



Photography

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Human beings have never encountered as many photographs as we do today. They surround us in public spaces, and populate the numerous screens we access in our daily lives. Anthropologists are working to understand the social and cultural ramifications of this ubiquitous photography on societies throughout the globe. This entry examines the work anthropologists have done on, and with, photography. It surveys the conclusions anthropologists have reached about the social and cultural impacts of photography and discusses the multimodal experiments that define the use of photography in anthropology today. Photography, anthropologists argue, is never an impartial representation of the world around us. It is part and parcel of making the world what it is. It is an active medium through which human beings define and re-define themselves and their societies.

Introduction

Human beings have never encountered as many photographs as we do today. 'Every two minutes', writes media theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'Americans alone take more photographs than were made in the entire nineteenth century' (2016, 4). In 2021, some 350 million photos were shared per day via the social media app Snapchat, another 350 million via Facebook, and around 95 million through Instagram. We see photographs in books, on billboards, in storefronts and on television screens, and nearly every time we pull our phones from our pockets, which for much of the world's population is well over a hundred times per day.

Photography, then, is more and more pervasive in our daily lives. Anthropologists, along with other social scientists, are working to understand the implications of that pervasiveness. Photography, their research shows, is continually expanding its social utility, cultural salience, and political relevance. It has become a tool of power and persuasion (Sekula 1992; Edwards 2001; Azoulay 2008), of memory and connection (Wright 2013; Campbell 2014; Miyarrka Media 2019). It operates as a kind of language (Miller 2015; Jurgenson 2019) through which we communicate our moods and our thoughts, and a social currency through which we imagine, construct, and add value to our public identities (Abidin 2018).

This does not mean, however, that everyone everywhere uses photography in the same way. Anthropologists, through long-term, in-depth studies of specific communities in diverse regions around the globe, have uncovered a range of meanings and uses associated with photography. For some, photography is a tool for capturing reality 'as it really is': its indisputable objective nature (Edwards 1992), or its

spiritual essence (MacDougall 1992). For others, photography is a medium for self-invention, a way of depicting what could or should be (Pinney 1998; Bajorek 2020). For still others, it is a method of deception, of distorting or manipulating reality, or of convincing others that reality is different than they had imagined it. In many cases, photography is all of these things at once (Strassler 2021).

Anthropology is not unique among the social sciences and humanities in giving photography this sort of critical attention. What sets it apart from other disciplines is its emphasis on lived experience. For anthropologists, photography is felt and embodied, not simply encountered or consumed. Photography is part of how we understand our selves and the world around us. As such, anthropologists often study photography by immersing themselves in other peoples' photographic practices: experiencing, to the extent that it is possible, what it is like to consume and create photographs from the vantage point of one particular population at one particular moment in time. They also recognise the value of photography in communicating anthropological ideas and have been on the forefront of efforts to use photography to enhance, expand, and complicate social scientific work. In a world where the image is rapidly supplanting text as the primary means through which we communicate, we increasingly see photography as a rich alternative mode of anthropological representation.

This entry shows how photography has been both a subject and medium of anthropological work. It surveys many of the observations and conclusions anthropologists working among diverse populations have made about photography. It also explores experiments to use photography to document, communicate, and expand the audience of anthropological work.

Part 1: Photography as research subject

'When writing about photography', Rosalind Morris notes, 'one often feels that almost everything has been said before' (Morris 2009, 13). The same arguments and insights are recycled again and again. In part, this stems from the simple functionality of a camera. You press a shutter release button, and light passes through a lens. That light either leaves a physical trace on film or a plate through reacting with some sort of chemical agent (silver nitrate, most commonly) or is stored as data on a memory card. What could be more straightforward and easier to interpret than that?

The recycling of insights on photography also stems from the tendency of theorists of photography, including anthropologists, to cite a rather small, and predictable, body of theory in support of their work, with Susan Sontag's *On photography*, Roland Barthes' *Camera lucida*, and Walter Benjamin's *A short history of photography* foremost among them. Photography, in this canon of thought, has specific, observable effects. The technology itself always, to some extent, determines the outcome. The medium is the message (McLuhan 1964). Photography acts as a mode of capture, reinforcing colonial conquest and the male gaze (Sontag 1976); it triggers reflections on [death](#) (Barthes 1981); and it opens pathways to the

‘optical unconscious’ (Benjamin 1931). Where anthropologists have complicated this canon of thought is in their insistence on placing acts of photographic production and consumption within particular cultural and [historical](#) contexts. For anthropologists, photography is always part of a larger assemblage. It is always ‘entangled’ in different social and political systems (Pinney 1997, 10). It cannot, then, be understood in isolation nor as a purely mechanical process with predetermined results.

