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Telling migrant stories in collaborative photography research: Photographic practices and the mediation of migrant voices

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Abstract
This article examines how photographic practices in collaborative research might mediate migrant voices. It looks at the case of Shutter Stories, a collaborative photography project featuring images by Indian and Korean migrants in Manila, the Philippines. Drawing on life-story interviews and participant observation data, I identify two ways that the photographic selection practices in the project mediated the migrants' photo essays. One is how subject selection practices led the participants to use both strategic and 'medium' essentialism in choosing their topics. The second is how technique selection practices enabled the participants to express vernacular creativity in crafting their images. I argue that the mediation instantiated by Shutter Stories fostered the participants' ability to use photo essays to articulate voices that simultaneously conveyed their personal stories and engaged the viewing public. However, I also identify the limits of this mediation, indicating how future projects can better enable migrant voices.

This article enquires into the articulation of socially marginalized voices within photography-based collaborative research projects. It particularly unpacks how photo essays created by migrant cultural minorities might be mediated by the interplay of a project and an individual's practices of photography. This mediation offers the promise of creating spaces that enable migrants to express voices that productively fuse institutional and everyday life photographic practices. It also runs the risk of putting migrants in the difficult situation of trying to articulate voices that need to address the potentially incongruent objectives of two distinct forms of photographic practice (Pink, 2006; see also Banks, 2007; Burgess, 2006).

In this article, I complicate our understanding of how photography mediates voice, defined here as 'the human capacity to give an account of themselves and of their place in the world' (Couldry, 2010: 10). There is already extant research on the diversity of the migrant experience and its influence on the kinds of photographic stories told by cultural minority groups. These have been conducted in places as

diverse as Singapore (Ye, 2013), London (Datta, 2011) and north Denmark (Pristed Nielsen and Faber, 2014). Together with these works, however, it is also important to look at the specific practices surrounding photography in collaborative research and their capacity to shape the stories that migrants tell. This is because these practices create specific conditions 'from which it is possible for [project] participants to speak, to perform or to represent themselves' (Buckingham, 2009: 648).

There has been some work on the role of various visual media in participatory research (for example, Mitchell, 2011; Pink, 2006; Sutherland and Cheng, 2009). These have not necessarily been concerned, however, with articulating how the very practice of photography in collaborative research might mediate such voices. It is this gap in the literature that I intend to address. To do this, I use the case of *Shutter Stories*: *A Photography Exhibition on the Life of Indians and Koreans in Manila* (which I will refer to throughout the rest of this article as *Shutter Stories*). This was a research project I initiated but worked on collaboratively with the five Indian and four Korean migrants whose works were featured in the exhibition, and two photography scholars from a top university in the Philippines. This project was meant to create an 'interruption' (Pinchevski, 2005) in the way the Philippine capital of Manila, a 12-million strong mega-city, has symbolically marginalized its two most visible migrant groups: its 114,500 Koreans and its 67,000 Indians (MOFAT, 2009; Salazar, 2008).

As I discuss in an earlier piece (Cabañes, 2014), Manila is an important case for nuancing our understanding of the migrant experience. The Philippine capital gestures to the broader reality that the dynamics of multiculturalism in the postcolonial cities of the Global South can differ significantly from the often-discussed global cities of the Global North. What one finds in Manila are not migrants who are marginalized both economically and symbolically. There are instead Indians and Koreans who are generally better off financially compared to the locals, but who are nevertheless portrayed in pernicious ways by the Manila-centric Philippine national media and in the public discourses of Manila's local Filipinos. Indians are stereotyped as the *bumbay*, a smelly, turban-wearing, heavily bearded male who rides his motorcycle into the narrow alleys of the capital's poor neighbourhoods. He works as a loanshark, preying on desperate locals who have no choice but to agree to an usurious lending scheme in order to borrow money or purchase home appliances. Koreans are depicted as moneyed but nevertheless *weird invaders* who have decided to come to the Philippines in droves. They are described as foreigners who stick out like a sore thumb because they do not make enough of an effort to acculturate and instead display naïve, self-centred, and reckless behaviours.

In an attempt to interrupt these problematic representations, *Shutter Stories* sought to foster a space wherein its Indian and Korean participants could create photo essays that articulated their own perspectives on migrant life in Manila. The project began in July 2011, when I worked together with the two photography scholars I mentioned earlier, whom I will refer to in this work by the pseudonyms Terri and Ricky. The three of us gave the Indian and Korean participants a series of seminars on basic photography, photo narration, and photo selection. This then led to the participants crafting their own photo essays. The project culminated in August 2011, when I organized a week-long public exhibition of the participants' photo essays in one of the largest shopping malls in Manila.

To sum up, this article reveals the ways in which the photographic practices surrounding *Shutter Stories* mediated the migrant voices of the project's Indian and Korean participants. I show how the photographic selection practices that emerged from the project opened up a space that not only fostered their ability to craft narratives about migrant life in Manila, but also did so in a way that moved their different personal life projects forward.

