

**Moments for Movement:
Photostories from the 1980s Resonate Today**

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2017

(with Kris Erickson). "Moments for Movement: Photo-Stories from the 1980s Resonate Today."

In K. Yang and R. Lawrence. *Participatory Visual Approaches to Adult and Continuing Education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

2

This chapter offers an intergenerational reflection on the production of photostories in the Toronto-based Moment Project of the 1980s, considering how its features of co-creation, creative forms, and critical social content could be reinvented with the new digital media forms integral to today's social movements.

Moments for Movement: Photostories from the 1980s Resonate Today

Deborah Barndt, Kris Erickson

2014 was a transition year for both Kris and me (Deborah). While I was retiring from York University, Kris was defending his dissertation on community-engaged camera practices; as I was exiting, he was entering academia. I had served on his PhD committee and he had studied my participatory photography work; he generously offered to help me archive and reflect on my work with photostories in the 1980s. When that became the theme of my contribution to this volume, I asked Kris to offer a commentary throughout my reflections to open up a conversation with new generations of community photographers.

As I was walking through neighborhoods of Lima, Peru in the mid-1970s, I was struck by how many people—many of whom were illiterate—were totally engrossed in “reading” magazine-size fotonovelas. Perhaps the paper equivalent of a soap opera, these photonovels usually seduced “readers” with stories about the wealthy, often spiced with illicit dramas (the mother having an affair with her daughter’s boyfriend, and so on). Although dialogue was written in bubbles above the characters’ heads, people with low literacy could interpret the photographs themselves. A doctoral student at the time, I was engaged in collaborative research with literacy groups applying the “pedagogy of the oppressed” of Brazilian radical educator Paulo Freire (2000), and I wondered how we might use media similar to fotonovelas to motivate adult learners to read and write. Why not adapt the form and change the content to reflect their daily lives? Thus began a process of collaborative production of fotonovelas, to help train literacy teachers in Freirean methods, with the use of these dramatic dialogues in photo or comic-book form to encourage their students to learn to read and write.

For the next decade or so, I co-created photostories with literacy teachers in Peru, with ESL classes in Toronto factories, and with popular education collectives in revolutionary Nicaragua, drawing on the life experiences of Indigenous migrants, immigrant workers, and Central American peasants, respectively.

Between 1985 and 1993, when I coordinated The Moment Project through the Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice in downtown Toronto, the photostory became a key component of our educational and organizing efforts (Barndt, 1989a; Davis, 1993). Based on the methodology of conjunctural analysis of Italian Marxist journalist Antonio Gramsci (1971, pp. 177–185), monthly multisectoral workshops brought together social justice activists to “name the moment,” that is, to identify hot issues, deepen our analysis of forces shaping possible actions, and develop short-term alliances to push for collective action around particular struggles of “the conjuncture” or, in more popular terms, “the moment” (Barndt, 1989a). We would then synthesize the analysis and propose actions in a popular quarterly education publication, *The Moment*.

The centerfold of each issue was a participatory production: a photostory representing a specific issue in peoples’ daily lives, linking the personal and political, the local and global, reflection and action. It was a way to develop direct relationships with groups in the Riverdale neighborhood of Toronto where the Centre was located, to work with the people most affected by the issue, and to collaborate with community organizations mobilizing around it. “And so, refugee women, kids affected by lead pollution, native residents—told their own stories and out of their experiences, we built a composite, fictionalized story. They then became the actors in the story” (Barndt, 1989b).

Now, 30 years later, I’m revisiting *The Moment* photostories to consider how the issues, production processes, forms, and activism have shifted from that moment to this one, from movements of that era to today’s social movements. In looking back, I realize that this work exists amidst emerging fields of artistic practice such as community arts (Goldbard, 2006), relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002; Bishop, 2012; Finkelppearl, 2013; Kester, 2011), a participatory and storytelling turn in the art world, photovoice, and digital storytelling (Bromley, 2010; Lambert, 2012). In this chapter, I’d like to revisit select photostories from that period through the filters of three critical features of my approach:

1. Collaborative production: a process of co-creation with groups most affected by the issue.
2. Various forms of photostories built on visual narrative sequence.
3. Content drawn from the life stories of marginalized communities, linking personal stories with broader structural inequities and collective action for social justice.

