

MEETING PLACE: ON THE ROLE OF RELATIONSHIPS IN PHOTOGRAPHY

by

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Honors Thesis

Appalachian State University

Submitted to The Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

April, 2022

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Abstract

In an effort to explore how the photograph inherently functions as a “meeting place” where the gazes of the photographer, subject, and viewer interact, I intentionally made it one through an interactive visual storytelling exhibition. The work aims to draw attention to the crucial role relationships play in comprehensive representation and social change. This thesis concept stems from the reflections and lessons gained after documenting vulnerable refugee communities in Iraqi Kurdistan and experiencing the importance of reflexivity and acknowledgement of power dynamics in the storytelling process. In an effort to avoid further contributing to the narrow presentation of refugees that is often seen in public media, I center the photographs around quiet moments of their everyday life. I invite the subject’s voices to be foregrounded through video interviews in which they initiate a conversation with viewers. By making the inherently multi-level, relational element of photography the main focus of the exhibition as opposed to an underlying truth, I encourage the audience to rethink the way meaning is created in visual media. By rethinking the possibilities of representation, social change is pursued and empathy is generated by extending the relationship between the photographer, subject, and viewer beyond the photograph.

Introduction

Meeting Place is an interactive visual storytelling exhibition exploring the ways in which photography can be used to build relationships. The photograph is an inherently relational medium, both in the way it physically requires individuals to interact during the making process, and in how the photograph itself becomes a liminal place where the photographer, viewer, and subject meet and negotiate meaning. *Meeting Place* is a collection of fifteen photographs and three video interviews, with an invitation for the audience to respond in writing. Together, they are the result of a reflection on how connections made in the photographic process could be used to generate empathy and build relationships. The origin of this thesis was unorthodox, as I originally made the fifteen photographs for a different purpose. However, in reflecting on the making process, I decided that the photographs would be an ideal way to examine that relational reality and explore an exhibition format intended to generate empathy and encourage new understanding.

Centered around my personal relationship with three individuals from Syria—Suaad, Yaser, and Kuljen, from whom I gained permission to use their first names—I explore how storytelling can positively influence the public's understanding of global issues while also emphasizing the importance of a more comprehensive representation. I engage in an alternative form of photographic storytelling and exhibition presentation aware that the representation of vulnerable groups of people—however well-intentioned—has historically been problematic. I resist the historical tendency to depict the Majority World in a reductionist light by using a reflexive approach and collaborating with individuals from Iraq to organize and create this project. I invite the subject's voices to join mine in the photographic process through video

interviews. *Meeting Place* is the result of a curiosity in photography's relational nature coupled with my belief that the medium has potential to be an avenue for positive social change.

Context

It was my passion for changing the representation and thus understanding of migrants like Suaad, Yaser, and Kuljen that led me to Iraqi Kurdistan in the summer of 2021. I received a communications internship with the people-first aid organization Preemptive Love Coalition (PLC), based in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq. With my background in photography, I was assigned projects that allowed me to use the medium and, at last, put into practice the theoretical knowledge I had acquired around the ethics of photographic storytelling of vulnerable individuals. Needless to say, it was humbling; what you study in a classroom takes a new significance when you experience it firsthand. It was in Iraqi Kurdistan where I learned what makes all the difference in these sensitive situations: relationships.

It was during one of my first assignments that I met Yaser (See Appendix, Figure 1). I was tasked with visiting the farm in the Syrian refugee camp that he had started alongside PLC's agriculturalist Kayla Hatcher and document their new endeavor. Since February 2021, they had been experimenting with arid farming and alternative watering techniques during their dry season (See Appendix, Figure 2). They had recently begun growing sheep fodder for Yazidi shepherders that lived on the other side of town in another refugee camp PLC served. My assignment was to spend the day with Yaser and document the transportation of the fodder from Yaser's farm to the Yazidi refugee camp. The five photographs of Yaser come out of this interaction.

Likewise, the photographs and relationships with Suaad and Kuljen came out of another documentary assignment (See Appendix, Figures 3 and 4). My supervisor allowed a fellow intern and I to spearhead the documentation of Syrian recipes for a potential cookbook. We were tasked with collecting oral histories from different women about the tradition and significance behind their favorite dishes. Suaad and Kuljen were two women that were willing to be photographed and join in this endeavor.

Suaad, Yaser, and Kuljen are Syrian nationals that currently find themselves living in a refugee camp in Iraqi Kurdistan. Suaad is a mother and grandmother, with five daughters, four sons, and four grandchildren. The matriarch of her family, she supervises and directs the communal cooking that takes place. She is always eager to sit down and have tea with her guests, and she will inevitably convince you to stay for a meal. Yaser is a father of two and works as an agriculturalist. Innovative and entertaining, he is not afraid to experiment on the farm and uses his informal comedic career to welcome those around him. Kuljen is the quiet driving force behind her family's educational success. Also a mother and grandmother, she has three sons and two daughters. All of her children have graduated from university.

I quickly found that my eye saw more after a cup of tea and a few hours of communion. It became almost pointless to pull out my camera before these ritualistic necessities. They made my photos better. It was these experiences that solidified in my thinking the full reality of the camera as a relational technology and photographs as relational objects. There I was, the photographer, making images of Kuljen cooking *maklupa* (See Appendix, Figure 5). I met her after her daughter Fadia and I spent three days with Suaad. Fadia lived in the camp and worked there as an English teacher. Her skill and knowledge gave us the privilege of trust and a local understanding into their lives and traditions. By then, Fadia had become a close friend. So when

we met Kuljen, she welcomed us warmly into her arms, as if she had already known us through Fadia's stories.

