

Picturing Social Inclusion: Photography and Identity in Downtown Eastside Vancouver

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This article offers an exploration of the relationship between photography and identity in the marginalised urban space, focussing specifically on the annual Hope in Shadows photography contest in Downtown Eastside Vancouver (DTES). Through an analysis of field-based research, I demonstrate how individuals in the DTES have used photography to (re)create notions of self and community identity, and explore what findings suggest for the development of participatory, visual methodologies. I discuss how a participatory visual model might enable socially excluded individuals to engage with the public sphere, actively claiming recognition within and outside of the DTES neighbourhood. Drawing on existing literature in visual sociology, this article explores the potential of resident-led photography in emancipating participant 'lifeworlds' from their excluded status, opening up multiple avenues to social action. I argue for the potential of the camera in person-centred research: promoting a recognition of C. Wright Mills' (1959) 'personal troubles' as 'public issues', encouraging dialogical understandings between urban in-groups and out-groups, and enabling the (re)assertion of affirmative social presence for excluded urban communities.

Keywords: Downtown Eastside Vancouver, Photography, Identity, Advocacy.

Photography, more than merely representing, has contributed to the emergence of a way of seeing ... this way of seeing informs contemporary self-understandings.

(Lury 1998, 218)

Through a theoretical and field-based exploration of the urban photography contest 'Hope in Shadows', this article explores the

perceived connection between photography and identity in the city, investigating the potential of the camera for the (re)creation/assertion of individual and collective identities in Downtown Eastside Vancouver (DTES). I position the practice and discussion of community photography as an enabling process, inviting individuals and groups to bring their personal troubles to the level

of public issues by setting their life-worlds in a wider visual context.

The Hope in Shadows contest is an annual event in the DTES, involving the distribution of disposable cameras to low-income residents of the area with the brief to use photography to 'document their own community' (Pivot Legal Society 2012). The contest is the flagship project of Hope in Shadows Inc., a charitable organisation based in the DTES, who describe their aim as: 'creating positive social change for people and communities impacted by poverty and marginalization' (Hope in Shadows 2013). Hope in Shadows work with a variety of non-profit organisations, including Pivot Legal Society, a community advocacy service promoting rights for vulnerable individuals – with campaigns for accountable policing, sex worker rights, safe and appropriate housing, harm reduction and legislative reform for drug users – as well as coordinating the Hope in Shadows photography contest on an annual basis, specifically for DTES residents.

John Richardson (Pivot Director: 2000–2011) describes the DTES neighbourhood as: 'where our society's greatest fears – of poverty, abuse, crime – are anchored ... often the result of misunderstanding' (cited in Cran and Jerome 2008, 31). It is this misunderstanding that the Hope in Shadows project seeks to resist by offering residents the opportunity to create a counter-discourse to media stereotypes.

The contest offers a C\$500 award for the best overall photograph, as well as four awards of \$100 for Best Portrait, Best Urban Landscape, Best Colour and Best Black and White Photograph (all film submitted is printed in colour and in black and white) to be judged by a panel of artists, photographers, community-workers and residents. There are four DTES Community Awards of \$40, voted for by residents from the judges' selection of the 'Top Forty'. Photographs are exhibited across the city at galleries and community venues, and can also be accessed through an online archive (Flickr). The top twelve images are available to buy in calendars from street vendors in the city and a wider selection of photographs can be purchased in large print format with 50% of the proceeds (after costs) going directly to the photographer (Hope in Shadows 2012). The contest celebrated its first decade in 2012 with the theme 'What I value in my Downtown Eastside Community' and provided the focal point for my study into how photography is used by, and might be liberating for, socially excluded individuals and groups. I am interested in how individuals understand the process and products of the Hope in Shadows contest and how they might relate this to perceptions of identity. My working definition of identity is informed by George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism, as located 'within the ebb and flow of practice and process ... things that people

do' (Jenkins 1998, 4). My use of the term 'social exclusion' is informed by Prue Chamberlayne et al.'s (2000, 8) definition, as recognising 'disadvantage as a multidimensional social condition, and not merely one of material deprivation'. The definition takes into account the multiple exclusionary circumstances such as material poverty, mental and physical disability, drug addiction and crime, which are visible in the DTES area (Newnham 2005, 4).

