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SPECIAL SECTION: ANTHRO-ARTISTS:  
ANTHROPOLOGISTS AS MAKERS AND CREATIVES

## The performative photograph

### A poietic approach to visual ethnography in a French banlieue

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By reexamining the empirical relationship between ethnography and photography, this article explores the phenomenology of photographic experiences in a French banlieue. Photography may be a powerful practice to critically depict social phenomena in the field. Taking into account the basic assumption that photography is more than visual evidence of observed realities, I analyze the creative and nonindexical dimensions of visual experiences. Based on collaborative, sensorial, and pragmatic practices, I discuss the politics of visual representation in marginalized and racialized urban spaces from an intersectional point of view. The analysis developed here contributes to the definition of a creative and critically self-reflexive approach to the depiction of ethnographic experiences. In doing so, this article explores the plastic, poietic, and performative dimensions of photographic narratives in visual ethnography.

Keywords: photography, ethnography, visual anthropology, materiality, banlieue, urban ethnography



Figure 1: (Author, 2017)





ASSA: What is important for me is to show that we are good at what we do, that we believe in rugby, that as girls we play as well as men do . . . that we are not afraid, that we are committed to our colleagues in the field. We like the physical contact in this sport, we are proud of what we do . . .

ASHLEY: Compared with men, we make the same, even more effort than them . . .

KOUMBA: We roll in the mud, we scrum, we pass, we crash, that's the kind of photos we want, the ones that portray us as true warriors . . .

Koumba, Assa, and Ashley are three young women living in Sarcelles, a *banlieue*<sup>1</sup> to the north of Paris. They are part of a rugby team at a high school named Chantierine. In the passage above they revealed the way they wanted to be visually depicted during a visual workshop that took place at their school in early 2017.

Why do they want to show themselves as being strong, proud, and courageous? How to represent their experiences respecting the image they have of themselves from their own practice? What aesthetic, methodological, and practical decisions arise for a researcher like me, who is both an ethnographer and a photographer in the field? To what extent can we improve our ethnographic understanding of social phenomena through creative, engaged, and multimodal visual practices?

This article suggests that creative and reflexive practices are essential to studying social interactions through photography. Based on sensory, phenomenological, and participatory methods this research advocates for new critical and multimodal photographic activities in visual ethnography. This manuscript is based on my doctoral research. Between 2015 and 2018 I conducted a visual ethnography in Sarcelles. This banlieue has historically been a “fantasized city,” a *cit * that figures powerfully in the imagination and imagined representations. Since

1. In France, a *banlieue* is located in the suburban area of a large city. Although in these suburban areas it is possible to find wealthy neighborhoods, from the 1970s the name banlieue is often associated with underprivileged developments on the edges of the city. A banlieue is often linked to a structural reality: an impoverished neighborhood with a high concentration of social housing complexes (also known as HLM) and an over-representation of an immigrant population, often of color.

the emergence of the “Grand Ensemble”<sup>2</sup> (large housing complex, sometimes also called a *cit *), Sarcelles has been regularly depicted in media as a marginal and ghettoized space. These visual representations have led to Sarcelles becoming one of the most recognized examples of French banlieues (Canteux 2004; Bertho 2014).

In addition, Sarcelles has become an icon in an urban mythology. As an icon, it produced the neologism derived from its name: the *sarcellite*. A sarcellite suffers a supposed “pathology” caused by living in large housing complexes (HLM)<sup>3</sup> and the connotations are partly responsible for stereotyping the *cit * as one of the most degraded banlieues in France.

Sarcelles is, in actuality, characterized by a number of challenging structural issues: a young population, a high unemployment rate, low household incomes, low levels of education, an underrepresentation of highly qualified working professionals, and a high proportion of immigrants in its population (INSEE 2016). Moreover, most of the residents live in an abject social housing complex. Since the construction of the Grand Ensemble between the 1950s and 1970s, this urban space has been steadily decaying. A consistent lack of public investment has led to slowly deteriorating living conditions in the *cit *.

In the course of my research, I was both a photographer and an ethnographer. This double activity conducted during long-term immersion allowed me to explore the social environment that defines this banlieue in more than one way. Being both ethnographer and photographer gave me the means to deconstruct the marginalized image of this place by producing photographs in a variety of local social contexts, contexts that I engaged with

2. *Grand Ensemble* is the French term for a big housing complex, usually based on massive functionalist architecture. These are often underprivileged spaces located on the outskirts of the biggest metropolises, such as Paris. The Grand Ensemble de Sarcelles is what is known as a *banlieue-dortoir*, the literal translation of which is “dormitory suburb.” It refers to the new suburbs created at the periphery of the main cities in France in the 1950s. The Grand Ensemble de Sarcelles was constructed between the 1950s and 1970s. They are called banlieue dortoir since they are mainly residential spaces with little access to services, as well as recreational and cultural activities (Vieillard-Baron 1996: 325).
3. This “pathology” which was characterized by behavioral misconducts and depressive attitudes points to the fact of living confined in the Grands Ensembles (Roth 2007).





Figure 2: (Author, 2017)

as an anthropological field researcher as well. I experienced, observed, and photographed. These three practices introduced me to the dwellers, the institutions, and, importantly, the moral ecology (Hannerz 1983) that organizes visual interactions in this social space. Based on this experience, I began to question photographic practices that take place in the field. I aimed at examining the ways photography could be used as a critical and reflexive medium to interrogate the ways the city dwellers themselves came up with their own representations of their environment. Based on a series of multimodal ethnographic examples, my research analyzed both the pragmatic dimension of visual interactions and the phenomenology of the visual experiences which took place during my fieldwork.

