

POTRANSI Quest Insight

Capturing the Intangible: A Quest into Photovoice



Curiosity, the unknown, a journey, deep fundamental questions – these are words that come to mind when we think of a “quest.” For POTRANSI, the overarching quest guiding our research is: How can people transform power relations towards more just, sustainable, and democratic futures, and how might we help enable that? As we carry this main quest forward, each of us focus on different questions, concepts, and methods. Quest insights are short written reflections capturing early ideas and hunches. Rather than providing a final answer, they are threads inviting you to follow our intertwined personal and academic pursuits. They are humble and transparent, shared to spark conversation.

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About the author: Séréna Aupoix is a junior researcher in the POTRANSI project at Utrecht University. She specialises in Political Ecology and holds an MSc in Sustainable Development from Utrecht University. Her work brings together decolonial and ecofeminist thinkers to *think-with* and towards radical transformative change. Inspired by her master’s research in Martinique on the Chlordécone crisis, she weaves together diverse epistemologies and practices to think from a Caribbean perspective.

Introduction: Cultivating POTRANSI's Quest

What types of embodied, participatory, or transdisciplinary methodologies and approaches can we use to enable individuals to not only recognise power dynamics but to act on them, both individually and collectively?

My name is Séréna Aupoix and with my background in Feminist Political Ecology, I aim to bring more embodied, context-specific, and participatory methodologies to the POTRANSI research project. As POTRANSI engages with language to discuss the abstract and complex concepts of power and transformation, it can make conversations about the situated and lived experiences of power or transformation feel hard and inaccessible, as individuals may lack the language to express them. Methodologies that are participatory, transdisciplinary, and not solely based on language can offer alternatives forms of knowing and sensemaking.

I am specifically interested in photovoice as an alternative form of doing and sensemaking. I believe that photovoice holds potential for more relational, embodied, and situated understandings of power. It can pluralise power by inviting alternative epistemologies, making strange how we relate to power (Baibarac-Duignan & van den Eijnden, 2025). When understandings of power are pluralised and expressed through context-specific examples, this can foster a more accessible form of communication that brings everyday struggles and resistance to the forefront. It can also empower individuals to recognise and transform existing power dynamics. This quest insight therefore delves into the methodology of photovoice.

Why Do I Love Photovoice?

Photovoice is a participatory methodology that involves participants as co-researchers who document aspects of their lives through photographs and then discuss these images through critical dialogue for social change. This methodology inspires me on many levels and aligns with my diverse forms of academic practice. I am a visual learner and the way in which I think about and understand research, meaning, theories, stories, or memories are through visual understandings. Therefore, the methodology of photovoice speaks to me, as I see it is an extension of language and an expression translated through a different medium. The visual can tell stories or convey meaning on complex topics which words cannot always capture. In some cases, it can both complicate and enhance language and writing. I also believe that it is important to embrace forms of communication that do not solely use words or language, and in the field of emotions or within the context of sensitive topics, images can be a means to capture and transcend what language cannot always do. For example, artist and researcher [Imogen Stidworthy](#) works with language and voice but through physical and spatial material. Her sculptural installations and films are shaped by different forms of voicing, asking how we experience and conceive of a space where words are unstable, run out, or fail, and what other forms of understanding might emerge in the face of unreadability. You can find examples of her work below in Figure 1 and 2, titled *Still Life Babel* (2025) and *Iris [A Fragment]* (2020).



Figure 1 and 2: Photos of Imogen Stidworthy's artwork. The top image shows an installation view of *Iris [A Fragment]* (2020), while the bottom image depicts the work featuring a medicinal-grade petroleum oil pool with projected video and audio sequences from *Still Life Babel* (2025), exhibited at AKINCI, Amsterdam. Images are sourced from the AKINCI Art Gallery website and photographed by Peter Tijhuis (AKINCI, n.d.).

My academic journey has always integrated visual and artistic mediums. In my [master's thesis](#), I engaged with artworks by Martiniquais artists, being inspired and humbled by the power they held in denouncing and illustrating a different story to a pesticide tragedy known as the Chlordécone crisis. These forms of visual representation are referred to as *Art Mawon* (Martelly & Naime, 2020). An example is shown below in Figure 3, by Martiniquais artist [Mr. Geez](#), titled *Killing us Softly*. Through photography, he reworks the Japanese pictorial maxim of the three wise monkeys to symbolise how authorities turned blind eyes, deaf ears, and silenced voices in the face of the pesticide's devastating effects (Marie-Nelly, 2019). His *Art Mawon* layers digital data, weaving forms of data visualisation into the artistic pieces themselves.