The work to date in the field of visual sociology inspires my own. In 'Visual Sociology: Expanding Sociological Vision', Douglas Harper (1988) discusses the use of the image in early editions of American Sociological Association journals. Harper points to 'thirty-one articles using photographs as evidence and illustration' (1896–1916), the relative 'absence of visual sociology' (1920–60), with the tentative re-emergence of the (sub)discipline thereafter. Indeed, the field is becoming increasingly popular today – with many keen advocates writing towards the use of the visual in research (Chaplin 1994; Knowles and Sweetman 2009; Margolis and Pauwels 2011; Harper 2012; Milne et al. 2012), as well as utilising photography and film in field-based projects (Knowles 2000; Radley et al. 2005; O'Neill 2011; Blakey et al. 2012; Harper 2012). Various visual techniques are employed by researchers, such as 'photo-elicitation' – where participants are

asked to discuss photographic content relevant to the research and/or use images as stimuli for debate – and 'photovoice' – which involves participants taking their own photographs and then discussing these with the researcher (Wang & Burris 1997; Purcell 2009; Harper 2012). In *Visual Sociology* (2012), Harper cites eighty-four published articles in fifty-four journals specifically using or regarding photo-elicitation methods (2012, 179) and 'just under ninety' articles published in fifty-seven journals using photovoice-type methods. Harper comments that 'few if any' of these articles were from the mainstream of sociology or anthropology (2012, 190). There is a case to be made for the visual as a vital methodological tool in the social sciences and related fields, and as an approach ready to be shifted from the periphery to the centre of academic debate.

For the International Visual Sociology Association (IVSA), visual sociology includes, but is not limited to:

documentary studies of everyday life in contemporary communities; the interpretive analysis of art and popular visual representations of society; studies of the messages, meanings, and social impact of advertising and the commercial use of images; the analysis of archival images as sources of data on society and culture; *the study of the purpose and meaning of*

image-making such as recreational and family photography and videography (IVSA 2012, italics mine).

My work focusses on the latter (italicised) aspect of the field, with an emphasis on still photography, the medium used in the Hope in Shadows contest. My focus on photography does not intend to disregard the value of other visual methods – for example, participatory video (Ledford 2011; Milne 2012), participatory mapping (Emmel 2008; O’Neill 2011) and community arts practice (Goldbard 2006).

I seek specifically to expand upon the sociological work of Harper (1982, 2012), Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris (1997), Caroline Knowles (2000), Alan Radley et al. (2005), and Maggie O’Neill (2011) – all of whom have utilised and discussed visual methods in their respective studies focussed on in/exclusion in the city. Work in the field has been largely researcher-led; visual methods have been applied within the remit of organised projects involving the purposeful recruitment of participants. In *Good Company*, Harper (1982) presents an immersive study into the lives of American ‘rail tramps’. Harper lived and travelled with the men he researched, and created a photographic record of the time spent with these individuals. In *Bedlam on the Streets*, Knowles (2000) includes photographs to illustrate research under-

taken with homeless and vulnerably-housed individuals in Montréal. The pictures were taken by Ludovic Dabert, a photographer employed specifically for the project. Although both Harper and Knowles provide models for meaningful, involved ethnography, I maintain that a more democratic approach to visual research lies in allowing participants to take control of the camera and of their own representation. Examples of participant-led photography can be seen in the work of Radley et al. (2005) and Wang et al. (2000), who worked with homeless individuals in photovoice projects in Bristol, UK and Ann Arbor, Michigan respectively. However, though the photographs in these studies were taken by participants, images were created explicitly for academic projects, positioned within a research agenda from the outset.

The Hope in Shadows contest is professedly not policy-motivated nor a product of a research initiative; its only expressed aim is to enable individuals in the DTES to record their experiences (Wong, pers. comm.). Brad Cran and Gillian Jerome’s (2008) book *Hope in Shadows: Stories and Photographs of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside* focusses specifically on the annual contest – presenting photographs taken alongside personal responses to them and short biographies of the individual participants. The book is the only work published to date on the subject of Hope in Shadows

and is identified by the editors as deliberately outside of the academic sphere (2008, 16), opening up an opportunity for a scholarly reading of the event. Such an analysis will facilitate an increased, critical understanding of how individuals use photography and what this might mean for future developments in research – something that Cran and Jerome’s text can only infer. My work looks to understand the contest process and its effect through the lens of cultural and sociological theory and through my own qualitative fieldwork with individuals in the DTES.

My exploration of the Hope in Shadows project endeavours to understand how photography encourages the extension of self-identity into the physical urban space. Harold M. Proshansky’s (1978) notion of ‘urban place-identity’ informs my exploration of the significance of the physical environment, and of visual accounts focussed on the city: ‘those dimensions of self that define the individual’s personal-identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, beliefs, preferences, feelings, values, goals and behavioural tendencies relevant to this environment’ (1978, 155). I suggest that the literal act of photographing the neighbourhood will provide an account of how individuals in the DTES respond to their world, in past, present and aspira-

tional terms. This article goes some-way to respond to Proshansky’s call to deepen and extend his own discussion: ‘to explore by means of an appropriate methodology the urban place-identities of some sample of residents of an urban metropolis’ (1978, 168). The continued relevance of a ‘reflective relationship between place and self-identity’ (Krase 1982) is identified in the current objectives of the CUNY Public Space Research Group (PSRG), which, through various urban-based research projects, focusses on the interplay between space, people and communities (PSRG 2013). The perceived link between urban space, place and identity will be explored through the analysis of my fieldwork in the DTES. This article explores the use of photography in the Hope in Shadows contest in terms of individual and collective identity representation and (re) creation, offering a discussion of how and why residents of a socially marginalised neighbourhood create and share visual images, and what this means for their sense of space, place and self.

