THE PROMISED LAND:
Zomi Diaspora in Tulsa

By: Daniel Gin Sian Mung
Project Chair: Jackie Bell

CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS

Who gets to tell whose story? Questions about identity, proximity and objectivity usually emerge when photographic work is being discussed. The photojournalism community has pushed for the perspectives of more insiders when covering a visual story. As a result, there has been a paradigm shift of indigenous and diverse voices within photojournalism in the United States, with groups such as Reclaim, The Authority Collective, Women Photograph and Diversify Photo to name a few, that are looking at how their stories have been told.

In her book 'On Photography,' Susan Sontag writes, "The camera is a kind of passport that annihilates moral boundaries and social inhibitions, freeing the photographer from any responsibility towards the people photographed. The photographer is always trying to colonize new experiences or find new ways to look at familiar subjects- to fight against boredom. For boredom is just the reverse side of fascination: both depend on being outside rather than inside a situation, and one leads to the other." In this context, Sontag associates the insider position with an empathetic

gaze, respect and dignity, while the outsider position produces work that voyeuristic, colonizing and lacking compassion.

Visual journalists have carried the responsibility of documenting the complex nature of refugee communities. In order to understand how photojournalists who are part of a particular community document stories ranging from indigenous land rights, mental illness to breaking stereotypes of Muslim-Americans, I interviewed seven photographers.

Role as insiders

Wesaam Al-Badry, a documentary photographer and artist based in Berkeley, California, said, "I grew up in a refugee camp at Saudi Arabia and journalists would come in their vans, take pictures and leave. Then, the ugliest picture of you would appear in the newspaper the next day." Al-Badry explains that it is important to have a non-stigmatizing approach when doing long-term documentary projects.

Gabriella Angotti-Jones says, "When I am working with women of color, because historically we have been disenfranchised, I try and show their power as a person through my images. They can be just released from a detention center or living in a

homeless shelter, but they still radiate this power and energy that they are able to survive, thrive and become who they want to be." Angotti-Jones identifies herself as biracial, with both Black and Italian background and currently a photo intern at the New York Times.

In his project "Northern Lights," New York City-based Egyptian documentary photographer and filmmaker Amr Alfiky documents his own journey to humanize his experience as an immigrant to the US after the Egyptian revolution. Alfiky points out that many engineers, pharmacists and journalists had to flee Egypt after the revolution and ended up dishwashing in the middle of Virginia. So, he started his photography project as a visual diary because he felt this aftermath phase was not being talked about and was invisible from the narrative. "After these people sacrificed their lives for their country and freedom, the least I could do is tell their stories," said Alfiky. He further explains that as an insider, you share the same experience with the people you are photographing; you understand where they are coming from, how things have been for them and what is changing.

For Kholood Eid, a Middle Eastern Midwestern documentary photographer based in New York, her personal ongoing project, "Diagnosed," dealt with the side effects of medication. In 2013, Eid had been diagnosed with depression. Many editors

have asked Eid to include herself in the "Diagnosed" project. Eid said, "For most of the time while working on the project, I couldn't afford therapy. So, talking to people, hearing their own experiences and photographing them was really cathartic for me. I actually ended up making one of my best friends from the project.

Jessica Chou adds to this topic, saying, "In general, you understand where the people you are photographing are coming from, because you are part of it and there is a lot less layer to peel back." Chou is a Taiwanese-American documentary photographer based in San Francisco and has been documenting her neighborhood in California for the project "Suburbia Chinatown."

Josué Rivas, a Mexica/Otomi visual storyteller based in Portland, has been documenting the Standing Rock community. His resulting project won the 2018 FotoEvidence award with World Press Photo. He discusses how telling stories about your ancestors is connected to your DNA. Rivas says that telling these narratives can sometimes trigger emotions within you and the people you are photographing. When talking about his work from Standing Rock, Rivas says "When photographing, I am looking for what is genuinely my own experience and how can I connect with the people I am documenting in the environment of my experience." Rivas further states that he is very conscious when photographing native people because he is aware of

how his grandchildren or great grandchildren would like to see themselves portrayed, 100 years from now.

"Native people have never been perceived as intellects. We are not viewed as creative content makers," said Al Badry on his portrait work, "Al-Kouture," which plays with the idea of symbolism, culture and consumerism. "Al-Kouture" questions the western world: would it accept the niqab, were it made by luxury fashion designers? Although numerous international publications and agencies showed interest on the project initially, Al-Badry said that they responded saying it was too "political" and that they did not have the appropriate columnists to write about it.

All the interviewees expressed their emotional connection, personal attachment to the stories covered and their ability to amplify a more authentic and deeper story-telling.

Disadvantages of an insider

A lot of times, insiders face issues of being biased, too close or subjective in telling stories from their own community.

