Working Visually in Community Identity Ethnography

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Abstract: This paper explores the democratic and participatory potential resident within visual ethnographic research. The first section presents the scope of the field of new digital technologies that contribute to more complex forms of visually-based research and looks at the ways in which the visual has come to present useful possibilities for researchers looking to create more authentic experiences of the site under consideration. The authors typically follow a six-stage process in conducting their research work, and each of these stages presents opportunity for the application of visual research approaches, and the second section of this paper draws upon one visually-based project and demonstrates how various techniques and approaches have been utilized in that work.

Keywords: Identity, Visual Ethnography, Research, Digital Technologies

Introduction: Technology, the Visual & Critical Social Research

NEW FORMS OF technology and a greater acknowledgement, understanding and incorporation of the subjectivity and relativity of epistemological positionings on the part of researchers have led to significantly more complex and comprehensive research work, and this is particularly evident in ethnographic-style research. The importance of this development can be seen in the deepening of understanding of even the most minute and seemingly mundane of social experiences and in the ways in which the presence of those whose lives are the material of such research are able to be both more intimately and authentically (re)presented and to utilise genuine opportunities to speak back to the research(er) and multiple audiences. The democratising impact on the research process is, in our view, a major outcome of this coalescence of technology and epistemology and has led to a greater awareness of the potential for social research to effect social change.

We research and write from the position of critical cultural workers whose current area of "disciplinary" focus is education. This paper presents an insight into some of the ways in which we and some of our colleagues have drawn upon new technologies and ethnographies (Goodall 2000) to give succour to our long-established aim of engaging in research that contributes to social betterment. In this endeavour, we acknowledge we are but a small component of a large community of critically-oriented research practice. Camus notes that *social research should be a form of intervention, rather than methodological practice* (Camus, et al 2004 p. 132). Sarah Pink argues that earlier conceptualisations of visual anthropology have omitted the most significant part of all, viz. *the use of the visual as a tool of social intervention* (Pink 2006p 82 82). While referring specifically to a particular group of visual researchers, Ruby (2000) presents the challenge to all visual researchers that pushes our work forward. It is, he says,

COMMON GROUND

> time for ethnographic film-makers to stop being so concerned with making "important" films and to become more interested in how their work affects the people they portray and those who view the images (p 221)

Our work is rooted in what Denzin & Lincoln (2005) have termed the eight and ninth moments of qualitative research and we additionally acknowledge our intellectual debt to the passionate work of many decolonial activists (see, for example Smith, 1999, 2005; Sandoval 2000).

We focus almost exclusively in this paper on our use of visual research methods and methodologies and the analysis of visual evidence in our decade-long research work on racial awareness. In so doing, we have been influenced by two observations of noted visual anthropologist, Sarah Pink. First, she argues that *the idea of visual media as a form of social intervention is long established* (2006 p 89) and later that *the future of visual anthropology depends partly on how its practitioners engage with new visual and digital media and technologies* (p 105). Taken together, we agree that in order to maintain the social intervention potential offered by various forms of visual media, we need to explore and embrace new technologies to draw out their capacity to enhance emancipatory social practice.

Why Race?

The authors have been collaboratively involved in both identity work and visual research for a number of years, and the current project stream is the result of a merging of these strands of academic interest with a concern to harness our work for social betterment ends. Our current intention is to contribute to the achievement of racial and ethnic harmony in our local communities through genuinely educative work. In this, we are motivated by McLaren's clarion call:

> One of the tasks ahead for those of us who wish to reclaim the dignity offered by true justice, is to revivify democratic citizenship in an era of diminishing returns. It is to create critical citizens who are no longer content in occupying furtive spaces of private affirmation but who possess the will and the knowledge to turn these spaces into public spheres through the creation of new social movements (1997:13)

Australia has been by no means quarantined from the effects of what Montagu (1974) has termed "Man's (sic) most dangerous myth" – race - and while perhaps figuring less prominently than other places on the pages and screens of the world's media, the country has experienced a significant increase in both the number and intensity of racially- and ethnically-related[1] tensions, disruptions and challenges in recent years. One of the most prominent and fruitful areas for the type of disruptive social action envisaged by McLaren, as we see it, is in bringing the largely invisible racial location that is Whiteness to more public consciousness – to what Paulo Freire (1974) termed *conscientização* (conscientization), or critical consciousness. While this is not the place to enter into a detailed exploration of the tenets of whiteness studies and critical race theory (for this, see the excellent collection of articles in Hill, 1997),

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[1] *We acknowledge that, in English lexical terms, the words 'ethnic' and 'ethnicity' are the more correct terms to use in the large majority of instances where 'race' and its derivatives are deployed. However, in keeping with more commonplace usage, we will use the more slippery term 'race' to stand for both 'race' and 'ethnicity'.*

it is important to outline a crucial connection between white racial identity and the project that forms the basis of this paper.