Fieldwork in the DTES

Fieldwork was undertaken in June 2012, to coincide with the tenth annual Hope in Shadows contest. Research involved the facilitation of two focus groups in the DTES, utilising photographs from the Hope in Shadows archive as

stimuli and concentrating on what the contest process, images and exhibition have meant for individuals and their community. Harper states: 'when two or more people discuss the meaning of photographs they are trying to figure something out together. This is, I believe, the ideal model for research' (1988, 23). Like Harper, I hope that the use of images in research may go some way towards democratising dialogue between participant and researcher. I suggest that talking about an image nurtures perspective through providing a stimulus for thought, a deliberate call for an individual to take a moment to pause and think about the detail before them. The image can be read subjectively, interpreted and analysed from multiple points of view, and allows a platform for the marginalised and silenced to articulate-by-other-means, a subject matter that they find important. The work of Wang et al. (2000) supports the use of photography in advocacy. Wang et al.'s definition of photo-voice as participant-led photographic practice in research sets out the following objectives:

(1) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers and people who can

be mobilized for change (Wang et al. 2000, 82).

Through my fieldwork, I explored how photography is used by individuals who do not necessarily have a policy-oriented agenda, but who do have an opinion about their identity and community. Heather Smith (2000) provides a geographic definition of 'community' that forms the basis for my own definition used throughout this article. I will talk about the DTES as a community based on an affiliation with the particular urban location. I will add that the DTES community is somewhat defined by the service provision across the neighbourhood, with individuals self-identifying in categories which are 'catered for' – for example by drugs, alcohol and mental health support organisations. From my own observation, the community seems to define itself as a whole through spatial, economic (low-income) boundaries, identifying members as individuals who live or spend the majority of their time in the area. For focus group participants, the words 'community' and 'neighbourhood' were used interchangeably.

My approach to research was informed by Phillipe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg's immersive ethnography, *Righteous Dopefiend* (2009). Bourgois and Schonberg spent over a decade working with homeless drug users in San Francisco, combining in-depth fieldnotes, par-

ticipant dialogue, and black and white photographs to express the experiences of individuals. I hoped to capture the spirit of such reflexive ethnography in my own study, albeit limited by time and financial constraints. To this end, I involved myself in the Hope in Shadows contest camera hand-out and collection, meeting community members in the process. I attended various community-run events in the DTES, and spent time in the neighbourhood. I adopted an open and inclusive approach to fieldwork recruitment, conscious that on many occasions, individuals in the DTES have been silenced due to sex, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religious beliefs and/or perceived 'lifestyle choices' (Robertson and Culhane 2005; Guimond et al. 2009).

Focus groups took place at Carnegie Community Centre, located in the heart of the DTES, to ensure accessibility and approachability. Carnegie is an example of a service designed to meet the needs of neighbourhood residents by providing affordable meals and an array of activities run for and by community members. Located on the corner of Main and Hastings, the centre is a geographically central DTES landmark and as such, a tangible target for media attention. During my time in Vancouver, this location was described to me by city residents as forming part of 'the four corners of Hell,' due to the perceived and much publicised visibility of 'unsavoury'

individuals in the area. There is a clear tension between Carnegie as a positive and welcomed resource for residents, as discussed by focus group participants, and a site positioned as a place to be avoided by the wider Vancouver population.

Participants were recruited through poster advertisements and word of mouth in and around the community centre space. Participants were fully briefed with regards to the focus group theme ('photography, identity and community'), the reasons for my interest in the area, my position as researcher, and how their responses would be used. I ensured individual consent to research participation and made clear the right to withdraw at any point prior to, during or post-research. There was 67% male (6 participants) and 33% female attendance (2 participants); 67% identified as White Canadian and 33% identified as 'other', including First Nations and English (Commonwealth) origin. This is reflective of the diverse DTES demographic (Cooper 2006; Lewis et al. 2008), though due to the random selection process, this does not represent an entirely accurate population snapshot. The first focus group included Danny, Jack, Carl and Ron; the second focus group included Sam, Sarah, David and Clare. Laura was interviewed independently. Participants were aged between thirty-three and sixty-five. Danny identified as First Nations, and Sam identified in three ethnic

groups (Chinese, First Nations and other) with the rest of the participants as White Canadian or other (various). All names have been changed to preserve anonymity as far as possible.

