ABSTRACT: Framed in a project on conviviality and migration-led diversity in Santiago, Chile, this article presents visual narratives of neighborhood participation. Accounts of migrants’ public lives have turned to underlining mundane forms of conviviality and place-making. This visual essay shows how such dynamics can comprise a fertile terrain for public engagement in contexts of “crisis.” The account is based on a photo-voice exercise developed by three long-established migrant women of different occupations, age, and nationalities during the COVID-19 pandemic, a crisis that shaped the personal/public interface of their lives. I propose that photovoice, by endowing agency and producing situated knowledge, can illuminate migrants’ local engagement, making visible (creatively, descriptively, and symbolically) the connection between the personal and the public while counteracting dominant problem-based representations of migrants.

KEYWORDS: Chile, COVID-19, diversity, local engagement, migration, participatory research, photovoice, urban space

This visual essay shows the sociospatial dynamics of local engagement developed by migrants in a context of crisis. The practices of neighborhood participation I identified evolved in the conjuncture of two milestones in Chile. The first was the social revolt of October 2019. This was a process of mobilizations and protests that expressed popular discontent with the unequal access and privatization of social security, education, health, and even water systems—all consequences of the neoliberal reforms imposed during Pinochet’s dictatorship (1973–1990) (Rodríguez 2021:8,9). The second was the COVID-19 health crisis. Both processes have dramatically made visible, and increased, longstanding vulnerabilities. As elsewhere, the pandemic in particular has involved the intensification of gendered violence, inequalities, and exclusions against women and girls, especially in the domestic sphere (McIlwaine et al. 2022; Razavi et al. 2022). Yet the COVID-19 health crisis has also encouraged local solidarities, mutual aid, and “community care” practices (McIlwaine et al. 2022; Razavi et al. 2022; Stang 2021). Based on the
application of the photovoice methodology, this article bears in mind this complexity, taking as its entry point the experiences and perspectives of migrant women.

Photovoice is a participatory visual method in which research participants are invited to take photographs to respond to different questions and express their views of particular themes (Biglin 2022; Harper 2012; Scârneci-Domnişoru 2017). This participatory visual technique mediates migrant voices in a way that promotes creativity, critique, and counter-discourses while narrating their experiences as city dwellers (Datta 2012). As part of this methodology, the photographs taken by research participants are introduced in (individual or group) interviews to elicit ideas, memories, and emotions. As Datta explains, “[i]n embodying the mobile-migrant and the reflexive photographer as one and the same person, these photographs work as interview “triggers” to stimulate discussion and reflection on the affective geographies in the city and of their mobilities” (Datta 2012: 1729). As such, the research process (rather than images alone) encourages us (the researcher and the participant) to “learn something together” (Harper 2012: 155), a principle connected to a research agenda that is collaborative, flexible, and open to the unexpected (Datta 2012).

Following Antar Martínez and colleagues (2018: 174), I propose that photovoice can influence dominant social imaginary and cultural narratives. This is a crucial contribution given the problem-based representations of migrants (either through ideas of migrants as passive, vulnerable, or a source of threat) that have pervaded public media representations of migrants in Chile (Liberona 2015) and appear to have become particularly salient in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis (Ramírez 2020). Through photovoice, participants position themselves as subjects of enunciation in the actual contexts they inhabit, contesting symbolic representations based on inequalities and hidden power relations. Under the principle of “giving voice,” Harper (2012: 155) explains, photovoice endows agency to “those who traditionally were the focus of academic attention.” This method “has had a subtext of empowerment” aimed to express thoughts and generate knowledge on participants’ own terms (ibid.), an agenda that has also been at the center of a feminist research perspective (Martínez et al. 2018). Indeed, feminist scholars have made the point that photovoice is a powerful tool to give recognition to vulnerable women’s experiences and perspectives. Photographs made in everyday spaces reveal the interweaving of individual experiences, personal locations, and social processes, blurring the line between the private and the public, and thus delineating that the personal is political (Martínez et al. 2018: 179).

Photovoice has also become an important tool to describe migrants’ and ethnic minorities’ relation with their local environments. For example, some authors have shown that by visually depicting the situations and places migrants daily avoid in their neighborhoods, they can become aware of the factors that generate spatial exclusions and inclusions, and identify social and spatial boundaries (Back 2007: 60–68). More specifically, photovoice allows migrants to become protagonists in the descriptions of the places they inhabit and delineate affective geographies of the city (Datta 2012). Photovoice can literally bring into “sight” the sites migrants occupy, including locations that can remain inaccessible for researchers.