One of the most important and most frequently commented on features of whiteness is its almost total invisibility to itself: whites don't see (their) whiteness. Instead, whites work an underexposed racial plane (an 'unthinking whiteness' in McLaren's (1997) words) and as such, "white" becomes conflated and then synonymous with the non-specific universal of "human". As Dyer explains,

> As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human form. Other people are raced, we are just people. (1997: 1)

One part of our work involves us applying the disclosing solvent to the invisible writing that inscribes race socially, and through what we currently term a racial identity auditing process (Hickey and Austin, 2009), we attempt to capture the many ways in which representations of race are present – and yet largely unnoticed – in various community contexts. In conducting a racial identity audit, we draw upon the most significant medium of communication in the contemporary era – the image or picture – and by working through a multi-stage process, capture, categorise and analyse the representations of race on public display. The outcomes of our monological research work here is then turned over to comment by inhabitants of that locale, allowing us to thicken (Geertz, 1973) our evidentiary data and deepen our understanding of racialised representations. The final stage in the process involves us, as relative outsiders to the context in question, inviting locals to "write back" (Rushdie, 1982) to the dominant (hegemonic) domains of racialised representation in their community.

In our work, we maintain the privileging of the visual as the default mode of research and reporting at the expense of other aspects of the anthropological sensorium (Pink 2006). We focus more on the image within the visual as opposed to the lexical: the picture rather than the word. In part, we have moved further into visual research techniques because it is the image that is the marker of the Age (Emmison & Smith, 2000, viii). However, in saying we focus on the image, we are not suggesting that the picture – an essentially two-dimensional claim of representation of a multi-dimensional reality – constitutes the extent of visual research. Increasingly, we have found ourselves focussing on the everyday and the (otherwise) mundane in a very broadly construed sense. We have found intellectual comfort in the way in which Emmison and Smith have conceptualised their approach to working with the visual:

> Social life is visual in diverse and counterintuitive ways. Consequently there are many more forms of visual data than the photograph, the advertisement and the television programme. Objects and buildings carry meanings through visual means just like images. Clothing and body language are significant signs we use to establish identity and negotiate public situations… From our vantage point, visual inquiry is no longer just the study of the image, but rather the study of the seen and the observable. (2000, ix)

A concomitant aspect of our intent to study the observable and the everyday is that we privilege the public as opposed to the private domain. The work upon which we draw in this paper has been initiated exclusively in public arenas and sites; that is, our interest has been in the public representation of identity rather than in its private performance. We must em-

phasise, however, that we only too readily acknowledge the significance of the sphere of the private in the concrete performance of any aspect of identity – indeed, it is in this sphere that the most intense and debilitating experiences of racialised, gendered and classed identities are experienced. The public sphere, however, presents to us as a site within which *conscientização* in a broader community sense might be more directly provoked and mobilised in the pursuit of more genuinely democratic social relationships. It also provides something akin to a shared cultural canvas from which we might read the expressions of collective identity relatively untroubled and unhindered.

Digital Technologies in the Project: Photographic Ethnography

Considerable intellectual effort has recently gone into imagining how the ethnographic endeavor might better come to genuinely (authentically) re-present the socioscape (Albrow, 1997). In our experience, threading forms of information, data, or evidence typically ascribed lesser places of significance and utility into ethnographic projects and accounts potentially moves us closer to this goal. For us, these non-traditional sets of data have been largely digital, and our use of them has increased in both frequency and complexity as digital technological developments have led to cheaper and more sophisticated cameras and storage and analytical software packages. The use of images to both illustrate a main narrative carried in traditional word-based textual format and to assume a major data and narrative function in and of themselves has allowed us to deepen our level of analysis, and to develop a greater confidence in our readings of the field in question.

While the application of various forms of photographic technologies has been a part of anthropological fieldwork for over a century (Becker, 1974) it has been with the advent of newer forms of digital photographic and filmic technologies that a more comprehensive, complex and reflexive relationship between researcher, participant, data and representation has become both possible and required.