In this article, I will explore the experiential relationship to photographic practice through examining a particular project: the construction of the photographic series *Les Rugbywomen*. Accordingly, this article explores three main subjects: the poetic approach of photographic practices in visual ethnography, the politics of visual representation, and the materiality of public narratives.

### Photographic *poiesis*: Exceeding the index

Photography has been used since the emergence of anthropology (Edwards 2015). Early theorization of visual

representation in the service of anthropology promoted observational approaches using precise methodological protocols to study social and cultural phenomena. The rise of sensory and phenomenological approaches in anthropology redefined the way images are conceived and deployed in the field.

Ethnographic film contributed to the phenomenological turn. Since the early contributions of Jean Rouch's "ethnofiction" (1957, 1979), film has provided experimental resources for reconceiving visual depiction through a variety of sensorial and participatory practices. Early theorization of visual anthropology helped develop collaborative and phenomenological elements in film, such as the pioneering participatory approach seen in Sol Worth and John Adair's *Through Navajo Eyes* (1975). David MacDougall has advocated for an ethnographic practice that focuses on the "corporeal aspects of images and image making." He sees visual anthropology as a discipline that explores a "larger domain of the feelings, the intellect; and the remaining senses . . . The individual is involved as a thinking and feeling person, but also as a body in relation to other bodies, to objects, to time, space, and place, and to the narratives of social interaction" (2005: 269). MacDougall's contribution is part of a larger disciplinary and institutional effort to encourage new ways of representing anthropological experiences through film. In a more recent contribution, Rupert Cox, Andrew

Irving, and Cristopher Wright advocate for new “modes of representation . . . that facilitate different kinds of theoretical, sensory and interpretative encounter and which utilise non-linguistic and non-textual knowledge” (2015: 2).

Historically, filmmakers have introduced critical ways of conceiving, exploring, and portraying social phenomena through epistemological and methodological experimentation.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, within the larger field of visual anthropology, film has been especially supported through a series of institutional and disciplinary efforts. There are graduate programs specifically in visual anthropology that focus on ethnographic films, for example, and there are festivals, competitions, and showings of award-winning films in public and professional venues.<sup>5</sup> Ethnographic photography has not received the same kind of support. Photography has been commonly considered as an “ethnographic tool” for describing or gathering ethnographic data. Technical experimentation has usually been confined to developing new ways of involving participants in the research process (e.g., the well-known photovoice and photo-elicitation techniques). However, less has been said about how photography can be conceived, experimented with, exhibited, and shared in the field itself.

On the one hand, most visual sociologists and anthropologists would agree that photography is a social construction. The photographer’s subjective choices and technical decisions will define how the images will be used and seen. On the other, photography has long been used as a means to register traces of social phenomena. Consequently, in its evidentiary form, photography has been seen as a trace of reality that has an indexical continuity with the photographed object or referent.<sup>6</sup>

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4. This is illustrated by the innovative film practices developed by institutions such as the Sensory Ethnography Lab or the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology.
  5. In contrast, there are few scientific associations based on ethnographic photography (with some great exceptions, such as *Writing with Light*).
  6. Rosalinda Krauss claims: “The photograph is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object. Its separation from true icons is felt through the absoluteness of this physical genesis, one that seem to short-circuit or disallow those processes of schematization or symbolic intervention that operate within the graphic representation of most paintings” (1977: 75).



Figure 3: (Author, 2017)

Indexicality has shaped early theorizations of photography in visual anthropology.<sup>7</sup> This is even more noticeable in visual sociology, a field in which photography has been used as extensively as film. Photography has been traditionally conceived of as a way of capturing visual pieces of evidence. For instance, Howard Becker claimed that photographs “show us real instances of what the text talks about, with enough detail about the specific people and places we are looking at to let us make more or other interpretations” (2002: 11). Studying urban spaces,

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In France, this position was strengthened by the semiotic approach of Roland Barthes, based on the assumption that photography is a trace of a *ça a été* [“it was”] (1980: 123).

7. I take as an example the pioneer theorizations of John Collier. In his well-known *Visual anthropology: Photography as a research methods* he invites readers to think of photography as an optical system that “offers no means for evading perceptive sensitivity” (Collier and Collier 1986: 1).

William H. Whyte analyzed the social life of “the city” through detailed and “unobtrusively” photographic materials (1988: 4). More directly and explicitly, the semi-otic approach of Michael Emmison and Philip Smith has claimed that photography should be conceived as “data for investigation in exactly the same way as all other visible phenomena” (2007: 10). In visual sociology, photography has been employed largely as a means to detail ethnographic observations. Employed as data (or as a means to obtain it, for example through photo-elicitation), photography has not been imagined by-and-large as a creative resource for depicting inner, sensorial, and corporeal experiences through critical and technical experimentation.

In visual anthropology, notable progress towards a more experimental approach has been made in recent years with the emergence of initiatives like *Writing with Light*.<sup>8</sup> The work of anthropologists like Robert Desjarlais exemplifies a phenomenological turn. In his recent book *The blind man: A phantasmography*, Desjarlais explores “how text and photographs might work together to say something new and telling about people’s experiences in the world” by depicting the imaginative dimensions of human experience (2019: x).

In this article, I suggest that creative, critical, and non-indexical practices such as Desjarlais’s phantasmography might help us re-envision the relationship between ethnography and photography. Taking into account the basic assumption that photography is more than evidence of observed reality, and following the path opened by sensorial and phenomenological approaches in visual anthropology, I consider photography as a means to depict the corporeal and inner dimension of urban experiences in French banlieues.