A mediational approach to photographic selection practices in action research

As the broad conceptual frame for this research, I use Roger Silverstone's (1999, 2002) concept of mediation. This refers to the 'fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process in which institutionalized media of communication … are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life' (Silverstone, 2002: 761). Silverstone contends that what makes this process uneven is that it is often the institutionalized media that primarily define and determine the meanings that are attached to our shared social symbols. But he also says that the process is dialectical because the users and consumers of the media also creatively engage and even challenge – with different degrees of success – the institutionalized meanings of these shared symbols.

Central to understanding mediation then is 'the instability and flux of meanings and … their transformations … [and] the politics of their fixing' (Silverstone, 1999: 16). This article attends to these aspects by looking at the ways in which migrant narratives are shaped by the interface between two key dimensions of mediation (see Thumim, 2012). One is institutional mediation, which is about how institutional spaces like the one offered by collaborative research projects shape migrants' representation of themselves. The other is cultural mediation, which is concerned with how the cultural formations wherein the migrants are embedded also shape these self-representations.

To map these dimensions of mediation onto the specificities of photographic practice in collaborative research, I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's (2003 [1990]) work, *On Photography.* Strongly paralleling the concept that mediation is situated in the interface between its institutional and cultural dimensions, Bourdieu argues that photography is a cultural form located in between the contradictory cultural spheres of institutional and the popular (see Figure 1). Indeed, the dynamics of institutional mediation can be seen in institutional photography, in that the latter pertains to the medium as an institutionalized cultural form passed on as a specialized and consecrated body of knowledge. The dynamics of cultural mediation is similarly present in popular photography, as the latter relates to the medium being an everyday cultural form subject to the tastes of people as users/consumers.

In order to explore the kind of mediation that emerges from the interplay between the conflicting tendencies of institutional and popular photography in collaborative research, I attend to the ways that they impinge on two key photographic selection practices: that of choosing what photographic subjects to focus on and of what photographic techniques to use (Pink, 2007). I indicate how these photographic selection practices might matter to migrant voices, whether in positive ways that foster them or in problematic ways that undermine them.
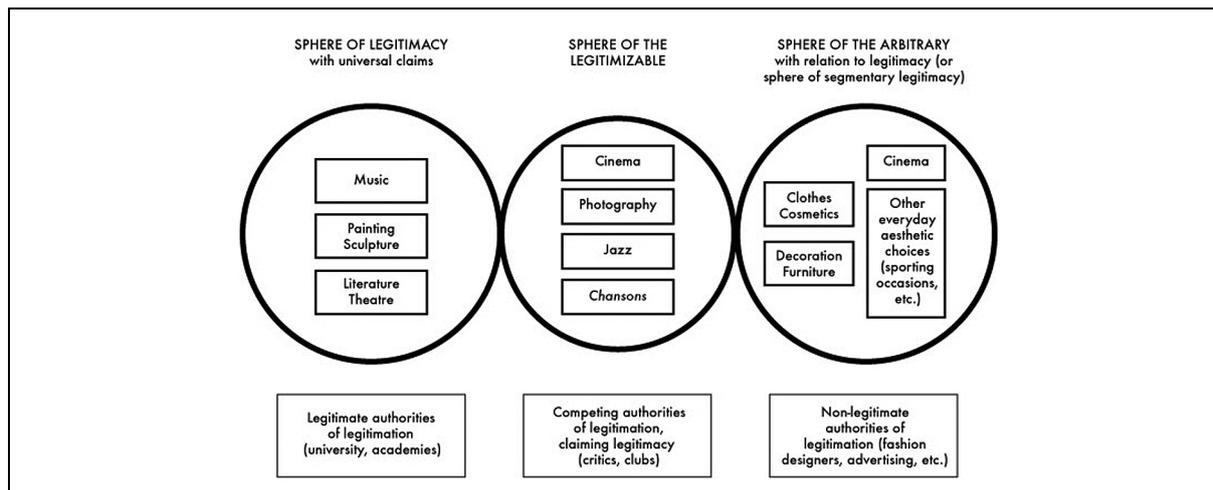
Figure 1. Bourdieu's hierarchy of cultural legitimacy

Subject selection practices

In collaborative research, the way that institutional photography matters to how photographic subject selection mediates migrant voices is anchored in the design of a particular project. When researchers delineate the kinds of photographic subjects that participants can choose, it is because they want to ensure that the participants' images contribute to answering a project's research questions (Grady, 2004). Consequently, the subject selection practices they espouse are those that conform to a project's methodological requirements. Researchers also want participants' images to fit into the social change agenda of a project (Becker, 2004). As such, they would prefer subject selection practices that align with a project's ideological framework.