> technology is changing not only the way we take images, but also the way we see, store, analyse and show them. (Parmegianni 2009:71)

We have utilised a wide and expanding array of digitally-based research hardware over the past few years, ranging from first generation digital still cameras through to large-storage hard drive video cameras, iPods, mobile phone cameras and high quality digital voice recorders. Our work in this area has developed to the point where, in early 2009, we established the *Digital Ethnographic Unit* at the University of Southern Queensland.

In this paper, we draw upon and report exclusively on our use of still photography in our current research. (Readers interested in the use of digital video in research are referred to a very useful primer by Shrum, Duque, & Brown (2005)). We have decided to focus here on this one form of visual research media for three reasons.

First, it is the form of visual work most readily available to the broad and general community. The capacity to capture still images is one of the most ubiquitous and accessible ways of recording culture, of generating and archiving public memory in contemporary life. After the pen(cil), the camera is possibly the most common tool available to individuals for documenting aspects of their lives – it finds its way into computers, dedicated camera formats, the mobile phone, and the like as well as appearing in specialised forms of scientific and

medical equipment. Specific forms of camera are available to capture every imaginable context, from large public events (witness the photographic wizardry applied to the inauguration of the current President of the United States of America[2]) through to microscopic minutiae. Cameras such as those attached to the Hubble telescope are able to capture features from genuinely unimaginable distances, while home surveillance security cameras capture the most intimate aspects of daily life. No longer is the incorporation of photographic functionality into seemingly everyday artifacts the exclusive province of the James Bonds or the Maxwell Smarts.

The increasing automation of almost all technical functions required to produce quality photographs means that the medium is available to almost every sector of the community, from the very young to the elderly. The highly intuitive nature of much of this automation means that, by and large, the tool is a genuinely cross-cultural one, although we are cognizant of and in debt to the body of work on the ocularcentricity of Western cultures in taming some of our optimism for the emergence of a truly democratic global research medium In the end, we follow Doug Harper's assessment:

> [T]here is no reason why photography must dominate empirical visual sociology beyond the fact that it has proved to be enormously useful (Harper 2005 p 748)

Second, the dictates of the current publishing format effectively leaches the value and much of the illustrative impact from the use of other than still photographic material. There are, obviously, other places and formats that enable the exploration of the contribution of video to social research work, and our experience is in keeping with Sarah Pink's confidence in the development of hypermedia spaces as locales for the development of more embodied forms of ethnography (see Pink, 2006, 2009).

Finally, we have focussed on the use of the photograph in social research because it is the format with which we have developed the most facility to date, and the one that has yielded us the greatest archive of research data with which to work. We have developed our use of photographic data and presentation in our research work over the past decade or more and have encountered and largely - although by no means fully – overcome numerous problems, limitations and challenges to the incorporation of what we believe to be a significant addition to the quality of the research work we involve ourselves with.

Research Design with Visual Data

Our research has typically come to be structured around a basic six-stage sequence. While these stages are by no means groundbreaking or necessarily innovative in and of themselves, they have provided us a sound structure around which the particularities of individual research projects have been built. In summary, these stages with illustrative prompting questions are:

Distilling a Purpose

What is the reason for engaging in the project at all? What is the potential for the project to provoke action for social change? What do we hope to achieve? What might others hope to

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[2] *Readers are referred to* http://www.gigapan.org/viewGigapan.php?id=17217 *for an example of the sophistication of photographic capture and access available widely to the community.*

achieve out of this project? What social benefit might flow from this project? What inspirations to act might be generated through this work? Who stands to benefit from this project? How will life be better in a social sense?

Designing the Research

What approaches will allow us to achieve our purposes? How will the trustworthiness of the project be maximised? How might evidence be collected in socially-just ways? How can we ensure the accuracy and authenticity of the participants' input is preserved? Which techniques will contribute to the most comprehensive or thick description of the context or problem under investigation?

Capturing the Evidence

What technical, compositional and aesthetic specificities need to be considered? What permissions, protocols and courtesies need to be secured and proffered? How will the data be tagged, stored and accessed? By whom? Whose data or evidence is it? Who controls its use?

Analysis

How will sense be made of the data? By whom? Which sense-making should be privileged or considered authoritative? To whom is the analysis referable?