Suaad, Yaser, and Kuljen are just three of 6.6 million Syrians that have been forced to migrate after the onslaught of the Syrian Civil War in 2011.¹ There are many perspectives on what catalyzed the implosion of one of the oldest civilized regions of the world.² However, causes go beyond just recent political struggles, social uprisings, and problematic leadership.³ Many see the wars that are categorized as the Arab Spring as a result of attempts to usurp the control and impact of colonialism on the region.⁴ The current borders of the Middle East—which for decolonial purposes I will refer to as SWANA⁵ (South West Asia and North Africa)—are not a reflection of ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, or even natural geographic lines. Rather these arguably arbitrary boundaries have been delimited and demarcated by the political, security, and economic desires of foreign powers—textbook colonialism.⁶ Even the term “the middle east” assumes that the region is defined by its relation to the colonial perspective of the west.⁷ The Arab Spring, and SWANA's tense borders can then be credited largely to Western involvement, both with more recent stratagems such as US support of “armed revolts” in Libya and Syria as well as through border delimitation stemming from the effects of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916.⁸

¹ UNHCR, “Syria Refugee Crisis Explained.” (*USA for UNHCR*, 5 February 2021).

² Al Jazeera, “Syria's war explained from the beginning.” (14 April 2018).

³ Amin, Samir, “Introduction to the English Edition,” in *The Reawakening of the Arab World: Challenge and Change in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring* (Monthly Review Press, 2016), 12-13.

⁴ Dabashi, Hamid, “Introduction” in *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*, (London: Zed Books, 2012), 10; Amin, Smair, 13.

⁵ SWANA Alliance, “What is SWANA?” <https://swanaalliance.com/about>.

⁶ Kurşun, Ali Murat, “Deconstructing the Sykes-Picot Myth: Frontiers, Boundaries, Borders and the Evolution of Ottoman Territoriality.” (*All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy & Peace*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2020), 84.

⁷ Dabashi, Hamid, “Introduction,” 2, 6.

⁸ Amin, Samir. “Introduction to the English Edition,” 12; Kurşun, Ali Murat, “Deconstructing the Sykes-Picot Myth,” 84, 91.

After World War I ended with the defeat of the Axis powers, Britain, France, and Russia worked together to draw borders that divided the resource-rich SWANA between them, resulting in the partition of ethnic groups.⁹ A line was drawn by Englishman Mark Sykes and Frenchman Francois Georges-Picot that gave France control over parts of Syria and Lebanon and Britain access to India through modern day Iraq.¹⁰ These decisions and agreements were based on colonial powers' economic, security, and political desires for the region and further violated "pledges of freedom given by the British to the Arabs in exchange for their support against the collapsing Ottoman Empire."¹¹ Many experts believe that "a majority of the struggles in the Middle East over the past one hundred years can be tied back to the Sykes-Picot Agreement," insinuating the West is in fact to blame for much of the unrest seen in the region today.¹²

Our history, how it is written, and what our modern media shows influences what we understand about a place and its people. Historically, our understanding of "postcolonial Africa," as photography critic and philosopher Susan Sontag communicates, "exists in the consciousness of the general public in the rich world... mainly as a succession of unforgettable photographs of large-eyed victims."¹³ Likewise, our understanding of SWANA is that of war, conflict, oppression, and suffering. For the purposes of this thesis and exhibition, I lack the appropriate time necessary to address all the historical complexities around the representation of non-white and non-Western peoples of the majority world.¹⁴ Still, it is important to note that since photography's establishment, non-white and non-Western individuals have been exoticized and exploited through the lens of the camera. Like many of the world's sufferings, refugees and

⁹ Al Jazeera, "A Century on: Why Arabs Resent Sykes-Picot." (Al Jazeera Center for Studies); Kurşun, Ali Murat, 85; Muir, Jim, "Sykes-Picot: The Map That Spawned a Century of Resentment," (*BBC News*, 16 May 2016).

¹⁰ Muir, Jim; Kurşun, Ali Murat, "Deconstructing the Sykes-Picot Myth," 98.

¹¹ Muir, Jim.

¹² "Sykes Picot Agreement," (*The Kurdish Project*, 27 Mar. 2019).

¹³ Sontag, Susan, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. (Douglas & McIntyre. 2003), 70-71.

¹⁴ Edward Said's work in *Orientalism* is centered around this.

refugee crises have been covered with a lack of dignity and sensitivity. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag criticizes these photos representing war and conflict, saying that grotesque scenes of suffering would have been approached with more tact had the subjects been white Westerners.¹⁵

The media around the Syrian refugee crisis is just one example of the narrow way we have been taught to see the majority world. The global public was bombarded with images of mothers crying or living in poverty¹⁶ (See Appendix, Figure 6) dead children like young Alan Kurdi washing up on beaches (See Appendix, Figure 7) and massive crowds of refugee men entering European countries (See Appendix, Figures 8, 9). Scenes depicting refugees are often limited to one edge of the spectrum or the other: immense suffering, joy, or threat. It is through these “public repositories” of visuals and the perspectives and narratives they contain, that our knowledge of that which we have not seen for ourselves is shaped.¹⁷ After over a decade now of coverage on the Syrian refugee crisis and its ongoing impact, narratives around refugees have gained a more nuanced presentation. But it remains true that public opinion and media representation has a complex cyclical relationship, one that is influenced by a multitude of factors on either side. The public perception of refugees is often formed by popular media, and popular media—while influenced by a variety of agendas—arguably reflects the views of general society. Thus, the representation and narrative surrounding an issue must change in order to change society’s understanding of said issue. The history of non-fiction photography is replete with problematic representations, and it is with this understanding of the historical violence of the photograph that I entered into the relationship dynamic with Suaad, Yaser, and Kuljen.

