

Critical Report

Romesh de Silva

Collaboration and Professional Locations: PHO0740

M A in Photography – Falmouth University

2024

Introduction

Photography is more than just capturing images for me; I now see it as a powerful medium for storytelling that can also challenge entrenched cultural narratives and amplify marginalized voices. As a portrait photographer, I've witnessed first-hand how images of people can shape perceptions and influence societal attitudes. In today's world, where images are ubiquitous, I believe the role photography can play is more critical than ever.

This critical report delves into the conceptual framework behind my project, *Beyond the Binary*, which is a collaborative photography endeavour designed to celebrate and document the nuanced identities of queer individuals. While the project currently focuses on the journey of Rifath—a young queer person navigating the complexities of self-expression, identity, and belonging in a society that often resists fluidity—this is just the beginning.

The larger and deeper intention is to expand this collaborative approach to include more individuals, each contributing their unique stories and perspectives.



Figure 1: Rifath in thought, in contemplation and in-between roles. 2024

At the heart of my project lies the principle of co-creation, a methodology that fundamentally challenges traditional photographic hierarchies and power dynamics. In this collaborative framework, participants like Rifath are not passive subjects captured through my lens but active contributors who shape their own stories. Mostly, as a studio portrait photographer, I'm accustomed to directing shoots and crafting images, but this project pushes me to democratize representation, moving away from conventional modes of authorship to foster ethical storytelling practices.

Photographic portrayals of queer narratives can often be influenced by external perspectives, which can simplify diverse, multifaceted identities into one-dimensional or familiar stereotypes, or erase ones' uniqueness entirely. Collaborative practices on the other hand offer an alternative framework—one that canters the voices of those being portrayed ensuring that their stories are told with authenticity and nuance.

The conceptual framework for *Beyond the Binary* narratives draws inspiration from the works of many photographers such as Zanele Muholi, Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Len Prince and Jessie Mann, Lissa Rivera and BJ Lillis, Wendy Ewald, Liz Orton, Graciela Iturbide, and Catherine Opie. These artists exemplify innovative approaches to identity and representation, employing methodologies that foreground participant agency and challenge traditional norms.