Report / Communicate/ Represent

How will the findings or conclusions drawn from the project be prepared for dissemination? Who are the audiences for the reporting? What scope is there for participants or audiences to "write back" to the report? Is there space for alternative readings or reports? Which reporting format and medium will best provide for appropriate dissemination?

Act

What is the potential for the project to provoke action for social change? How might the findings be harnessed to an action plan for social change? What is the role of the researchers in the action stage? How do we know when the project is finished?

Working with the Visual: Selections from our Project Folios

We move now to a presentation of the ways in which we have used photographic images in our broad project of racial conscientization, and in doing this, we use selected photographs as discussion material. In this section, we will focus on stages 2,3,4,5 and 6 as outlined above and describe how we have drawn in particular ways of working with the visual. Always, Parmegianni's admonition is an unstated caveat to our work:

> a researcher should ask **whether**, and which, digital technologies can be effectively integrated into a specific research protocol (Parmegianni 2009:71, emphasis added)

Just because digital technologies are available does not necessarily mean they will provide the best way of approaching and resolving an issue or problem. Tools remain just that, and sometimes a tape measure will serve a purpose far better than a laser measuring device. However, it has been our experience that developments in the field of the digital offer considerable enhancements to the work of ethnographers. What follows are more examples of our use of visual research strategies in our recent work.

Stage 2 Designing the Research: Shooting Scripts

While much of our work derives from emergent design principles and we readily embrace the notion of the bricolage (Kincheloe 2001, 2005), we typically identify what appear at the beginning of a research project to be those forms of data or evidence most likely to contribute to us achieving our hopes for that project.

In the Building Racial Harmony project (see Hickey & Austin, 2009 for a fuller description of this project), we needed to collect as much image-based data as possible: this was the nature of the project. In looking at visual representations of race in a particular community context, images were, of necessity, to carry the large bulk of the evidentiary base for our analytical work, and we considered that the most effective way to both capture and present that form of data was in photographic format.

One of the most productive visual research strategies we've used here is based on Charles Suchar's (1997) idea of shooting scripts. This approach is a response to what Suchar calls the need for visual researchers to "embody the interrogatory principle" in their photographic work (2006,p 212) and essentially works as a means for formulating ("scripting") the types or categories of information or data to be sought and captured.

In the Building Racial Harmony project, we identified specific types of representational data that we felt we needed to seek out from the site. While in this project these categories were relatively limited, their development was an important step in generating a strong body of data or evidence for our later analytical work. We settled on two major representational mediums – image-based and other artifactual - and within each of those, two content foci: representations of white racial identity and representations of non-white racial identity. We were able to generate a simple four-celled grid (Figure 1) which we used as a guide to data gathering.

Figure 1: Shooting Script Data-type Grid

	Image-based	*Other Artifactual*
Representations of whiteness		
Representations of otherness		

As with any script, we were guided in our actions as visual researchers by what the grid dictated we needed to actively search for. (There is much in common with grounded theory here, but this is not the place to enter into those comparisons). Giving rise to the interrogatory principle, as we collected data items for each of the four cells, we were able to readily identify emerging trends of commonality or frequency and of invisibility. In this project, we needed to return to the field to more actively seek representations of non-white racial identities. In itself, the process of capturing, categorising and actively returning to the site enabled

early analysis of data to occur and emergent ideas about the nature of racial representations at the particular site to form more firmly. We quickly determined that this was, in a representational sense at the very least, a very white place. There were very few images of other than white racial identity, and despite our active search for evidence to the contrary, we were unable to uncover more than a handful of images that would fit either of the "otherness" cells in the shooting script grid.

Stage 3 Capturing the Evidence: Emic & Etic Image Capture

Image 1: Honoring Anglo Ethnicity: An etic Image

In this project, we utilised two quite different positions of visual data gathering, what might simply be seen as emic and etic work. In the initial stage of the project, we wandered the site as strangers, capturing what we saw as relevant data for our purposes. As strangers, we were limited in our field of work, since we were almost obliged to keep to established paths as we walked and photographed the site. The visual data from this etic position reveals something of both a naivety and a freshness of view. We captured things that struck us as reflecting race or ethnic identity in some form. When we later shared these images with those who are very familiar with the site, we were surprised at the degree to which intimate knowledge of a site operates to anaesthetise the senses to the intricacies of that site. Many of the images we captured surprised the students who "hadn't ever really looked at that before".

