occurs” (p. 346). Jagodzinsky capitalizes the “X” to symbolize the in-between or liminal space, calling it “the void of the Real.... The ‘nomadic’ site in art” (jagodzinski, 2009, p. 346). This point is critical. The nomadic element is that indefinable liminality where subjectivity is in play. Photography forces us into places, so even if we begin as voyeur, we are in a certain physical proximity to the subject.

The shift is to a focus on process, deemphasizing the camera's ability to reproduce, document, or capture. How does the camera facilitate moments of self-refleXivity if we stop privileging its output and instead address the potential of the process to introduce new ways of knowing and intersubjective encounters? The photographer takes on an active and intersubjective role

as witness in public—a position that activates tourism to engagement and potential. The camera functions as relational apparatus, where researchers are in proximity to other living and non-living beings.

Encountering the Punctum.

The foci of visual anthropology and cultural geography overlap in a number of ways. Visual anthropologists are interested in communities' visual and material culture as well as the ways that visibility speaks about a culture's worldview and value systems (Pink, 2001). Cultural geographers consider culture a distribution of things that make up the everyday, where places speak to a way of life, and develop meaning through daily practices in space, often shaped by power relations (Anderson, Domosh, Pile, & Thrift, 2003). Both disciplines examine how our visual world has meaning, while the latter views life through ways that cultures exist in relation to each other and the spaces they occupy. In addition, feminist approaches to cultural geography question ways that places constitute identity and effect subjectivity (Rose, 1995, 1997; Tolia-Kelly, 2010, 2012).

While the representation of space is the historical domain of geography, cultural geographers interested in the visual affect of space use photography not just to represent but also to examine how spaces develop meaning (Rose, 2008). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, cultural geographers began to examine the landscape as text, influenced in part by Barthes (Rose, 2000) and Derrida (Bonta & Protevi, 2004). To make meaning of the ways that images constitute, photography has been read as a language (Webb, 2009). Barthes (1981) avers that the “photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent” (p. 5). For Barthes, the *studium* is the general field of signs that make a viewer interested in a photograph, while the *punctum* is the pinch or intense affect generated by something in the image. Barthes is describing the way that the photographic image affects viewers, at times with an identifiable signifier, but more importantly produces an affect that cannot necessarily be described adequately in language.

Issues of affect in photography often focus on the affective force of the photograph or archival source on a viewer (Bassnett, 2009; Edwards, 2012; Furuhashi, 2009). While these sources examine affect in relation to photographs as well. Their descriptions resonate with the affective potential of the photographic act, as affect is often linked to issues of memory and identity. Bassnett (2009) describes a “transactive encounter” (p. 244) that connects identity, memory, and place. Edwards (2012) describes the affective force of photographs in their potential for “placing” (p. 226). Although her description refers to an engagement with photographs, she considers how the act of photography *places* the photographer “in social space through which questions of materiality, adjacency, assemblage, and relations frame the meaning” (p. 226). Positioning the camera as nomadic weapon looks beyond photographs as aesthetic objects to

privilege *doing* photography, “asking how images exceed their frames and directly affect their viewers” (Levin, 2009, p. 329).

Perhaps the camera can facilitate a consciousness of the *punctum* in the everyday, although Barthes (1981) describes that, “the *punctum* should be revealed only after the fact, when the photograph is no longer in front of me and I think back on it” (p. 53). But maybe approaching new spaces in familiar landscapes can evoke an experience like the one Barthes describes. How do we both read place as a text and then trouble that reading through an embodied engagement? How can we begin to consider that element that punctures our vision? That strikes us as we move through our community?

Photography as Arts-Based Inquiry

As we begin to shift away from product to process, the embodied and relational encounter becomes the privileged space of becoming, rather than a focus on the image produced. Like anthropology, geography, and sociology, arts-based approaches range from a more representational domain to the embodied and temporal. Sullivan (2006, 2010) examines the potential of the research-practitioner, where visual media as research method allows researchers to recognize the potential of research as constitutive. In this frame, the practice of research is seen as transformative, emphasizing the actions and subjectivity of the researcher. Artistic output is the data, and process is product. The researcher does not stand apart from the data or participants to examine findings, but instead the research is in a constant state of emergence and development. Many of these elements apply to the way photography effected my engagement with unfamiliar spaces using photography as a pedagogical apparatus.