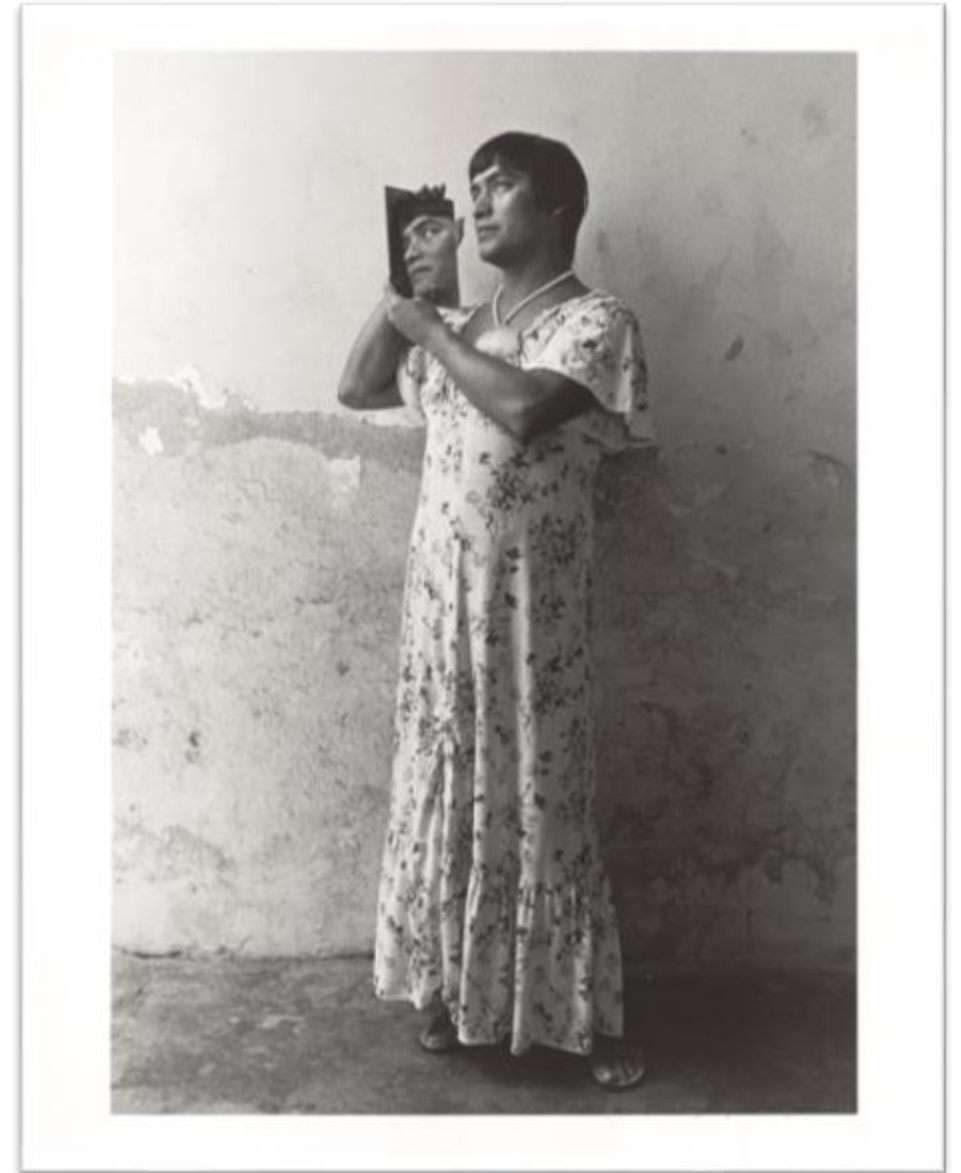


Figure 2: Graciela Iturbide, *Magnolia*. 1986

Additionally, the work of Ariella Azoulay, John Tagg, and Roland Barthes have provided me with critical insights into the ethical dimensions of photographic practices and its potential for social transformation. Their thinking underscores the importance of viewing photography not merely as an art form but as a socio-political act with profound implications for representation and power.

Redefining Photographer-Subject Dynamics

I've now come to realize that collaboration represents a paradigm shift in the relationship between the photographer and the subject. My traditional approach often positioned me, “the photographer” as the sole author and my subjects as passive objects of observation. This dynamic naturally perpetuated a power imbalance, where my thinking was dominant. Collaborative practices, however, reconfigures this relationship by emphasizing mutual agency, shared authorship, which also forms a basis for ethical storytelling.

Ariella Azoulay's theory of photography as an "event" rather than a static artifact provides a foundational framework for my collaborative practices. In her seminal work, Azoulay argues that photography involves a complex interplay between the photographer, the subject, and the viewer. Each participant contributes to the creation and interpretation of the image, challenging the notion of unilateral authorship. This perspective aligns with the methodologies I'm employing in *Beyond the Binary* project, where Rifath and future participants are integral to shaping their visual stories. By acknowledging the subject's agency, I aim to disrupt traditional hierarchies and foster a more equitable creative process.

Roland Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author" further informs my collaborative approach by challenging the idea of singular authorship. Barthes posits that the meaning of a text—or image—is not solely determined by the creator but is co-constructed by the audience. This aligns with the emphasis on multiple interpretations and shared creation of meaning with collaboration. In the context of the project, this perspective reinforces my commitment to allowing participants' narratives to be shaped by both their input and the viewers' engagement.

The Historical Context

Collaboration in photography is not a novel concept; it has historical precedents, especially within documentary and activist practices. During the 1930s, photographers associated with the Farm Security Administration (FSA), like Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, sought to depict the realities of the Great Depression. While they engaged deeply with their subjects, their work was still mediated through governmental institutions, which would have imposed certain narratives or perspectives, and may have undermined the agency of the subjects.

Similarly, during the 1970s, feminist photographers like Jo Spence began exploring collaborative practices to challenge patriarchal representations of women in media. Spence's work along with the Hackney Flashers collective emphasized participatory methods in dismantling oppressive visual narratives.

