Abstract
The proliferation of participatory visual methods (PVMs) in applied research has highlighted new ways of seeing and thinking about research. A core tenant of PVMs is the situated, collaborative, reflexive, and co-constructed nature of the work and resulting findings. However, as these methods gain popularity, there can be a disparity between how PVMs are theorized, imagined, and facilitated. Although the facilitated and reflexive nature of PVMs is generally understood by practitioners, researchers seldom report on pedagogical design of their projects, even though the facilitation of a method, and a researcher’s own lens and orientation to photography will influence the production and reading of images. To achieve greater congruence between paradigm and practice, it may be important to return to fundamental questions about the role of facilitation and the process of crafting and exhibiting images in photovoice in relation to one’s study aims. In this article, I explore the crafted role of image-making in the context of a photovoice project that asked stakeholders to visualize engagement in the local HIV sector. Participants created and exhibited 63 photographs and narratives that relied heavily on metaphor as a crafted strategy. They also created three site-specific photo installations. Through detailing our facilitated process, I illustrate how certain design elements (influenced by my pedagogical and theoretical orientations toward co-theorizing) created the necessary conditions for participants to visualize their ideas through metaphor and installation. In turn, the exhibited images and associated installations created new opportunities for synthesis, dialogue, and dissemination. I conclude with a theoretical discussion of the possibilities for taking a crafted and reflexive approach to image-making in photovoice studies.

Keywords
photovoice, social justice, methods in qualitative inquiry, community-based research, feminist research

Introduction
The proliferation of participatory visual methods (PVMs) in applied research has highlighted new ways of seeing and thinking about research (Pauwels, 2015). The move toward PVMs can be partially attributed to the “participatory” turn in the social sciences, in response to feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern critiques against positivist conceptions of objectivity (Gubrium & Harper, 2013). Other influences include increasing interests to move research findings beyond academic audiences (Fraser & al Sayah, 2011) and widespread cultural shifts with regard to how images are produced and consumed as a result of the ubiquity of mobile digital technology (MacEntee & Flicker, 2019).

A core tenant of PVMs is the situated, collaborative, reflexive, and co-constructed nature of the work and resulting findings (Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Mitchell, 2011). Researchers and participants share credit for the active roles they play in knowledge coproduction. However, as these methods gain popularity, there can be misalignment between how PVMs are theorized, imagined, and facilitated. To achieve greater congruence between paradigm and practice, it may be important to return to fundamental questions about the role of facilitation and the process of crafting and exhibiting images in photovoice in relation to one’s study aims. I situate this discussion within a photovoice study that asked stakeholders to visualize engagement in the local HIV sector.

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Photovoice, initially developed by Wang and Burris (1997), offers participants cameras to identify, document, and analyze issues in their lives with the aim of creating program or policy change. Photovoice projects are designed within a diversity of paradigms (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Hergenrather, Rhodes, Cowan, Bardhoshi, & Pula, 2009; Nykiforuk, Vallianatos, & Nieuwendyk, 2011). These paradigmatic orientations will affect how researchers understand the role of the researcher and image. Nonetheless, like many PVMs, photovoice commonly fits within an interpretive–constructivist and/or participatory research approach (Mitchell, De Lange, & Moletsane, 2017). Within this paradigm, participant-produced visuals are understood as being co-constructed in relationship to multiple elements (e.g., photographer, audience, design process) (Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Mitchell, 2011). Here, a researcher’s own lens and orientation to photography will influence the types of images that are intentionally or unintentionally promoted within a project (Brushwood Rose & Granger, 2013; Latz, 2017). As Brushwood Rose and Low (2014) argue, taking up PVMs as “crafted as well as empirical, acknowledges that [visuals] emerge, not as direct or transparent reflections of experience, but as products of a creative and often imaginative process” (p. 38; italics mine). This is in contrast to a positivist paradigm that might conceive the image as an evidentiary artifact or a transparent entry point to participants’ viewpoints, experiences, or understandings (i.e., a docu-photo approach).

In photovoice, the “imaginative process” often includes facilitated activities that support the photovoice 'steps’. These pedagogical elements are adapted to particular settings, contexts, and research projects and influence the crafting of participant-produced images. And yet, they are rarely reported on. By pedagogical, I mean the conscious or unconscious desires that researchers enact in creating a particular (co-learning) environment (Gaztambide-Fernández & Matute, 2013). I wish to shine a spotlight on facilitation to explore its influence on the crafting of participant-produced images and the way in which one’s pedagogical approach might be productively used to reflect on the research process itself. I take inspiration from Mitchell’s (2015) call to examine the process of image creation in PVMs as well as what she calls the “pedagogy of exhibition”—in other words, how images in exhibits are potentially received by audiences.