Participants were shown a selection of photographs from the Hope in Shadows contest archive, depicting the DTES and its residents, as stimulus for debate. In their 2005 study, Radley et al. divided photographs taken by homeless participants into the following categories: self, homeless friends, homeless strangers, streets, places used by homeless people, details of hostel or life of homeless people, own room or possessions, buildings, space primarily used by others (2005, 280). The Hope in Shadows contest shows a similar range of photographs, of people and of buildings in the community, often focussing on shared spaces in the neighbourhood – the street, the park and shelters. DTES participants were encouraged to talk about their own contributions to the contest as well as any personal photographic practice and/or ideas for hypothetical images that they felt would represent their self and/or community identities. Focus groups were undertaken with a flexible format, in the style of semi-structured interviews. My approach was partly influenced by the ‘SHOWeD’ model, as discussed by Harper (2012). The SHOWeD acronym invites participants to a discussion based on the following framework:

What do you SEE here? What is really HAPPENING here? How does this relate to OUR lives? WHY does this situation exist? How can we become EMPOWERED by our new social understanding? What can we DO to address these issues? (Harper 2012, 202).

My reason for only loosely following the model is due to my recognition of the acronym as ‘over-directive and inimical to more natural discussions of images’ (202). I endeavoured to facilitate a more personal and spontaneous dialogue; I used pre-prepared notes to direct conversations thematically, allowing this to deviate to enable individuals to discuss issues that were meaningful to them. I reflected back my own understanding of what was discussed, to ensure the best possible representation of the focus group. Participants were provided with my contact details should any issues or additional comments arise post-fieldwork. Focus groups were recorded, transcribed and analysed dialogically, taking into account both the social context and the language used to express and understand photographic practice and image content in relation to identity (see Steinberg 1999, 733–4).

The Politics of (Mis)representation

The Downtown Eastside is widely understood as a community

that is negatively represented by local, provincial and national media (Smith 2000; Robertson and Culhane 2005; Cran and Jerome 2008; Walls 2011; O'Neill and Seal 2012). Travel literature and internet travel sites warn against visiting, identifying the DTES as a place synonymous with deviance, framed in the forms of poverty, drug addiction and crime (Best Vancouver Guide; Lonely Planet; Tripadvisor; Virtual Tourist 2012). The area is notorious for being the poorest postal code in Canada (Newnham 2005, 4), sitting in contrast to the affluent living standards of the rest of Vancouver, a city that has been cited as the world's most liveable by the Economist Intelligence Unit survey numerous times over the past decade (The Economist 2011).

There was a sense of awareness in the focus group that DTES residents are individually and collectively positioned as 'Other', a feeling that they are judged by the world outside neighbourhood boundaries. This (perceived and actual) judgement is perpetuated through images that connote deviance. In my 2012 interview, Gillian Jerome referred to an influx of researchers, journalists and art students into the area, trying to take photographs that encapsulate the 'gritty' nature of the community. Participant discussion of the media focussed on the exploitative nature of journalists who were observed to be looking for a shocking story for entertainment purposes,

often at the expense of the residents themselves:

Jack: There's a history of people wanting to come here for a real Downtown Eastside dirty snapshot.

The 'dirty snapshot' can be understood as a realisation of Patricia Chauncey's concept of 'poornography', which 'depends on voyeurism and connotes exploitation' (Walls 2011, 144). The 'dirty snapshot' implies outsiders using the camera to capture a shocking or controversial image of the area that is seen as typifying the neighbourhood. The idea of the snapshot suggests fast-paced work, with no real investment in the community in focus:

Danny: My mum's been exploited quite a bit by ... a few different newspapers. They came ... they came down here before the Olympics and they took her picture and did an article on her, but they said ... they said they were going to do the positive side and so she told them her story and everything and they totally flipped it negative ... everything she said. They flipped everything and it was very damaging. It actually hurt her very very badly. Because she thought it was going to be very positive and then when the paper came out it was just ... it was so negative.

Danny's description of the media

portrayal of his mother as ‘damaging’ implies a significant impact on her self-perception and/or other’s perceptions of her. Other focus group participants added comments about the neighbourhood and its residents being consistent targets for negatively framed press. Negative representations of individuals in the community were understood as reflecting badly on the community as a whole. Danny’s discussion of the media treatment of his mother was met by sympathy within the focus group and with similar stories of their own experiences or the experiences of friends, family and/or acquaintances. The noted effect of negative media portrayal on DTES identities opens up a space for a counter-discourse framed in more positive terms. The feeling that the DTES is misrepresented was further emphasised by focus group participants who juxtaposed media images against resident-led photography in the Hope in Shadows contest. Focus group participants verbally contrasted the negative ‘lies’ of the media with the ‘truth’ of particular images taken by DTES residents, thereby challenging the dominant (external) definitions of their community. When shown a selection of photographs from the online archive, focus group participants showed particular interest in ‘The Hug’ (Elko 2003) – a photograph of a man hugging a child in the street, which they mutually agreed was representational of ‘the truth’:

Danny: ... because there’s love on the streets, right? And I think that kind of captures it, that picture (‘The Hug’) ... And that’s what ... that’s what I like to see, I like to see pictures like that picture.