Nonetheless, anthropologists too have often reiterated the same general arguments about photography, even if they word them differently. One of those arguments is that photography is never merely a way of representing the world around us; it is also itself a world-making practice, a means by which we transform the social, political, and material conditions of our lives. Photography, in other words, makes things imaginable and thinkable by changing the sensual apparatuses through which we encounter, understand, relate to, and act towards the things and beings around us. Photographs, anthropologist Terrence Wright explains, ‘intrude on, and become part of, everyday perception’ (Wright 1992, 28). ‘We do not simply “see” what is there before us’, elaborates Deborah Poole. ‘Rather, the specific ways in which we *see* (and represent) the world determine how we act upon the world and, in doing so, create what the world is’ (Poole 1997, 7).

Indeed, photography significantly impacts how anthropologists do, and think through, their own work. As is often noted, anthropology and photography developed in tandem as two mid-nineteenth century efforts to capture the elusive nature of the world around us (see Edwards 1992; Edwards 2001; Pinney 2011). Early anthropologists, just like early photographic innovators William Henry Fox Talbot and Louis-Jacques Mandé Daguerre, saw photography as a direct translation of what was out there ‘in the world’ onto a photographic plate. As such, photographs, for nineteenth century anthropologists, served as data or evidence of human cultural and morphological diversity. Photographs could chronicle the precise details of a subject with far greater precision than drawings or textual descriptions. Before [ethnographic](#) fieldwork was an established part of anthropological practice, anthropologists depended upon photographs from explorers and missionaries for key details about the populations they studied. Photography was the perfect medium for documenting dress, [architecture](#), and artefacts. It also became a tool for documenting difference, a means by which European and American anthropologists [visually](#) reinforced their own peoples’ perceived superiority to others. In the most extreme form, this amounted to anatomical studies, where native populations were forced to stand naked before a grid, their bodily proportions and facial features subjected to the scrutinising gaze of ‘racial science’ (Edwards 2011; Pinney 2011). Here, photography was an instrument of [colonialism](#), working side by side with an incipient anthropology to categorise and classify human beings around the world in ways that served the interests of European imperial powers.

By the early part of the twentieth century, however, anthropologists like Bronislaw Malinowski recognised the unique capacity of photography to present human populations with greater nuance and complexity ‘than any written commentary’ (Young 1998, 26) could. Though anthropology remained largely a discipline

of words (Mead 1974), its ideas communicated through written articles and monographs, scholars like Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, used photography to capture ‘the intangible relationships among different types of culturally standardized behavior’ (Bateson and Mead 1942, xii), or to ‘record visual impressions’ that could later be ‘carried into the laboratory for refined analysis’ (Collier 1957, 846). Photographs, after all, contain a superabundance of information. They capture errant and ‘quotidian details’ (Young 1998, 1) that often exceed the intentions of the persons who take them or who chose to include them within a text (Taylor 1996). Sometimes they even contradict the intentions of an anthropologist, revealing greater complexity than their own argument could allow. In such cases, photography is not merely a passive or neutral recorder of personal observations but rather exists alongside those observations, expanding upon and complicating them. In short, photography exerts a kind of [agency](#) over anthropological practice. It helps shape the field of anthropology rather than merely serving its ends.

Multiple forms of agency

Another argument that anthropologists make repeatedly is that photography does not just do things *to* us; we do things *with* it. Photography is always entangled with other kinds of [agencies](#), other agendas, other social projects. It never simply serves one end. In the case of the [colonial](#) photography of early anthropology, for instance, the photographed also exerted some agency over the images produced. ‘Rather than seeing photography purely as a tool of the colonial project’, writes Jane Lydon, of her work on archival images of Aboriginal Australians, ‘a closer look at the production and consumption of the photographic images under scrutiny here reveals a dynamic and performative relationship between photographer and Aboriginal subject’ (Lydon 2005, xiii). While colonisers use photography to demonstrate their difference from the colonised, the colonised use photography to present a more complicated picture: of their own modernity and sophistication, their own syncretic and hybrid identity, their fluidity and continuity in the face of imperial powers. Photography does not just act upon colonial subjects: it can also act with them.