In the Picturing Participation project—a community-based participatory research (CBPR) study exploring engagement in the HIV sector—participants created 63 photographs and narratives for exhibition. Together, we also created three site-specific photo installations. Installations are made for specific spaces, explore characteristics or qualities of this space, and involve everyday objects in sometimes unusual ways to encourage audience interaction from multiple viewpoints (González, 2014). Both participant-produced images and photo installations relied heavily on metaphor as a crafted strategy. Metaphor often relies on an economy of signs and symbols. It applies one object, thought, or action that is known to another, unlikely object. In contrast to positivist ideas of expressing data, metaphor is less about representing tangible, concrete facts, and more about communicating an essence or feeling that is often outside of language (McIntosh, 2010). Through detailing our facilitated process, I illustrate how certain design elements (influenced by my pedagogical and theoretical orientations toward co-theorizing) created the necessary conditions for participants to visualize their ideas through metaphor and installation. In turn, the exhibited images and associated installations created new opportunities for synthesis, dialogue, and dissemination. I conclude with a theoretical discussion of the possibilities for taking a crafted and reflexive approach to image-making in photovoice studies.

Methods

Study Design

Picturing Participation: Exploring Engagement in HIV Programming, Service Provision, and Care is a CBPR project that used photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) to explore how different stakeholders understood “engagement”. CBPR is an approach to research in which stakeholders colead all stages of the research from design to data collection, analysis, and dissemination (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). A team of academic researchers, community members, and service providers partnered with three community-based sites to do this work. The sites included Empower, a youth-led HIV prevention and harm reduction program; Casey House, a sub-acute HIV hospital; and Toronto People with AIDS Foundation (PWA), an AIDS Service Organization. Study participants included program participants, clients, peer volunteers, and staff members in various roles (peer workers, coordinators, clinicians, etc.).

The overall study design is represented by Figure 1. The project resulted in several outputs, including a community exhibit and report launch, where 63 photographs and three installations were shared with approximately 100 attendees including community members, service providers, and policy makers. Study findings, including those coauthored by our multistakeholder team, are discussed elsewhere (Switzer et al., 2017).

Theoretical Orientations

Despite attention to researcher reflexivity in visual research, photovoice scholars seldom report on the theoretical lens they bring to their projects (Liebenberg, 2018). I led and nested my doctoral dissertation within this project, building on previous relationships with each of the sites. Many of the research design elements and questions were negotiated and co-designed with community partners. However, I arrived with my own theoretical ideas about engagement based on over 13 years of coordinating peer-led, arts-based projects within the sector and a deep immersion in the literature.

In health, community engagement is predominantly presented as a biomedical, individual, and behavior-based phenomenon (Barello, Graffigna, & Vegni, 2012; Chiu, 2008).
I was invested in challenging the idea of engagement as either an end or an instrumental means and applying a relational approach (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Van Deventer Iverson & James, 2014). I considered engagement, as the etymology suggests, as a commitment to showing up to a process that is fundamentally unfinished, with its potential transformation (if we can even call it that) lying in collective dialogue, grappling, and imagination. For me, engagement was not an end (a community was engaged) or means (we engaged a community in order to), but a **beyond** (Switzer, 2019).

I was also interested in co-theorizing and learning from participants’ understandings of engagement. Inspired by Tuck et al. (2008), Sánchez (2009), and Herising (2005), I wanted to challenge the idea that there is a firm boundary between the one that theorizes (i.e., the researcher) and the one that is theorized about (i.e., the participant or ‘subject’). Photovoice’s focus on group dialogue, community strengths, and its collaboratively-led program and policy change made it an appealing fit for co-theorizing (Aldridge, 2014). Engagement is a “fuzzy” concept (Head, 2007), and I hoped that the taking and talking about pictures could help participants reflect on their everyday experiences and concretize their understandings (Mannay, 2010).

Orientations to photography will influence study design and the types of images or aesthetic strategies that are intentionally (or unintentionally) promoted within a project (Brushwood Rose & Granger, 2013; Latz, 2017). In the spirit of Wang (1999), I wanted to photovoice to act as a site for dialogue and co-inquiry. My past work had taught me to embrace participants’ visual literacies and think more intentionally about representation (Switzer, 2018). It was important that participant-produced photographs not be viewed as entry points into viewing some fixed, local reality but rather serve as sites for conversation. Encouraging participants to see their visuals as crafted representations was one way to achieve this and adjoined with my interest in co-theorizing. As a poet and an amateur photographer, I was also drawn to working with an economy of signs and symbols. Prior to the study, I had participated in a workshop in which I learned to physically manipulate which likely influenced my openness to working outside traditional photographic formats.²

My prior experience working with PVMs had also encouraged me to think critically about the “truth effect” of photography—in other words, how the medium itself may encourage audience members to consume a photograph, as if it presents a visual truth (Switzer, 2018). Many visual scholars have written about the truth effect (Tagg, 1999; Wells, 2003), photography’s social and/or technological history (Benjamin, 1972; Evans & Hall, 1999), and its long history of constructing racial discourse (J. K. Brown, 2014; González, 2006). When working with communities who experience marginalization, this truth effect can inadvertently stigmatize communities, especially when images travel outside research contexts or are read in ways unintended by their producers. This has implications for employing PVMs with communities who are already surveilled by the state such as young people of color, people who use drugs, or those involved in illicit activity (Switzer, 2018; Switzer, Guta, de Prinse, Chan Carusone, & Strike, 2015). There is a

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**Figure 1.** Project overview.
growing body of critical scholarship that explores the unintended consequences or potential harms employed by PVMs (Holtby, Klein, Cook, & Travers, 2015; Joanou, 2009; Packard, 2008; Prins, 2010). I was cautious about replicating some of these harms.