Carl: That was the first thing that came into my mind, it is the truth – when you see this on the streets, because I’ve seen it lots of times. But my first thought when it came round to us this time was wow that’s something ... I don’t see that enough anymore.

This discussion between Danny and Carl positions the photograph as depicting ‘truth’ despite Carl’s assertion that demonstrations such as the hug pictured are no longer seen enough. For Carl, the truth is not represented through the regularity or consistency of street images, but through a normative claim. I argue that the photographs taken in the contest context are not a completely accurate depiction of life in the DTES since no one image can ever illustrate an objective reality; the photograph is a product of perspective. However, the shared understanding of ‘The Hug’ as ‘pure’ points to a collective understanding of how the DTES should be represented. The image is simultaneously coded and deciphered by residents of the DTES to represent their own truth, providing clear visual cues to suggest love and compassion. The photograph’s widely acknowledged

semiotic value positions it as an emblematic image of the human reality of the DTES community. This might be understood as a direct response to external stereotypes: presented in the binary language of the media.

Moving from collective to individual representations, I asked participants how they would use photography to portray self-identity. Carl's response prompted further debate regarding the understanding of 'truth':

Me with a blank piece of paper with one sentence saying something along the lines of 'the truth from my point of view' ... 'The truth as I see it' – because each of us see it a little different, right?

Carl presents an understanding of truth claims as situated and partial, reflecting the work of Harper (2012, 110). Carl's reference to the image of 'The Hug' as 'truth' seems to be informed by an understanding that the concept is fluid, transient and dependent on the standpoint of the individual. There was a sense that 'truthful' images could only be manipulated with the addition of language:

Sam: When you add a social or political or religious connotation to a shot and there's words attached to it, it's the words that dilute the photo because they take you on a different journey.

Sam comments on the differential levels of language-based and visual meaning. He appears to express the opinion that the photograph presents a social reality, while words distort it. Sam discussed the fact that he was illiterate until a relatively late age (thirty-eight). As a First Nations individual, this is not uncommon. Sam expresses a connection with nature and with the visual, bringing him closer to the image as a medium for understanding. Until relatively recently, the written word was a privilege of the external Other. For Sam, the text is a weapon that can be used to distort images negatively. Sam locates text in terms of mainstream print media, rather than as a tool for DTES resident voices.

Shifting the understanding of text from a weapon of the Other to a tool for community, I suggest that the addition of written or spoken narrative can enhance meaning and communicate an intended message more clearly. Though this can be deemed unnecessary in art photography, it is a useful approach if photographs are to be used to promote community values and/or needs to an external audience. For example, the image of the heroin user shooting up, with the addition of Carl's focus group commentary can change perception, removing the stigma of the 'dirty snapshot':

There was a young lady who came to me and said, you know ... 'You're gonna be so mad at me

– I’m using again’ and I said ‘Look dear, I don’t care whether you use or whether you don’t, it doesn’t matter to me. Like, just don’t quit trying to quit and that is all I ask, and I love you just as much standing here now as I did when you were first trying to get help’.

The addition of this narrative re-contextualises the ‘dirty snapshot’, reframing it through compassionate, resident-led understanding. The importance of who is speaking about an image when establishing meaning is apparent in this example. One picture can represent multiple realities, and reception of an image is dependent on how meaning is interpreted and communicated.

The assertion of multiple representational realities throws the idea of misrepresentation into flux. This becomes problematic when used in defence of the ‘dirty snapshot’. I suggest an understanding of misrepresentation as any one-dimensional response, omitting or distorting the voices of the individual or group in focus. A definition is needed that bypasses polarised conceptions of ‘truth’ and ‘falsity’ and takes into account a more complex understanding of representation. I suggest that a sense of ownership is crucial to a sense of affirmative representation. The community-led nature of the Hope in Shadows contest enables those involved to enact reclamation of space and place through photography. The focus

group participants actively contrast the images produced with those of the media, and in doing so create a renewed, reclaimed sense of identity. The style of representation offered through the Hope in Shadows contest model invites DTES residents – many of whom live chaotic lives – to represent themselves and their community through a creative mosaic of pictures and text. Rather than creating a linear narrative of a community over ten years, the Hope in Shadows contest, in process and as an archive, offers a fragmented account of multiple truths.

Photography and Identity in the DTES

The focus group discussions pointed to the participants’ recognition of the existence of a link between photography and identity:

Danny: In the Hope in Shadows I did use the photography to define, kinda to define what ... a little bit of what I’m about.

Danny, a first-time entrant in the contest, took the opportunity to show the positive, or what he interpreted as the ‘angelic’ side of his community:

Danny: I’ll tell you what I did, I made some angel wings and I wore them around the Downtown Eastside for a couple of days and I just asked people if they would like to have a picture taken with

the angel wings on and erm I got a really good response, everybody was ... everybody liked it, everybody wanted to wear the wings. And so ... and so I was trying to say like in this bad area there ... there is angels and there could be angels, and there's good ... where, where everybody thinks is maybe not so good, you know?