A similar point has been made about the Peruvian Andes. Anthropologist Deborah Poole argues that the ‘image world’ of the Andes, constructed through a range of photographs taken by colonists and others, shapes the world experienced by the people in the Andes themselves. However, it is never simply a top-down world imposed from on high by colonial powers. Image worlds instead are negotiated through millions of small acts of image-production, circulation, and curation, an ‘intricate and sometimes contradictory layering of relationships, attitudes, sentiments, and ambitions, through which European and Andean peoples have invested images with meaning and value’ (Poole 1997, 7-8). The meaning production connected with photography, in other words, is a continually unfinished process engaged in by multiple parties with different stakes in the outcome. Some of those parties may have disproportionate power to shape the meanings invested in photographs, but that doesn’t mean other parties have no power. The

colonised too participate in meaning-making. They too help shape the image world photography constructs around us.

Recognising that photography can serve different ends in different contexts, anthropologists studying photography have committed themselves to looking beyond the Western world, chronicling the multiple, intertwined [histories](#) of the practice and displacing a Eurocentric perspective (Pinney 2003; Behrend 2013). In doing so, they again and again note the agentive practices of photographers and the subjects of their photographs. In the Indian city of Nagda, for instance, photography is employed for various projects of state and self-making (Pinney 1998). While the Indian government continues colonial-era practices of using photography to document, define, and track the whereabouts of its [citizens](#), citizens themselves often use photography to thwart or undermine these ends. While the state invests in a 'naturalist' or 'realist' paradigm of photography, in which what is depicted is simply an accurate representation of what 'is', Indian citizens frequently use photography to project a kind of [dream](#) version of self and place, exploring the potential of photography to enact, through elaborate staging and post-production practices, particular kinds of fantasies and desires. Here, photography is more about imagination than representation.

The line between the two, however, is not always clear. In Mussoorie, a resort town in the foothills of the Himalayas, domestic Indian [tourists](#) dress themselves up as 'idealized peasants, bandits, Arab sheiks, and pop stars' (MacDougall 1992, 103) to get their portraits taken in photography studios. They do this, claims anthropologist and filmmaker David MacDougall, not simply to play act or mess around, but to represent a deeper, spiritual self, a self not necessarily visible to onlookers. Photography, here, becomes a form of self-actualisation, bringing the private self into alignment with the public self. MacDougall's film on photographic practices in Mussoorie, *Photo wallahs*, allows us to observe this practice from multiple vantage points, itself demonstrating the irreducibility of [visual](#) (or audio-visual) content. In Chinese-owned photo studios in Dutch-colonial Java, similarly, customers got their photos taken before elaborate backdrops of foreign lands. These portraits, argues Karen Strassler, serve as 'a form of virtual travel beyond the horizons of the everyday' (2010, 77). Photography here is more about what 'could be' than what currently 'is'. It works 'to expand the horizons of the actual' (Strassler 2010, 79).

Such photographic horizons are often inseparable from political ones. The people of Senegal, for instance, have used photography 'both to document a time of radical social and political change and to effect these changes' (Bajorek 2020, 5). Sometimes this takes on the seemingly innocuous form of the fantastical studio portraits described by Strassler, MacDougall, and Pinney, or as documented in Ghana by Tobias Wendl in his film *Future remembrance* (1998). Sometimes it depicts explicitly political events, like presidential rallies and protests. In either case, photography is not neutral. By representing themselves supported by crowds, politicians reinforce their power (Bajorek 2020). By documenting the masses drawn to their protests, movements of [resistance](#) gain momentum. Even studio portraits retain a certain transformative political potential. By depicting themselves as cosmopolitans and sophisticates, surrounded by consumer

goods or in front of private jets, West African people work to transform their social and economic status (Bajorek 2020).

The political potential of photography, however, is not limited to what is depicted in images. What is left out, omitted, and censored also has importance, helping shape social and political realities. In Kenya, Heike Behrend argues, choosing not to depict oneself, or appearing only in veiled or altered form, has taken on a deep political significance for the [Islamic](#) minority (2013). The Kenyan government, like nearly all governments in the contemporary world, makes heavy use of photography in [surveilling](#) and accounting for its population. Official identification headshots, required for state-issued IDs and other [bureaucratic](#) endeavours, are one example. Kenyan Muslim women, who often choose to veil for both religious and personal reasons, are frequently required to remove their veils for official photographs, subjecting them to the scrutinising eyes of the state. It should come as little surprise, then, that many Kenyan Muslims are suspicious of being photographed, whether for state purposes, advertisements, or tourist images. Behrend refers to the efforts of Kenyan Muslims to go without photographic depiction, and to conceal, mask, and disguise their images when they do appear in photographs, as ‘the aesthetics of withdrawal’ (Behrend 2013, 20).