My theoretical imprints can be found across the study. This is not an anomaly. What is atypical, however, is my desire to draw attention to these markings (following the work of Lather, 1986) in an effort to trace their impacts. Conducting doctoral work while also trying to “co-theorize” comes with unique tensions (see also Sánchez, 2009). To attend to this, my dissertation contained collaborative and solo-authored elements (Switzer, 2019). I also collaborated with community co-investigators on the planning of photovoice workshops. Moving forward, the “we” in this article signals and honors this collective effort.

**CBPR Meets Photovoice: Workshop Design and Approach**

Photovoice as initially developed, follows a prescribed method of issue identification, photo training and instruction (including ethics), discussion, and analysis (Wang & Burris, 1997). It usually occurs over several weeks and in group format. Because workshops are highly facilitated, they are often designed in advance by researchers. Following a highly prescriptive process may be at odds with the participatory nature of CBPR (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Nykiforuk et al., 2011). It is important that we design and adapt our workshops to reduce as many barriers to participation as possible.

Over a period of 6 months, 14 photovoice workshops and 17 photo-elicited interviews were conducted with participants across the three sites (Figure 1). Workshops were co-facilitated by me and Kamilah Apong, a community-based research assistant and former Empower youth coordinator. They were supported by student research assistants. Many team members supported the planning of the workshops, including community and staff representatives from each site. In other words, how we facilitated the workshops—including overall design, the development of photo prompts, and creative icebreakers—was open for review. Representatives were also present and played varying roles at workshops.

We approached image-making in photovoice as a way to open dialogue and invite different ways of thinking about and visualizing engagement as a concept. At each site, we introduced the project; brainstormed ideas about engagement; provided training on ethics and photography; and discussed, analyzed, and celebrated participants’ photographs (Figure 2). Based on discussion with team members, the format of the workshops at each site differed slightly to consider ethical issues and participant needs. Participants were quite diverse with respect to race and ethnicity, Indigeneity, gender and gender identity, HIV status, drug use experience, housing, health, and immigration status. Some participants also struggled with mental and physical health challenges. Our participants had a wide range of accessibility needs; it was important that we design and adapt our workshops to reduce as many barriers to participation as possible.
Project Orientation and Brainstorming

Our first workshop introduced participants to each other (and us) and oriented everyone to the project. Since the concept of engagement can be abstract, prior to asking participants to take and talk about their photographs, we led participants through a series of creative activities to draw out participants’ initial ideas about engagement. For our icebreaker, we arranged miscellaneous objects on a table (Figure 2). Participants were invited to select one object that represented their ideas about engagement and to share their thoughts. Working with objects encouraged participants to consider multiple ways of thinking about engagement (i.e., participants heard a range of ideas), practice abstract or symbolic thinking, and share broad understandings.

This initial activity was inspired by Mitchell (2011) who asks what a visual researcher might do with objects, given their symbolic and materialist meanings. Working with objects, what Pahl (2017) describes as “object pedagogy” may help participants to “enter on their own terms” (p. 1) and invoke new conceptual framings about a topic. Objects, “nodes at which matter and meaning” intersect (Daston, 2004, p. 16), may act as memory prompts and/or ground abstract concepts (Mitchell, 2011; Mitchell et al., 2017).

Guiding principles for the activity (“there’s no way to do this wrong” and “don’t over think it”) encouraged a non-rational or creative approach. This opening activity likely set the stage for the symbolic photos participants would later produce and their eventual turn to installation. It also supported discussion of engagement (an abstract term) by making the conversation more concrete, without relying on behaviorist understandings. Coincidentally, a detailed description of this same activity can be found in a later text by Mitchell (2017) for use when drawing out concepts with multistakeholder groups.

Photographic and Visual Ethics Training

In the second workshop, we introduced the idea of photographic composition and encouraged participants to try out their photographic skills prior to taking project-related photos. Participants were trained to use point-and-shoot digital cameras that they could keep following the study. Most photovoice studies include a brief orientation to photography including ethical photo-taking guidelines (Catalani & Minkler, 2010), but it is rare to find studies that document training in composition (Sandlin, Szkupinski Quiroga, & Hammerand, 2018). Participants often arrive to photovoice projects with a range of visual literacies that they are interested and willing to share with others (Holtby et al., 2015). While not all photovoice researchers agree with including composition as part of this training (as they see it as heavy-handed), many of our participants expressed an interest in learning more about photography as an art medium and asked that we devote time to learning more about photography as part of the study.