Kris: Like Deborah, I have also been fascinated by how photos and films continue to be so engrossing for many people. I too have wondered about how so-called “consumers” of such images may learn to become producers themselves. I have been particularly interested to explore pedagogies and processes that privilege collaborative and cooperative making—of art and other forms of culture—where the co-creation of a community challenges the hegemony of individual authorship, and where the relationship between so-called “amateurs” and so-called “professionals” is fundamentally challenged.

In comparing the era of *The Moment* photostories with participatory media production today, I have been continually heartened by examples of the rich visual experimentation to be found across emerging forms of digital and networked social media, developed and distributed by artists, activists, and communities (often those that are marginalized) aiming at nothing less than equality, hope, peace, love, and justice. I have also been devastated, time and again, by the all-too-frequent images of discrimination, poverty, and even brutal, fatal violence that such mobile media make unprecedentedly apparent.

I share with Deborah an interest in looking at *The Moment* to understand ways the myriad challenges of contemporary existence may be collectively addressed through processes that privilege the affective and everyday experiences of those most deeply impacted by them. I hope that the following observations can help reveal the cultural and pedagogical value of Deborah’s work at the present moment. I am convinced that the participatory and media-based pedagogy of the photostory Deborah and her colleagues developed 30 years ago, and the collaborative production process she describes below, continue to have potential for impacting the present. Emerging communication technologies may play a key role in amplifying this legacy, making both processes and products accessible in profoundly transformative, even revolutionary, ways.

Processes of Co-Creation

Deborah: It was the collaborative production of these photostories that ensured they reflected the daily experiences of those most affected by the issues and would be used by groups organizing around them. Although each process was different, I’ll highlight two prominent struggles that still resonate today. In 1986, the last of four First Ministers’ Conferences on Native Self-Government in Canada ended in deadlock with no progress on the front of Aboriginal self-determination. To ground this issue in local realities, our production team connected with the First Nations Wandering Spirit Survival School and the Wahnepuhnud Corporation, an Aboriginal thrift shop as well as an Immigrant Women’s Centre. A common environmental justice struggle emerged: Canada Metal Eastern, Ltd. had been emitting lead into the air and soil, endangering children’s health in Riverdale, and the Indigenous community of Grassy Narrows in northern Ontario was being poisoned by mercury discharged into the rivers by a paper mill. So children became the key protagonists and actors in the photostory, visiting the nearby polluted Don

Figure 2.1.



River and the metal factory, where First Nations children shared the knowledge of their elders that “the Earth is our Mother and we have to respect her,” because “if you hurt her, it’s like hurting your own skin.” This photo-story (Figure 2.1) fed the organizing of public support for Aboriginal self-determination; the process of producing this story helped us link very local organizations (women’s centers, native schools, and businesses) to larger social movements.

It is particularly striking to revisit this story almost 30 years later, when the poisoning of the Grassy Narrows community near Kenora, Ontario, is again in the headlines with disastrous health impacts and a persistent lack of political

will and action. At the same time, Indigenous people across so-called Canada are leading new social movements, such as Idle No More and the Standing Rock tribal nations protecting water against the Dakota Access pipeline; in Canada, their actions have led to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and an inquiry into the Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women. Inspired by those initiatives, my own activism is now focused on producing digital web-based videos based on an intercultural exchange between settler and Indigenous projects around food sovereignty.

A second co-production involved collaboration with the Basic Anti-Poverty Action group in the late 1980s, to create an edition of *The Moment* entitled “Homelessness: It’s Not Your Fault.” The context was the construction of the SkyDome in downtown Toronto, which gentrified the area and eliminated low-income housing in local hotels and rooming houses. We worked collaboratively with homeless people through The Meeting Place, a drop-in center of St. Christopher House, to develop a composite story based on their real-life stories.