The following account is framed within a larger research project aiming to understand the dynamics of coexistence that emerge in a context of diversity-led migration and crisis (such as the crisis prompted by the pandemic). In dialogue with the accounts of 24 migrant interviewees conducted in one of the neighborhoods under study, and also (pre-pandemic) participant observation, in this article I focus on the case of three long-settled migrant women who participated in the project through follow-up interviews, photovoice, and elicitation exercises. They are Judith, 36 years old, Venezuelan; Ester, 46 years old, Argentinian; and Cristina, 53 years old, Peruvian. All of them have been living in Gran Yungay for more than a decade. While Cristina
worked as an entrepreneur with small businesses in the food sector and, during the pandemic, as a paid domestic worker and informally selling food to her friends and neighbors, Carmen and Judith were both professionals and worked as administrative staff in the private and public sectors.

I decided to focus on and present these women's stories because their distinct profiles resemble that of other participants in significant ways. Also, due to my ongoing collaboration with them in a wider timeframe, a more intense inquiry and dense research material was generated.

It is worth noting that women have been at the forefront of dealing with crisis in their local communities, both generally (González et al. 2019; Magliano 2019) and particularly during the crisis of COVID-19 pandemic (McIlwaine et al. 2022; Razavi et al. 2022; Reyes-Muñoz y Reyes-Muñoz 2022). Migrant women have been involved in this process too; academic accounts have focused on their experiences of community organization and political subjectivation (Gavazzo y Nejamkis 2021; Stang 2021), leaving underexplored the sociospatial dynamics of local (dis)engagement that daily emerge in relation to new uncertainties.

Research Context

In Chile, migrants represent almost 8 percent of the population, comprising 1,492,522 migrant people, whose diversification in terms of nationality, status, and time of residency, has notably increased in the last decade (INE & DEM 2021). The Gran Yungay, where the study that frames this article took place, is an urban area located in the center of the capital city, Santiago, that has the highest proportion of migrants relative to its overall population. Gran Yungay has been considered a place where migration is inherent to its social identity and also more visible than in other areas of Santiago (Margarit and Beijit 2014).

Along with associations and groups formed mostly by and for migrants, the area is well known for its active civil society, either formally organized or informally gathered around shared interests and needs—community gardens, artisans, local heritage defense, local security concerns, soup-kitchens (ollas communes), motherhood, and feminism, among others. Diverse forms of political and social engagement, as well as a vibrant social and cultural life, are also expressed in graffitiories and (sometimes outstanding) murals, which, along with local markets, festivals, cultural hubs, cafes, and restaurants, attract its diverse local inhabitants and people from other locations, including tourists, who come to visit the place.

Such features make this space a location where migrants can find and develop diverse forms of support, resources, and local involvement. In highlighting these features of the area, I do not seek to downplay migrants’ vulnerability, which is also part of their daily lives (for example, through abusive subleases, overcrowding, insecurity and stigmas). Quite the contrary, I seek to show that regardless (or even because of) precarities, people can engage with others and their local contexts.

Visual Narratives of Local (Dis)Engagement and Conviviality in a Context of Uncertainty

Ester, Judith, and Cristina photographed ordinary moments of their daily lives and public spaces, as well as social encounters and solidarity activities. Also, spontaneously, they shared personal photographs generated before the study. These elements allow us (researcher and readers) to observe mundane dynamics and spaces of another (pre-pandemic) time and invite us
to reflect on how, in the context of intense social change, participants sometimes need to “look back” to talk about and comprehend their present circumstances.

It is important to note that participation through photovoice coincided with moments of strict measures of quarantine and confinement, including ongoing curfews. The research participants’ decisions to mix vernacular photographs—that is, those developed in the context of their daily lives independently and before the research—with photographs taken in the context of this study was compelling. This was as a way of voicing a relative loss of public life, which, nevertheless, was recreated in different ways as the following photographs and elicitations show.

Considering a set of more than 60 photographs taken by long-settled migrant women, I analyzed them and found meaning that attended to what was expressed during interviews while looking at the images, and also through the identification of themes and generation of categories, which were later applied comparatively to the whole set of images (Becker 1999).