Danny uses angel wings as props to alter the presence of individuals in his neighbourhood, actively casting the community in a positive light. The home-made angel wings (made using hanger-wire and white paper) are used to create a visual metaphor. Danny uses the wings to challenge a presumed perception of the neighbourhood as 'hell'. Danny's involvement of other community members in his imaginative visual metaphor nurtures a participatory, inclusive culture. His approach works in contrast to the media-made images of the neighbourhood due to his insider status. When asked what photograph Danny felt would represent his self-identity, he chose the picture of himself, wearing the same wings. For Danny, this represented the kind of person he tried to be in the DTES. Through a staged enactment of the angelic, Danny creates or recreates identities for himself and for his community. These identities may be transient – dependent on and created for contrived scenarios. However, when understood as part of the much larger Hope

in Shadows archive, Danny's approach contributes to a legacy of repeat-representation, going some way to secure and make permanent the positive framing of individuals.

Positive understanding and (re) creation of identity was mediated through a recurring theme of 'in the midst of'. Describing 'Eastside Magic' (Washburn 2011), a winning photograph in the contest picturing a woman leaning out of Carnegie Community Centre's window, smelling some flowers, Carl states:

There was kind of a bright spot in a harsh reality and you just stop and smell the roses for a minute – and you go wow – there's somebody's grandmother there, smelling the roses, in amongst all of this ugliness that we sometimes have a tendency to see.

For Carl, the human subject of the photograph and her actions define the 'bright spot'. Carl describes the woman in the picture as 'somebody's grandmother', assigning her a social role that he can identify with. Throughout the focus group discussion, Carl described DTES residents in familial terms – as sons, daughters, aunts and grandmothers. Carl brings individuals closer to himself through these definitions, emphasising the human connections in the community. There seems to be an inclination to contrast the positivity and potential of DTES residents against a more negatively framed

urban landscape. Drawing on the same theme, Laura describes a photograph of herself taken against a graffiti backdrop. She talks about the reaction to the image from community members and individuals in the wider Vancouver area:

I was called beautiful in the photograph in the Downtown Eastside amongst rubble and drugs and grief – but they see beauty, they see me.

The depiction of 'Hope in Shadows' for Carl and for Laura is almost literal. For both participants, the neighbourhood is constructed through positioning something 'good' against something 'bad'. Laura was not the photographer, but the subject of the photograph she discusses. She concentrates on her own visibility and how she is externally perceived. Laura's binary understanding of herself against the DTES backdrop is arguably shaped by the rhetoric of the contest itself. While the DTES residents are positioned as the 'Hope' – a perception that encourages agency in the individual – the perpetual framing of the neighbourhood as negative might enforce a feeling of being trapped by circumstance. This might be recognised as a limitation of the contest, problematising the neighbourhood through framing space and place as undesirable.

While the Hope in Shadows project does not have an explicit agen-

da, it does invite a certain kind of representation. The contest might not have an attached research or policy agenda, but it certainly has its own dictate, locating the neighbourhood as 'in the shadows' by unifying distinct pictures under the broad category of the Hope in Shadows brand. Regardless of photographer intention, once positioned under the Hope in Shadows umbrella, pictures are encouraged to be viewed as depicting the contest theme. The Hope in Shadows contest, by virtue of name alone, influences intention and reception. The potential influence of the contest motivation was taken into account in focus group approach and analysis. Focus groups took place in a separate space, in an openly unaffiliated context (as advertised on event posters and explained to participants) to stimulate as far as possible a genuine, spontaneous dialogue.

Urban Photography as Identity Portraiture

On asking individuals what photograph they would take to represent community identity, the following responses were elicited:

Jack: I would take a picture downstairs in the kitchen – but empty, you know, I – just so because, that's what I do, you know – I'm one of the chefs here ... it's my community.

Carl: I'd think more about an aer-

ial photo from 100 feet above ... probably Carrall and the centre up to Gore from one edge and the Victory Square at another edge and just Hastings and that alleyway – just a long panoramic shot of everything going on.

Jack declared that he would use the same image to represent his personal identity, emphasising the point that the kitchen would be empty. In the second focus group, Sam stated:

I'd take a picture of Chinatown looking out Main Street past the Carnegie and the mountains. Because that's where I came from. It's part of my blood.

Jack, Carl and Sam referenced a photograph of the urban space and place without any people in the frame. The discussion of these 'empty' photographs suggests how urban space and place can become a metaphor for collective and/or self-identity. The choices of pictures without people arguably go some way to provide an imaginative response to the media images that explicitly depict people, often in a negative light and often at their most vulnerable. The 'empty' images simultaneously subvert the binary opposition implied by the Hope in Shadows contest name.