In this case, some of the homeless participated in all aspects of production. We met twice to develop the story, which flowed directly from their experiences; the second time, one participant grabbed a marker and started making a storyboard on the flipchart. Others suggested very specific locations for shooting and identified specific people to take on certain roles. One was keen to join me as a photographer, so I taught him to use the camera. He took several photos used in the final story. These self-advocates, street people who were also antipoverty activists, joined with other housing rights and antipoverty organizers to launch the publication as a tool for mobilizing coalitions around housing issues and against gentrification. This year-long process of collaborative production in itself served to build relationships and deepen commitments.

Kris: In maintaining and elaborating a connection to the everyday, lived-local context, projects from *The Moment* seem to have framed participation as a kind of imperative: those taking on roles may also be seen as those willfully assuming responsibilities. There is a kind of democratization of knowledge in the grassroots and the participatory research Deborah describes here. Expertise of knowledge is not predetermined, but achieved collectively, through a range of investigative methods, and made manifest in a variety of forms. Neither knowledge nor expertise are given qualities or fixed in relation to one another. Instead, critical readers become community participants to stages of broader transformative processes.

Forms of Photostory

Deborah: The genre of the photostories evolved over the years of coproduction. Although they all consisted of narrative sequences, we found ourselves creating different forms of storytelling from one edition to another. We began with a large broadsheet form and then moved to a four-page centerfold.

Some photo stories used only dialogue in bubbles, while others offered a narrator to contextualize the conversation. In some cases, the issue itself suggested a specific kind of narrative. In 1987–1988, for example, we found ourselves in the middle of an extended struggle to fight the very first free-trade agreement, dubbed the Mulroney Deal, as then Prime Minister Brian Mulroney shepherded it between the Canadian and U.S. governments. This was a watershed moment in Canadian politics, and the elections of 1988 actually hinged on this battle, which starkly revealed the interests of capitalist business and complicit governments, while motivating the formation of broad-based coalitions of social justice groups. Indeed, through our Naming the Moment workshops, church and labor groups and feminists formed alliances, integrating our educating and organizing efforts into the first Ontario Coalition for Social Justice.

The challenge of educating ourselves and the public around free trade was that it was unknown; as the first modern bilateral agreement of any magnitude, its potential impact was uncertain. Big businesses argued that it would bring jobs and stimulate the economy through global trade, whereas labor and other activist groups questioned who would benefit and how from these agreements. Because we had no precedents, we decided to frame the photostory as a nightmare predicting an unsettling future for farmers, workers and our health care system, in particular, as the deal promoted harmonization of policies with the United States, which often meant stooping to the lowest common denominator. The drama of a nightmare (rather than a dream) countered the discourse of neoliberal free trade and globalization as good for all, inevitable, and the way of the future. Once again the story grew out of a storytelling process, which brought to the fore the differences between U.S. and Canadian policies, and privileged the voices of those most marginalized in both systems.

Building more drama into the stories echoed the original inspiration of the fotonovelas that I had first discovered in Peru, which usually included romantic tensions in some form. The photostory project focusing on the peace process in Central America in 1988 (Figure 2.2) revolved around a romance between a Canadian factory foreman and a Salvadorian refugee garment worker. Following the device of soap operas to create suspense from one program to another in a series, a story called “An Intimate Connection” was built on a previous story about women workers challenging management as well as the free trade story above and left the reader uncertain what would be the next sequence of this story: Will Doug ever understand? Is there true love after free trade?

Although the photostory was based on real stories of refugees who fled conflict and lost family members because of their political activism, the romance piqued interest and opened up serious issues through the interpersonal relationship, with all its emotional melodrama and intercultural differences. The unfinished ending also responded to critiques we had received about earlier photostories that seemed to resolve real conflicts too easily and offered

Figure 2.2.



simplistic ready-made responses to complex situations. An ending that asked the reader to suggest what happens next and to bring his or her own analyses and potential responses to the issues was more engaging and empowering.