In order to not assert undue influence and to support participants in developing their own visual vocabularies, we designed the training to foreground and expand on the visual literacies participants already brought to the project. For our composition training, I brought in a selection of photographs (some taken by me but most cut out from commercial and art magazines) that reflected a range of visual strategies (Figure 2). Participants were asked to select an image that interested them and describe one visual element that they liked about the photo (e.g., perspective, framing, light, a photo that tells a story). Contributions were shared with the group and recorded on a flip chart. We concluded the training with a brief presentation on considerations for taking photos including ethics. However, by the time we arrived at this stage, at all sites, nearly all the presentation points had been addressed by project participants (and more). The presentation thus served to cement the idea that participants already had the tools—and now the language—to take compelling photographs. As a group, we discussed that there was no “one way” to make a “good” photo.3 We stressed that since everyone was able to identify one visual element during the exercise, they already had the collective knowledge to craft compelling images.

Following this, participants took part in a photo scavenger hunt that site representatives and I designed to encourage participants to try different ways of taking photos including some of the visual and ethical strategies they identified in the workshop (e.g., take a photo from an interesting perspective, show a creative way of keeping yourself anonymous). As homework, participants were encouraged to practice taking photographs and take one photo that represented what engagement meant to them, so that we could troubleshoot any issues at the subsequent workshop. This approach to composition “training” centered the experiences and voices of participants rather than the expertise of a researcher or artist. At all sites, people’s experience with photography varied, and many enjoyed sharing their photographic strategies with others. During this workshop, many participants spoke about the role of photography in telling a story through narrative and metaphor. They expressed strong interest in photographs that had an affective impact on them and expressed excitement about their new skills and the task at hand.

Photographing Engagement

In the third workshop, we provided participants with clear and specific instructions for taking photos about engagement. We began by brainstorming ideas about engagement on a flip chart and shared our own understandings where appropriate. We also shared some of the engagement-related photos participants took as homework and troubleshooted issues as a group.

Each participant received a handout with instructions that we reviewed orally. Facilitators and the prompts they provide can influence the photographs that participants choose to take in any visual methods project (Gubrium, Hill, & Flicker, 2013; Luttrell, Restler, & Fontaine, 2012). To account for this and make our study more congruent with the aims of CBPR, our
instructions were developed collaboratively with the support of site representatives. We asked participants to reflect on what engagement meant to them personally, what it looked like in practice at their site (e.g., youth engagement, client engagement, volunteer engagement), and to take photos that represented their ideas. The guiding principles that framed our icebreaker in Workshop 1 were repeated throughout the instruction process: “there is no way to do this wrong” and "don’t overthink it.” Later, participants told us that this framing was encouraging, and as they moved through their day and saw objects, places, or interactions that made them think of engagement, they photographed them.

The instructions also included project guidelines (e.g., no people in photos without consent) and a secondary list of sub-prompts to help if people were stuck. Secondary prompts were tailored to each site. Many of our participants had learning disabilities, cognitive challenges (e.g., brain injuries), and physical health needs, so accessibility was important. For example, one of these sub-prompts was adapted from our object icebreaker (e.g., “at your site, the following ideas were discussed when talking about engagement...pick one from the list, and take a photograph that captures this idea or shows what it looks like in practice”). During this workshop, participants took photos and were invited to continue taking photos at home as homework, if they so desired.

**Discussion and Analysis**

Photographs were discussed as a group at Empower and PWA and in a photo-elicited interview format at Casey House (Harper, 2002) in order to accommodate accessibility needs (Switzer et al., 2015). Discussions followed an adapted version of the SHOWED method (Wang & Burris, 1997). In groups, we asked participants to briefly respond to the photograph being shown prior to hearing the photographer’s thoughts. This put a focus on the act of reading images, and lent itself to Freire’s (1973) ideas of collective meaning-making established through dialogue. During group discussions and interviews, we stressed that images could be interpreted in many ways. To centralize the producer’s intentions, we asked participants to write an accompanying narrative about their photo.

Although some participants employed a realist or docu-photo approach (e.g., a photo of a reception area to show the importance of a space), many participants relied on metaphor as a visual strategy (Figure 3). For example, Lydia photographed a bike without a wheel to illustrate the way organizations fail young people around accessibility and support. Andrew depicted a bee to show an ecological or symbiotic understanding of people living with HIV and the larger sector. Marc depicted empty chairs to show the impact of collective grief over time. Other metaphors (e.g., journey as a metaphor—not pictured) were so dominant that they warranted a specific visual analysis as published elsewhere.