John Tagg's critical analysis of the institutional power of photography underscores the importance of dismantling hierarchical structures that have historically marginalized certain voices.

By adopting participatory practices, I aim to align Beyond the Binary project with this progressive approach, ensuring that participants' voices remain central and that the representation is authentic and respectful.



Figure 3 : Jo Spence Remodelling Photo History. 1982

Contemporary Practitioners

Zanele Muholi's *Faces and Phases* embodies visual activism to celebrate and empower Black LGBTQ+ individuals. Muholi's dignified and intimate portraits emphasize collaboration, allowing participants to co-create their narratives. This approach demonstrates how photography can shift the power dynamic between the photographer and the subject, fostering mutual respect. Muholi's use of personal context and shared vulnerabilities serves as a model for cantering Rifath's journey while respecting his identity and voice.

On the other hand Paul Mpagi Sepuya's work explores themes of queerness, intimacy, and self-representation by challenging traditional roles of the subject, viewer, and photographer. His incorporation of mirrors and fragmented compositions introduces layered narratives that deconstruct the idea of a singular gaze. For *Beyond the Binary*, Sepuya's exploration of multiplicity inspires me to use similar techniques—such as fragmented reflections and layered compositions—to convey the complexities of self-discovery and identity.



Figure 4: Zanele Muholi's *Faces and Phases 13* . 2019



Figure 7: Lissa Rivera | Beautiful Boy: Chapter II. Study with Chairs. 2017

The collaborative work of Len Prince and Jessie Mann investigates the dynamics of collaboration, muse hood, and identity. Mann's role in shaping the visual storytelling highlights the potential for participants to be active agents in their representation. This inspires me to engage Rifath—and future participants—as co-creators, incorporating their ideas and performative expressions to depict pivotal moments in their lives.



Figure 5: Paul Mpagi Sepuya Mirror Study (0X5A9954). 2020

Lissa Rivera's Beautiful Boy series explores gender fluidity and self-expression through intimate collaboration. The project delves into the performative and fantastical elements of gender identity, using lush visuals and symbolic settings. Similarly, Beyond the Binary will integrate staged and surrealist compositions to represent participants' experiences. Using vibrant settings and abstract motifs, I aim to visualize their transformation and emotional depth.

Wendy Ewald's participatory approach, as seen in Living Between Languages and We Are Here, underscores the transformative potential of collaboration. Ewald gives participants the tools to tell their stories, weaving together photography, text, and cultural elements. Her methods can form the basis of the participant-generated content in Beyond the Binary, where future collaborators document their own lives. This inclusion enriches the narrative, providing insights that might be inaccessible through external observation alone.



Figure 6- Jesse Mann "Self Possessed" Photographs
by Len Prince DP03- 1999-2008

Application and Methodology

The project is structured around key moments in participants' lives, each representing significant experiences that have shaped their identities. With Rifath, I focus on twelve pivotal events, ranging from introspective reflections to public expressions of self, such as participating in a Pride march. By structuring the project around these events, my aim is to capture the fluidity and evolution of identity over time. As the project expands, each new participant will contribute their own narrative, adding depth and diversity to the overarching story.

Drawing from collaborative methodologies, participants will contribute to brainstorming sessions, share their thoughts and ideas for visual representation. This ensures that the the project concept aligns with their experiences and perspectives. Inspired by practitioners like Sepuya and Rivera, the project will employ surreal and abstract techniques. I will encourage the participants to influence styling and composition to reflect their experiences authentically.

Consistent with ethical collaborative practices, images will be reviewed and discussed with participants, ensuring their comfort and agreement with the representations. This co-creative process will foster a sense of ownership and authenticity, ensuring that the images are not only representations but extensions of the participants' real life experiences.