After all, once our images are ‘out there’, circulating by hand or through media, they are often outside of our control. They take on a life of their own when they are defaced, reproduced, or taken out of context, for example. They can generate parody images, be cut and pasted into collages and montages, or become street [art](#) or Internet memes. Karen Strassler, discussing the tendency of images to multiply and circulate in the media environment of contemporary Indonesia, refers to occurrences where photographs get mixed up in larger public debates and political discourses as ‘image-events’ (Strassler 2021). An image-event, she writes,

is a political process that crystallizes otherwise inchoate and dispersed imaginings within a discrete and mobile visible form that becomes available for scrutiny, debate, and play as it circulates in public (Strassler 2021, 13).

Image-events can take many forms: a picture of a celebrity in a men’s magazine that may or may not be nude, an image of a killed political activist photocopied and pasted onto walls, a caught-in-the-act shot of a politician engaging in unseemly or outright illegal behaviour. Photographs get intertwined with larger social processes, a fact, claims Strassler, that should lead us to abandon the conception of photographs as static depictions of particular moments. It may be worthwhile to think of ‘all images as “events” of varying intensity, duration, and scale’ (Strassler 2021, 13).

Photography’s multiple meanings

That does not mean that images are fully available to the academic gaze, or that we can come to any

complete understanding of what a photograph does or means as it circulates in public. Photographs retain something of a stubborn opacity. Images in colonial-era Java, claims John Pemberton, reveal ‘unintended traces of a ghostliness within the machinery of the modern’ (Pemberton 2009, 49). There are presences within images that can’t always be accounted for, details that fail to conform to our understanding of events. What is that shadow in the corner of the image, that smirk creeping up the side of a face? Photographs don’t only show us what we want them to show but they can also reveal elements otherwise hidden and contradictions not easily contained.

Photography can move through different modes and functions even within a single cultural context. In his study of photographic practices in the Roviana Lagoon of the western Solomon Islands, Christopher Wright describes the ‘entanglement’ of Roviana people with photography in various ways: ‘through being the subjects of colonial photography, through their own uses and expectations of the medium, and through the role photography can play in their ideas of history’ (Wright 2013, 2). In Roviana, as in Nagda or Java, there is no single, simple explanation of what photography is or does. There are only singular instances in which the Roviana use photography towards various ends. Roviana people are both the subjects and objects of photography. While colonists used photography to capture and categorise the Roviana, the Roviana used photography to tell their own oral histories, forge their own understanding of the past, and even to re-imagine, and rework, the colonial encounter.

Given photography’s frequently multiple meanings, the conclusions anthropologists reach about a particular body of photography are not necessarily shared by their interlocutors. In his work on the interpretation of colonial-era photography in The Gambia, Liam Buckley shows how [citizens of postcolonial](#) countries often interpret photographs in ways that are unpredictable, sometimes even contrary to the political and theoretical ends of the anthropologist herself (Buckley 2014). Gambians, he explains, denied him the sorts of ‘subaltern narratives’ he was hoping for in their interpretations of colonial photographs, focusing instead on aesthetic details: their age, their flatness, their amateurishness (Buckley 2014, 721). In essence, they rendered them largely meaningless, incapable of inflicting the kind of social or psychological harm anthropologists, and other experts, might imagine of them.

The same can be said of Yolngu practices of smart phone photography in contemporary Australia. As anthropologist Jennifer Deger has written in her collaborative account of the practice, ‘my Yolngu friends and family use mobile phones as a technology with which to tap into—and amplify—the push and pull of life’ (Miyarrka Media 2019, 9). Through fancifully edited photographs, mobile-phone-wielding Yolngu people use photography to connect with each other, their sense of identity, and their memories of past events. Photography doesn’t impose a singular view on Yolngu people. It gets mixed up in larger Yolngu projects of individual and collective becoming, projects that will never be finished.