¹⁵ Sontag, Susan, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 72.

¹⁶ PANDIR, Müzeyyen. “Stereotyping, Victimization and Depoliticization in the Representations of Syrian Refugees,” (*Dokuz Eylül University Journal of Graduate School of Social Sciences* 21, no. 2, April 2019), 418.

¹⁷ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 86-87.

Photography can sometimes feel wrong, even voyeuristic; you are not engaging, just watching. However, that feeling was not present during my time in Iraqi Kurdistan. In my encounters with individuals, the camera did not come out until a feeling of familiarity was tangible. For once, I was not on a tight schedule. As my supervisor told me, if you are in a situation where you have to choose between prioritizing the work or the relationship and trust of the subject, prioritize the relationship. I was not only there to document so that others could see my experience. I was documenting in order to extend the relationship beyond Suaad, Kuljen, Yaser and myself into a relationship between them and the viewer of the work.

I entered my relationships with Suaad, Yaser, and Kuljen with an understanding of the inherent power dynamic present—centuries of historic privilege on my side and political marginalization on theirs.¹⁸ The fact that I was able to raise the money to travel thousands of miles from my home to theirs, hold a camera in my hand, and be underneath the umbrella of an aid organization, all placed me at the top of the present power dynamic. I did not speak Kurdish or Arabic conversationally and relied heavily on the assistance of locals to communicate. Furthermore, and maybe most importantly, I was “looking” at them from a Western perspective, one prone to ethnocentrism. It is with a desire to avoid adding to the reductionist view of refugees that I sought to approach representation differently. I quickly learned that centering the process and outcome around relationships was the answer.

Once back in the United States, I found myself with this lesson at the forefront of my mind. While these photographs were not originally made to be part of a thesis, when I looked at them, I saw a vivid display of the relational reality of photography. I had already been engaged in

¹⁸ Lippard, “DOUBLETAKE: The Diary of a Relationship with an Image,” 352; Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” 10.

conversations around the way photography is an intersection of gazes, a discursive network made of the photographer's gaze meeting with the viewer's and subject's.¹⁹ In addition to the abstract, relational possibilities every photograph holds, I wanted to explore how these images could be an opportunity for others to have their own experience with Suaad, Yaser, and Kuljen. These photographs held potential for interaction, all contingent on who ends up in the meshwork—that is to say who the viewers are—and what they bring to the table.

Theory

If public opinion and media representation have a cyclical relationship, then it is reasonable to explore how photographic storytelling can generate global understanding and interaction. As previously mentioned, our understanding of the majority world is dominated by images of suffering and war—"full frontal views of the dead and dying," as Sontag explains it—affecting the narratives we create around individuals we have never met.²⁰ Furthermore, the photographer attributes value and importance to what they photograph, simultaneously inferring that what is in the frame has a right to be seen and what is *not* in the frame should *not* be seen.²¹ *How* the subject is framed determines the meaning that is attributed to the photograph. All visuals in public media communicate what should be seen, "[forcing] the reader to follow that eye and see the world from its position."²² We experience that which we do not have access to through lens-based media, and for those who live a more "affluent" life, they "learn about the world's horrors through the camera."²³ It is for this reason that *what* is depicted and *how* it is

¹⁹ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*, Translated by Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copeland, (Les presses du reel, 2002), 27.

²⁰ Sontag, Susan, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 70-72.

²¹ Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*, (McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1973), 12.

²² Lutz, Catherine and Jane Collins. "The Photograph as an Intersection of Gazes: The Example of National Geographic," (Routledge, 2003), 355.

²³ Sontag, *On Photography*, 110; Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*, 9.

represented matters; it will shape the way the viewer understands the world. Photography holds an intrinsic power.

Part of this power is tied to the way a photograph feels like a reflection, a mirror, a window into the world and as such, has historically been accepted as objective truth.²⁴ This assumption has led to the photograph serving as justification for any value judgments given the subject(s) at hand.²⁵ Co-opted for scientific research and forensic evidence, photographs have been used to prove racist pseudoscience and criminal profiling of individuals.²⁶ However, the reality is an image is but “a trace of something brought before the lens,” making it the most convincing and captivating representational art.²⁷ We need reminding that this act of looking is but an “illusion of seeing for ourselves.”²⁸

Although photo making and taking is now nearly universal in our heavily media-influenced world, to “capture” one’s likeness is no simple feat.²⁹ Within every image two dynamic relationship structures are found. First, there is the relationship that is established or created through the photographic process. The second relationship is found in the made image itself. It is here that the photograph is most misunderstood and thus misleading. Transcending time itself, the photograph is more than a singular outcome or event. Rather it is, as Ruby explains, “a momentary arrest of many animate meshworks in action.”³⁰ It is a continual, changing meeting place where the gazes of the photographer, subject(s) and viewer(s) meet. I will use “intersection of gazes” and “meshwork” to refer to this phenomenon, and while critics

²⁴ Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, 3, 28; Ruby, Jay, *Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film & Anthropology*, (The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 140.