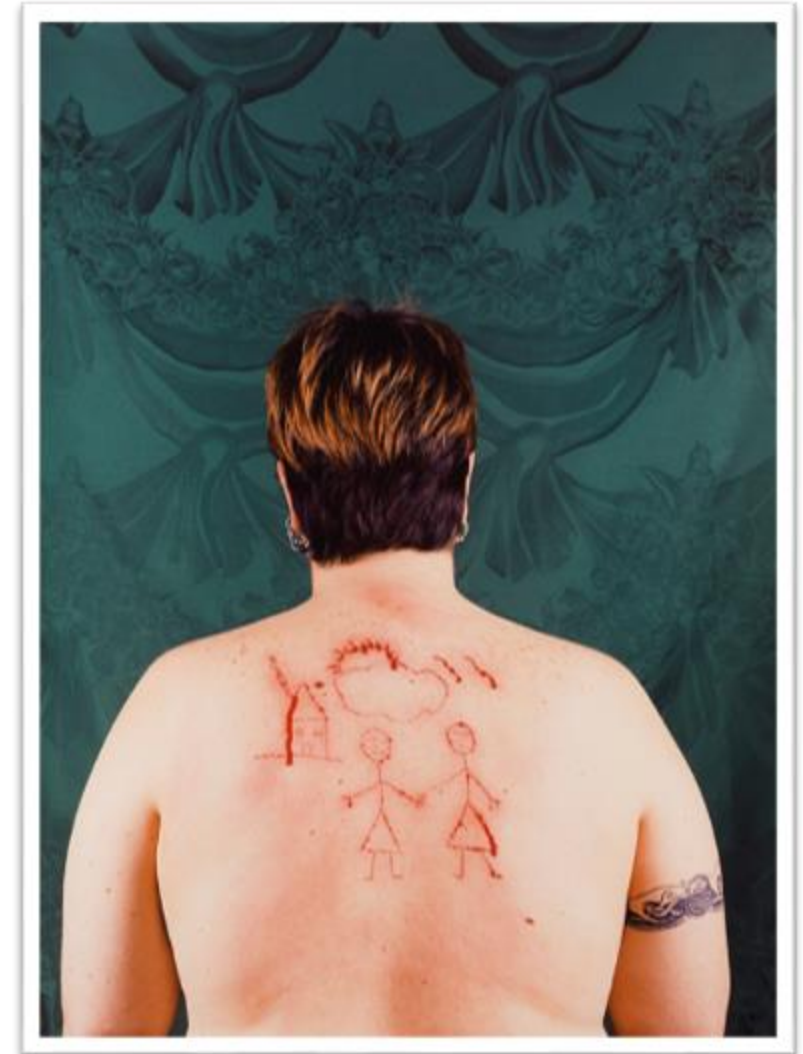


Figure 8 :Catherine Opie Self-Portrait/Cutting. 1993

Embracing Wendy Ewald's participatory approach, I am considering to provide participants with cameras to document their daily lives. This includes capturing moments of personal significance, such as interactions with friends, places of comfort, or objects that resonate with their identity. These photographs will be woven into the broader narrative to create a dialogue between their perspective and my vision.

I plan to incorporate mixed media elements in the final project, such as:

- **Polaroids and Cyanotypes:** Symbolizing introspection and memory, these add an ethereal quality to the imagery, complementing themes of self-discovery and transformation.
- **Handwritten Reflections:** Incorporating participants' writings—notes, journal entries, or poetry—enhances the personal connection and depth of the narrative.
- **Collage and Layering:** Techniques inspired by Sepuya's fragmentation reflect the complexities of identity, creating multi-layered representations.

One of the most significant outcomes of *Beyond the Binary* will be the creation of a photobook, offering a comprehensive and enduring format that aligns with the project's ethos of deep engagement and nuanced storytelling. It will also be a means of cultural preservation and dissemination, contributing to the broader discourse on identity, representation, and social justice.

It will also provide an enduring record of the participants' stories, ensuring that their voices are heard and remembered. The permanence and collectability of a photobook can also enhance the project's visibility and impact, enabling potentially to reach international audiences and fostering cross-cultural understanding.

