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OWNING THE IMAGE:
PHOTOGRAPHY AS A MEANS OF EMPOWERMENT IN CONTEMPORARY NAMIBIA

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is about photography and its potential to motivate, to serve as a medium for self-expression, and to change the lives of marginalized people. At the same time, it is about the limits to this positive role for photography due to power structures and societal discrimination. These potentials are investigated through observation, interviews and analysis of photographs within three participatory photography projects in community-based organizations in Namibia. The thesis argues that a number of critical perspectives relating to the polysemic and yet potentially colonial nature of the photographic gaze, and to the pedagogy of adult education in settings where differentials of privilege between teachers and learners predominate, need to be integrated in order to understand these photographic movements. Explaining in detail the ethnographic and participatory approaches used, the thesis reports on this researcher's immersive investigation in the three Namibian photography projects. The thesis makes conclusions in a number of key areas, which need to be taken into consideration by both planners of and academics working within these projects. These conclusions include, centrally, the need for facilitators in these movements to become aware of their relative privilege and how it affects the learning process about photography. Also, the thesis examines the role of liminality among members of the photographic projects surveyed. This liminality involves being in flux between privilege and oppression, suffering multiple intersecting oppressions and anxieties, lacking a clear concept of 'home'. The data suggest how photography as an art form can relate to these liminal spaces. Finally, the thesis makes use of semiotic analysis of pictures taken during the projects the author was involved in. The research data, it is argued, make the case that this kind of analysis is useful for understanding photography and its potential socioeconomic impact.

Keywords: photography, media, empowerment, marginalization, ethnography, Namibia, Southern Africa, pedagogy, participatory media.