Initially, I was surprised by the reliance on the figurative, as our instructions did not deliberately prompt participants to work with metaphors. However, by reflecting on our pedagogical approach, I realized that icebreakers, open-ended prompts, guidelines, and our focus on photography as a mode of inquiry (i.e., a way of thinking) likely encouraged participants to step beyond the “docu-photo” photovoice approach to a more figurative one. Metaphor may have also allowed participants to attend to ethical issues. While participants were permitted to photograph others (with consent), stigma and issues of disclosure pose unique ethical issues for HIV-related visual research, as documented extensively elsewhere (Schrader, Deering, Zahl, & Wallace, 2011; Switzer et al., 2015; Teti, Murray, Johnson, & Binson, 2012).

![Figure 3. Working with metaphor—Figurative understandings of engagement.](image-url)
Workshop 5 concluded with participants looking across their photos to identify common similarities and differences within their sites. These discussions were used to inform study findings. As a collection, participants’ photographs and associated narratives encouraged organizations to consider individual and organizational journeys, relationships (to self, other, and to the land), accessibility and support, grief and loss, advocacy and peer leadership, and non-participation (actively choosing not to participate) when thinking about engagement (Switzer et al., 2017). We also discussed how we wanted to exhibit our work. It was during these meetings that the idea for site-specific installations was born.

Preparing for Exhibition
Exhibition is a common element of photovoice (Latz, 2017). These exhibitions often follow a standard approach: photos are matted or laminated and displayed on tables or walls. In our project, participants chose to create three site-specific photo installations, in addition to displaying their 63 photographs. We exhibited these works at the launch of a collaboratively produced community report (Switzer et al., 2017).

The installations were not planned in our initial study design. The initial idea of installation was sparked by Tatiana B. Ferguson, a community co-investigator with Empower. She suggested to the group that they exhibit their photographs as a puzzle (Figure 4). During the final workshops, at subsequent sites, we shared Empower’s idea to demonstrate that participants were not limited in their exhibition options. This encouraged other sites to be imaginative, sparking inspiration for a tree installation, and a creative representation of the former hospital building (a house) (Figures 5 and 6). Prior to the exhibit, a smaller group of participants met 2–3 times (at each site) to further conceptualize and build the installations. At

Figure 4. Puzzle installation: 24” × 36” poster-sized puzzle, 100 pieces.

Figure 5. House installation: 28” × 32” × 66” house made from cardboard; photographs as shingles, wallpaper, and stained glass.
each site, we asked participants, “why a house/puzzle/tree?” to aid the creation process and provide material for artist statements, as referenced in descriptions below.

The Puzzle

At Empower, an arts-based, youth-led HIV prevention and harm reduction peer education program, participants created a puzzle out of their collective photos (Figure 4). For Empower participants, the puzzle acted as metaphor for collaboration and coming together across many different communities and program cycles. As reflected by our artist statement, “We often have many diverse identities and experiences in the room: our pieces sometimes fit, and don’t fit. A puzzle reminds us of the importance of this difference.”

We created a mock puzzle designed from participants’ photos to help us plan and conceptualize the installation. In order to create the final design, participants voted on image options drafted by one of our research assistants and offered feedback. Ultimately, the group decided on a collage comprised of participants’ photos and process photos and asked for the Empower logo to be placed centrally. Empower participants were highly creative; they were interested in ideas of engagement enacted in the doing of the work. For them, it was important that the puzzle emphasized the product and process when thinking about engagement. While planning our puzzle, they had many questions: How might the puzzle be used at a workshop or exhibition? How many pieces, and how big? How long should it take to complete? Participants stressed that it was important that audience members not know what the final image was when they assembled the puzzle. This became a striking metaphor for engagement. As taken from our artist statement,

When working on a collective project we often don’t know what the end result will be—the end “image” is a coming together of all of our different parts. It is an adventure that requires that we trust in the process, and give a piece of ourselves. This can be challenging but beautiful work.

The House

At Casey House, a sub-acute HIV hospital, clients suggested we build a replica of the former hospital (Figure 5). During the study, Casey House was in the process of moving from a small, 13-bed hospital site located in an old house to a new 58,000-square-foot purpose-built facility. At first, I was incredulous about the feasibility of this task. Our limited time, participants’ accessibility needs, and the complexity of this installation seemed like insurmountable challenges. Some participants were current in-patients at the hospital and were quite ill. However, participants had strong vision, dedication, and were very invested in the planning and execution. A small subgroup led primarily by myself, research assistants, and a community co-investigator created the blueprint and first fashioned a “shell” out of a large cardboard box.

Clients’ vision came alive when we began to build together. Together, we transformed participants’ photographs into shingles for the roof and wallpaper for the inside, carefully selecting images of the former site for this purpose. We imagined, constructed, and installed decorative elements (e.g., window boxes and chimneys). Participants added embellishing touches, like flags and stained glass modeled after the original, and crafted from participants’ photos. We wrapped the house in a plastic sheet of bricks and picked and matched paint colors. We planned landscaping.