Ethical Considerations

While collaboration offers significant opportunities for empowerment and authentic representation, it also presents challenges that require careful navigation. Ensuring that participants retain agency throughout the process demands constant dialogue, transparency, and reflection. Ways to address this will include:

- **Informed Consent:** Clearly communicating the project's goals, methodologies, and potential outcomes to participants, ensuring they understand and agree to each aspect.
- **Ongoing Communication:** Establishing regular check-ins to discuss progress, gather feedback, and address any concerns or changes in comfort levels.
- **Flexibility:** Being willing to adjust plans or approaches based on participants' input, emphasizing their well-being and comfort.

Another challenge lies in balancing artistic interpretation with authentic representation. While creative techniques can enhance the narrative, there's a risk of overshadowing the participant's voice or distorting their experiences. To mitigate this, I will need to involve participants in creative decisions to ensure that my artistic choices align with their vision and feelings.

I will also need to continuously reflect on the ethical implications of the visual choices, considering how these impact the portrayal of participants' identities.



Figure 9 : Liz Orton - Everybody is an Archive. 2020

I will draw on Azoulay's framework of photography as a dynamic, ongoing process, and embrace these challenges as integral to ethical collaboration. By not viewing the project as an end but as a participatory journey, I will foster a respectful and empowering environment.

In Conclusion

I expect *Beyond the Binary Narratives* to expand my photographic practice. By integrating participant-driven content, mixed media, and surrealist techniques, the project challenges traditional paradigms of representation that I was accustomed to. Working on this project has encouraged me to reevaluate my conventional practices and embrace more collaborative and innovative approaches.

On a societal level, I aim for the project to foster visibility for queer identities, particularly those that are often underrepresented or misrepresented in our country. By sharing participants' stories with authenticity and depth, the project challenges stereotypes and invites audiences to engage with the complexities of queer experiences.

By archiving personal narratives within a historical context, *Beyond the Binary* contributes to cultural memory. It ensures that the voices and experiences of queer individuals are recorded and recognized, countering the historical erasure of marginalized groups. This archival aspect is particularly significant in preserving the nuances of individual journeys for future reflection and study.

The project also engages with academic discourse on photography, identity, and representation. By drawing on theories from Azoulay, Barthes, Tagg, and others, it situates itself within conversations about the role of photography in society. Simultaneously, the photobook allows the project to remain grounded in community engagement and hopefully create a real-world impact beyond stories told in its pages.

In a world grappling with issues of identity, inclusion, and equality, it is my wish that projects like this illuminate paths toward greater empathy and connectedness, reminding us of our shared humanity.

References

- Azoulay, A. (2008) *The Civil Contract of Photography*. New York: Zone Books.
- Azoulay, A., Ewald, W., Meiselas, S., Raiford, L. and Wexler, L. (2020) *Collaboration: A Potential History of Photography*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Barthes, R. (1977) 'The Death of the Author', in *Image-Music-Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, pp. 142–148.
- Ewald, W. (1985) *Portraits and Dreams: Photographs and Stories by Children of the Appalachians*. New York: Writers and Readers Publishing.
- Ewald, W. (2015) *Living Between Languages*. New York: Aperture.
- Ewald, W. (2018) *America Border Culture Dreamer: The Young Adult Immigrant Experience from A to Z*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Gupta, S. (1986) *Exiles*. London: The Photographers' Gallery.
- Iturbide, G. (1989) *Juchitán de las Mujeres*. Mexico City: Editorial Toledo.
- Muholi, Z. (2010) *Faces and Phases*. Munich: Prestel.
- Opie, C. (1999) *Domestic*. Los Angeles: Regen Projects.
- Orton, L. (2019) *Every Body is an Archive*. [Self-published].
- Prince, L. and Mann, J. (2012) *Self Possessed*. New York: PowerHouse Books.
- Rivera, L. (2017) *Beautiful Boy*. New York: ClampArt.
- Sepuya, P.M. (2019) *Paul Mpagi Sepuya*. New York: Aperture.
- Spence, J. and The Hackney Flashers (1983) *Who's Holding the Baby?* London: Photography Workshop.
- Tagg, J. (1988) *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*. London: Macmillan.