This does not mean that collaborative researchers do not question the inevitable power inequalities that arise from how they conduct research. If anything, many are uneasy about how this condition makes their desire to work together with participants problematic. As Marcus Banks (2007) explains, some researchers are averse to unilaterally setting boundaries on the subjects that participants can feature in photographs and favour setting boundaries through a process of negotiation with them. Banks says that some researchers actually end up closely coordinating with participants through every step of the subject selection process, while others end up stepping back and allowing participants to take control of the process. Despite this corrective mechanism, the reality is that photographs in collaborative research will always be produced in an 'experimental context', since they are created in spaces set up by researchers (Rich and Chalfen in Ramella and Olmos, 2005). But at least this mechanism provides a way to mitigate the power inequalities that arise from such endeavours (see Chaplin, 1994).

Also significant in the way photographic subject selection mediates migrant voices is the influence of popular photography rooted in everyday photographic practice. This is because the default for most project participants is to take photographs the way 'ordinary people' do and so produce images that draw from a common range of subjects in everyday photography (Harrison, 2002). As many researchers have observed (for example, Holland, 2004; Slater, 1995), the subjects of everyday photography primarily revolve around two things: special people (such as

family, friends and other loved ones) and special events (such as tours, holidays and leisure trips).

This predominant pattern in how ordinary people select their photographic subjects stems from the interplay of several important social forces that shape the practice of photography in the everyday. One is class *habitus*, something that Bourdieu (2003 [1990]) argues for strongly. He says that people select photographic subjects on the basis of what is acceptable to their particular social class and, in so doing, maintain and reinforce existing social class relations. There are, of course, other equally important social forces at play in this selection process. These include gender, as in the case of happy family photographs glossing over various kinds of abuse that women might suffer at home, and race, as in the case of tourist photographs being rooted in the colonialist interest in the exotic (Holland, 2004). There are also more benign manifestations of existing social arrangements that shape the process. For example, selecting specific subjects can help create and sustain positive interpersonal and community relationships (Van House et al., 2005) and contribute to the maintenance of traditional cultural group values (Pinney, 1997).

The influence of both institutional and popular photography in photographic subject selection practices produces a mediation of voice wherein 'the intentions and objectives of researchers and informants combine in their negotiations in order to determine the content of the photographs' (Pink, 2007: 76). Depending on the outcome of this process, this mediation can provide a narrative framework from wherein migrants can productively articulate their photographic stories. Conversely, it can act as a narrative imposition that can stifle the kinds of stories that migrants would like to tell.

In the case of *Shutter Stories*, the resultant mediation provided the migrant participants with two helpful principles for choosing what photo essays to work on*.* One was strategic essentialism, which was about choosing stories that tactically mobilized a unified but simplified version of one's cultural identity in order to effectively speak against the cultural hegemony of a dominant social group (see Spivak, 1988; see also Pratt, 1991). The other principle was something that I labelled as 'medium essentialism', which was about choosing stories that deliberately adopted a narrow range of narrative strategies that were generally assumed to be best suited to the photographic medium (see Hutchby, 2001). I discuss both these principles at length in the latter half of this article.

Selecting photographic techniques

In collaborative research, the degree to which institutional photography impinges on how photographic technique selection mediates migrant voices strongly depends on the visual data that researchers need for their work. Some researchers minimize their intervention because part of their research agenda is to observe participants' existing practices of selecting photographic techniques (see Sharples et al., 2003). Others aim to provide a template for how participants should take photographs, in order to provide visual support for their work (see Pinney, 1997). Finally, there are also those who might also influence participants' selection of photographic techniques in terms of skill (Banks, 2007). This is especially the case when participants do not possess the necessary skills to participate in a particular

photography project. Researchers attempt to intervene in these instances so that participants do not end up concentrating far more on '"getting [the image(s)] right" technically than on the image(s) they are seeking to create' (Banks, 2007: 82).

Meanwhile, the influence of popular photography on how photographic technique selection mediates migrant voices is seen in the set of local photographic conventions to which ordinary people subscribe (Banks, 2007; Pink, 2007). As Bourdieu (2003 [1990]) contends, in selecting specific photographic techniques, people tend to mirror a particular society's social values. For him, 'the popular "aesthetic" expressed in photographs and in the judgments passed on photographs follows on logically from the social functions conferred upon photography, and from the fact that it is always given a social function' (Bourdieu, 2003 [1990]: 80). I agree with this claim, in that people do draw from photographic conventions rooted in social function. I would say though that these conventions are based not merely on social class, but on broader cultural cosmologies. Take for instance the anthropological works that show how vernacular rules govern the ways in which portraits are taken in India (Pinney, 1997) and how wedding photographs are taken in South Korea (Kendall, 2006).