Furthermore, the use of photography in relation to arts-based educational research takes a range of forms as a result of a range of goals. While the photograph as data may be more emphasized than embodied research in other social science, an interest in participation can be seen in contemporary approaches to all. Marin and Roldan (2010) examine the use of narrative series as a form of photographic inquiry. The authors examine the potential of starting with the work of past photographers as inspiration to examine social change. The production of photographs to produce a series, essay, or discourse offer students ways of exploring local or global issues, personal reflection, and narrative techniques through visual images.

Castro (2006) examines the potential of imposing “constraints that enable” as an inquiry-based strategy. Working with a group of high school students using photography as research method, Castro (2006) used a hypothetical question, such as, “If you were struck blind tomorrow, what vision of the world would you have?” to limit and expand the potential of student engagement and imagination (p. 79). His questions were inspired by past

photographers, such as Dorothea Lange, providing a second level of educational potential. In my scavenger hunt, the general categories and geographic boundaries acted as constraints that enabled new ways of knowing myself, and my community.

The photographic process may also be viewed as a multisensual moment in time. As a mode of visual inquiry, it is important to realize that vision never works singularly. Scarles (2010) explains that,

...in order to realize the potential of the visual in methodological practice, it is necessary to reposition visuals as pathways *to* and *of* multisensual encounter; tools for complementing, reinforcing and sharing the visualities of the practices and processes of both their production and consumption. (p. 923)

In arts-based educational research, the act of photography is intertwined with the production of knowledge to a greater degree than most anthropological, geographical, or sociological approaches. Making the photograph is a way of coming to know differently through an aesthetic engagement with the subject.

A Performative Shift

We must first become affectively attuned to embodied engagements, utilizing the camera as part of an activated and performative investigation. To make this shift from visibility as language to one that is in-flux and activated, the notion of performativity becomes significant. jagodzinski (2009) describes,

...the force of the artistic event is its ability to change, rupture, and transform a system of set relations—the dynamics of being and unfolding as judged along ethical grounds. This double force of art is the process of art-ing, written as a gerund to indicate art and its education to be transitive, transitional, and temporal; that is, manifesting ‘time out of joint’ in its performative affect of becoming. (p. 345)

Like St. Pierre (1997), jagodzinski addresses the ethical nature of being in relation as part of an aesthetic event. Performativity is often linked to affect and memory (Bal, 2002; Levin, 2005), addressing the force of an act to produce a shift or affect change. Garoian (1999) argues that performativity, “represents the performance of subjectivity, a means by which students can attain political agency as they learn to critique dominant cultural paradigms from the perspective of personal memories and cultural histories” (p. 8). Viewed as a performative public act, photography can be seen as a form of *participatory citizenship*, where “the very process of taking photographs at a moment of public crisis needs to be read as an ‘act of interlocution, a need to make sense and communicate’” (Levin, 2009, p. 334). As the focus of

my project shifted from the aesthetic document to an aesthetics of engagement, the process became profoundly creative.

Photography as Performance

Conceptual artists of the 1970s attempted to open up the closed hermeticism of the art world using photography. Photographers such as Dan Graham and Stephen Shore took color snapshots of the everyday that were reminiscent of advertising and family snapshots, while others such as John Baldessari, Christian Boltanski, and Jan Ader employed narrative with photographs in series that were at times fictitious and mysterious. Godfrey (1998) claims, “the greatest effect of conceptual art on the use of photography has been to make the photograph function like a question and not like a self-evident statement” (p. 339). One important distinction being made is that beyond questioning the truth of the photograph, the medium was used as a mode of institutional critique at that moment by injecting images of the everyday and popular culture. This operation is important as it parallels shifts in social sciences as well, where images of the everyday and of the researcher as subject become as important as traditional ethnographic research data.

Other conceptual artists questioned the privileging of the art object and the legitimacy of cultural institution through performance and earth works, where photography functioned as documentation and was often thought to constitute the experience (Lippard, 1973; Van Gelder & Westgeest, 2008). Performances were intended to be temporal and site specific, resisting the capitalist art market. By documenting them, the photographer as documentarian often became part of the performance. Again, this shift can be seen as a parallel to participatory shift in qualitative research, where researcher as photographer is no longer the disembodied and objective eye but instead a performative participant. Kester (1998) highlighted the impact of the blurring of roles that happened during the 1970s in relation to photography, activism, pedagogy, and curatorial practices twenty years later, claiming, “the current political moment demands an activist aesthetic based on performativity and localism.... An activist art...defined as an intersubjective ‘communicative action’” (p. 15). Kester’s statements consider a shift to a local, political, and action-based art-making process that engages intersubjective change with a community.