Kris: The alignment of historical accuracy with creative license—that is, the overlapping of fact and fiction—is a recurring formal concern found in photostory production in *The Moment* project. As Deborah admits, synthesizing a fictional narrative from aspects of participants' lived experiences risked overly simplifying rather than generatively enriching complex issues. Yet in *The Moment* such formal experimentation became a powerful way to bridge narrative and stylistic tropes with the complexity of authentic experience. The photostories never merely illustrated a problem, but aimed to be a generative part of its resolution. This experimentation is an aesthetic strategy as much as a pedagogical one, developing and expanding Freirean notions of conscientization and praxis (Barndt, 1998). It also anticipates what Thompson (2015) has recently described as “ambiguous” and “didactic” aspects of the field most recently described as socially engaged arts. Such arts exist on a spectrum between these two poles, he suggests, and even draw complementary features from such seemingly contradictory aims. The implication—that is, that these photostories can be seen as art as much as activism—suggests that *The Moment*

contributes an important legacy to the history of activist adult education as an example of community-engaged activist art.

Life Stories of Marginalized Communities

Deborah: Although the form and production process of *The Moment* photo-stories might at times mimic those of dominant media practice, what most distinguished these stories from hegemonic forms were the voices and experiences that were featured. It was not the daily lives of the wealthy with white skin privilege whose stories we dramatized and visualized, but rather the life stories of people marginalized by race or Indigeneity, gender or sexuality, class or poverty; and we attempted to portray them not as victims, but as resisters who often express agency and seek allies for their struggles.

One example is the plight of refugees, an issue like that of Indigenous self-determination, which goes to the core of our relationship to the land and citizenship rights, and which is once again front and center on the “national” agenda today. In 1989, the federal government closed the doors to the flood of refugees coming from conflict zones in the south in particular. Co-workers in the refugee support team of our Centre organized the Vigil Network to advocate for more open policy and to challenge inequities within the refugee hearing process. They helped us create a scenario that represented the complexity of the situations of the protagonists, both in their efforts to escape conflict in their countries of origin as well as in being subjected to legal processes and procedures when they arrived in Canada.

The resulting story, “Our Lives Are on the Line” (Figure 2.3), focuses on the experience of a Muslim Somalian refugee, and reveals not only the difficulty of getting documents to escape the conflict at home but the contradictory actions of those in Canada charged with helping them through the refugee hearing process. The two large images of the hearing process shift the focus literally and substantively from the actors in the Canadian system (including a Somalian interpreter who likely is from a different political group than the refugee candidate) to the candidate’s traumatizing personal experience in this bureaucratic context. Here we get a glimpse of the personal and the structural dynamics at play in this complicated scenario, but one that plays out daily in Canadian courtrooms is literally a matter of life or death for many refugees. The final frames in the sequence also reveal some of the levels of actors and layers of activism in the incipient Vigil Network. Our hope was that this photostory and the entire issue of *The Moment* on refugee rights would serve as an educational tool both for refugees as well as for advocates fighting for policy changes and government action on behalf of refugees.

Although it’s been a long time since 1989, refugee rights and government procedures are again a hot topic, especially since a new Liberal government has responded to the Syrian refugee crisis by promising to admit 50,000 by the end of 2016. Although the gesture has been lauded, in particular in contrast to the anti-immigrant and Islamophobic rhetoric south of the border, there

Figure 2.3.



are new tensions emerging in the process. As a member of a group sponsoring a refugee family from the Middle East, I am witnessing the complexities and contradictions of current government policies; with an unprecedented number of Canadians offering to sponsor refugees, the government procedures for matching needs with offers have been confusing. Perhaps new photostories are needed to show Canadian complicity in the conflicts from which these refugees are fleeing, as well as the processes both refugees and sponsoring groups must navigate to get them safely resettled. There is never a lack of emotionally compelling personal stories with accompanying complex local, national, and global realities shaping their lives and our lives. The process of constructing a photostory can be part of healing and settling refugees who are carrying trauma and struggle to be integrated as newcomers. For example, I've involved the older children in the family we are sponsoring to create a slideshow video based on their first weeks in Canada; in selecting and editing the photos, the boys are telling us more about how they see their experience. I'm hoping to create other paper-based photostories of specific adventures here that they can use in the ESL classes. This new project echoes our work in the 1980s, and two of my colleagues from those days are part of the sponsoring group—revealing the persistence of the issues and the long-term commitment of the activists.