Participants discussed how pictures taken in the Hope in Shadows contest often depicted what had dis-

appeared, marking out a significant absence that could only be understood by others in the neighbourhood who were aware of the meaning, or explained through talking about their images:

Carl: On Main Street I'm so used to sitting at the Wave looking over Vancouver Police Department and ... it disappeared! I don't know how, because I'm there every day and I said to these people 'Where'd the sign go?' and they said 'What do you mean?' and I said 'Well they're finally gone.' The Vancouver police had been leaving there for over a year ... I said 'Their sign's gone' and started taking pictures of this sign being gone.

Picturing the disappeared enables community photography to establish itself as an 'insider' practice. The need for accompanying explanation as to why an image is significant, and what it means, can be empowering for the photographer. The discussion of symbolic urban landscape images seems to imply that DTES residents share a visual language at a community level. The impact of a photograph becomes contingent on and controlled by those who understand its symbolic value, necessitating further involvement of 'insiders' to enable 'outsider' understanding. There is a sense articulated by the focus group participants that urban photography is

intrinsically emotive and associated with individuals and groups regardless of whether people are included in the picture. Photographs of the neighbourhood were discussed in terms of psychological wellbeing, aspirations and personal feelings about the community.

Through repeat-representation, the Hope in Shadows contest becomes a mediator of identity in the neighbourhood. The event asserts a common ground amongst differential service-users, positioning the urban neighbourhood as a shared space that, through the collective act of photography, can symbolise a collective DTES identity. The name of the photography contest invites meaning-making, encouraging individuals to re-think semiotic cues. The 'Hope in Shadows' title encourages individuals to picture something good against something bad, and is taken up by many individuals who participate in the contest – with Danny's angel wings providing an example of this. Carl's picturing of the disappeared does not follow this theme; his photograph is ambiguous to the outsider, it does not explicitly locate a positive or negative image. His picture asserts an ownership of his space and reclamation of meaning that extends beyond any perceived confines of the contest theme. These differential approaches to the contest emphasise the multiple roads to empowerment that community-photography can facilitate.

Pictures for Community Advocacy

The impact of the Hope in Shadows contest on the DTES community presents an argument for the potentiality of participant-led photography for advocacy, demonstrating why Wang et al.'s (2000) model of photovoice can be an example of a democratic, meaningful, policy-oriented approach. The case-study also raises more questions about how photovoice might be developed in future work. The perception of the camera as a powerful tool for related advocacy was explored in the focus groups; gentrification, policing and service-provision were key themes, raised repeatedly. I asked participants how they might use photography to express community issues to policy-makers. Sam immediately discussed the need in the community for a First Nations neighbourhood house – specifically for children and for Elders, to encourage relationships and meet social needs:

I'd take pictures of children interacting with Elders you know – outdoors and indoors – like storytelling and then, then playful activity, nature walks ...

The value of the camera as a tool to express the requirements of a complex community with multiple needs seems clear. Photography can be used to capture the community in action – humanising the meanings of statistical data, eluci-

dating quantitative abstraction.

Carl spoke about a project run by DTES residents, which involves using photography to record questionable policing in the neighbourhood:

I worked on 'Cop Watch' – taking photos of cops jacking people up and just ... we don't get in their way we just take their pictures. We don't ask – we don't care. It's happening on the sidewalk, this man's getting himself busted for something, I mean we just want to make sure he's not getting his arm twisted up around his ass and not getting hauled off to jail for something that's unwarranted ... I try not to get his picture, I try to get a picture of the cops that are ... that are dealing with him, right?

Carl recognises the position of power that the camera puts him in and how this contrasts with the vulnerable position of the individual being arrested. The Hope in Shadows contest itself involves a strict etiquette of consent when taking pictures of people in the community. In Carnegie Community Centre, photographing individuals is banned. It is how the image can be used that becomes contentious, particularly when involving socially excluded individuals. I suggest that in certain circumstances, pictures without people in them might have the desired impact, without the ethical issues that photographing people can involve. Focus group discussion

has indicated how the image of the urban space can convey personal issues through visual metaphor and symbolic meaning, without picturing the subject themselves. This style of photography offers a potential alternative route for visual advocacy.

Images for community advocacy allow the involvement of community members at a grassroots level – enabling individuals to provide the initial catalyst for debate in a language that is arguably far more accessible than the formalised, traditional written rhetoric of policy. Photography can enable individuals to reshape, redefine or reclaim their social reality (Chatman 1996, 195), removing barriers of hierarchical knowledge or perceived social standing. The Hope in Shadows project provides a platform for community access to public representation; Laura states: 'the click of the camera, it changed my life – it got me into places I would never, ever be otherwise. I've met politicians.' Laura's involvement in the community project allowed her access to the public political realm – an area from which low income individuals are so often excluded. I suggest that the Hope in Shadows contest does not simply document spaces and places, but creates visual narratives of the DTES that are meaningful to individuals and to groups in both personal and political ways, and that these visual narratives can be used to influence positive outcomes for the community.