From this perspective, I imagine photography as a *poietic* practice. Poietic differs from poetic. The first term derives from the Greek “*poiesis*” and denotes an act of creation. The second refers to the production of a rhythmical, imaginative, and meaningful composition.<sup>9</sup> A poietic ap-

proach focuses the visual anthropologist on the technical, narrative, and phenomenological dimension of photographic creation. It presses us to explore the multiple ways in which social and cultural phenomena can be depicted and visually experienced through nonindexical practices.

A poietical approach questions the position from which the creator is observing and depicting social and cultural phenomena. Sandra Harding’s standpoint epistemology envisages a feminist analysis that “insists that the inquirer her/himself be placed in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter, thereby recovering the entire research process for scrutiny in the results of the research” (Harding 1987: 9). I suggest that a critical photographic practice may enhance Harding’s project by engaging the ethnographer in reflexive and engaged visual practices (Leon-Quijano 2019a, 2019b).

To develop my argument further, I turn to a discussion of the politics of photographic representation based on my ethnographic experience with the photographic project *Les Rugbywomen*.

### The politics of visual representation: The performative photograph

I introduced this article with a scene in which a group of students from the Chantereine high school in Sarcelles discussed the way they wanted to be depicted during a screening session that took place in early 2017. This high school is located at the periphery of the Grand Ensemble. It has a high dropout rate and 86 percent of the students come from financially stressed families.

I met the team after being contacted by their coach at the end of 2016. He was interested in having a photographer document the team’s activities in order to showcase and promote the team.<sup>10</sup> Some of the students knew about my presence in Sarcelles as my photographs were regularly published on social media.<sup>11</sup> For over a year I

8. A photo-essay initiative launched by a curatorial collective “to bolster the place of the photo-essay—and, by extension, formal experimentation—within international anthropological scholarship” (see <http://societyforvisualanthropology.org/writing-with-light/>).

9. A poietic approach doesn’t rule out a poetic one. They are closely related. Nevertheless insisting on the poietic dimension of visual ethnography aims to make explicit the plastic, iconic, and technical features that underlie the creation of photographic objects.

10. Initially, there was an interest in having “good photographs” for raising funds as they were preparing the national tournament. Participation in the tournament depended on financial support from public and private institutions. At this early stage, my photographs were conceived of as a form of collaboration and were expected to contribute to the team’s communication strategy.

11. I was known as the “Colombian photographer” or the “black and white photographer.”



Figure 4: (Author, 2017)

had followed the activities of the rugby players from the high school.<sup>12</sup> I regularly attended the training, tournaments, and informal meetings. In particular, I had photographed a group of five players. I was interested in discovering the relationship between rugby and the urban experiences of the young Sarcelloises. Upon receiving the coach's invitation, we decided that I would document the activities of the team while creating visual materials to showcase the sports activity to a broader audience.

It hadn't been an obvious choice for me, as a male ethnographer, to regularly follow and photograph a group of young teenage girls (fifteen to sixteen years old). But the project gave me different opportunities. Photography was not only a means to build a story about them; it was a way to reflect on the creation of a new kind of visual narrative in a social context characterized by marginalizing and stereotyping discourses (Berthaut 2013).

To introduce the social and corporeal environment in which the photographic ethnography took place I start by presenting a (verbal) portrait of two rugbywomen.

Koumba was born in Sarcelles in 2001. Her Malian parents arrived in France in 1999. She has two older sisters, a little brother, and a nephew. Her father, retired after contracting a lung disease in 2014, was an industrial worker. Her mother is a maintenance employee and works in Paris five days a week. The whole family is Muslim. Since the age of three, she has been living with her parents in one of the social housing towers located in the Grand Ensemble. Even though her family doesn't have significant income, in material terms they do not live in a precarious situation.<sup>13</sup>

For Koumba, rugby was a way to prepare her future. She wanted to become a top-notch sportswoman, and this was connected to her relationship to the high school and the local environment of the banlieue. Koumba didn't feel comfortable in Sarcelles.<sup>14</sup> She wanted to move away

12. The "rugbywomen" were a group of twenty young women, fifteen and sixteen years old. They were part of the UNSS rugby team of the Chantereine high school (3<sup>ème</sup>). Most of them live in the Grand Ensemble. All of them had parents of non-European origins (mostly from sub-Saharan Africa, the Sahel, and the Antilles).

13. In France there are subsidies from the state for housing, school, social security system, and healthcare.

14. Koumba declared in an interview: "The fact that people don't respect me as a woman makes me sick. Since I'm a girl men will tell me what to do. I'm also Malian. I don't



Figure 5: (Author, 2017)

from the place and rugby was a means to pursue her professional project and to get out of town.

As a girl, you have fewer opportunities than a male rugby player. For instance, during training, the *cadets* [young male players] have two hours of rugby at the stadium. Les *cadettes* [young female players] only have an hour and a half. They take thirty minutes off our time . . . just because we're girls! . . . And I know that playing at a higher level is not easier. We don't get paid. My dream would be to become a professional player, I would like to be paid, but rugby women aren't paid, unlike boys. That's not normal, that's not fair.

One problem impacting the possibility of her becoming a professional rugby player is the prevalence of gender inequalities in sports. Koumba is fully aware of this social reality, as is Assa, the captain of the team:

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know why they have a problem right now with Malians, Malians don't use creams, Malians do this, Malians do that, a kind of racism . . . Everyday life is exhausting since I'm always doing the same thing, seeing and being in the same place. I'd really like to quit Sarcelles . . . I'd like to see something else, that's why I hope I will be able to go to Perpignan [to a new high school specializing in rugby]."

We work hard, even harder than men because we want to be recognized as sportswomen, but we have no recognition, we can't develop in this sport.