Similarly, when the students took digital cameras on their search for representations of race on the same site, their insider, emic, knowledge led them to places we knew nothing

about. There is a strength in combining emic and etic positionings in research of this type, and the resultant enhancement of the complexity and value of the data generated was, in this instance at least, significant. As an interesting exercise in role reversal, the students visited us at the university and engaged in the same process of racial identity auditing, only this time they were the outsiders and we were the insiders. Again, the difference between the sets of images was pronounced, with almost no duplication of instances racial representation.

Our experience here would suggest that a powerful technique for use in visual research work resides in the merging of insider -and outsider-captured images. Certainly, we found that the differences between the sets opened up useful spaces for dialogue about what was racially significant at the research site. Having racially-coded locales identified in the images repository also prompted the student-participants to talk about their experiences with race at the school and enabled the researcher-participants to work more pedagogically through the opportunity to explain how and why we considered a particular image to carry represent-ations of race or ethnicity. For example, Image 1 provoked a number of quizzical looks from the students when we presented it to them. Through our explanation of our rationale for capturing this image (from a set of school honor boards mounted along the walls of the school assembly hall), a deepening understanding of the means whereby race is infused into the mundanities of daily life resulted. (To us, the names on the honor board reflected a certain homogeneity of ethnicity that, on a superficial level at least, reflected eurocentrism at play).

Stage 4 Analysing the Data: Content Analysis

Analysing image-based data presents as both challenging and creative. The most common non-semiotic reading or analysis of the visual is achieved through quasi-quantitative ap-proaches that fall broadly into the content analysis basket. Essentially, this involves sifting each item of visual data and combing out particular characteristics or occurrences of specified phenomena. For example, in the study under consideration here, we could determine the relative weightings of white as opposed to non-white racial identity representations by cal-culating the relative frequency of occurrence of each in percentage terms. While unearthing potentially useful patterns or frequencies to us, such a simplistic reduction of complex imagery – where this complexity resides in both the literal and the metaphoric meanings to be found within any one image - seems to us to oversimplify understanding and leach much of the critical reading out of the data.

In this project, we have utilized the image content functionality of NVivo 8, a qualitative data analysis software package. The current version of this application allows for the incor-poration and analysis of photographic and video data directly from within the application itself, and also allows for coding, sorting and combining the more frequently used transcript –based data with image-based material. This allows us to categorise data in multiple ways, and to then search for and combine categories of images to both expose patterns or coalesces of data not easily recognizable otherwise and to more readily identify gaps in our data set.
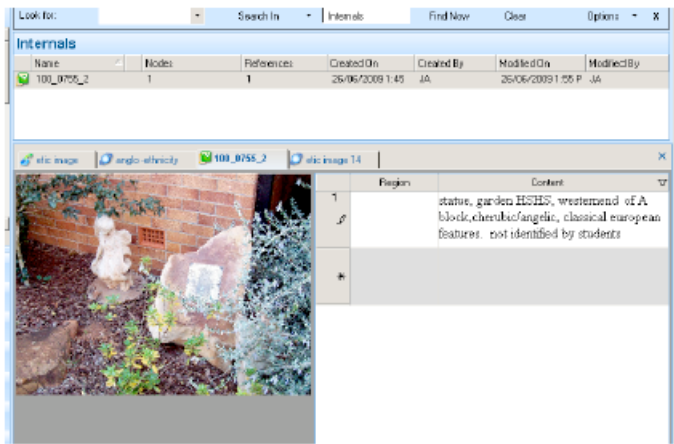
Image 2: NVivo Screen Shot

We have also found the functionality of NVivo 8 with regard to working with selected regions within an image to be of considerable additional benefit in our analytical work (see Image 2).

Stage 5 Reporting

This vital stage of the research process is probably the point at which the most innovative, creative and emancipatory work in qualitative research generally and visual research in particular is occurring. The advent and continuous development of web-based hypermedia forms have allowed researchers to more fully represent the complexity of the sites in which they've worked. Being able to utilize text, audio, video and photographic media to report on their work has meant that far more detailed, rigorous and cohesive reporting on projects is not only possible, but almost becoming mandatory. (As but one example of the type of thing in use, readers are referred to Coover's 2004 work).