It is important to point out that people also express agentic creativity by combining local photographic conventions with other popular photographic practices, especially the production logics of the creative industries (Burgess, 2006). This often manifests itself in how they attempt to take photographs that apply visual codes current among industry professionals. People might, for instance, appropriate popular photographic genre codes (for example, advertising photography and fashion photography) as well as reference particular popular culture trends (for example, the celebritization of their self-representations and the use of iconic images as photographic pegs). In so doing, they assert their capacity to put together available cultural resources for their own expressive purposes.

If institutional and popular photography synergize in the practice of selecting photographic techniques – that is, when researchers are able to properly harness the everyday life practices of migrants – then a collaborative project can mediate migrant voices in manner that enables the emergence of vernacular creativity. This is something that Burgess (2006) defines as a productive articulation of distinct communicative practices. If the control that the researchers exert on photographic technique selection is incompatible with the goals of the research, however, then the mediation produced not only runs the risk of closing off particular narrative opportunities that participants might think about. It might also fail to build the goodwill with participants that is so central to collaborative projects or, worse, end up supplanting the participants' voices with their own (Banks, 2007).

In *Shutter Stories*, the photographic technique selection practices did create a mediation that opened up a space for the migrants to express vernacular creativity (Burgess, 2006). The project allowed them to creatively fuse together professional and everyday photography, as they drew on elements of both in constructing their photo essays. I return to this assertion in the second half of this article.

Table 1. The *Shutter Stories* Indian participants.

Name	Sex	Age	Civil status	Ethnic affiliation	Occupation	Migration history
Amisha	F	21	single	Other	freelance make-up artist	2nd generation
Sukhprit	F	19	single	Punjabi	undergraduate student	2nd generation
Roshni	F	20	single	Sindhi	undergraduate student	2nd generation
Anil	M	23	single	Sindhi	advertising account manager	2nd generation
Preet	M	22	single	Punjabi	advertising strategic planner	2nd generation

Table 2. The *Shutter Stories* Korean participants.

Name	Sex	Age	Civil status	Occupation	Migration history
Sonya	F	22	single	undergraduate student	1st generation
Sang Mi	F	24	single	undergraduate student	1st generation
Hae Jin	M	24	single	undergraduate student	1st generation
Matt	M	23	single	undergraduate student	1st generation

Methodology

The data I use for this article comes from the two phases of the *Shutter Stories* project. I conducted the life-story interviews with the project's five Indian and four Korean participants during the first phase of the project (see Table 1 and Table 2). In this earlier preparation phase, I also talked to another 12 Indians and 11 Koreans, seeking to understand how the social issues they faced in Manila were imbricated in the pernicious mediation of multiculturalism in the city (Cabañes, 2014). I did the participant observation in the second phase of the project. It was in this latter implementation phase that I worked together with the photography scholars Terri and Ricky as well as the project participants in putting together the *Shutter Stories* exhibition. I use in particular the field notes and audio recordings that I made during the photography seminars that preceded the public exhibition (see also Cabañes, 2017).

Throughout *Shutter Stories*, I took the position of 'participant as observer' during the seminars (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 93). I was a participant and an insider because of my role as project organizer; I worked closely with the photography scholars facilitating the seminars and also with the nine migrant participants. I was also an observer and an outsider because of my role as a researcher; apart from collecting field notes and audio recordings during the seminars, I also took a step back and examined the process that the participants and I were undergoing. Being an insider-outsider allowed me to gain a complex understanding of how the Indian and Korean participants found the project enabling and, at times, disabling of their individual voices (see Mac an Ghaill, 1996).

Apart from my own subject position, it is also important to discuss the composition of the nine participants in the project. They shared a number of strikingly similar characteristics that, interestingly, turned out to be instrumental in helping me convince them to join the high-commitment project. Their relatively young age and their unmarried status meant that they had schedules that were more flexible than some of the other life-story interviewees who had heavier family and professional duties. Their university experience also made the photography seminars a familiar set-up, unlike some of the other interviewees, who might have found the format rather daunting. Finally, their interest in photography meant that they were keen to learn more about it and get recognition for doing it too, unlike some of the other interviewees who might have been less interested in or more apprehensive about the craft.

Finally, it is crucial to review how the research ethics surrounding participant anonymity was dealt with in a project with a considerable public-facing component. For the collaborative photography exhibition, I discussed with the participants the implications of making their names public. While most of them sought to be publicly recognized for the photographic work they did, two of them requested anonymity. I made sure to respect these wishes. For this article, I went through a second process of discussion with the participants. And in this instance, they all requested that their anonymity be kept. I have thus changed their names and some identifying details about them. I have also selected photographs that do not easily give away their identities.

Photographic subject selection and its essentialisms

To unpack how the photographic selection practices in *Shutter Stories* mediated the voices of the project's Indian and Korean participants, I first turn to the ways in which the migrant participants selected their photographic subjects. In this project, the mediation produced by the interplay between institutional and popular photography resulted in the emergence of two principles for choosing subjects that allowed the participants to tell personally relevant but also publicly engaging narratives about migrant life in Manila. As I mentioned earlier, the participants' based their choices on strategic essentialism and 'medium essentialism'.