In some cases, I had similar visual accounts, so I decided to include in this article those photographs that were more compelling and better echoed other people’s depictions (following Scârneci-Domnişoru 2017). I was also guided by ethical criteria. For instance, images of children’s participation in public life were common, especially for mothers with kids and tweens, such as Judith and Ester. Among the photographs with children, I chose those that were more compelling, exemplary, and that were authorized through informed consent by their tutors and the children themselves (pixelating their faces if visible). The inclusion of photographs of children also has ethical implications in the sense that it permits overcoming the invisibility of childhood as a fundamental part of neighborhood life.

Local markets, squares, parks, cultural hubs, and local festivities were important sites in the women’s narratives. Since the social revolt of 2019, marches, assemblies, and other forms of gathering became visible in the area, which some migrant neighbors actively attended. Additionally, especially during the pandemic, some more organized initiatives led by associations and groups were started or transformed, such as soup-kitchens and the collection of groceries to be given in solidarity to those in need.

More precisely, first, I identified ordinary daily forms of participation close to what Ash Amin (2002) has called micropublics. These are mundane forms of encounter and coexistence across difference in diverse cities, taking place in daily spaces such as squares, streets, schools, clubs, and sports places. These are “contact zones” where both tensions and more positive and productive encounters can occur (Wise and Velayutham 2021).

Second, along with those mundane and daily dynamics, I found “more spectacular” processes of public formation (Iveson 2007; Vigneswaran, Iveson, and Low 2017), which were mutually made with a sense of communality, shared interests, and public appearance in public spaces. These processes mostly took place after the social revolt of October 2019 and included, for example, congregations in the plaza—to “see what was going on” or “meet up” there—with pots and pans demonstrations, art-based interventions such as collectively made murals, and assemblies in response to the national contingency. Along with the main squares and monuments, ordinary and abandoned streets also acquired new significance and use (Iveson 2007).

A third, more formal and organized form of ongoing solidarity and mutual aid was boosted during the pandemic. This was a process in which “the neighborhood and its associative fabric became a space and an agent of resistance and community creativity against vulnerability” (Cano-Hila and Argemí-Baldich 2020: 238). In a diverse context, this could involve the formation of “intercultural communities”—that is, “practices that bring people into relation with each other, and thereby bring differences into relations of reciprocity” (Noble 2009: 59). Then, regardless of distance from public space and suspension of usual social activities, adjustment and new forms of community engagement across diverse people was enacted.
I found differences between women in terms of public participation. Those that have expressed relatively fewer experiences of discrimination and racism in public spaces, such as Judith and Ester (who in a Chilean context would be identified as “White Hispanic”), participated more visibly in openly “political” activities that involved active use of public space, in contrast with Cristina, who recounted significant experiences of policing, xenophobia, and racism. These experiences somehow inhibited her willingness to engage in public forms of demonstration. Yet, Cristina and other women were more involved in organized initiatives of solidarity and mutual aid.

The photographs made more concrete the ideas expressed in oral narratives and made visible both quotidian and ephemeral situations that often remain unspeakable. By showing actual places, people, and activities, they resonated and expanded what was collected through words. In the following narrative, the photographs are presented in consideration of such thematic and also temporal frames, organized through a textual/visual interface (Heng 2019).

A Diverse Daily Social and Spatial Landscape—As They Have Always Been

[1] “The window in my room overlooks the Mountains [Cordillera de los Andes] and I always look because I know that on the other side is Argentina. . . There is an old building which is like a mansion, and there is a modern one that respects the height of the old one. Even though they are different, there is respect and harmony for the heritage zone.” (Ester)
[2] “This was on September eighteenth [Chilean Independence Day]. It is when the neighbors are sharing in the streets, with food and music. Sometimes they make noise in the street and they do not let you sleep, and you cannot say anything because they say you are a gossipmonger.” (Cristina)

[3] “This was a feminist bike route in Yungay Neighborhood. We [Ester and other women] toured places where Gabriela Mistral, Elena Caffarena, Violeta Parra, and Eloísa Díaz (Chilean feminist icons) lived and studied. We got to know part of their legacy and the beginning of the feminist struggle in Chile.” (Ester)
“This is a carnival that we always go out [to the street] to look for with my daughters. We have always participated, walking alongside the caravan.” (Ester)

“These pictures were of when we practiced sports in the park or a local school, with people of the neighborhood and my community. All women of different ages, the majority migrants. Since the pandemic, everything has changed; it’s not how it used to be.” (Cristina)
The Social Revolt as Promoting and Activating New Publics