‘All photographs’, writes Craig Campbell ‘are actually agitating; even the most mundane and seemingly

transparent images...have the capacity to agitate against or undo our meaning making endeavors' (2014, xiv). The inherent indeterminacy and instability of photographic meaning enables different populations to interpret photographs differently, employing them towards diverse, and often explicitly political, ends. Even photographic archives, Campbell shows, retain a dynamic capability, continually repurposed and reimagined for the concerns of the present. During the Soviet era, for instance, Russian communists used images of Indigenous Siberians to cast them as part of a larger national narrative, in which a continuity existed between Indigenous social structures and experiments in communist utopia. Today, Indigenous Siberians, and anthropologists like Campbell, use the same images to find gaps in this narrative, and to tell a messier, more complicated story about Indigenous survival under colonisation. Once again, as Strassler (2021) argues, not even still photographs are static.

A useful way to make sense of this semantic multiplicity of photographs is to ask how they appear and circulate in particular 'visual economies' (Poole 1997). Some participants in this economy will have more influence than others on how an image will be received and understood, as well as the kinds of stories it will be made to tell. One such disproportionate power resides with those that Zeynep Devrim Gürsel refers to as 'image brokers', the photography commissioners and editors for newspapers, websites, and other media resources where we encounter photographs. Image brokers choose which images to include with articles, and which images to use to illustrate a particular point, to represent a particular people or place, or to break up the text in visually arresting ways. 'Image brokers', writes Gürsel, 'act as intermediaries for images through acts such as commissioning, evaluating, licensing, selling, editing, and negotiating' (2016, 2). Their power, of course, is not unlimited. They too are subject to significant constraints: the authority of editors and advertisers, the perceived interests of their readership, and the fluctuations of the news market. Nonetheless, image brokers play a significant role in determining how audiences see and perceive the world around them. 'Professional image making', writes Gürsel, echoing by now a familiar sentiment, 'is central to processes of worldmaking' (2016, 13), as it shapes how we understand and act towards the world around us. Americans learn to regard other countries in particular ways in large part due to how they perceive them based on the images of them they have encountered. How would Americans conceive of Russia, Afghanistan, or other countries distant from them without the work of image brokers operating behind the scenes? Image brokers, then, hold an enormous sway over American, or any other, foreign policy. They are one set of power players in world politics who go largely unnoticed, their work too often mistaken for reality as it is.

While anthropologists have spent considerable energy uncovering the political potential and limitations of photography, it is important to note that not all photography is political in any explicit sense. In his open-access publication on uses of photography on social media apps like SnapChat and Instagram, Daniel Miller claims that photography is employed for all sorts of quotidian tasks. In these tasks, it operates like a language, expressing any variety of ephemeral moods and thoughts in ways not meant to have a lasting

impact or be taken in an overly serious manner (Miller 2015). Nathan Jurgenson (2019) refers to this as photography's 'phatic' function. Photography can be said to be functioning in a 'phatic' manner when it serves to create or maintain social connection, rather than communicate something meaningful.

Singaporean social media influencers may similarly reject many of the high and mighty purposes academics might want young people online to engage in through online photography (Abidin 2016). Photography on social media, instead, is for making silly faces in acts of self-deprecation, for amusing oneself and one's friends, for expressing opinions without having to take the time to compose one's thoughts into words (Miller 2015). Crystal Abidin describes this variety of phatic photography as 'subversive frivolity' (2016). In any case, with most photos now taken on smart phones, photography, Miller claims, has been thoroughly democratised. It is no longer the domain of elite image-makers. It is a medium for all of us, and as we make use of photography in more and more domains of our lives, we are continually expanding the boundaries of what photography can say and do.

Part 2: Photography as research medium

It should come as no surprise, then, that anthropologists are exploring what photography can say and do within their own work. Where previous generations of anthropologists used photographs largely to illustrate or support points made through text (Taylor 1996, 66; Strassler 2021, 27), anthropologists today are increasingly exploring ways to make photographs speak alongside their texts, telling a different, more open-ended, kind of story in a uniquely [visual](#) language.