Strategic essentialism

The strategic essentialism that the migrant participants used in selecting their photographic subjects was about tactically using a unified but simplified notion of Indian-ness and Korean-ness to challenge the predominant worldviews of the Filipino cultural majority (see Spivak, 1988). In choosing the topics for their photo essays, they all went for those that positively depicted their cultural groups and, crucially, challenged the negative stereotypes that Manila's local Filipinos had about them.

The way in which institutional photography contributed to the emergence of this strategic essentialism can be traced to my involvement in the project. At the start of the photo narration seminar, I, in my capacity as project organizer and researcher, made it clear that my interest in initiating *Shutter Stories* was driven by my research findings about Manila's pernicious representations of the Indians as the *bumbay* and the Koreans as *weird invaders* (for a full explanation of this, see Cabañes, 2014). By sharing my research with the participants, I aimed to establish the social change agenda that undergirded our collaborative research project (see Becker, 2004).

Meanwhile, the way in which popular photography helped cement the use of strategic essentialism in the project can be attributed to the participants' engagement with my research findings. What happened was that they found their own experiences resonating with my findings, as they themselves have experienced how Manila's simplistic representation of its Indians and Koreans impinged on their everyday lives. This led to them sharing the same interest in making photo essays that would interrupt the pernicious mediation of multiculturalism in Manila.

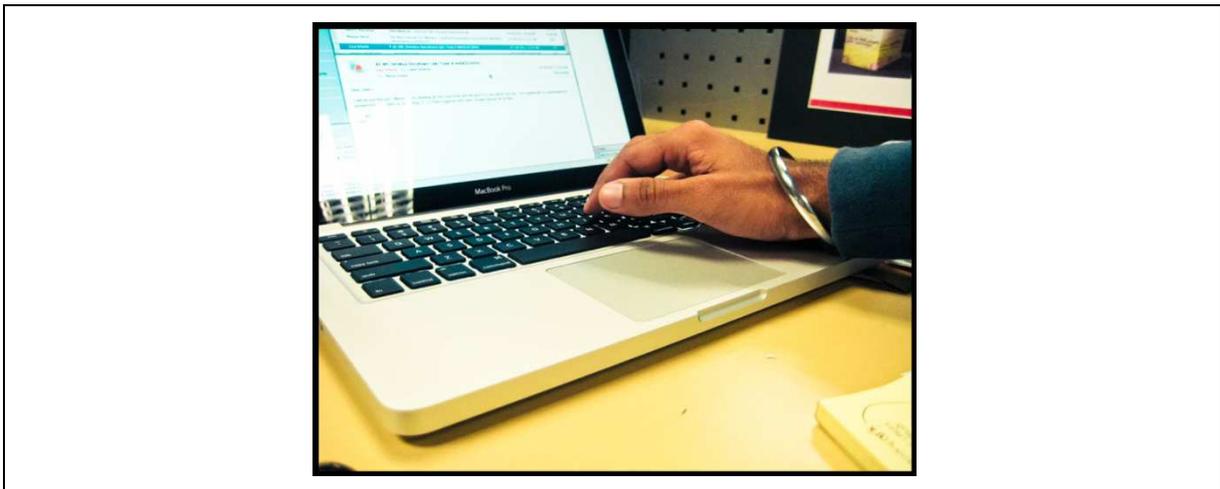**Figure 2.** Photo 2 in Preet's photo essay

Figure 3. Photo 6 in Preet's photo essay

Take for example, Preet (22, male, Punjabi Indian). He said that he was deeply affected by how many of his male relatives in Manila's Punjabi Indian community – most especially his beloved father – fitted the *bumbay* stereotype. Because of the ridicule that local Filipinos heaped on his relatives, he could not help but be ferociously committed to promoting his Punjabi Indian heritage. 'Who wouldn't be pissed?' he once asked me rhetorically. At the same time, Preet said that he was also concerned about whether Manila's wider Filipino society would accept him, especially since he did not fit the *bumbay* mould. He wanted to have a sense of affinity with local Filipinos because his own worldview was more akin to that of the city's middle- and upper-class locals, since he was heavily influenced by the kind of intellectual currents he encountered and the friendships he had developed in Manila's private schools. As he said: 'I can't really deny that, in some important ways, I am also very Filipino.' For his photo essay then, he wanted a topic that addressed the ambivalent feelings he had towards the *bumbay* stereotype. To this end, he thought of putting together photographs that placed in parallel his father and himself (for example, see Figures 2 and 3). He said that he wanted to express his pride in his father, even if his father engaged in money-lending and, in many ways, fitted the stereotype of the *bumbay*. At the same time, he also wanted to express his pride in himself as a strategic planner in

one of Manila's top advertising companies and, as such, as an Indian who has managed to break free from the *bumbay* stereotype.