Assa, fifteen years old, was also born in Sarcelles. She lives in a social housing block near to the train station. Her father works as a waste collector and her mother does domestic work. Assa is the best student in the high school, with the highest grades. Unlike Koumba, she doesn't want to leave Sarcelles. Nor is rugby a means of upward social mobility for her, or a way to prepare her professional future. Yet, this sport plays a key role in the way she conceives of her body in public:

Rugby taught me about self-confidence, to convince myself that my body was a powerful tool on the field . . . that I wasn't afraid of people's weird gazes. Because sometimes people's gazes in the streets make you feel like a monster . . . On the field I feel good. I convince myself that I'm doing something good . . . Rugby taught me how to gain self-confidence, now I care less about people's looks . . . even if I run, I fall, I tackle, I have that feeling of liberation and freedom.

Doreen Massey has argued that space is "always under construction." It is a "product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions" (2005: 9). For Assa,





Figure 6: (Author, 2017)

rugby has changed the way she interacts with the local environment. She gained in self-confidence. She braves the male gaze and recognizes her capabilities as a woman. By regaining self-esteem, Assa rethinks her corporeal relationship to public space.

In a social environment characterized by intersectional inequalities, sport is an emancipatory activity and a way to experience self-esteem. To a certain extent, ethnographic practice combined with the regular feedback participants gave me on the photography produced a critical and reflexive visual narrative. I regularly photographed Koumba and Assa. They were my two main contacts in the field. Photography was a means to get to know them better and to discover how they perceived themselves as rugbywomen. On the one hand, I wanted to understand the phenomenological “interrelations” between the girls and the urban environment. On the other, I was interested in exploring their “corporeal image” (MacDougall 2005) and the ways in which the participants visually experienced their own bodies and places.

Photography was integral to a critical depiction of urban and corporeal experiences through visual encounters. J. L Austin’s theory of speech acts outlines the performative uses of language (1962). He shows how linguistic utterances may engender actions. In some cases, “saying something is to do something.” Although this research did not focus on the linguistic dimension of social

practice, Austin’s theory is useful to understand to what extent photographs figure as a response to and are productive of social interactions between the participants and the ethnographer. My research explored the way in which the right people, the adequate technical materials, and the appropriate social environment make ethnographic photographs happen. Performativity here accounts for the relationship between the photographic activity and the narrative genesis of the ethnographic series.

To give an example of what has been said so far, I detail the phenomenological elements that contributed to the conception and production of the following image. The picture in Figure 7 usually opens the photographic series *Les Rugbywomen*.

*Field notebook — January 25, 2017*

I met the team at 2 pm. It was freezing. The school was empty. On Wednesday all the students are usually home and yet nine players came to the training. The training took place at the multi-sports field since the rugby stadium was flooded. The weather was so cold that all the players kept on their scarves and winter coats. They practiced passes and dodging from 2:15 to 4:00 pm.

I photographed the training sessions from different angles. I went up to the top of a small hill. From there I had a large overview of the field. My hands were so cold that I could barely press the shutter. At 2:30 pm



**Figure 7:** A training session in the high school. The original is a color photograph, taken by the author.

snow start falling. I made a series of pictures. I wanted to take advantage of the snow to bring out the atmosphere and thermal sensation during the training session. I shot the scene with a long focal length (70mm) adding an external flash to highlight the snowflakes.

This photographic image includes a series of iconic elements: the players, the field, and the buildings of the Grand Ensemble. In the original file, in spite of the flash lighting, the snowflakes appear very faintly. Colors are pale and poorly contrasted. The raw file doesn't portray the corporeal, thermic, and emotional situation I experienced that day. Back home, I uploaded the raw file on my computer. Based on the practical elements experienced by the players in the field,<sup>15</sup> I postproduced and transformed the original photograph. I made sixty-six adjustments, including reframing, adding radial filters (which made snowflakes more visible), and increasing the contrast. For me, postproduction was a means to fashion the harshness of the situation. A photograph with heightened contrast, showing more clearly the material elements that defined the situation (a focus on human action, reframing, highlighting on the snowflakes), depicted in a more accurate way the interactions I sensed that day.

15. These practical elements include: the commitment of the players who trained in extracurricular schedules; their discipline to train in spite of adverse weather; their physical investment in a space that is not adapted for practicing rugby (for instance, they were practicing in a multisport field where the soil had been paved over with asphalt).

In addition, going from a color photograph to black and white was a technical decision to perform an ethnographic experience based on emotional, sensorial, and participative feedback. This choice aimed to challenge the realist and marginalizing representations of Sarcelles prevalent in the media. Postproducing the photograph in black and white allowed me to rethink the way in which banlieues had historically been represented since the end of the 1980s, when color photography became the dominant form of visual representation of the banlieues.<sup>16</sup> On the one hand, this decision to use black and white stands against a hegemonic form of representation based mostly on realist aesthetic approaches. On the other, it questions the iconic representation of banlieues as merely ghettoized and disadvantaged spaces.

I use the term "photographic plasticity" to refer to the aesthetic potential photography has of shaping visual narratives by modeling the imaged materials in the light of experience of the photographed situation. In this ethnographic research, technical choices such as low-angle shots, wide lenses, close-ups, postproduction black and white, reframing, and the use of external flash contribute to a better depiction of the interrelations between spatial, sensorial, subjective, and interactional experiences.

From the French word *plasticité*, photographic plasticity refers to the ability of a material to be shaped.

16. This shift to color photographs is explained by the historian Raphaëlle Bertho in an article on the iconography of the grands ensembles (2014). In particular, the DATAR national photographic commission documented in color and large format the state of decay of the banlieues in the 1980s.