Another issue from past moments and movements that continues to be central in our lives in Toronto is that of homelessness and affordable housing (further complicated by the competing demands for housing for new refugees!). Again, 30 years later, I am living in the Toronto neighborhood of Parkdale, where many of the homeless and psychiatric consumer survivors ended up when they were pushed out of the area around the dome. Our photo story, “Homes Not Domes,” could be reproduced today, perhaps with the title, “Homes Not Condos,” as affordable housing becomes more and more of a scarcity in the west end of the city. My son, born in the mid-1980s, is now coordinating the Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust Network in the community where we both live; the network promotes community owned and controlled land to stave off developers and ensure affordable housing and urban agriculture for newcomers and low-income residents.

Revisiting *The Moment* photostories has revealed a persistence of particular social struggles, such as the ongoing fight for Indigenous and refugee rights, and opposition to free trade and homelessness. It also raises the question of how these stories might be told today. One obvious and dramatic shift over the past three decades has been from print to digital media. Engaging the current protagonists in coproducing digital stories for on-line media platforms could invite more interaction and promote alliance building across borders. I leave it to my younger colleagues, starting with Kris, to help me explore the infinite possibilities of storytelling and transnational organizing in the digital world.

Kris: The shift to digital from photochemical (analog) photography—completed in the early 2000s and accelerated by the integration of cameras into mobile digital devices of all kinds—has resulted in a profound increase in both the diversity of individuals making images and the overall quantity of images being produced (Larsen & Sandbye, 2014). Personal experiences, if not personal stories, may be found across all varieties of contemporary digital and social media. However, at the same time as more images, and more diverse images, are being made than ever before, it seems that the ability or will to empathize with those images and the life experiences of their subjects and makers has changed. Just as new tools for photostory production now exist, perhaps so do new challenges as well.

It would be folly to think that any method such as photostory production could alone repair such widespread social dysfunction. Yet it would also be wrong to think that such a method could play no part at all: the rich integration of formal complexity and participatory action has much to offer, particularly to those who feel powerless to speak, yet who have been witness to so much. The rich pedagogical experiences of the facilitators and participants of *The Moment* project's past workshops may be difficult to recuperate at present—some participants are gone, some contexts are now unrecognizable—but the formal construction of the project's photostories continues to be evident, and will remain to provide a valuable blueprint for present and future interventions into our collective societal challenges. Movements like Occupy, Idle No More, and Black Lives Matter have been particularly effective at mobilizing digital

media to reshape conventional narratives (Adams, 2016; Coates & Goodman, 2015). Perhaps it is to these movements, and the organizations taking shape within them, that we must also look.

Deborah: I agree with Kris that we are living in an era when the marginalized communities we focused on through *The Moment* photostories three decades ago are not only leading social movements and educating all of us through decolonizing processes, but are also exploiting digital media tools to create powerful statements that are reaching millions through social media. As I peruse the proliferation of videos coming out of the “protectors of the water” at the Standing Rock Sioux reservation, for example, I can imagine that the three themes we have explored here could be revisited by these new protagonists. They have eschewed top-down hierarchical processes of decision making and of co-creation, embracing democratic practices of consensus making. The forms they are using—integrating animation, satire, slow motion, and so on—move beyond my limited forms of photostories, and the viral nature of social media means they reach millions rather than hundreds of potential activists. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the life stories portrayed in these new media forms are not OF or WITH marginalized communities but BY those defined as marginalized, now seen as bringing perspectives, processes, and cosmovisions needed desperately by all of us. This is another Moment, and although it offers terrifying elements of environmental destruction, racism, Islamophobia, and violence, it is also a hopeful moment because of those who are now making the photostories—how, why, and for whom.

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