Another example would be Sang Mi (24, female), who wanted to break down the idea of Koreans as *weird invaders*. Sang Mi shared her ambivalent feelings about her life as an international student in Manila. She said that she really wanted to be friends with local Filipinos. For instance, she talked about her love for jeepneys, the iconic public transport vehicle of Manila, saying: 'I love the jeepney. You see different people, you pass around the money, you say "*Para*!" (Stop!). There's real interaction with Filipinos.' But then again, Sang Mi often felt rebuffed by the locals. The worst of these were her multiple experiences of being victimized by petty crime, which made her careful in talking to locals. As she put it: 'You become more concerned about being alert than about being friendly after your phone gets stolen twice.' She also tried to make friends with her local Filipino classmates at university, but found them elusive and distant towards her. They would greet her '*An-nyung-ha-se-yo*!' (Hello!), but would not really be interested in hanging out with her. For her photo essay then, Sang Mi chose to tell a narrative – cheerful but with tinged with loneliness – about how Koreans could be loveable friends. As an attempt at breaking the stereotypes about Koreans in Manila, she took portraits of some of the international friends she had made in university. In all these portraits, her friends held a red heart-shaped paper cut-out that she made. The cut-out carried the text 'I love you Korea!', written in both Hangul and English (for example, see Figure 4).

From the cases above, it is clear that the principle of strategic essentialism proved helpful in fostering the migrant participants' voices. Crucial to this was that they felt that the project's ideological frame intersected meaningfully with their own personal life projects. In responding to the project's aim of challenging the pernicious mediation of multiculturalism in Manila, the participants found themselves telling stories that not only used the stuff of everyday photography to reflect the experiences they broadly shared with their cultural groups (see Bourdieu, 2003 [1990]; Harrison, 2002; Holland, 2004; Slater, 1995), they also found themselves crafting narratives that paralleled personal issues that they were struggling with in their own individual lives (see Archer, 2007).

Medium essentialism

As I previously posited, I would like to call the second principle that emerged in the project as 'medium essentialism'. Riffing on the reification of the notion that different media have distinct affordances (see Hutchby, 2001), this pertains to how one believes in the need to harness the particular narrative strategies that are best suited to a particular medium. 'Medium essentialism' manifested itself in *Shutter Stories* through the claim that the photograph is best suited to telling narratives that maximize the visual language (see Harrison, 2003; Messaris, 1997).

Figure 4. Photo 4 in Sang Mi's photo essay

The way in which this 'medium essentialism' was rooted in institutional photography could be seen in how Terri and Ricky, the two photography scholars involved in the project, wanted to ensure that the migrant participants crafted photo essays that harnessed the properties of the image, so that these had stronger chances of instantiating an interruption. Towards the end of the photo narration seminar, Ricky in particular helped the participants think through whether and how the initial stories they had identified could be feasibly told in a visually powerful way.

The parameters that Ricky set were helpful in allowing the participants to exercise their voice. These forced the migrants to think about the logistical challenges they might encounter in attempting to tell their proposed stories. Take, for instance, Amisha (21, female, other Indian), who originally wanted to do a photo essay documenting a day in the life her older brother, Sharma (25, male, other Indian). Amisha explained that she wanted to explore how Sharma broke the *bumbay* mould, despite still being a moneylender. Instead of going around on a motorcycle, he went around in an expensive sports utility vehicle (SUV). And instead of lending money to the lower class, his customers were mostly middle-class businesspeople.

Ricky discussed with Amisha the possible pitfalls in her idea, most especially how Sharma's customers, middle class as they were, might not want to be photographed borrowing money. And if Amisha attempted to be more covert about her project and use a hidden camera for instance, then she would be entangled in ethical issues around taking photographs. Amisha eventually changed her plans and told a different story. She said that Ricky was right, as even Sharma himself told her that 'his clients wouldn't want me taking shots of them. That'd be rude.'

While this 'medium essentialism' did not create tensions with almost all the participants, it did so in the case of Anil (23, male, Sindhi Indian). This incident crystallized how the tendency for popular photography might creatively – if not always successfully – negotiate with the tendency for institutional photography. During a conversation with Ricky, Anil said that he wanted to tell a story about how his being a Filipino-Indian figured in his passion for cooking. He was keen to tell this story since it spoke to his being a frustrated chef. He wanted to explore the issue of his cultural identity in relation to a long-held regret about him turning down a culinary arts scholarship and attending university instead.

Ricky said that this story seemed to be really important to Anil and might also be potentially interesting to other people. Taste, however, was something that photography would not be able to capture well. Anil disagreed with this, saying that taste could be captured visually. He said that, perhaps, he could show the Indian twist to his dishes by adding hints of the food's spiciness, such as focusing on the chili and emphasizing the red colour of a dish. After much deliberation, Ricky managed to convince Anil to let go of this topic and work on an altogether different topic instead. Anil's desire to reflect on his hybrid cultural identity did become more visually powerful and publicly engaging when he crafted a different photo essay about how he knew the twists and turns of the innards of inner city Manila. But his desire to also reflect on his being a frustrated chef no longer figured his photo essay. It can be said then that Ricky's intervention helped Anil to articulate a stronger voice, but then also limited Anil's ability to take full control of it. (see Rich and Chalfen in Ramella and Olmos, 2005).