Thinking in terms of plasticity for photography means considering photography as a performative practice that allows the researcher to model visual representations based on experiential feedback. Photography is much more than a tool to document (participant) observations in the field. Postproduction and editorial choices intervene in the portrayal of social phenomena based on pragmatic<sup>17</sup> and phenomenological<sup>18</sup> practices. Therefore, a plastic and poetic approach to visual ethnography involves the activity of depiction through critical multimodal practices. Technical choices, as I have shown, shape the way ethnographic experiences are represented.<sup>19</sup>

Infrequently discussed with reference to photographic ethnographies, the politics of visual representation demands considerable critical reflexivity. I was photographing rugby, a social practice known for being violent, white, and male dominated.<sup>20</sup> What is more, I was a male photographer focusing on young female bodies. Aware of my presence in a gendered, heteronormative, and racialized context, deconstructing the gender relationships in this ethnographic fieldwork forced me to critically question my presence as a male photographer.<sup>21</sup>

Deborah Poole has analyzed the ways in which the representation of non-white bodies has been undertaken in the history of anthropology. For Poole,

ethnography's relationship to the photographic image continues to be haunted by the specter of race, in that the photograph can only really be imagined as a form

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17. Analyzing practices and relationships between actors and their environment (Dewey 1934).
  18. Exploring the corporeal, sensorial, experiential, and non-representational dimensions of human experiences.
  19. The complete set of considerations concerning the ethical and political commitments regarding this photographic activity are detailed in my doctoral dissertation (Leon-Quijano 2020).
  20. Since its appearance in the United Kingdom, in the late nineteenth century, rugby has been conceived as a white-male game. This racialized and gendered structure was reinforced during the twentieth century in countries such as South Africa. In this country, the institutionalized segregationist regime strengthened the development of rugby as a white and male-dominated sport.
  21. In the field I was mostly perceived as a white man. This dominant perception was in some measure relativized by the fact that I am Colombian and French is not my native language.

of evidence in which fixity (in the form of simplicity or focus) is favored over excess (in the form of contingency or confusion). (Poole 2005: 172)

Poole calls for an explicit questioning of the “empirical language of positivist science” and to rethink the visibility of “race” (2005: 173). My photographic activity was mediated by a sensory, corporeal, and emotional awareness of the social activity I was depicting. My rethinking of the relationship between the visual representation of women’s racialized bodies and my presence as a male ethnographer was mediated by collaborative activities that involved both the photographer and the “photographee” eye.

Margaret Duncan has demonstrated how sports photographs “encompass stereotypes of women and men, attitudes relating to the appropriate roles and behaviors female and males” in a public sphere (1990: 25). Duncan showed the gendered iconographic structure of a series of images in sports magazines: as women are usually seductively portrayed, photographers (and editors) highlight the “physical marks of femininity” and in general choose images in which women are “photographed in poses that bear a striking resemblance to those of women in soft-core pornography” (1990: 29). Moreover, she shows to what extent the camera angle plays a crucial role in the visual depictions of sportswomen:

[F]emale athletes are usually portrayed in below-eye-level angles, suggesting their smallness and inferiority; male athletes are often portrayed in above-eye-level angles, suggesting their height and superiority.<sup>22</sup> (Duncan 1990: 38)

I considered photography to be an encounter and a mediation. The technical and plastic choices defined my position as an ethnographer. Very often I took this type of picture from low angles, close to the subjects, with wide-angle lenses (24mm). These choices were guided by a double desire: to photograph the team from the

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22. To complement this argument, we could look at Erving Goffman’s *Gender advertisements* (1979). In this book, he reveals the gendered construction of visual representations through a detailed analysis of commercials. He illustrates the categories that structure the gendered representation of women in advertising and publicity. I mention Goffman because these categories (e.g., “the feminine touch, the ritualization of subordination”) are still useful when describing and analyzing the gendered construction of visual representations in sports.





Figure 8: (Author, 2017)

inside but also to contest the hegemonic forms of representation of sportswomen revealed by Duncan. In this specific case, the creation, postproduction, and exhibition of black-and-white photographs highlighted a sensory and reflexive reality experienced in the field. A different visual approach (i.e., by photographing in film, using telephoto lenses, or portraying from “below eye-level”), would lead to a distanced and detached visual message that could not do justice to the ethnographic encounter.

Having carried out several participatory activities on gender issues in Sarcelles (Leon-Quijano 2017a), I knew that a critical way to depict and understand the phenomenology of photographic experiences was to get the players involved in the editing process. Throughout the season I regularly shared the photographs with the players.<sup>23</sup> In a vast majority of cases, the pictures that portrayed physical effort (tackles, scrums), tenacity, and strength were the ones they preferred. For me, as well, it was a means to reflexively rethink my position in a “critical plane,” as pointed out by Harding (1987).

Despite the presence of marked contextual elements, the aesthetic we chose was a creative way of establishing

subjective emotions, sensations, and experiences through a critical analysis of the gendered environment. The dialogues I had throughout fieldwork with the players about their visual selves provided me with valuable feedback. It allowed me to identify the kind of iconic representation they wished to publicly display and raised awareness of the visual representations of gender and social issues for all of us. Not surprisingly, the players preferred those photographs that visually enhanced them as empowered women. If the point of view and the iconic content played an important role in the visual depiction of their everyday experience, the participants also warned me about the photographs that they considered as “too voyeuristic” and that could potentially damage their reputations. These kinds of photographs were usually the ones that depicted parts of their bodies that they didn’t want to show publicly, or corporeal positions that they didn’t feel comfortable with.<sup>24</sup>

23. I organized three collective editing sessions with the team along with individual photographic ethnographic interviews with Koumba, Assa, and three other rugby players.