The Hope in Shadows contest

provides a platform for communication with the wider city through the presence of the online archive, city exhibitions and calendar sales. The contest goes some way to give a voice to individuals positioned and/or self-identifying as socially marginalised and to increase visibility on residents' terms. Nevertheless, the community remains excluded, with little evidence of social change as a direct result of the contest and the repeated community representations that it facilitates. The Hope in Shadows project does not promise change or directly challenge policy; in fact the organisers deliberately position it as being itself outside any direct agenda. My aim is to learn from the Hope in Shadows model as a template for future participant-led visual work, with the propensity to challenge exclusionary norms and work towards tangible, social outcomes. To achieve image-based impact outside the DTES, I suggest that the community must not only be represented, but recognised on their own terms by 'significant others' (Mead 1964). I define significant others as the wider Vancouver population, service-providers, policy-makers, and local and national media, as identified by focus group participants.

Collaboration with influential individuals with the ability to affect policy is paramount in enabling resident-led images to create impact and catalyse change. Academic or organisation-based researchers

with links in local or national government can help raise the profile of community projects conceived to tackle local issues. I suggest that photovoice methods can enable participants to create the agenda for relevant advocacy, based on their own understandings of community needs. The model that I suggest for such collaboration draws on Paulo Freire's (2006) dialogic educational paradigm, in which the oppressed individuals are positioned as co-creators of knowledge. In her work on community arts practise, Goldbard (2006) voices her hopes for the outcomes of participatory projects rooted in Freire's pedagogical theory:

That people facing social exclusion, when given the opportunity to express individual truths in the language of their own creative imaginations, will become aware of their common concerns and common capacity to take action in their own interests and may even join together to actualise that awareness ... Second is the wish that gatekeepers and others who wield power will be reached by such expressions, will be moved to respond constructively (Goldbard 2006, 14)

I argue that photography is a medium that can enable the 'experiences which are lived through as thoroughly personal and subjective' and 'problems fit to be inscribed into the public agenda and become mat-

ters of public policy' (Bauman 2000, 78–79) to reconnect. In other words, photography can be a useful tool for elevating C. Wright Mills' notion of 'personal troubles' to the status of 'public issues' (Mills 1959, 8).

Conclusion

My study has indicated the significant relationship that the camera can reveal between the embodied individual and their sense of place and space – the 'entanglements of the individual and the city' (Lancione 2011). The focus groups in the DTES opened up a forum for meaningful discussion around images taken in and of their neighbourhood. Discussing community images and personal practice (both within and outside of the *Hope in Shadows* contest), participants approached meaning-making in the following ways:

- Through directly countering external definitions.
- Through proactive (re)visualisations of the community.
- Through the creation of a (visual) community language.

Understanding urban photography as personal or collectively conceived visual metaphor can subvert external semiotic coding practices and place the images in the hands of the community, who can explicate relevant intentions and interpretations. This symbolic act allows representation on resident's terms,

nurturing a collective sense of empowerment. Focus group responses indicate how Proshansky's (1978) concept of place-identity can be affirmed through urban photography: connecting the embodied, psychological self to the environment through meaningful images. The place-identities of neighbourhood residents are formed through mutual affiliations with the DTES space and place, creating a common ground for community. Resident-led photography enables individuals to present 'personal troubles' in the context of wider neighbourhood or 'public issues' (Mills 1959) through sharing personal photographs as part of a community project in the public sphere. For DTES residents, however, the relationship with the wider 'public' remains restricted by perceived spatial and emotional boundaries. Focus group participants discussed how they felt abandoned by the Vancouver police and ignored or aestheticised by wider city residents. I suggest that participatory visual methods with a resident-led agenda for advocacy can work towards breaking down barriers between marginalised communities such as the DTES, and 'significant others' (Mead 1964).

Through a discussion of contest images such as 'The Hug' (Elko 2003), focus group participants demonstrated how images can provide the stimulus for normative claims to (multiple) truths. Through the use of angel wings as visual

cues, Danny demonstrated how photography can be used to portray his community in a positive light. Through picturing the disappeared, Carl demonstrated how the DTES community can actively retain a significant role in the explication of symbolic meaning to outside audiences. Through community photography, the Downtown Eastside can be presented as a multi-faceted, complex space. Resident-led representations are at once personal and collective, overlapping, intersecting and running through the veins of the neighbourhood, with the potential energy to inform a wider audience of service providers, urban and social policy officials of their values, issues and aspirations.

David states:

But you know the best way of reaching people in London or Vancouver or Birmingham or Toronto or anywhere else is to educate people – to let people know what the real people of this neighbourhood ... what the real people get up to.

Echoing the sentiment of Freire (2006), I suggest that this education must be dialogical in nature, undertaken with and from the vantage point of excluded communities, encouraging affirmative social presence through the amplification of grassroots voices. I position the camera as a tool to promote a qualitative increase in mutual under-

standing, to picture and make possible social inclusion in the city.

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