[6] “My neighborhood has a lot of beautiful murals. They always transmit something, sometimes with colors, sometimes gloomy, sometimes with clear and powerful messages, and others that need to be reflected upon. Some of them more professional-looking, like this one, and others with spray-paint only. The revolt meant many things to me, but the most enriching thing was to see how the neighborhood gained strength in the organization, networks were set up, we marched together, we took care of each other, well . . . still. . . I like the walls that speak.” (Judith)

[7] “I got to know about this soup-kitchen (olla común) when I was walking home from my daughter’s school. A signboard on the wall said something like ‘we are gonna make a soup-kitchen this day, at this time; bring lentils, or juices, or salads.’ People started to arrive. Those who organized this were neighbors, and they decided to do this. They went out to the street, set the table, that is it! . . . a street band (murga) arrived and sang. . . . It was an opportunity to meet and get to know each other.” (Judith)
“The three of us [Judith and her two children] are always together up and down the streets... During the revolt, the three of us went several times [to Yungay Square]. We would get together with the people of the assembly there, and we would make the route that leaves from Plaza Yungay, passes by Plaza Brasil and reaches the Plaza de la Dignidad [the heart and more famous assembly point of Santiago City].” (Judith)

“Another mother in my daughter’s school invited me to participate in feminist committees and assemblies. These spaces allowed me to access information and learn things about Chile that I didn’t know before. They allowed me to participate, establish connections with others, and learn how the Chilean educational system works... We are trans, black, dissident women, from different territories who come to participate in the area. Some of them are migrants; others are not. There are all kinds of women.” (Ester)
Solidarity and Mutual Support in Times of Pandemic

[11] “These were the most difficult days, where we hardly ever left the house. There were some moments of amazement because of the beautiful views. We [as a family] watched the sunset. A small moment of satisfaction in a quarantine where things have not been easy. We are a very active family, and now we cannot do anything.” (Ester)

[12] “We gathered in Plaza Yungay to show the strength of the neighborhoods. I like to see the flags of many different countries here. That’s how diverse the neighborhood is. This reunion was now during the pandemic. It was a way to re-invent and reorganize, to continue supporting the neighborhood organization.” (Ester)
[13]: “The last thing we did as a community was the delivery of boxes of groceries... We usually save money through a small fee to have a little fund, and since we had saved money, we decided to give food to those who needed it. We supported each other.” (Cristina)

[14] “It is a storage box (caja de acopio) made by the neighbors. It says: ‘If you don’t have one, take one. If you have something, leave it [for someone else].’ It’s also a new routine, after my shopping, to leave something.” (Judith)
Conclusion

Bringing migrants’ voices and storylines to the fore, this article has developed a situated approach that shows the connection migrants can establish with their surrounding urban context, thus unsettling tropes of migration and urban space in terms of segregation, urban vulnerability, and social fragmentation. This approach is also relevant as the focus on migrants’ local connections can offer an alternative standpoint to the dominant focus on transnational lives or ethnic minorities’ urban segregation.

In terms of methodological exploration, even though photovoice is associated with taking new photographs during the research processes, this study (unexpectedly) included some vernacular images which were taken before our research, as our participants wanted to tell a story in which past and present are inevitably in dialogue. In this sense, it is critical to reflect further on the participants’ agency while creating visual narratives, and in photography not only as influenced by the positioning of people (in terms of gender, class, age, ethnicity, and other attributes) (Martínez et al. 2018), but also by the conditions of the more extensive social, cultural, and political environment, and available and familiar technologies. These aspects become evident in contexts of multidimensional “crisis.”

In terms of narrative potential, through photovoice, photographs have the ability to connect different moments and social processes with the lived experiences of people and the occupation of places. Distinctions that were diffuse in the participants’ oral narratives became discernible in dialogue with the visual material. These distinctions were articulated with the photographs and allowed us to make sense of the broader picture, while also showing the porosity of the borders that separate the private and the public.

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CAROLINA RAMÍREZ is academic researcher at the Centro de Investigación en Ciencias Sociales y Juventud (CISJU), Universidad Católica Silva Henríquez (UCSH), and is adjunct researcher at the Centre for Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies (COES). Carolina did her MA in Social Research and PhD in Visual Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her main research interests are diversity and migration, conviviality, place-making, and care. Carolina has published in the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, Ethnic and Racial Studies, Global Networks, and Identities, among other international journals. She recently co-edited the book Migraciones, etnicidades y espacios: Aproximaciones críticas desde la etnografía (2021, Ril Editores).

Email: cramirezc@ucsh.cl. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5586-8961.
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