24. I decided not to publish those kinds of images in this article. These pictures often involved the overexposure of some parts of the body (due to interactions on the field involving catching, falling, and tackling, etc.) or interactions where their bodies were in submissive positions. Despite a scientific interest in publishing such materials, to illustrate what they didn’t like, I have promised the participants not to publish those kinds of photographs.



**Figure 9:** (Author, 2017)

For example, one element that was regularly highlighted by the participants was gender inequality. In the introductory passage of this article, Assa mentioned that she wanted to be shown as someone strong, proud, and committed. Engaged in a sport often perceived as “too masculine” or “too violent” for girls, rugby was for most of these

young women a way to improve their self-confidence and sense of strength. Many of the editorial and postproduction decisions made were based on this double feedback. On the one hand, I had the feedback from experiences in the field. On the other, I had input from the dialogues, interviews, and collective editing we did with the players.



**Figure 10:** (Author, 2017)



**Figure 11:** Screenshot of *Les Rugbywomen* sound slideshow (4 min). Available online: <https://vimeo.com/258468083>.

The visual narrative we produced highlights the women's physical investment in sports and describes the heterogeneity of the social world in which this practice takes place. As I said before, the visual and moral engagement of the narrative is tightly tied to the dialogues and interaction I had with the rugby players. There is one activity that particularly shaped the participatory construction of the photographic narratives: sound recording. Throughout the fieldwork a group of rugbywomen took part in the production of audio recordings. Following Rouch's experiences in ethnographic filmmaking, I instructed the participants how to record (Rouch 1979: 61). In particular, they recorded a series of soundscapes. The recordings, as testimonies and informal interviews we had, directed me to discover the intimate dimensions of social interactions among the young women. Sound recordings and, on a larger scale, the ethnographic encounters improved my understanding of a series of plastic and iconic representational elements during the photographic documentary process. Afterwards some of these recordings were used in the creation of *Les Rugbywomen* sound-slideshow.

### **The sound-slideshow: The plastic construction of a multimodal object**

The sound-slideshow is a short composition that assembles images, text, and sound in a multimodal story.

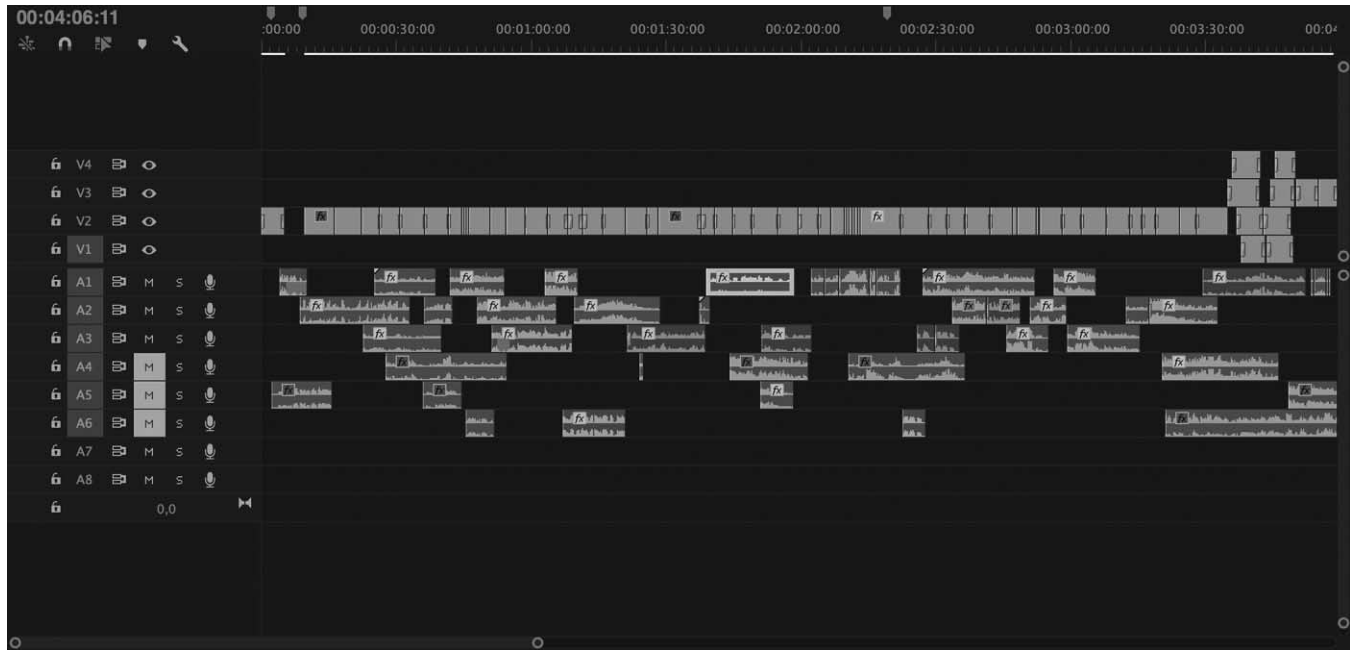
Creating it involved the editing of images (mainly photographs), a soundtrack, and written excerpts. The distinctiveness of this format lies in overlaying three discursive types (photography, text, and sound). The editing process determines how visual messages will perform, in the sense suggested by Austin. Based on the physical and emotional experiences they sense in the field, the sound-slideshow depicts the empowering activity performed by the rugbywomen.