Art Mawon reflects how artistic creation operates as a form of *Mawonaj* – an expression and practice of resistance and liberation in a Caribbean context (Melyon-Reinette, 2012). Such practices imply thinking about the representations of the world and making strange dominant narratives (Ferdinand, 2021; Baibarac-Duignan & van den Eijnden, 2025). In this context, art can be understood as a medium through which “the subaltern speaks” (Spivak, 2023), not by offering fixed narratives, but by expressing complex, layered responses to specific contexts, revealing how people interpret and react from a particular standpoint (Pink, 2015; Rose, 2016).



Figure 3: Example of *Art Mawon* by artist Mr. Geez, entitled “Killing Us Softly”. Picture was sourced from the artist's website (Geez.mq, n.d.).

Inspired by Art Mawon in Martinique and guided by my way of thinking- and working-with, I deeply believe that visual representations and methodologies such as photovoice can act as contestations, allowing submerged and emergent narratives to rise and offering different epistemological perspectives. It also enables deep contextual and lived experiences to be translated.

What is Photovoice?

Photovoice is a visual participatory action research methodology, influenced by feminist theory and Freirean critical consciousness. It was first developed by Caroline Wang and Mary Burris in the 1990s for public health research (you can find an example of their work below in Figure 4). Participants were involved in a collaborative research project and produced photographs documenting aspects of their lives related to empowerment, liberation, and social justice (Cornell, Linda, & Shose, 2019). These photographs were used to engage the participants in critical group discussions about the injustice in their lives, and to imagine ways to enact social change – a form of achieving critical consciousness (Cornell, Linda, & Shose, 2019; Kenfield, 2020). They were then publicly exhibited to key stakeholders, illustrating the participants' experiences and perspectives and presenting opportunities to influence policymakers (Cornell, Linda, & Shose, 2019; Fantini, 2017). This allowed language and epistemological perspectives to be communicated across researchers, participants, and policy makers (Fatini, 2017).

The methodology embodies an emancipatory research paradigm. It positions participants as experts and knowledge holders of their own lives, agents of change in their own community, and co-producers of knowledge in research (Wang & Burris, 1997). This engenders a more horizontal research process (Gioacchino & Williams, 2016). Photovoice also aligns with feminist theory, as it grounds participant's active involvement in decision-making and privileges place-based and context specific knowledge (Wang, 1999). It invites participants to co-design the project and collaboratively touches on issues of injustice and oppression in personal socio-political and socio-ecological contexts. This enables a first-person viewpoint, helps to affirm local perspectives, and captures complexity (Gioacchino & Williams, 2016; Lapenta, 2011).



Figure 4: Picture from Wang & Burris (1997) research. The explanation of the picture is as follows: "Drinking water is a problem in our mountainous area. The water is not very clean. The water the woman is getting flows from two faucets. The faucet water is pumped up from the pond by the electric power station. Whenever there is a power blackout in our mountain areas, even the water from these faucets is not available. I wanted to show the difficulty of getting drinking water." Photograph and caption by Li Cui Zhen, a Chengjiang County farmer, age 34" (Wang & Burris, 1997).

Cornell, Linda, & Shose (2019) put forward photovoice as a decolonial feminist praxis. They argue that it does not only root itself in a historical understanding of the effects of colonial power in contemporary society, but it also centers the lived experiences of individuals in relation to their interconnectedness with others and with the institutions and structures of society, as well as the experiences of all those who have been historically marginalised and oppressed (Cornell, Linda, & Shose, 2019). Participants are not conceptualised as fixed subjects but are seen as co-researchers that embody a flux of contextualised inter-subjectivities (Kenfield, 2020; Jankowski, 2025).

The photovoice project led by Cornell, Linda, and Shose (2016) embodies a decolonial feminist praxis by contributing to broader understandings of racial structures within the University of Cape Town. Through collective engagement among student-participants, student-researchers, and academic collaborators, the project aspired to start building a decolonial feminist agenda for the university. The photovoice project examined black students' experiences of transformation at a historically white South African university between 2013 and 2015. After the dismantling of apartheid in 1994, the university's transformation policy had focused on increasing the diversity of the student population. However, beyond a more representative student body, transformation had been slow, inadequate, and contested. Their guiding question for the photovoice project asked: "What does it mean to be a Black student or researcher at the University of Cape Town?" Examples of participants' photographs are shown in Figure 5 and 6 below. Viewing the project through a decolonial feminist lens enabled participants to feel recognised and empowered, fostering a space of openness and trust in which students could share deeply traumatic experiences within their socio-historical context (Cornell, Linda, & Shose, 2019). The project also generated visibility at the highest institutional levels and mobilised student participants to engage actively in the *RhodesMustFall* and *FeesMustFall* movements (Cornell, Linda, & Shose, 2019).