²⁵ Sekula, Allan. “The Body and The Archive,” (The MIT Press, vol. 89, Winter 1986), 14.

²⁶ Sekula, 17.

²⁷ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 24.

²⁸ Lippard, Lucy R. “DOUBLETAKE: The Diary of a Relationship with an Image,” (Routledge, 2003), 352.

²⁹ Ruby, *Picturing Culture*, 137-138.

³⁰ Knight, Jacqui. “A Relational Ecology of Photographic Practices,” (*AVANT*, vol. 8, special issue), 293.

use various linguistic references, they all agree: the gazes and relationships that meet at the photograph are “central to the stories... that the photo can be said to tell.”³¹ This meeting place is constantly evolving and adapting as different people enter the space.³² It is because of this meshwork that the photograph holds power. When overlooked, the photograph is seen as truth itself, which is a misnomer; when the intersection of gazes is acknowledged, the photograph holds power to encourage dialogue and build connections.

The overlooked reality is that photographs “are co-produced by a complex, transformational meshwork of determinants” including the above-mentioned intersection of gazes as well as the technical choices the photographer makes: framing, angles, and “conventions of [their] visual culture.”³³ The viewer is being told what to see based on the photographer’s decisions, decisions that are influenced by one’s background, perspective, personhood, and biases.³⁴ Moreover, the viewer’s gaze is itself “structured by a large number of cultural elements or models,” affecting interpretations of the visuals.³⁵ To complicate it further, the viewer is rarely singular, making the meeting place of the photograph a transitory space, always changing and gaining new gazes.³⁶ These relationship structures are not separate. They themselves are interconnected and related, with an understanding of complexity and nuance required to understand this mosaic presentation of not objective truth, Knight reminds us, but of mere “information, along the lines of their relationships.”³⁷

³¹ Lutz et al. “The Photograph as an Intersection of Gazes,” 354

³² Alcoff, Linda. “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” (Winter 1991-1992), 12

³³ Knight, Jacqui. “A Relational Ecology of Photographic Practices,” 286-287.

³⁴ Ruby, Jay, *Picturing Culture*, 140; Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” 7.

³⁵ Lutz et al. “The Photograph as an Intersection of Gazes,” 357.

³⁶ Lutz et al, 358.

³⁷ Knight, Jacqui. “A Relational Ecology of Photographic Practices,” 287.

The understanding of the importance of ethics and representation in storytelling and visual media is changing. However, historically, this recognition of the relational significance of photographs has been overshadowed by an emphasis on “objectivity.”³⁸ This desire for objective truth has, at times, subsequently turned subjects into objects and things to “capture” as opposed to people to whom we should listen, collaborate, and relate.³⁹ An additional problem arises when the subject of the photograph is of a sensitive nature. Sontag argues that a photograph is the result of “an interest in things as they are, in the status quo remaining unchanged (at least for as long as it takes to get a ‘good’ picture).”⁴⁰ In light of this rationale, no wonder looking at a photograph of “the dead and dying” can be more disturbing than if you actually saw the scene for yourself; it is a confirmation that for at least a period of time, someone stood by and watched the scene unfold, doing nothing but capturing the moment.⁴¹ Furthermore, the photojournalist and news photographer are limited by the news organizations that edit and present only that which is “chosen for use and emphasis” (emphasis mine).⁴² The stories shared are a result of “interference from the media’s agendas,” with those agendas influenced by politics and social norms of the time.⁴³ These images are made under the justification that they are advocating, calling for justice, and encouraging understanding.⁴⁴ Historically, photojournalists have often attempted this through the “objective” reporting of news, people, and the world. My time in Iraq taught me that—regardless of how you want to categorize the medium—relationships are the key to comprehensive storytelling. They need not be sacrificed.

³⁸ Ruby, *Picturing Culture*, 198.

³⁹ Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, 14.

⁴⁰ Sontag, 12.

⁴¹ Sontag, Susan, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 42, 70.

⁴² Lutz et al. “The Photograph as an Intersection of Gazes,” 357.

⁴³ Rose, Jon and David J. McIntyre. “Empathy and the Media: Can We Really Know People From the News?” (*The Person-Centered Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2002), 97-98.

⁴⁴ Olin, Margaret. *Touching Photographs*. (University of Chicago Press, 2012) 141; Ruby, *Picturing Culture*, 142.

It is important to recognize that the gaze I contribute to any photograph is inadvertently influenced by my identities and perspectives as a white, middle class, American woman.

Creating an opportunity for the subjects to tell their own stories is ideal as it would “offer the possibility of perceiving the world from the view of people who lead lives that are different from those traditionally in control of the means of imaging the world,” Ruby tells us.⁴⁵ Additionally, Linda Alcoff tells us that creating “the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than for others” would serve to mitigate the problematic effects of “speaking for others.”⁴⁶ In order to change the narratives told about ourselves and others and thus the way we interact and understand one another, we must change who is telling the stories in the first place.

We have access to more imagery and information than ever before in history, and yet we feel increasing disconnection and polarization globally.⁴⁷ It is well known that one’s understanding of the world grows through interaction and experience, but many are not “secure with one’s self and situation [enough] to be forced into discomfort” and explore a new way of looking at the world.⁴⁸ Photographic storytelling has thus become “one of the principal devices for experiencing something,” transporting an individual into the metaphorical arms of another, without even leaving the safety of their own norms.⁴⁹ Many photographers—Diane Lange and Sebastião Salgado are just a few—have explored the best ways to connect, educate, and present a “call to action” through photographs with hopes of generating empathy for social issues.⁵⁰ I seek to join this exploration centered around the possibilities the meeting place that is the photograph

⁴⁵ Ruby, Jay, *Picturing Culture*, 196.