One thing photography is understood to do is provide a medium through which diverse vantage points can be expressed. In photography, what is in the frame and outside of it, in focus and out, determines what we see and how. What we see is not the whole truth, but the selective and edited truth of one person, occupying one position at one moment in time. Recognising this feature of photography and looking to include their interlocutors as active participants in the production of knowledge, anthropologists have frequently provided cameras and other tools of visual representation to their interlocutors to do with as they will. To chronicle their harrowing journey across the Sonoran desert, for instance, Jason DeLeon (2015) supplied undocumented migrants with disposable cameras. To gain inside access into what it feels like for Somali refugees to await asylum in Delhi, India, Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan (2015) gave cameras to the young men with whom he was shooting a documentary film. The method, known as 'photovoice', purports to give the marginalised, and often unrepresented, a 'voice' to depict themselves. It is often part of a larger project of 'decolonising' anthropology, challenging the power relationships that have constituted, in fact that continue to constitute, the discipline. Yet typically it is the anthropologist who selects from among the photos taken for inclusion within their work, and it is the anthropologist who provides context and interpretation for them. 'Although these projects push against imbalances of power inherent in the act of photographic representation', writes Alexander Fattal of photovoice, 'echoes of those

very imbalances inevitably resound in their implementation' (2020, 153). Nonetheless, photovoice projects, like Fattal's own among youth in drug-war-torn Colombia, can provide moving, evocative, and unsettling representations from outside the academy.

It remains to be seen, however, whether the interventions of photovoice will retain their relevance in the era of near-ubiquitous photography. 'These days', writes Paul Gurumuruwuy as part of the Miyarrka Media collective, 'every Yolngu has a phone' (Miyarrka Media 2019, 1), and nearly every phone has a camera. Photographs are more present in the lives of the people anthropologists study than they ever have been. They are also more prosaic. There are, of course, still people in the world without regular access to cameras, such as the youth Fattal worked with, but their numbers are diminishing quickly, and with numerous social media platforms at their disposal, their [dependence](#) on anthropologists to present their work is less pronounced. The idea that anthropologists might play some crucial, interventionist role in providing their interlocutors with a means of documenting their own lives seems increasingly outdated. In most cases, anthropologists are simply not needed for that. Instead, liberated from a sort of salvage visual anthropology, they are exploring other, more experimental roles photography might play within their work.

'The way to restore photography to a concrete contribution within the discipline', wrote Elizabeth Edwards at the beginning of the [digital](#) era, 'is to harness those qualities peculiar to the *medium* of still photography' (1997, 53). Those qualities, she explains, are the open-endedness of photography, its inherent ambiguity, its incompleteness, and its inability to include everything within a frame. These are attributes that can be harnessed towards [ethnographic](#) ends, made to evoke rather than illustrate, and present non-reductive, multidimensional representations that enable us to 'see through different eyes from beyond the Boundary' (Edwards 1997, 54) that separates one cultural world from another. Anthropologists in the last two decades have found diverse ways to do just that.

Seeking to capture the affective landscape of a Brazilian sanatorium, Joao Biehl, for his book *Vita: Life in a zone of social abandonment* (2005), partnered with photographer Torben Eskerod. The resulting black and white images are less illustrative than evocative, immersing readers in the feeling of the place, rather than revealing details or reinforcing arguments. The images here work alongside the text, neither one subordinate to the other. The same is true in *Righteous dopefiend* (2009), an emotionally wrenching depiction of life on the streets of San Francisco for unhoused heroin [addicts](#) that Philippe Bourgois wrote in partnership with photographer, and then anthropological graduate student, Jeff Schoenberg. The book's images provide emotional texture in addition to expository information, doing different, but no less important, work than the text.

The epistemic and emotional work that photography does depends on its ability to capture, without explicit commentary, a viewpoint that is both expansive and particular. To harness that dual potential, anthropologist Filip De Boeck partnered with photographer Marie-Françoise Plissart, and later Sammy

Baloji, for the books *Kinshasa: Tales of the invisible city* (2004) and *Suturing the city: Living together in Congo's urban worlds* (2016). Both books attempt to depict the irreducible complexities and contradictions of life in a contemporary Congolese city. Here too, the images add another dimension to the work. Rather than being a mere visual accompaniment, they make their own sort of 'sensory argument'. The visual depicts what words cannot: a city lived and experienced, rather than theorised or explained.