Montage is a key phase in this creative process. To use Marc Henri Piault's description, montage is a moment of "logical or chrono-logical organization of shots that form sequences whose articulation tells a story."<sup>25</sup> Photographs, sound extracts (including interviews), and texts were categorized and then carefully arranged in a storyboard (see Figure 12).<sup>26</sup>

Unlike the photo-essay, the sound-slideshow involves three discursive formats within a time-limited composition. The photographs are arranged in movement. Certain narrative and stylistic strategies can be deployed in

25. "Le montage-narration met dans un ordre, logique ou chrono-logique, des plans formant des séquences dont l'articulation raconte une histoire" (Piault 2011: 6).

26. This activity is a well-known process used by most ethnographic filmmakers. I used Adobe Premiere for the montage of the various materials.



**Figure 12:** Screenshot of the storyboard of *Les Rugbywomen* sound-slideshow (4 min). Taken by the author.

the editing phase to define how the subject will be portrayed. I will highlight three of them. First, there is the opportunity to vary the duration and exposure of each image based on a determined narrative strategy with its preset emphases. For instance, the time frame and the transition effects regulate the importance each image will have in the story. Second, there is the use of sound layering. This consists of the modulation of the main track based on superimpositions of sound layers from different sources (interviews, field recordings, voice-offs) in order to create an immersive soundscape. Third, there is the creation of visual dynamics. For instance, a rapid succession of images can accentuate the sensation of movement, while long sequences accompanied by long silences can create moments of pause and reflection (see Figure 13).

In this way, the sound-slideshow is the result of, and is itself, a performative experience on a phenomenological and communicative level. It is phenomenological,

since I shared the moral and interactional environment that regulated the girls' everyday experiences. It is sensory, as the multimodal production was conducted by the corporeal, perceptual, and emotional encounters experienced when photographing. It is communicative, since the photographic narrative is the result of conversational and editorial practices undertaken with the players throughout the fieldwork.

### The materiality of public narratives

Making the visual narratives public is a crucial stage in the social life of ethnographic photographs. For instance, Daniel Cefaï has distinguished two major ways of thinking about publicity (*publicité*): the first is located in a discursive paradigm inspired by the Habermasian theories of public space (Habermas 1978). The second one alludes to an ecological and pragmatic conception of publicity.



**Figure 13:** In this quick sequence, four photographs enhance the sense of movement. Photographs by the author.



Figure 14: Editing of the exhibited photographs. Work by the author.

Following Dewey (1927), Cefaï describes publicity in an “ecological and processual” way (Cefaï 2018). I considered the sharing of photographic materials as a mechanism to understand the visual ecology of the social image of the studied community.

In the field, the photographic exhibitions were part of public narratives. The heuristic activities of the exhibitions allowed me to explore the phenomenology of visual experiences. They were also moments to analyze the way participants visualized their own spaces and interactions (Leon-Quijano 2019a, 2019b). Sharing and exhibiting photographs were, in that sense, more than simple feedback activities (*restitution*).<sup>27</sup>

The *Les Rugbywomen* exhibition took place in June 2017.<sup>28</sup> Since the beginning of the photographic activity, we had planned an exhibition to highlight the physical commitment of the team. The exhibition, with its visual

narrative of twenty photographs, was planned and conceived with the coach and the rugby players.

Among the elements that defined the visual narrative were the materiality and the scenography of the exhibition. For the team, it was important to invest and rehabilitate their space.<sup>29</sup> The walls of the high school seemed a convenient and appropriate location for the exhibition. Each 3 × 4 meter photograph depicted a situation experienced in the field (see Figure 15). The photographs were mainly based on sport interactions. They were fixed on the outside walls of the high school, in 180 linear meters of print, creating a visual narrative based on a number of values asserted by the players: strength, solidarity, emancipation, and teamwork. By doing so, the walls of Chantereine became a space of expression for the team.

ASSA: We wanted to show the teamwork, strength, solidarity, pride that rugby conveys for us

FLORIAN (COACH): To me, the important thing was to share not only the violent dimension of rugby but also the everyday situations that we experience in the field.

27. I have translated the French word *restitution* with the English word “feedback.” The English “restitution” is often used in anthropology to denote the activity of “restoring” ethnographic knowledge in the studied environment.

28. A photographic account of this experience is available on: <https://www.camilo-leon.com/the-rugbywomen>. The exhibition *Les Rugbywomen* was supported by the Society for Visual Anthropology/Robert Lemelson Foundation Fellowship.

29. Behind this claim there was one about gender. Visually occupying a large space is a way of challenging the gendered structure that defines the urban experiences of women in banlieue (Leon-Quijano 2019b).





**Figure 15:** Installation of *Les Rugbywomen* exhibition in the Chantereine high school. June 1, 2017.

Photograph by the author.

In addition, we presented the sound-slideshow.<sup>30</sup> This second format completed the photographic exhibition. It also aimed at creating a new visual narrative summarizing the sensorial and emotional experiences registered in the sound recordings.

To inaugurate the exhibition, an opening ceremony was organized. More than a hundred Sarcellois attended the event.<sup>31</sup> Most of them filmed and photographed it, and in a short period of time their pictures were posted on social media. New narratives about the photographic experience were produced and broadcast. This new round of publicization and narrative allowed me to critically consider the visual reception of *Les Rugbywomen* in the local community. In addition, it gave me phenomenological feedback about the sensory perception the public had of the visual exhibition.

After the screening, several people pointed out the importance of the sound-slideshow:

SAID: It completely changes the perception of the story, you can feel that you are almost in the field with them.

The principal of the high school: The photos on the wall are really imposing, it's the first time we have done something like this in Chantereine . . . but the video really touched me, the mix of sounds and images is

very moving, it pulls out a lot of emotions . . . the testimonies, the noises, the soundscapes, all this is a real immersion.