⁴⁶ Alcoff, Linda, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” 23.

⁴⁷ Manney, PJ, “Empathy in the Time of Technology: How Storytelling is the Key to Empathy,” (*Journal of Evolution and Technology*, vol. 19, no. 1, Sept. 2008), 2.

⁴⁸ Manney, 6

⁴⁹ Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, 110, 10; Manney, 6.

⁵⁰ Kay, Tamara, “Building Solidarity with Subjects and Audience in Sociology and Documentary Photography,” (*Sociological Forum*, vol. 26, no. 2, June 2011), 427.

holds by intentionally making it one. I believe that “extend[ing] the human” beyond the frame to encourage a conversation between viewer and subject could be a solution towards a change of public sentiments.⁵¹ In the absence of proximity to a person or issue, storytelling functions as a relational conduit and generates empathy.⁵² Furthermore, exploring these concepts in the context of intercultural migration initiates a conversation around the complexity of the issues already present in each image: colonialism, racism, political disenfranchisement, photographic exploitation, and social misrepresentation.⁵³ These add additional layers of historical biases and personal subjectivities to the ever-present “intersection of gazes” found in each photograph.⁵⁴ However, the complexity of this conversation draws attention to the intentionality and nuance required when representing vulnerable groups of people. In the case of *Meeting Place*, focusing on the common humanity and everyday rituals of Suaad, Yaser, and Kuljen, emphasizes their role in society as an equal rather than a people to be pitied.⁵⁵ The simplicity of having tea with friends suddenly becomes proof of agency and autonomy in a world that often sees refugees as victims (See Appendix, Figure 10). By making the inherent “intersection of gazes” that is present in each photograph the focus instead of an underlying theme, it encourages viewers to rethink the impact photography has on the narratives through which they see the world.

Exhibition Methodology

The context through which visuals are seen impacts the sense of meaning and understanding garnered through interpretation.⁵⁶ If I attempt to use photography as what it is—a

⁵¹ Knight, Jacqui. “A Relational Ecology of Photographic Practices,” 293; Lutz et al, “The Photograph as an Intersection of Gazes,” 354.

⁵² Manney, PJ. “Empathy in the Time of Technology,” 2.

⁵³ Lutz et al. “The Photograph as an Intersection of Gazes,” 354; Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, 64.

⁵⁴ Lutz et al., 354.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Gervais, Thierry, editor. *The Public Life of Photographs*, (The MIT Press, 2016), 11; Sontag, *On Photography*, 106.

point of connection—then opportunities to connect and communicate must be enabled. I felt that the most natural response to exploring the relational aspects of photography was to 1) choose to display *Meeting Place* in a physical exhibition space and 2) to make the exhibition itself interactive.⁵⁷ The fifteen photographs display quiet moments and portraits from the daily routine of Suaad, Yaser, and Kuljen to offer an alternative to sensational media reporting on their community. This was in an effort to portray them beyond the narrow lens of public media where refugees are either presented in scenes of suffering or portrayed as unfathomably joyful. Often for those who have been socially disenfranchised and exoticised, they have been portrayed in a simplistic, reductionist view.⁵⁸ However, I wanted to engage in showing the in-between spectrum of emotions and experiences that are often solely allotted for those of us with the historical storytelling power.

Instead of women crying and in poverty, I was able to photograph Suaad in her kitchen preparing to welcome her guests (See Appendix, Figure 11). The kitchen she is seen in serves as her second and “real” kitchen, with her first kitchen being just for appearances. It is because of the time I spent, the trust I built, and the relationship we fostered that I was allowed into this intimate part of her home. Likewise, instead of men threatening the safety and security of Western countries, Yaser is seen tending to his crops and collecting the day’s yield of vegetables (See Appendix, Figure 12). This is an everyday activity he engages in, an element of his life that might seem unimportant and insignificant. However, it contributes to the missing elements of a refugee’s life that public media often turns its lens away from in an effort to emphasize the suffering and oppression they experience. But redirecting that lens to these quiet rituals, his humanity is emphasized instead.

⁵⁷ Gervais, Thierry, *The Public Life of Photographs*, 128.

⁵⁸ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 72.

Allowing the viewers to engage with these photographs in the context of a relational, interactive exhibition changes the way the photographs are “touched” and interacted with. In this case, Sontag offers that “photographs cease to be ‘about’ their subjects in the same direct or primary way; they become studies in the possibilities of photography.”⁵⁹ My interest in building connections through the photographic medium is not unique; many documentary filmmakers and photographers alike have invited their subjects to be present at gallery openings and film festivals, allowing a chance for interaction between the audience and subject. Others, like Salgado “create an active audience by building networks around the issues he analyzes” through working directly with related organizations.⁶⁰ I wanted to contribute to this ongoing exploration through a slightly different approach. A physical space allows the viewers to stand near the photographs, eye to eye with the portraits and video (See Appendix, Figures 13 and 14). Furthermore, it is with the addition of the written response allowing the viewer to communicate back to the subject that I explore alternative possibilities in how photography can connect people. The interactive gallery exhibition becomes a reciprocal product, emphasizing the role of relationships in photography by creating otherwise unlikely connections through a photographic piece.