Photographic technique selection and vernacular creativity

I now turn to the migrant participants' photographic technique selection practices. In this process, the mediation borne out of the interaction between institutional and popular photography generated a form of vernacular creativity. Overall, this helped contribute to making *Shutter Stories* a space that fostered the voices of its migrant participants (see Burgess, 2006).

At the heart of this vernacular creativity was an equal recognition of the value of institutional photography and popular photography; that is, having the participants use the photographic conventions of professional media but also allowing them to use the photographic techniques they wanted. Asking the participants to consider the former mattered in strengthening their voice. As Terri and Ricky, the photography scholars, argued, this helped increase the possibility that the photo essays the participants were creating would actually engage the public. This was something that I myself supported and was precisely the reason why I requested the photography scholars to be involved in the project. But the same time, allowing the participants to use the latter was important in their exercise of voice. This helped reinforce their belief in their capacity to articulate their narratives, since it allowed them tell their photo essays in their own terms (see Gauntlett, 2011).

Figure 5. Photo 6 in Sukhpreet's photo essay

On one level, these two concerns mapped well onto each other. All of us in the project certainly shared similar aesthetic resources for judging and constructing images; we all consumed and appreciated images produced by the professional media. This led to a positive mediation of migrant voices, in that the photography lessons the photography scholars offered gave the participants confidence in being able to exercise their voices. These lessons made them feel they had the knowledge necessary to produce professional images.

The migrant participants were excited to learn about professional photographic techniques from Terri, who led the basic photography seminar. These techniques included making use of photographic elements like lighting, texture, focus, angling, composition, and colour. Sukhpreet (19, female, Indian), for example, created a portrait of her mother – whom she fondly called *Maa* – as an exemplar of a traditional Indian woman. Sukhpreet said that by painting a complex portrait of her mother, she sought challenge the *bumbay* stereotype. In her photographs, she was deliberate in using composition, among many elements, to convey a narrative that would nuance how Filipinos saw Indians. She talked about one image, for instance, where sought to capture how their home life was characterized by the combination of the modern and the traditional (see Figure 5). She explained:

> Here [in this photograph], the modern part would be those signs on the doors [of the rooms of my brother and of myself]. Then the traditional part would be prayer area…. In a way, I'm trying to capture that despite how my brother and I are Westernized in so many ways, Maa keeps us tied to our Indian culture.

The participants were also inspired by Ricky's seminar about the different narrative techniques in photo essays, like following the day in the life of a character, playing on contrast by juxtaposing images, and covering the unfolding of an event. Matt (23, male, Korean) said that he chose to play with the 'day in the life' template in sequencing the images for his photo essay. He found this narrative technique useful because he wanted to convey a story that showed local Filipinos that Korean students were not necessarily wealthy. He sought to give the locals a glimpse of daily life in his decrepit dormitory that had 'so many insects inside' and sometimes had 'no electricity … [with] the lights just turn[ing] off' (see Figure 6). It was important for Matt to tell this

story because he also felt that it was difficult to establish meaningful links with local Filipinos. Even if he wanted to make friends, he ended up staying mostly in his dormitory 'because it [was] just easier' that way. He whiled away his time using his laptop to communicate with his girlfriend back in Korea.

On one other level, the attempt at vernacular creativity led to two isolated cases of tension. In these cases, the photography scholars and the migrant participants did not see eye-to-eye as regards the aesthetic quality of the participants' own photographs. Embedded as they were in the 'institution' of professional photography, Terri and Ricky considered the works of the participants as amateur. This was not a derogatory judgment, but more of a professional observation that the participants' works had yet to reflect mastery in maximizing the potential of the photographic medium.

Preet (22, male, Punjabi Indian), most especially, did not see his images in the way that the photography scholars did. He believed that working in advertising had honed his skills with visuals, images included. He said that he often got a lot of praise from his colleagues because of the visual impact of his presentation slides. Preet's understanding of powerful visuals was actually reflected in the slides he presented during the photo selection seminar. He manipulated the colours of the images so that they appeared stylized, cropped the images so that particular objects within the frame came into focus, and put two or three images per slide so that he could play around with their juxtapositions. Terri and Ricky, however, suggested that Preet return the photographs to their original colour and size and simplify their layout, since they wanted to see the raw images first. He did not challenge the photography scholars' advice, although the mixture of surprise and stoicism in his facial expression made it evident that he found their comments unexpected.