This performative aspect of the photographic encounter is critical. Research becomes a nomadic and performative engagement with spaces, where we are activated, critical, and creative thinkers. The process and product of photographic encounters merge to become a form of *art-ing* as nomadic, pedagogical, and potentially political inquiry. Each encounter becomes an event, where the camera becomes nomadic weapon, producing affectivity and exteriority from being in relation to and with bodies (Hardt, 1993). A practice that privileges action in the everyday addresses Benjamin’s (1934/1992) critique of a divide in art between

the political and purely formal aspects of art and photography where, “the smallest authentic fragment of everyday life says more than painting. Just as a murderer’s bloody fingerprint on a page says more than the words printed on it” (p. 486). Each photograph bears the bloody fingerprint of the photographer as a marker of a moment of revolutionary potential.

Photography becomes a form of participatory civic engagement, pushing photographers into active and physical encounters where ethics are in play, potentially triggering the force of thought. This project revealed the spaces in my community that I drive by and never see, considering new futures through affirmative and relational encounters with difference. Using this frame in art education to engage in a reflexive investigation of the everyday may open our eyes to difference, invisibility, and potential.

A month after I took the first photograph, I returned to the taco stand to eat lunch and photograph the site again. I decided to record a video and talk through my drive there.



Figure 2. Video clip of drive to the taco stand

The video was made with my phone. When watching it, the movement of the camera evokes a feeling of anxiety as oncoming traffic passes to my left. As I drive down the highway approaching the taco stand, I explain,

I am going to this little taco stand here today. I have never stopped in part because I don't know where to park, and I don't really know how to order. It's just really cute... and...it's by this little trailer. But every time I have thought of coming I think...I don't really know how to order here. (My voice breaks with a pause) And I've never noticed there are menus here because...I've never been this close.



Figure 3. Menu from the taco stand

As I pulled in and saw the menu, the entire experience changed. The taco stand was no longer unfamiliar. While it was special to me because of the ideas it generated after the first experience, entering the space revealed all of the familiar elements from other taquerias. A woman opened a window on the side of the trailer and greeted me. I told her that it was my first time coming there and asked how long they had been open. We talked for a few minutes about the stand, how business had been going, and her thoughts about whether they would be able to stay long with increasing development along the highway. I asked if I could photograph the taco stand while I ate lunch and she didn't mind.



Figure 4. Open sign with window

I sat down in one of the plastic chairs that appeared in my initial image. As I watched cars pass on the highway, looking across the road at the spot where I first stood, I was awash with emotions. Curiosity and ignorance initially brought me there. Fear and anxiety kept me from photographing it up close or talking with the people inside the trailer. My previous interest in reflexivity and affect provided a self-conscious lens often absent in traditional photography education.

Being conscious of my anxiety triggered reflection on why and how I viewed the taco stand as different or less approachable. Without an activated awareness of my affective response and a willingness to reflect on my assumptions, I might have simply moved on from the initial awkward experience. Instead, the process generated entirely new ways of thinking about contemporary American society, globalization, designer capitalism, and the potential of direct community engagement.

Listening to the video that I made as I returned to the taco stand is almost painful. I sound like a naïve teenager, but at the moment, it was somewhat sincere. While the video served as a recording of the moment, I was conscious that it was a performance for research data. We have to allow ourselves to not know and be open to the possibility of learning through the embarrassment of our ignorance. I have focused much of this paper on social science research rather than contemporary photography and its theory because I am privileging this process as a primarily pedagogical approach, where artistic production is the participatory performance and the photograph is a by-product.

One might ask if we need the camera to produce this kind of rupture in thought, and the answer is, no. The same experience might be generated through the process of walking or writing (St. Pierre, 1997), but the camera might serve as a tangible trigger to deterritorialize our ways of thinking, producing a smooth space through the nomadic force of affective rupture. The smooth space of the nomadic encounter can produce new *lines of flight*, but as Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) aver,

Of course, smooth spaces are not in themselves liberatory. But the struggle is changed or displaced in them, and life reconstitutes its stakes, confronts new obstacles, invents new paces, switches adversaries. Never believe that the smooth space will suffice to save us.” (p. 500).

So while I have argued that the camera become nomadic weapon, its more common function of representational tool operates in this scenario to reterritorialize through the click of the shutter, bringing thought to form and the experience to momentary closure. Using the device as nomadic weapon may rupture barriers of ignorance, prejudice, and fear through reflexive

actions and performative encounters, triggering the vitality of thought and the enjoyment of learning.



Figure 5. Tacos



Figure 6. Empty Plate

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