When we discussed “why a house?” to represent engagement, participants drew on metaphors using the materials
around them—glue and tape measures—to convey their thoughts. As discussed below, it became clear that the house was more than just an architectural rendering. It was a home, representing belonging. As expressed by our artist statement,

We built it together over 3 weeks, using lots of glue and paste—the bond that holds us together. We measured angles with tape measures, “to see how far we’ve come.” It was important to take our time with the house, because “we’ve come a long way.”

As we built the house, we talked and laughed about memories in the old space and hopes for the new building. As one participant expressed, “we want to build this house so that no one forgets.”

The Tree

At PWA, an AIDS Service Organization with a large peer-led volunteer program, participants created a tree installation. The tree served as a homage to the “family of HIV”—a theme that was integral to the organization’s 30th anniversary that was happening at the time of the study (Figure 6). Together, we transferred photos onto leaves gathered from the park. Many participants had found support and acceptance at PWA, through their role as peer volunteers. Participants felt that the tree acted as a metaphor for the organization, and the leaves, for the project. As expressed by the artist statement, “The photographs produced would not be possible without the trunk of the PWA family tree. The leaves also represent the diversity of current volunteers, their journey since connecting with the agency, and the nutrients gained from previously fallen leaves.”

Beneath the tree were “fallen leaves” with tracings of participants’ photographs, which we imprinted using direct sunlight. Themes of light and darkness as connected to personal and organizational journeys were significant at this site. At PWA, as we planned for the tree, we had lengthy conversations about the tree as an ecological metaphor for volunteering at the agency and for the “stages of one’s journey through physical and emotional loss, hope, and acceptance.” The fallen leaves symbolized the volunteers who had come before and who had been lost to HIV. Many participants also spoke about the medicinal and healing qualities of leaves from marijuana plants to greenery used for healing in participants’ home countries.

Similar to participants’ photographs, these installations might not have emerged had we employed a docu-photo or realist approach to image-making. Our initial conversation about exhibition occurred after participants had looked across their collective photos. These conversations likely primed participants for thinking figuratively about engagement and may have influenced their desire to build highly symbolic installations.

Discussion

In 1970, the Museum of Modern Art hosted a photography exhibition entitled “photography into sculpture.” Called “photo sculpture,” the artistic works were created from two-dimensional photos transformed into three-dimensional and interactive forms. As their curatorial statement explained,

Photography into sculpture embraces concerns beyond those of the traditional print, or what may be turned into “flat” work, and in doing so, seeks to engender a heightened realization that art in photography has to do with interpretation and craftsmanship rather than record-making. (Bunnell, 1970, p. 1)

Even 50 years ago, it was essential that meaning not be collapsed fixedly into a single photographic image. Similarly, our installations—crafted through a facilitated photovoice process—challenged each of us (participants, researchers, and audience members alike) to reconceptualize the role of the image in our project.

Metaphor and installation may provide many productive possibilities for visual researchers. The following section reflects on the methodological implications of our process and the role of installations and metaphor as a site for synthesis and dialogue, audience reflection, and new theoretical insights in photovoice studies.

A Site for Synthesis, Dialogue, and Action

By synthesizing many of our conversations into a collective image, installations were a rich site for continuing and deepening conversations about our study topic. We built our installations following a collaborative analysis process that involved participants, community coinvestigators, and academic researchers in different configurations. Consequently, installations extended our discussions about the significance of each site’s photography collection. At PWA, our discussion about the tree was so rich that as a facilitator, I had to cut the conversation forcibly short or else we would not have finished the tree. At Casey House, participants’ insistence on the structural elements of the house helped us understand the emotional resonance between the physical space and engagement at this site.

While building, it was not about creating an exact replica of the house, rather, it was what the house symbolized that was important.) At Empower, participants’ focus on an interactive installation helped us make use of their expertise (and understandings) as peer educators. These learnings informed project findings as published elsewhere (Switzer, 2019). In contrast to the optic register of photography (i.e., how we see photographs), metaphor involves a “haptic register—what it might mean to feel photographs, and how photographs might, in turn, feel” (E. H. Brown & Phu, 2014, p. 14). In our project, many narratives and associated photographs shared painful stories of loss or the challenges of living life on the margins. For some, images were difficult to witness. Photographs often function like “sacred objects […] providing a tangible connection to a lost place, person, or object” or “a reminder of an elsewhere behind the photograph” (Cvetkovich, 2014, pp. 281–282). While this “tangible connection” was sometimes generative, it could be upsetting for some. The emotional difficulty that visuals may incite has been identified as an ethical issue...
when working with the arts in research (Boydell et al., 2012). It was important that we not cause undue harm. The act of transforming individual images into a collective installation was a productive way of working with what might otherwise be difficult material. The installations, composed as a collection of images, worked as tools to distill otherwise difficult or complex material into a single encounter—especially when dealing with issues of absence, such as loss and collective grief. Working with installation enabled us to keep our sight on the task at hand, creating a way for the audience to interact with or take up the key study themes rather than focusing on individual and sometimes painful stories shared through photos.