More significantly for our purposes, however, is the democratic potential that resides within the web environment. Possibly the earliest (and longest lasting) example of the use of web-based technologies to present research work while at the same time providing opportunities for those "researched" to participate in the reporting about them has been Jay Ruby's website for the Oakhill Project (see http://astro.ocis.temple.edu/~ruby/opp/). This site carries Ruby's long-term study of the Oakhill community, his formal reports to funding bodies, links to historical background material, community members' contributions, photographic records, and the like.
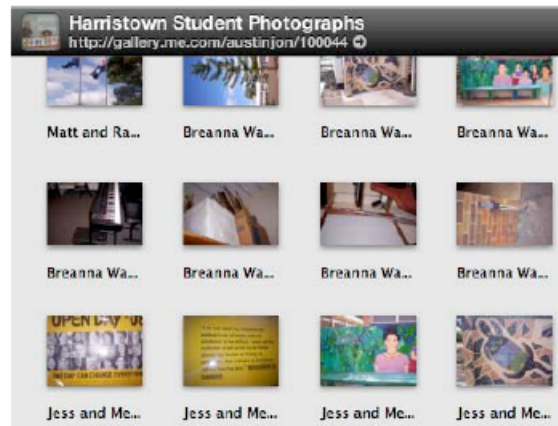
Image 3: Gallery: Participant Images

The interactivity provided by the internet has allowed us to mount selections of our visual data for access by comments from participants. In the case of the project discussed in this paper, we established a formal gallery of images of race captured by the participants (image 3) and to which they have access.

The images are also linked to the website for this project (http://www.digitalethnography-unit.blogspot.com/ , see Image 5) and as we proceed further into the analysis and reporting of this project, specific illustrative images will be drawn down from the gallery to the website and have written and spoken commentary from the researchers and the participants attached. In this way, we believe the reader / listener will be able to engage the visual data and the commentary or analysis accompanying these from both emic and etic perspectives. This allows the participants to have a direct presence in the representational aspect of the research into their community – in this case, the school.

Developing the preparedness to engage in this interactive role in the analysis of the data collected is a major part of the next phase of the work with the students at this school. This presents to us as a powerful addition to the repertoire of avenues for the enactment of community agency that is the focus of the final stage in our research process: action.

Stage 6 Acting

Our work is firmly rooted in the critical, where we see the purpose of critique as being to provoke action for social betterment. In the Building Racial Harmony project, our purpose was to stimulate consciousness of racial representations and their effects on the part of a group of middle years students. Our hope was that by racially auditing the site, we might generate a heightened awareness of the ways in which that school environment privileged some and submerged other racially-based identities to the point of invisibility. From such conscientisation, we hoped, some of these students might be encouraged to act to make some formal change to the school environment. While not necessarily "visual" in the terms of the research process as discussed in this paper, much of the social action work of the participants utilised forms of imagery and the power of the graphic to carry messages about their views of the racial representations in their school. Almost all of the students involved in the project

identified as white. One example of this "writing back" (Image 4) displays the use of visual/imagery as a means of communicating an intention to disrupt dominant discourses of race and racism.
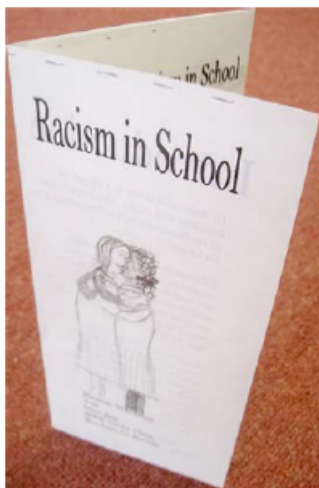

Image 4: Embracing Action for Change

Conclusion

Our experience in social justice oriented research over many years has had a powerful developmental push with the incorporation of various forms of visual data and techniques of working with these. While this paper has drawn upon only a small selection of ideas, techniques and possibilities from one project, the rapidly-expanding universe of visual research holds numerous alternatives and options for the researcher intent upon developing stronger ethnographic research and far more democratic, participatory and transformative outcomes from that work. We eagerly await the next stage of technological development in this area in anticipation of what this will present to researcher and other cultural workers.

Image 5: The Community Audit Site

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Jon Austin is an Associate Professor and member of the Centre for Research in Transformative Pedagogy in the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland. His current academic and research interests reside broadly within the areas of cultural studies and critical pedagogy: identity & difference; postcolonial and decolonial praxis; and transformative pedagogies. He is the editor and co-author of three books (Culture & Identity 2005, Re-Presenting Education 2006, and Educating for Healthy Communities 2007). His doctoral work was in the area of whiteness and white identity.

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