While some anthropologists have partnered with photographers to create a more immersive sensory component to their work, others have taken their own photographs and made them central to the act of ethnographic communication. Throughout his book *Monrovia modern: Urban form and political imagination in Liberia* (2017), former photojournalist Danny Hoffman employs full-colour photographs to show how Monrovia inhabitants inhabit, manipulate, and move through the deteriorating built environment of their city. Shot with wide lenses and available light, with human subjects often blurred or as tiny figures in the background, the images are both architectural and emotive, capturing something of the lived feeling of making do with a collapsing [infrastructure](#) and crumbling economy. Kevin Lewis O'Neill and Benjamin Fogarty-Valenzuela's co-authored book *Art of captivity* (2020) also uses photography to demonstrate the way people occupy and make use of space. Focusing their lenses on Pentecostal drug rehabilitation centres in Guatemala, their richly coloured photographs of small, dank spaces capture the claustrophobia of captivity, human figures collapsed like plastic tarps in the corner of their cells. For both Hoffman, and O'Neill and Fogarty-Valenzuela, photography is a tool for depicting affect, those pre-articulate moods and sensations that animate the [atmospheres](#) around us (see Seigworth and Gregg 2010), even when we are unable to define what they are or mean. Their photos are complex and ambiguous, opening up multiple interpretations rather than presenting a specific argument. Borrowing from a street photography tradition that emphasises the ambiguity, complexity, and irreducibility of the image, my own photo-ethnographic essays on the streets of Indonesia (Luvaas 2022) and in the confines of my own [home](#) during the coronavirus [pandemic](#) (Luvaas 2021) mimic the opacity of lived experience, and expose the inability of theory to account for the complexity and multidimensionality of everyday life. It is up to us, Thera Majaaland (2017) explains in regards to her own photographic work that shows the facades of [houses](#) in Denmark, South Africa, and elsewhere, to fill in the gaps of what is not shown in an image. Photographic images tend to provide no closure.

In enabling such open-ended modes of representation, photography has become one part of a larger move towards what have been called 'multimodal anthropologies', a range of experiments in non-textual, or at least more-than-textual, sensory media with the intention of expanding the parameters of what counts as anthropological work and who is included within its practice (Collins, Durrington and Gill 2017). Here, photography can be used as a way of collaborating with the natural environment, for example, whether by literally using plants to make images (developing film with stinging nettle or mashed up rose) or re-creating archival photographs of national parks in order to come to a better understanding of how those

spaces have changed over time (Smith 2007). Even researchers' family photographs have been used for both personal and political analyses, demonstrating, for example, how the 'entanglement of subject and nation formation emerges in the images that comprise [a] family's archive' (Dattatreyan 2018).

Multimodality of this sort is understood as a way of interrogating existing power relationships within anthropology and its representations, even if it is not able to overcome them entirely. While 'there is nothing inherently liberatory about multimodal approaches in anthropology', they can nonetheless help us attend to 'that unsettled feeling that we get in our gut' that something in our practice is reinforcing power differentials (Takaragawa et al. 2019, 520). Multimodal forms of research and representation can help open up potential avenues to make anthropology more inclusive, more expansive, and more subversive of dominant narratives. While photography has been and continues to be a tool of domination and control, it also continues to be a tool, however imperfect, for participating in and supporting social justice movements, allowing us to work 'as politically engaged makers and scholars' (Alvarez Astacio, Dattatreyan, and Shankar 2021, 426).

Conclusion

Photography has never been a passive medium, a simple capturing of light that reflects a complete picture of what is 'out there' in the 'real world'. It is, and has always been, a series of choices, made by situated social subjects under particular conditions of power, about how to depict their world and how to use those depictions to make substantive changes to it. People use photography to gain knowledge and mastery over their environments and the people around them. They use photography to push back against accepted social realities, to re-invent themselves and transform their social identities. They also use photography to just have fun, playfully reinterpreting their lives in ways that may read as frivolous or superficial to outside observers.

Studying the uses of photography by different populations in specific places and specific moments in time, anthropologists have long taken photography seriously, not just as a popular practice, but also as a social and political project with real-world consequences. Photography, anthropologists' work shows, reframes and reshapes reality as we understand and experience it. It is a practice of world-making, not just world-representing. Moreover, it is a practice that different populations around the world use differently, for their own personal and political ends. Photography thus always has to be understood within a specific social, [historical](#), and political context.

This does not mean, however, that photography is always available for understanding. If we recognise the inherent ambiguity of photographs, we become attuned to the fact that they depict more than what their producers purport them to show. Instead, they provide a complex, contradictory, and irreducible vantage point on reality. Anthropologists increasingly recognise this aspect of photography to be an asset in their

own work, and they are exploring ways to use photography to create a more open-ended, inclusive, and collaborative vision of their discipline.

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