Video Interviews

It is the silence of the photograph that can be haunting and distancing for the viewer. While the subject’s gaze is evident, a sense of voyeurism is attributed to the viewer. The subject’s lack of ability to speak creates a distance that “[changes] the person photographed into

⁵⁹ Sontag, *On Photography*, 132-133.

⁶⁰ Kay, Tamara. “Building Solidarity with Subjects and Audience in Sociology and Documentary Photography,” 429.

an object” and prevents any confirmation that the viewer’s interpretations are correct.⁶¹ My desire to address this disconnection often inherent in photographs led me to explore ways in which the subject’s voices could be present. People interested in “empowerment photography” as Margaret Olin calls it, have explored different “ways of allowing their subjects to talk back” through various mediums.⁶² Because of my remaining connections to the subjects, the possibility of exploring how Suaad, Kuljen, and Yaser could communicate with the viewer was within my reach.

A direct “transmission” from the subjects that the viewer can interact with alongside their portraits draws more attention to the photograph’s intricate meshwork while also mitigating the negative tendencies of “speaking for others.”⁶³ The environment of the gallery becomes an “equalizer,” further encouraging relationship-building between all the gazes present.⁶⁴ Instead of solely *my* voice shining through the photographs, there is now an option for the subjects “[to have] a greater say in the construction of their image,” returning a measure of autonomy that is often foregone in photography’s power dynamic.⁶⁵ The “returned gaze” seen both in the frontal, straight-on portraits of the subjects and in the frontal video interviews directed towards the viewers “promises shared subjecthood,” alleviating the historical exploitation of the lens on refugee communities.⁶⁶ Furthermore, it removes the audience’s typical role as “passive viewer.”⁶⁷ The combination of photographs and video interviews allows the subjects to speak and viewers to interact in a way that photographs alone cannot.

⁶¹ Olin, Margaret. *Touching Photographs*, 31; Lutz et al. “The Photograph as an Intersection of Gazes,” 358; Rose et al. “Empathy and the Media,” 98.

⁶² Olin, Margaret, *Touching Photographs*, 133; Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, 74.

⁶³ Alcoff, Linda, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” 23.

⁶⁴ Gervais, Thierry, *The Public Life of Photographs*, 260.

⁶⁵ Ruby, Jay, *Picturing Culture*, 204.

⁶⁶ Olin, Margaret. *Touching Photographs*, 30.

⁶⁷ Lutz et al. “The Photograph as an Intersection of Gazes,” 358.

Choosing video interviews as opposed to other media was a result of seeking to optimize the subjects' ability to speak for themselves. Any attempt of mine to describe their reality replaces their ability and right to use their own voices and puts me in a role of "speaking *in place* of them... speaking *for* them" (emphasis mine).⁶⁸ The choice to pursue an exhibition proved to be a positive decision in my effort to avoid the negative results of "speaking for others." Instead, the physical presentation of the photos and video interviews "promote[s] humanistic values and cultural exchange on a wide and democratic basis."⁶⁹ While the video interviews are indeed structured by questions I formulated—another potential level of bias—because of the time I took to build a relationship beyond the one the camera provides, I trust that they felt enabled to speak freely. I feel this is once again proof that taking the time to establish and maintain a relationship strengthens the work created. Not only is the content and impact of the work improved by allowing for autonomy on the side of the subject, but also the technical and formal qualities of the content are enhanced as the trust between photographer and viewer is made evident visually.

It seems no small coincidence that in order to make an interactive piece, I, too, would have to interact with others through collaboration. I brainstormed different ideas of how to collect the content to enable a three-way conversation, even considering traveling back to Iraq to do so. At this point, I had already been in contact with Fadia, asking her to ask Suaad, Kuljen and Yaser if they were okay with my using the photographs and embarking on this project. Fadia remained a constant voice in the creation process. In my exploration of relationships in photography through the creation of this project, it made sense that I would have to rely heavily on connections with other individuals to navigate cross-cultural, cross-linguistic relationships.

⁶⁸ Alcoff, Linda, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," 9.

⁶⁹ Gervais, Thierry, *The Public Life of Photographs*, 128.

When travel proved unlikely, I decided to reach out to former fellow PLC intern, friend, and Iraqi videographer Rawan Al-Juboori to present my idea and ask if she would be interested in working with me to collect video interviews. I coordinated with her, Fadia, and Kayla Hatcher—a PLC employee who works with Yaser in the camp—to connect with Suaad, Kuljen, and Yaser. Rawan and Fadia’s linguistic and cultural familiarity allowed me into the lives of Suaad, Yaser, and Kuljen in a way I would not have been able to engage with on my own, but this also further complicates the intersection of gazes.

Over several months of communication and miscommunication, we organized a date and time for Rawan to travel to the camp through Kayla’s transportation and work with Fadia to create the interviews and translate them from Arabic and Kurdish to English. It is important to note that collaboration requires you to give up some autonomy and control over the end product.⁷⁰ Communicating with individuals across a seven-hour time difference, across linguistic and cultural differences made the creation and communication process incredibly challenging and slow. There were many times I thought the idea for the exhibition would implode because of uncertainties around availability, time, coordination, transportation, etc. After several months of uncertainty, the factors needed to organize a time for Rawan to visit Suaad, Yaser, and Kuljen finally came together. While the outcome again wasn’t exactly as planned, the audience was still able to interact with Suaad, Yaser, and Kuljen on a level that the photographs alone would not have been able to provide. The reason this opportunity for reciprocal communication between the subjects and viewers existed was because of Rawan, Fadia, and Kayla.

