
Critical Depiction: Aesthetic Engagement and Photographic Storytelling in a French Banlieue

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Abstract

Over the course of an ethnographic fieldwork in Medellin (Colombia) and Sarcelles (France), I used photography as an instrument to studying gender in marginal cities. A participative technique allowed me to involve participants in a visual narrative of their everyday life. I carried out ethnographic research over three years, working with more than 50 women in a visual project that studied the way gender shapes the urban practices of actors. Inspired by participative action research, critical pedagogy and participatory photography, (*ie.* Anadón, 2007; Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991; Freire, 2012; McIntyre, 2003; McIntyre, 2008; Wang & Burris, 1997) I started doing a collaborative research in 2014. I directed a series of workshops (19) in Colombia and France (25) in which we used photography in multiple ways.

This presentation intends to analyze the role esthetics, engagement and representation when doing a photographic ethnography of gender in marginal urban spaces. I will analyze on of the four types of "photographic engagement" (*engagement photographique*) I found during my ethnographic fieldwork (aesthetic, creative, interpretative and political)[1]. The aesthetic engagement envisages a creative activity that values the perceptual, sensorial and emotional qualities conveyed by the photographic experience. By provoking the interest or the excitement of the spectator, the photographer engages the public in an intentional, reflexive and expressive experience. In an ethnographic fieldwork, the aesthetic engagement of photographic activities can be much more than a *can-opener* (Collier et Collier 1986, 25), creating new meanings and understandings of a culture or society. The aesthetic engagement allows us to go beyond the iconic dimension of the photograph, a relation theorized by classical approaches in visual ethnography (documentary and descriptive role of the image).

In sum, I will present the multiple participatory photographic activities I have been doing in Sarcelles, one of the most marginalized cities. Then, I will explore the aesthetic photographic through the project called "Tackling Stereotypes: The Rugbywomen of Sarcelles". This last (and longer) section intends to analyze the role of aesthetics when doing a photographic ethnography. In particular, I will be interested in showing the way photography may be a powerful instrument to fosters new ways of representing gender and empowerment in marginal spaces through visual engaged practices.

(Leon-Quijano 2016; *forthcoming*)

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