Figure 5 & 6: Picture from Cornell, Linda, & Shose research (2019). The explanation of the picture is as follows: "Cecil John Rhodes Is Still Here: The above pictures were taken where the Cecil John Rhodes statue used to sit. Now you will find the stand with the words "C.J. was here!" and a shadow of the statue spray-painted in the same area. The #RhodesMustFall movement was an attempt at racial transformation at UCT. However, even though the physical removal of CJR was a great achievement, there is still a lot of racist actions within the institution. In my particular experience, the drawing of the CJR shadow is representative of a lack of empathy for the struggles of black students at UCT. It is painful to think that someone thought it would be funny or necessary to paint this shadow of CJR after students had articulated their struggles during the RMF movement" (Cornell, Linda, & Shose, 2019).

A decolonial feminist framework therefore explicitly challenges the gendered, classist, and racialised power structures captured through the photovoice of the participant's lives, aiming to render visible and dismantle entangled historical and contemporary forms of power (Cornell, Linda, & Shose, 2019; Jankowski, 2025). It also urges the disruption of fixed and deficit views of societies, knowledge, and pedagogies as methodologies, which are reconfigured through local knowledge systems (Kenfield, 2020).

Challenges: The Romanticisation and Fetishisation of Photovoice

It is important to not fetishise and romanticise photovoice: it can have limitations, especially when stages of the methodological process do not concretely integrate the foundations of Participatory Action Research – where theory does not follow through to practice (Fricas, 2022; Gioacchino & Williams, 2016). In some cases, researchers and participants may inadvertently reproduce notions of disempowerment (Kessi, 2011; Cornell, Linda, & Shose, 2019). Hence, photovoice too can risk becoming an "instrumental practice" if researchers and participants fail to create the conditions for agency and resistance within existing power structures (Cornell, Linda, & Shose, 2019). This can lead to power dynamics being (re)produced in research and beyond, as it fails to address, challenge, and dismantle oppressive power structures, legitimising, rather than challenging, dominant structures (Cornell, Linda, & Shose, 2019). The decolonial feminist project led by Cornell, Linda, and Shose (2019) seeks to confront these issues, for example, by reimagining and contextualising participatory approaches to research. More concretely, such concerns become evident when photovoice projects do not include participants in academic dissemination phases or when researchers fail to integrate participants as co-authors (Cornell, Linda, & Shose, 2019). This leads us to question: Whose voices

are served for academic publications? Can photovoice enable us to do research that gives voice? And what does it mean to 'give voice'?

It is therefore crucial for photovoice projects to integrate and practice ongoing reflexivity, revealing the researcher's own influence and positionality (Cook, 2015). It is also important to question our situatedness (our socio-cultural and political experiences and intersectional background, our academic training and our geographical contexts) and whether our conceptual and methodological practices can contribute to forms of social, political, or ecological justice (Haraway, 2013; Cornell, Linda, & Shose, 2019; Fricas, 2022). We should therefore critically reflect on whether photovoice is an appropriate method to employ in this context: whether it aligns with the research aim, questioning the motivation, whether it is used meaningfully rather than for the sake of labelling and claiming participation, and how power relations remain embedded in representation and participation. Beyond reflexivity, as researchers, we must also interrogate how we frame knowledge, sharing diverse ontological and epistemological experiences and explanations (Fricas, 2022).

Kenfield (2020) proposes participatory cultural humility – an approach that invites researchers to practice interactions with participants and other community partners by valuing, respecting, and focusing on all contributions and working through reciprocal involvement. Practicing cultural humility can predispose the researcher to appreciate epistemological plurality, engaging with different bodies of knowledge, including the "non-academic" (Kenfield, 2020). This can help to practice epistemic justice as we broaden the realm of knowledge through the supported testimonies of photovoice explanations (Kenfield, 2020; Jankowski, 2025; Fricas, 2022). It also repositions the researcher, by inviting them to become the learner, as they understand and listen to the meanings behind the photographs (Wang & Burris, 1997; Jankowski, 2025). In humility, we should also acknowledge that breaking down power dynamics is an ongoing struggle that requires a constant iterative process and a sensitivity to ethical, methodological, and representational issues (Fricas, 2022).

How does this speak to POTRANSI?

As previously mentioned, the concept of power and transformation is highly contested, and, in many cases, abstract and theoretical, addressing this through different embodied practices and methodologies can help alleviate this. Photovoice can enable this, allowing participants to better conceptualise and act on understandings of power with the hope of reaching transformative potential within their own prefigurative initiatives or movements. Rather than working through purely language and words, photovoice bridges the visual and the textual, allowing participants to engage with other means of expression (Cornell, Linda, & Shose, 2019). This transcends the limitations of language and allows for epistemic and pedagogical plurality (Smith, 2021).

