

Oral Presentation

“For decades, the common figure of the photographer was identified as a male figure roaming around the world and pointing his camera at objects, places, people, and events, as if the world was made for him. He can vanish from people’s worlds in the same way that he appeared in them” (Azoulay, 2016, p. 2)

I spent my formative years in a small Somerset town that always felt in decline. Growing up in a working-class family environment where low aspirations were the norm, it was usual for my peers to leave school at 16, and were eagerly employed by awaiting local factories, following the same cycle until the inevitable redundancies would come along, as one by one industry left the town.

I rejected these expectations, and decided not to ‘get a real job,’ I saw photography as a ticket to another world, a life that I viewed through glossy magazines and travel shows. I actively sort to reject any association with the community of my formative years and moved away as soon as I could, seeking ‘the other.’

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I worked as a freelance travel and editorial photographer, based in Western Australia. I embracing the roaming male photographer image as referenced by Ariella Azoulay, and never stopped to consider the impact of pointing a camera in the direction of a subject.

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“The Photographer is supertourist, an extension of the anthropologist, visiting natives and bringing back news of their exotic doings” (Sontag, 1979)

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Susan Sontag’s assertion of the photographer as ‘supertourist’ requires us to consider that the photographer does not work with the subject of their photograph in a collaborative sense, and only seeks to bring fascination and intrigue to the audience, a kind of microscope

pointed at persons that are 'different than us.' In my own case, my images served as a commercially motivated form of this, an anthropology in order to sell holidays.

For example, I was in the coastal areas of Mombasa, Kenya, aiming to capture the kind of image was typical of my practice. Whilst at the same time that I was focussing on this image to sell to western audiences, those same western tourists would show a clear indifference to the local population, rarely venturing out and engaging with them, seemingly continuing to view the 'exotic' (Lutz & Collins, 1991) from the safety of a hotel bar. My images in supporting this purpose, although never maliciously so, could be considered as supporting the inherent intersectionality of the situation.

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Later, when I was on assignment for National Geographic Traveller in Bali, these questions persisted. Bali's economy centres and relies on this promotion and would possibly suffer if this was to stop. It is a situation that only exists through the continued influx of travellers, which has happened in the region for decades.

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Although not directly affiliated with National Geographic Traveller, being that it is a franchise publication, National Geographic has historically viewed the world through a 'colonial gaze' highlighted in the article 'The Photograph as an Intersection of Gaze' discussing the disconnect between the photographer and world they are photographing. National Geographic have only recently acknowledged a past built on the exploitative imagery of 'exoticism' through the issue of an apology in their April 2018 'The Race Issue' (Goldberg, 2018). My own fascination with 'the other' is completely born out of this kind of societal coding in comparing where I came from with 'exoticism.'

“To Rise Above Our Past, We Must Acknowledge It” (Goldberg, 2018)

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“The photographer responds to what is sometimes a profound alienation from the people being photographed” (Lutz. & Collins. 1991 p.137).

Community has always been a topic of my work. Coming to realise that this is a continued look at ‘the other’ extending to differing social groups, and is an attempt to see where I might fit into them. The desire to escape my formative environment and rejection of that community has meant that I had a real disconnect with the world and would use photography as a platform to make observations into others, the profound alienation that Lutz & Collins discuss resonates with me and also Sontag’s camera as a ‘Passport’ into other people’s lives without any responsibility. (Sontag, 1979). I observe and record, never truly engaging

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Perth is the most remote city on the planet and colloquially considered to be a cultural backwater. In the short time that I was living there, people and money were free flowing through the city and it was a time of huge change, with implications on the community and the environments that they inhabited.

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I explored this idea in my project ‘Million Dollar Sand Pit’ (Hill, 2013) that looked at the vast, largely sterile housing estates cropping up, increasing its footprint on the land without the infrastructure or real regard for community. homes are selected from a catalogue and placed on plots that were regularly auctioned from upwards of one million dollars.

As a result, migrants are left with a version of the 1950's American dream and its lure of home ownership, materialism, and also individualism. I was drawn to this environment, seeing the quiet subversion of these ideals through the banal microscope of the 'New Topographics' style, and similar to the way photographers such as Stephen Shore, and Joel Meyerowitz approached the booming US in the 60s and 70s.