My reliance on these individuals to bring this project to fruition further complicates the meshwork at hand. I wrote the interview questions and relayed them to Rawan and Fadia, but

⁷⁰ Alcoff, Linda, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” 15.

Rawan conducted the interview with Yaser in Arabic and Fadia did the interviews with Suaad and Kuljen in Kurdish. Furthermore, gender, cultural, and relational dynamics were at play. Fadia, a Syrian Kurdish woman, interviewed two fellow Syrian Kurdish women, one of which was her mother. Contrarily, Rawan, an Iraqi woman, interviewing Yaser, a Syrian man with whom she did not have a prior relationship, resulted in a completely different dynamic. This reality—combined with the simple fact that I had spent more time with Suaad and Kuljen than with Yaser—is evidenced in the different level of responses garnered from each subject. Suddenly, it is not only *my* gaze that I have to consider in this creation process. Perhaps as the photographer, I had more impact on the photographs; however, in the video interviews and thus the exhibition itself, Rawan and Fadia join me in the meshwork as fellow contributors. Their closer connection to the culture and language of the subjects significantly helps in the communication process, and yet, there is still an added complexity.

Ideally, this process would have been more collaborative. However, in order for *Meeting Place* to be “truly collaborative,” all voices and roles involved would have needed to engage in the making process equally.⁷¹ In reality, I served more as director and curator than that of co-collaborator; Rawan, Fadia, Suaad, Kuljen, and Yaser contributed to the content, but not to the thought process and gallery planning. This subsequently, and unfortunately, affects the relational dynamic present in the meshwork at hand, keeping a portion of the inherent power dynamic intact. However, simply being the photographer in the situation, regardless of one’s background, distances you from the subject.⁷² If Suaad, Yaser, and Kuljen were the ones holding the camera, the power dynamic would not entirely be eradicated.⁷³ This is additionally why

⁷¹ Ruby, Jay, *Picturing Culture*, 208.

⁷² Ruby, Jay, *Picturing Culture*, 215.

⁷³ Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” 8, 10, 22.

recognizing and drawing attention to the relationships and “meeting place” present in every photograph is crucial when pursuing comprehensive representation. The choice to “speak for others” is a sensitive and intricate one. The telling of others’ stories should not be avoided for fear of doing it wrong, rather one should see the complexity as a chance to emphasize the importance of educating oneself and exploring alternatives.⁷⁴

Written Response

The opportunity for a viewer response was a crucial element in this exploration as it enables a type of interaction with visual media that is not often present. I wanted the videos to feel like a conversation with Suaad, Kuljen, and Yaser, but “conversation” infers a two-way communication. Furthermore, facilitating an audience response encourages viewer engagement with the photographs beyond what is typical in a traditional gallery setting.⁷⁵ Creating a dialogue, a safe space where people are mutually willing to listen, learn, and engage with one another, enables growth and relationship-building as opposed to a situation of “speaking for others.”⁷⁶ The presence of a viewer response allowed for the interaction present in the exhibition to avoid a sense of “randomness” and instead, intentionally “[provoke and manage] individual and group encounters.”⁷⁷ However, the reality of the intersection of gazes makes engagement complex. Suaad, Yaser, and Kuljen are reaching out, seeking connection with the audience through the photographs and ultimately the video interviews. But the interaction itself hinges on whether or not the audience will choose to respond and engage. The notepads and pens are presented to the audience on plinths in front of Suaad, Yaser, and Kuljen’s portraits (See Appendix, Figure 15)

⁷⁴ Alcoff, 7, 10.

⁷⁵ Gervais, Thierry, *The Public Life of Photographs*, 256.

⁷⁶ Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” 23.

⁷⁷ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*, 30.

and a note in front of the video interviews implores: “After listening to Suaad, Yaser, and Kuljen, we invite you to continue the conversation and respond in writing. Responses will be translated and sent back to each person.” Because of the honesty of the video interviews—presented alongside with the questions I wrote to ask them for added reflexivity—the viewer is encouraged to respond with a similar level of candor and honesty. Ideally, I had hoped for the video interviews to hold more of a conversational feel, with Suaad, Yaser, and Kuljen introducing more elements of their personhood so that viewers could do the same. The length of the interviews prevented this. However, the commentary on their situation and the grace they extend towards the West—even after their recognition of the West’s impact on their situation—still communicates agency and encourages viewer response beyond what would be possible through the photographs alone.

The inclusion of written response attempts to free the viewer from the sense of voyeurism and encourage a new feeling of autonomy and responsibility through the act of looking. However, this is all dependent on and thus limited by whether or not the viewer chooses to engage in the conversation present. Still, regardless of how much the viewer interacts with the exhibition and with Suaad, Yaser, and Kuljen’s stories, the exhibition’s focus on the relational aspect of photography strives to limit the power of bias present—from both the photographer or audience—to unknowingly assign values and roles to subjects and viewers.⁷⁸ It is through the reflexivity present that attention will be drawn to the power dynamic that is inherent in all visual media. At the very least, the open invitation into a new conversation will attempt to encourage the audience to think differently about their interaction and relationship with media coverage of marginalized groups moving forward. In the future, taking time to gather more of the audience’s

⁷⁸ Sekula, Allan. “The Body and The Archive,” 33.

interpretation and interaction with the exhibition would be crucial to understanding the full impact and usefulness of such an endeavor. In order for a true, lasting conversation to be started and engaged with, I would need to ensure that the subject and viewer would equally interact with each other's stories.