Piloting Photovoice in POTRANSI

Seeking to transcend language and the abstractness of power, I established a pilot project together with the POTRANSI team. The exercise invited each of us to take pictures representing what power and transformation meant to us, in our lives, communities, or workplaces. This was also used to think deeply and spark critical dialogue about our positionalities and orientations on power and transformation.

Group discussions brought critical insights, particularly attention to shapes. In many of the pictures, power was represented through straight, rigid lines, whereas transformation was captured through organic shapes and flows, specifically water in all its forms and states. This led us to question the representations associated with power and transformation, and whether we could turn these understandings the other way round: *what if photographs that captured straight and rigid lines signified transformation, and what if organic shapes and flows, such as water,*

represented power? Can we invite alternative interpretations that further cultivate meaning-making? This illustrates the forms of substantive and critical questions that emerge, rather than merely methodological ones.

Reflecting on the exercise, team members emphasised how it grounded them, reminding them of their place-based experiences and allowing these to be shared within an academic setting through intimate conversations. It enabled people to feel “empowered,” as power and transformation was an abstract concept, yet they could enter conversations with something guiding them. It became an extension of their voices.

To delve into where some of these conversations emerged, below are two reflections on photographs shared by two team members (Figure 7 and 8):



Figure 7: Photographs representing transformation and power, by S er na Aupoix, all rights reserved.

Description of transformation (picture on the left) by S er na Aupoix: *“I saw transformation as worlds, cultures, and religions colliding, exploring new paths of life. Sleeping in the desert with the Bedouin, deepened my understanding of their culture and religion and confronted me with my ingrained Eurocentric assumptions. I further realised how limited my worldview was, shaped by context and experience. Through laughter, listening, and shared stories, we wove a learning space that opened our worlds to diverse practices, beliefs, and cosmovisions.”*

Description of power (picture on the right) by S er na Aupoix: *“Oman’s struggle with severe water stress and shortages is situated at the intersection of diverse water practices. Each practice reflects different processes and expressions of power — from groundwater pumping to sustain agriculture, to over-abstraction in coastal areas leading to seawater intrusion and aquifer degradation, to the unbundling and commercialisation of water services through the creation of independent private companies.”*



Figure 8: Photographs representing transformation and power, by Flor Avelino, all rights reserved.

Description of power (picture on the right) by Flor Avelino: *“Heart rate spike when presenting a research proposal in front of a large committee with full decision-making power to grant 1 million euros, or not. It did not just spike during the 30 min interview but already 3 hours before in nervous anticipation. If a relatively unthreatening situation like this can already do this to a human heart, what happens when individuals facing real danger and power as violence?”*

Description of transformation (picture on the left) by Flor Avelino: *“The roots of a plant in front of the branches of a tree. While the 'seed' is a popular metaphor for transformation ("seeds of transformation"), this picture instead proposes roots and other rhizomic structures as a symbol of transformation (mushrooms, bushes, soil more generally). It also visualises entanglement between all living beings and material things – this entanglement enables transformation, but may also impede it?”*

Its Entanglement with Other POTRANSI Methods

Beyond establishing a pilot project, photovoice is also deeply entangled with our other methodological practices, including Theatre of the Oppressed and storytelling. Rooted in Freirean critical consciousness, photovoice aligns with the foundations of the Theatre of the Oppressed and its roots in Freirean discourses on pedagogies of the oppressed (Freire, 2017; Boal, 2019). It works as a different embodied participatory action research methodology, using photographs as catalysts for critical collective dialogue and discussions (Kenfield, 2020; Wang & Burris, 1997).

Photovoice's engagement with critical dialogue, as participants share meanings behind photographs, is also entangled with the practice of storytelling. Storytelling like photovoice's practice of critical dialogue, offers place-based and contextual testimonies to participant's lived experiences, gaining deep material insights into understanding, imaginaries, and epistemologies (Jankowski, 2025). The intersection between photovoice and storytelling further highlights the intertwined synergy across our three methodologies.



What Next...

Having taken you along my journey with photovoice, weaving together insights from artists, academics, and my own reflections, I return to the initial question posed in the introduction, now revisited in light of what has been discussed: How can we use photovoice, by enabling individuals not only to recognise but also to act upon power dynamics, to simultaneously challenge and pluralise understandings of power and transformation? More specifically, how can photovoice help transform power relations towards more just, sustainable, and democratic futures?


Moving forward from this pilot project leaves us with more questions to take forward within POTRANSI: How do we want to facilitate conversations around power and transformation, and deepen exchanges across plural perspectives, allowing space to sit with the troubles? In what ways do we want to use photovoice within POTRANSI – as an emancipatory tool? For data gathering? For support within story telling? How can we ensure that photovoice does not become an “instrumental practice”, rendering justice to its participatory and emancipatory nature? And how do we want to capture and communicate these findings to broader audiences, while also translating them into concrete actions for change within prefigurative initiatives and networks?



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