As we built our installations, we considered the interpretive conditions of each piece and audience interaction. At Empower, we contemplated the size and number of pieces, so that the puzzle could feasibly be completed within a certain time frame and be usable in workshops or community exhibits. At Casey House, while painting doors and window boxes, we reflected on memories of the past house and talked about what it meant to pay remembrance to this space. How “true” did the house have to be to its’ original for people to recognize it? What was the link between memory, imagination, and the feelings it evoked?

This process lent itself well to the participatory and social change elements of our work and helped us move our conversations from theory into practice. Because the installations were designed explicitly for exhibition, they were a way to collectively evoke praxis (action–reflection–action), an important tenet of photovoice. This collective theorizing can sometimes be ignored in photovoice projects, even though it is often the group-based element that sparks impetus for community change (Liebenberg, 2018). Last, participants took pride in their installations. The installations produced a lighthearted sense of competition between sites and added to a sense of ownership among participants. They quickly became a topic of conversation. Participants were often spokespeople for the installations (and the project) both formally and informally. This may have contributed to the larger community uptake of our project.

A Site for Audience Reflection

As a dynamic and interactive form, installation was a promising way to move findings outside traditional academic settings and invite audience members to engage differently with the research (Cole & McIntyre, 2008; Reshetnikov, Bogumil, Capous-Desyllas, & Lara, 2018). For example, at multiple youth conferences, myself and a team of participants presented our puzzle to young people and adult allies. Rather than telling audience members why we built a puzzle, we asked our audience to “put together the pieces” and tell us why they thought a puzzle might symbolize or be a metaphor for youth engagement, thereby enacting the pedagogical quality of the installation. This activity was often accompanied by a standard conference presentation and distributed copies of our community report. However, it was only in the doing of the puzzle that our findings came to life. Empower participants felt strongly that our installation be interactive. As youth peer educators, it was only in the doing of collaborative work—especially when working across difference toward an unknown outcome—that engagement was born.

In combining the visual, thematic, and textual data, installation art requires audience members to engage in a dynamic process of interpretation that might not happen with a flat or textual surface (O’Donoghue, 2011). At our community exhibition, our installations were created from the same 63 photos that were exhibited on the walls as 8 × 10 prints. I watched as audience members physically interacted with installations. I noticed that while most individuals read photo narratives at the same time as they viewed the photo, many participants chose not to read the installation artist statements or did so only after interacting with the installation. While a study on audience perception is beyond the scope of this study, I suspect that even the photographs portraying metaphorical content (Figure 3), when shared with a narrative, might have been read as direct reflections of participants’ experiences or understandings. This is not a critique—at its best, photovoice ought to foreground participant voice. The project was intentionally designed to showcase stakeholders’ diverse understandings of engagement in order to encourage organizations to think more deeply about their practices of inclusion. However, perhaps because of their unlikely and collectively produced form, our installations may have challenged our audience to not just consume participants’ understandings but to ask questions about engagement as a phenomenon and their involvement in these very processes as either community members or organizational decision-makers (or both).

If framed appropriately, images can introduce multiple entrances, readings, and perspectives into an understanding of an issue, thereby expanding opportunities for the uptake of research (Capous-Desyllas & Morgaine, 2018; Weber, 2008). Through interacting with the installations, audience members were provided with a window or door that might move one from questions of “what is this?” to “what could this be?” As audiences peaked through windows of the house, shuffled puzzle pieces, or walked around the tree to see photographic leaves from different angles, they were met with a sensory and immersive experience. As O’Donoghue (2011) writes,

"[T]he installation requires viewers to engage in a dynamic process of meaning-making that is contingent upon searching for and making connections between what is represented, what is suggested, and what is imagined. [...] In this type of work, meaning is generated through interaction and negotiation with the work. (pp. 644, 647–648)"

Installations did not serve as direct reflections on reality. The 63 photos were the same, but the form that the installations took left the meaning much more open.

Last, working with installation may be a generative site to move findings into practice. It is often not feasible to show the
full set of photographs at a conference or workshop. Created from the collective photos of each site, our installations included all of our exhibited photos and crystallized these findings into three memorable images that invited audiences to understand both the summative and affective dimensions of our study. For example, during a community panel, one of our community investigators spoke evocatively to an audience of service providers and community members about the importance of chosen family and “home” for long-term HIV survivors. He encouraged organizations to dismantle preconceived ideas and think “outside the box” when thinking about engagement. His speech was powerful, but it was only when he pointed to the bricks and mortar of the house (initially built from a giant cardboard box)—that the audience sighed—signaling that his point may have “arrived home.” It was in this moment that I understood the degree to which many participants felt ownership over the installations and the project.

A Site for Theorizing

In our project, I was invested in cocreating a space where we could co-theorize and grapple with what we meant by the term and practice of engagement. I also came to the project with unique theoretical interests. Participants’ interest in installation and metaphor is particularly apt, given my interest in the “beyond” of engagement work, as alluded to above. I could never have guessed that this is where we would have ended up.