Conclusion

Through the interaction available in *Meeting Place*, the viewers and subjects alike are encouraged to reclaim their responsibility in the meaning-making process of photography they have historically been distanced from. While a multimedial, direct exploration of the intersection of gazes is less common, *Meeting Place* is still but an extension of explorations pursued by photographers in the past. It is through my collaboration with Rawan and Fadia, as well as with Suaad, Yaser, and Kuljen, that I was able to pursue such an extension of this exploration. My hope is that the necessity for collaboration in this piece will further emphasize the power and importance of relationships in visual storytelling, and furthermore highlight the way this medium can be a unique and complex method of relationship-building. Still, it is important to recognize that regardless of *my* intentions, collaboration requires me to give up “some portion of [my] control over the meaning and truth” I am presenting.⁷⁹ This need to relinquish an amount of autonomy to the meshwork must still be balanced with the need for the photographer to take responsibility for their work.

Even with any miscalculations on my part and the remaining power dynamic that exists because of my role in the project and in the relationships, I hope that my attempt to work with new voices and allow Suaad, Kuljen, and Yaser to tell their own stories leans towards a

⁷⁹ Alcoff, Linda, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” 15.

“democratizing change” in the way people view their representation.⁸⁰ It is in recognizing this power dynamic that I can further reflect on the complex photographic process, learn better approaches for the future, and encourage others to do the same.⁸¹ The answer is not to give up in the face of the challenges of documentary storytelling, but rather to be reflexive, honest, and open to learning through experience.

By considering who has control over the narrative-creation and storytelling in our world, we can critically analyze why we see people and issues in the way we do, and thus, strive to make said views more nuanced and empathetic. As PJ Manney reminds us, “where no empathy exists, conflict breeds.”⁸² Building relationships, encouraging dialogue, and changing our proximity to issues inherently generates empathy.⁸³ In order to change the way we interact with and understand the world, we must change the way that world is presented in public media. Visual storytelling can simulate relational proximity when physical proximity is not possible.⁸⁴ It is because of, not despite, the relational reality of photography that it holds the power to recreate global narratives and social understandings. Recognizing and utilizing the meshwork found in each photograph is paramount when using the medium to transform representation and thus, essential in pursuing social change.

⁸⁰ Ruby, Jay. *Picturing Culture*, 215.

⁸¹ Alcoff, Linda, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” 24.

⁸² Manney, PJ, “Empathy in the Time of Technology,” 2.

⁸³ Rose et al, “Empathy and the Media,” 95.

⁸⁴ Manney, “Empathy in the Time of Technology,” 6.

Image Appendix



Figure 1 (Left): **Yaser.** Yaser stands holding recently grown sheep fodder in the farm’s greenhouse located in the Syrian refugee camp.



Figure 2 (Above): **Resilience.** The farm that was started in Feb. 2021 is pictured here in June 2021, abutting the refugee camp’s outer fence.



Figure 3 (Left):
Suaad

Suaad stands in a doorway of her home in the Syrian refugee camp.



Figure 4 (Right):
Kuljen

Kuljen waves goodbye outside her home after one of our last encounters.



Figure 5:

Keeping Traditions

Kuljen makes *maklupa* in her kitchen.

Figure 6: Kilic, Bulent. Syrian internally displaced people walk in the Atme camp, along the Turkish border in the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib, on March 19, 2013. The conflict in Syria between rebel forces and pro-government troops has killed at least 70,000 people, and forced more than one million Syrians to seek refuge abroad. AFP PHOTO.

<https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/syrian-internally-displaced-people-walk-in-the-atme-camp-news-photo/164064900>

Figure 7: Demir, Nilufer. A young migrant, who drowned in a failed attempt to sail to the Greek island of Kos, lies on the shore in the Turkish coastal town of Bodrum, Turkey. REUTERS. Sept. 2, 2015.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-turkey/troubling-image-of-drowned-boy-captivates-horrifies-idUSKCN0R20IJ20150902>

Figure 8: Stanmeyer, John. With their home in Ayn al Arab, Syria, under attack, ethnic Kurds push toward a barbed wire fence at the Turkish border. National Geographic. Feb. 16, 2015.

<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/projects/out-of-edem-walk/articles/2015-02-glance-back-180000-syrian-refugees-flee-into-turkey/>

Figure 9: Mitchell, Jeff J. Refugees are escorted by police through Dobova, Slovenia, Oct. 22, 2015, en route to a holding camp. Getty Images. Oct. 22, 2015.

<http://america.aljazeera.com/multimedia/photo-gallery/2015/10/photos-refugees-overwhelm-slovenian-border.html>



Figure 10: Starting With Tea

Fadia, Kuljen's daughter and our translator pours tea. In the reflection of the teapot we can all be seen together.



*Figure 11:
Welcoming
Guests*

Suaad prepares the afternoon meal for her guests in her second kitchen. The first kitchen is often used just for appearances; it is in this second kitchen that the "real" cooking takes place.



Figure 12:
Morning Rituals

Yaser uses an alternative technique to water the crops at the farm in the morning.



Figure 13:

A view of the sequence of *Meeting Place* arranged in the Looking Glass Gallery at Appalachian State University.



Figure 14:

The video interviews were positioned in line with the photograph sequence, presented with the list of questions that were asked as well as a request for viewer response.



Figure 15:

Three notebooks were provided on plinths in front of Suaad, Yaser, and Kuljen's to encourage viewer engagement in *Meeting Place*.

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