The materiality of the exhibition governed perception of visual narratives. It highlighted the corporeal and sporting commitment of the players not only by the iconic components of the photographs but also by the way in which those pictures were printed and displayed.

The exhibition can be considered a heuristic experience as it directed thought to the reception of the photographic materials within the studied community. The photographs were not passively experienced by the participants or the community. Two complementary events illustrate the ongoing dynamic nature of the photographs. At the end of the year, the players offered a personalized rugby ball to Florian, their coach. On the ball, they printed a collage of four images from the photographic series. They added text to the composition (see Figure 17) :

Well done, we became war machines thanks to you!  
(*Bravo, vous avez fait de nous des machines de guerre !*)

The message conveyed in their composition focuses on the visionary role the players attribute to the coach. On the one hand, the visual composition plays the main role for Florian's gaze. On the other, the verbal message underlines the strength and resilience of the actions carried out by the team. The association of a linguistic and iconic message within this composition reveals the material practices that may emerge from visual objects collectively produced and shared in the field.

30. For the first presentation we edited a twelve-minute *diaporama sonore* with a 135-photograph story that included descriptive texts, interviews, and soundscapes.

31. Those attending included the rugby players' families, other local people, NGO leaders, teachers, local journalists, and a few sportsmen.



Figure 16: (Author, 2017)

A second event reveals how participants may materially reclaim photographs to communicate personal and inner experiences. During their last encounter<sup>32</sup> the coach handed out 20 × 30 cm printed photographs of the team as souvenirs (Figure 17). Unexpectedly, players started to write verbal messages behind the prints of each other. These objects became new material supports of creative communication and memory. For most of them, these prints became a physical reminder of the collective experience of being part of the Chantereine team (Figure 18).

Photographs play a key role in maintaining social bonds at a microsocial scale. The social construction of images requires not only practices involved in producing and disseminating them, but also discursive strategies that aim at boosting a common identity based on a collective experience.

Analyzing the material practices and sensory implications of the visual narratives has been essential to understanding the social role photographs played in the community under study. In this case, the giant format of the exhibited photographs, the sound-slideshow, the customized rugby ball, and the printed images induced different types of social practices. Be it textual inscription

or social media sharing, the materiality of the visual medium creates opportunities for how the images will be socially experienced. In sum, from both a pragmatic and a phenomenological perspective, examining the materiality of public narratives is a way of exploring the local perception of the ethnographer's images from a reflexive point of view.

## Conclusion

Photography is a social activity that makes possible the sensory study of urban experiences through creative and critical practices. This article explored the way in which photography could be conceived, realized, and shared in a visual ethnography that took place in a French banlieue. On the basis of phenomenological, participatory, and pragmatic approaches, photography can become a powerful practice to depict social experiences. This project aims to renew the relationship between anthropology and artistic activities by exploring the multidimensionality of photographic praxis in the field.

A poetic approach can contribute to critically rethinking the role of photography in visual ethnography. By moving away from an indexical position that considers photography as a physical trace of observed reality, we also move away from the idea of using photography primarily as a means to collect data. Instead, a poetic approach looks at ethnographic experiences through

32. For most of the rugby players it was their last year at the high school.



**Figure 17:** On the left: the personalized rugby ball offered to the coach. On the right: Fatime signs the printed photograph of Assa. Photographs by the author.

performative activities, following the path of anthropologists who use photography in experimental and creative ways (Desjarlais 2019).

In this article, I suggested the concept of plasticity in order to denote the potential of photography to depict social phenomena in a creative way. The materiality of photographic practices is central to the ways in which visual activities are experienced. As a consequence, a technical and material awareness when creating and reproducing visual materials is essential in order to portray what Andrew Irving calls a “sensory exchange between body and world” (2013: 292). For example, revealing the

social implications of material elements and practices such as photographic scenography or multimodal productions may give a better understanding of the phenomenology of visual practices.

Reflexive practices, participant feedback, the right social environment, and the right visual materials make ethnographic photographs happen. The way in which photographs are built relies firstly on the senses, secondly on editorial practices. In that sense, a performative photograph is a poetic, reflexive, and plastic response to a social sharing between the ethnographer and the social environment.



**Figure 18:** Prints on the wall of Koumba's room. Photograph by the author.

Based on critical approaches (Harding 1987; Poole 2005), this article insisted on the necessity of socially situating the visual ethnographer's status in the field. A theoretical and methodological awareness of the power relationships in the research process is a way to reflexively rethink photographic production. Furthermore, I argued that a way of understanding the ordinary experiences of the field was to engage in a creative and collaborative activity. As a consequence, this visual ethnographic project was conceived in terms of sharing. In marginalized spaces, participatory photographic practices have the potential to be a powerful medium for questioning the construction of a collective identity through negotiated visual practices (Leon-Quijano 2019b, 2020). For instance, the public depiction of gender and corporeal issues in the *Les Rugbywomen's* series illustrates the heuristic practice that may emerge from poetic activities.

In sum, this article has discussed the issues that may arise during the creation and publicization of photographic narratives in ethnographic research. It pursued the sensory and phenomenological exploration that has been extensively realized in the domain of film, but that has still to be consolidated in photography. One of the potential outcomes of this research is to review the way in which photographic narratives are created and disseminated in public media.<sup>33</sup> Analyzing photographic experiences from a poetic, reflexive, and phenomenological perspective may contribute to rethinking the critical role that ethnographic narratives have in society.

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33. For instance, the *Les Rugbywomen* series was published in national and foreign media such as *Libération*, *Paris Match*, *Le Parisien*, *VICE*, the *Washington Post*, and the *British Journal of Photography*.



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