I was also influenced by Ben Roberts' topographic approach in his series 'The Gathering clouds' (Roberts, 18 June 2011 - 25 July 2011) that showed the uninhabited Spanish housing estates as a result of the recession. My is the other end of the spectrum, with the expansion of Perth producing an economic bubble that would surely crash in a similar way that Roberts documented in Spain.

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My series 'Classifieds' (Hill, 2012) considered how people were trying to build relationships with each other after migration. They would do this through the online small ads site Gumtree, normally reserved for buying and selling goods, people were using the site to reach out to others with similar interests, seeking community through online connectivity. I responded to their adverts, asking for a portrait instead.

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Of course, this project is still looking at 'the other.' And I am still maintaining a distance, choosing to examine the bizarre statements that some of these advertisers presented. Referring back to Sontag, who wrote 'The Photographer chooses oddity, chases it, frames it, develops it, titles it.' I approached the subjects because of the very different nature of the subjects. However, I made a conscious choice to title this work using the exact advert copy

from Gumtree, giving the subject more of a voice than I may have done previously, starting the process of more engagement with my subjects in my practice.

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I have come to debate my place in photography, and what I can realistically contribute to the conversation. Photography has been transformative for me, allowing me to move between social strata and improve my social status, I no longer belong to the working-class demographic of my formative years. Should it be my photography that looks at community and the signifiers within it?

Mark Sealy's book 'Decolonising the Camera' (Sealy, 2019), challenges us to consider the way images have been created from the viewpoint of the white European and its racial subtexts. However, Sealy challenges us not to shy away from this fact, we must work in full knowledge of this past by saying: *"I think a plurality of cultural voices amplified in the world helps us all work towards a greater understanding of the different ways of being and signs of recognition"* (Sealy, 2019)

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. I like the idea of thinking with images rather than thinking for them" (Sealy, 2019)

Sealy's writing is not to be taken as permission to continue creating work as before, it is vital to break down the accepted conventions of how and why photography is created. Patrick Waterhouse exemplifies this approach with his collaborative series 'Restricted images' (Waterhouse, 2019) made in partnership with the Warlpiri of Central Australia and turns the concept of what we know about anthropological photography and the 'exotic' (Lutz & Collins, 1991) into a narrative made together with the subjects of his work. This kind of collaboration is something that I feel I should include in my own work.

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noun

1. *the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively.* (Deacon, 2018)

Identifying community as the main continuity in my work, I have recently come to look at the theory of 'Social Capital' and how it has related all along. As outlined by Robert Putnam (Putnam, 2000), referring to the relationships that allow society to function - these are created through homogeneous bonds, the relationships within them, and the links to those outside of the established relationships. Specifically, for Putnam, it is a look at how the traditional forms of social capital have declined through civic, religious and political disengagement. My research project will look to ask what has changed with these traditional forms of social engagement, continuing to explore community and to see where I fit in.

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As shown through the work of photographers looking at the community, such as Laura Pannack (Pannack, 2019), who shows an empathy to her subjects humanity, Alec Soth's (Soth, 2002) intimacy with his subject, and Pieter Hugo's (Hugo, 2013) continued evaluation and questioning of his home country.

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It is also important to identify and analyse what Geoff Dyer refers to as 'cultural signifiers' which can be used to compare our society. Photography is a crucial tool, evidencing and documenting defining societal signifiers and community is a rich subject to make this kind of comparison

To this end, my current work is a look at the tradition and culture of the area that I am from with the aim of re-engaging with my former community before I start to seek 'the other' once again.

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My formative years were spent in the 'working-class male' demographic, considered to be one of the lowest attaining groups in the UK. Now changed, I have found that I no longer fit into the world of my youth, nor fully in the middle-class community where I now find myself. My new demographic is already ubiquitous in the photographic world. Does this require me to stop being able to contribute to that conversation? No. I must aim to continue to questioning the lens in which I view the subjects that I am photographing, to better engage and collaborate, and to remove some of the 'exoticism'

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