Conclusion

In this article, I sought to examine how photographic practices in collaborative research might mediate migrant voices. I looked at the case of the *Shutter Stories* collaborative photography project, which featured photo essays by five Indians and four Koreans residing in the Philippines capital of Manila. I paid particular attention to the mediation that came out of the interplay between the often-contradictory forces of institutional and popular photography that impinged on the photographic selection practices in this project (Bourdieu, 2003 [1990]; Silverstone, 1999, 2002). I argued that this resulted in the participants relying on strategic essentialism and 'medium essentialism' in choosing the topics for their photo essays and in them expressing vernacular creativity in crafting their photographs (see Burgess, 2006; Hutchby, 2001; Spivak, 1988). This kind of mediation generally enabled the migrant participants to use voices that not only conveyed their own personal stories, but also drew in the viewing public. In my informal conversations with the local Filipinos who viewed the exhibition, I saw how *Shutter Stories* did succeed in creating some degree of 'interruption' (Pinchevski, 2005) to the persistent cycle of social strangeness and estrangement in Manila. From finding out that there was an Indian celebrity in Philippine show business to seeing that some Koreans were also Christians, many of these local exhibition visitors judged their encounter with the photo essays as 'fascinating', 'interesting', and 'educational'.

Figure 6. Photo 16 in Matt's photo essay

The key contribution of this article is that it provides insights into the ways in which photographic selection practices in collaborative research impinge on the photograph's mediational quality. Consequently, this piece also provides indications as to whether and how we might apply such practices for future collaborative projects, so that they can better foster socially marginalized voices in general and migrant cultural minority voices in particular (see Buckingham, 2009). In relation to photographic subject selection, *Shutter Stories* underscores the importance of paying attention to what different people involved in a collaborative research project assume to be the key affordances of photography. For instance, the photography scholars in *Shutter Stories* drew heavily on institutional photography and posited that a central feature of the photograph is that it works best when telling narratives that emphasize the visual language (see Harrison, 2003; Messaris, 1997). There is, of course, some truth to this idea and it did help the migrant participants create photo essays that managed to attract members of the public to engage with and meaningfully reflect on their migrant stories.

That said, the discussions between the photography scholars and the migrant participants about whether a story can be told photographically serve as a warning against overly reifying this particular affordance. These discussions concretize the claim of extant scholarship that there is a danger of institutional photographic selection practices creating narrative constraints for some project participants (see Pink, 2007). These practices can needlessly limit the stories that these participants are able to tell and, as such, unintentionally undermine their ability to articulate their voices. *Shutter Stories* suggests to us, then, that in collaborative research projects, people's different ideas about the narrative possibilities of the photograph should at least be explored initially rather than be closed off immediately. This is especially the case if these people are like the migrant participants of *Shutter Stories* who, along with many other

urban cultural minority youth, have a strong familiarity with the increasingly ubiquitous photographic medium.

As regards photographic technique selection, *Shutter Stories* emphasizes the need to attend to what people in a collaborative research project think about as publicly engaging photographic logics. As mentioned earlier, both the photography scholars and I actually thought it valuable to stay close to the production logics of the creative industries (Burgess, 2006). Again, this worked to a great degree because it made the migrant participants' photo essays accessible and relatable to for the broader public.

Recall, however, that there were the understated disagreements that arose in those few instances when these production logics did not closely align with the migrant participants' own ideas. These instances show that valorizing a particular institutional logic too much can undermine the confidence that participants might have in their ability to harness photography in telling their stories. *Shutter Stories* serves as a reminder that any project on voice always necessitates a careful balancing act between fulfilling the aims of the endeavour and sustaining the goodwill among the people involved (Banks, 2007). After all, such projects are always premised on a compromise among the 'individual interests, values, self-perception[s], and intended self-projection[s] of [its] speakers' (Coleman, 2013: 11).

Subsequent studies can add to this research by expanding this article's interest in attending to the instability, flux, and transformations of symbolic meanings that characterize the process of mediating migrant voices (Silverstone, 1999, 2002). In this project, I have only looked at mediation in relation to the first order of voice, or voice as a process, defined as one's capacity to speak about oneself and one's place in the world (Couldry, 2010). Future work can pay greater attention to mediation in relation to the second order of voice, or voice as a value, which pertains to 'the act of valuing, and choosing to value, those frameworks for organizing human life and resources that themselves value voice (as a process) … [and] discriminating against frameworks of social, economic and political organization that deny or undermine voice' (Couldry, 2010: 10–11).

Such studies about mediation would entail evaluating whether the migrant voices enabled by collaborative photography projects are in turn fostered (or not) by the political, economic, and symbolic frameworks that are prevalent in a particular society. This means asking whether and how different social institutions might value – that is support, disseminate, and listen to – these kinds of migrant stories. It also means asking whether and how the very genre of collaborative research projects can contribute to making these broader social institutions more receptive to migrant stories that emerge out of such endeavours.

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