In the text Art Beyond Itself, García Canclini (2014) challenges us to think carefully about the role of art and, in particular, metaphor for working against easy, simple answers. For García Canclini (2014), the role of the artist is not to supply missing information but instead to construct “spaces where we can see and think in a different way” (p. 115). For Canclini, metaphor can accomplish this by getting something to remain unresolved. Our installations and metaphorical images translated ideas without nailing down any one meaning. Instead of fixing engagement as either a means or an end, as a curated collection, participants’ photographs and our coproduced installations became a way for us (myself, participants, and audience members) to ask new questions about what is possible when thinking about engagement within community-based HIV organizations. The installations and metaphorical images were certainly not what one might expect, given how engagement is often discussed in health as a biomedical-, individual-, or behavior-based phenomenon (Barello et al., 2012; Chiu, 2008). Our project didn’t fit—this was precisely its strength.

This is particularly important, given the initial aims and the larger goals for this project: to encourage organizations to think more deeply, and in nuanced ways about centering the voices and lived experiences of people living with or impacted by HIV in programming or policy change. We needed to shift the frame. Metaphor’s ability to create ruptures, work outside language, and submit to what Barthes calls the “intractable” passage is a way of achieving what Sandoval (2000) refers to as differential consciousness—a technology of the Methodology of the Oppressed. Drawing on Barthes, Sandoval argues that this strategy can be used to deconstruct dominant ideologies that appear as natural, such as “engagement as an instrumental, apolitical means” or a “fixed end.”

Audience members frequently commented how surprised they were by how much emotion was evoked when reading the work. The nonfixity of meaning in metaphor may be what helps to carry an image’s emotional impact along. In other words, we are convinced because it is not rational (McKay, 2001). Similar to Barthes’s (2003) punctum, that which “wounds” or “pricks me” (p. 25), metaphor may pull the viewer into a subjective experience. As McKay argues, metaphor is “a form of knowing which ‘counters the primordial grasp’” (McKay, 2001, p. 26, drawing on Levinas). I am regularly haunted by the image of the chairs in Figure 3. The empty chairs are symbolic of the loss we encountered in the project. The image, and its associated metaphor, pricks and bruises me. Images like this one are lodged in my memory. But even this understanding of loss can’t quite be articulated—it floats. I cannot grasp it. It is not “a vestige of the other, but a translation of it” (McKay, 2001, p. 28, italics original).

Conclusion

How might we think differently about the role of images in our photovoice projects? Not as vehicles for supplying missing information but as “the invention of cognitive openings or networks?” (García Canclini, 2014, p. 77). The materiality of an image has profound consequences for how it is interpreted (Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Mitchell, 2011). Yet the crafted nature of visuals is rarely explored in detail in visual methods literature (Brushwood Rose & Low, 2014). Furthermore, while community exhibits in photovoice are common, rarely do scholars describe whether or how participants are involved in exhibit development (Evans-Agnew & Rosemberg, 2016). This is surprising given photovoice’s focus on “empowerment,” participation, reflexivity, and social change. Photovoice will not create social change by itself (Liebenberg, 2018; Nykiforuk et al., 2011). Thus, if a goal of PVMs is to invite critical reflection on an issue, researchers may want to explore pedagogical and methodological approaches that open up meaning rather than foreclose it. Furthermore, practitioners ought to remain open to new ways for images to be seen across different sites, audiences, and modalities (Mitchell et al., 2017).

In this article, I explored the methodological and pedagogical elements of a photovoice project that focused on engagement in the HIV sector. This project led to the creation of photographs that relied heavily on metaphor as a visual strategy and three site-specific installations created explicitly for exhibition. By reflecting on my theoretical orientations to photography and our methodological and pedagogical process, I show how certain design elements led to the development of installations and photographs that relied on metaphor as a crafted strategy. Together, these metaphorical images and installations opened up new possibilities for synthesis, dialogue, action, and dissemination. As one policy maker said when
thinking about peer programming at her organization, “this work is making us think differently.” Revisiting the role of the image in photovoice studies may allow us to fashion photovoice projects not to reflect on pre-existing ideas but to create new ones.

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Notes

1. We must also consider how our subject locations (e.g., gender, race, ability, sexual orientation) and life experiences shape our ways of looking and thinking (Moosa-Mitha, 2005).
2. I am grateful to Jessica Thalman and Ryan Van Der Hout for their workshop “Cut, Fold, Scratch: How to Lovingly Degrade and Manipulate Your Photographs” hosted at Gallery 44 in Toronto, Canada, in 2016.
3. It was important to disrupt hierarchical understandings of quality or “goodness.” As Tavin (2007) argues, drawing on the work of Bourdieu, the concept of aesthetic goodness is historically loaded.
4. Images in Figures 4–6 were graciously provided by Fonna Seidu.

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