Wing Young Huie, a Chinese-American artist based in Minnesota, has worked on projects covering immigration, identity and race. He explains that "the goal is to make it feel like it's from the inside, but that is not easy to do sometimes. I feel that being on the inside does not give you the same perspective as being on the outside. I can see it with my own family. It is hard to have perspective on my own family."

Rivas adds to this point, saying, "It is even harder to photograph when you are an insider. Native photographers want to go document other people because it is too painful to document your own people." Al-Badry further points out that, "sometimes your own people do not want you to do their story. Revisiting the past is a painful experience for a lot of refugees because you have been stripped away from everything."

Both Angotti-Jones and Eid talk about how as a person of color you can be pigeonholed as exclusively a "female Muslim or Black photographer." "What photographers of color often struggle with is when editors can't conceptualize them working outside of what they are passionate about," said Angotti-Jones. Eid agrees, saying how a particular publication will reach out to her twice a year to document the two major Muslim holidays.

Rivas argues that a lot of insider photographers struggle with normalizing how to best represent native communities. “The challenge is to show people respectfully, even when they are in their worst self, whether it be an alcoholic or addict,” said Rivas. He adds that when there is a personal bond and a connection with the people you are documenting, it affects the photographer internally as well.

Advantages of being an insider

The interviewees expressed that when documenting a community, it is established that both insider and outsider photographers need to represent the people they are photographing with respect, equality and compassion.

Alfiky claims that when covering a story, the people you are documenting often want to control the narrative. As a result, they may selectively tell you what they want you to hear. “As an insider, since you understand the community, the people you photograph do not have control over the messaging. You get to ask deeper questions and try to demystify and normalize an issue,” he adds. In visual stories, Alfiky looks out for Muslims that are unapologetic and going against what mainstream media deems as a “good” or “bad” Muslim. Through his work, he wants to continue working on

deconstructing the stereotype of Muslim Americans in mainstream media and reconstructing their identity as a multi-layered, complex and nuanced.

In June 2018, New York Times published Alfiky's story on American Muslims and the different reasons they own guns. "The feedback from the Muslim community worldwide was heartwarming. Many Muslim-Americans, who grew up in the US struggling with surveillance, stereotyping and profiling reached out saying you are the first person to cover such a sensitive issue in a nuanced way," said Alfiky. When the readers wrote back saying that the media needs more stories like this, Alfiky replied, "I was only showing a slice of how Muslim-Americans lived in the Mid-West and the South".

Eid says, "I have actually had certain people tell me, 'I am so glad they sent you'," referring to some of her assignments for newspaper and agencies. "As a woman of color, a lot of times people that I photograph feel more relatable with me." Eid understands the one-dimensional coverage of the hijab. Wearing hijab is the biggest signifier in public of the Islamic faith, and it is also the most stereotyped. Through her work, Eid explores how the identities of Muslim women go beyond religion and the hijab. She recently worked on a visual story focusing on the Sunday routine of Noorain Khan, a Muslim-American woman, who is a program officer at Ford Foundation for the

New York Times. The photographs focus on showing life beyond the hijab. The images explore Khan's relationship with her husband, her morning ritual prayers, their Sunday brunch with friends, love for barre and the couple's favorite pasta joint.

Long-term documentary projects are built on access and trust. "Speaking the language provides a certain amount of underlying trust that you might not have otherwise. Automatically there is a notion that maybe you are one of us and that you will not take advantage," said Chou. Angotti-Jones, during her assignments with newspapers, has experienced how 'Black, Latino or women of color' were more willing to open up to her to her due to a higher level of perceived trust, because they identified with her. Expanding on relatability and trust, Angotti Jones says, "I met an 80-year-old Black woman today and when I introduced myself and said that I worked with the Times, she gave me a hug. From there she opened up to me and gave me a bunch of story ideas and told me the history of the community."

"As an insider, you are able to go deep into your community and bring forward stories that more authentic than anyone else can. This process can bring about internal reconciliation and healing," said Rivas.

Al-Badry reminds us that as an insider you are aware that although you have similar experiences and have something to relate to in a conversation, you are equally mindful of your position. “It is important to meet people where they are at, to be humble and know it is not your space,” said Al-Badry.

Conclusion

Alfiky, Rivas and Al-Badry talk about how there is a new paradigm shift with minorities starting to own media platforms and working on self-funded independent projects. “We can’t be spectators anymore,” said Rivas. “For too long they have been telling our stories. It is on us now, to tell our own,” adds Al-Badry. Angotti-Jones further illustrates that “I believe as an industry, we can show that people of color are not monolithic, but truly show the depth of humanity.”

The trio agree that they are on the forefront of writing their own people’s history and will be questioned by the next generation photographers: “What did you do during your time, to make it easier for us?”