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Affective Misplacement and the Image City

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In a letter to Rochester, New York Police Department Chief La'Ron Singletary, in reference to the body worn camera videos documenting the March 23, 2020 "mental hygiene arrest" of Daniel Prude, Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren says she is "concerned that these body worn camera videos are not just viewed through the lens of the badge, but through the eyes of the people we serve" (Smith 2020: 2). Prude, a Black man, died of complications from asphyxia resulting from the arresting officers' use of a "spit sock" hood and the forceful application of a knee to his back, pressing his naked torso into the snow-flurried pavement. In a memo to Warren, Rochester Deputy Mayor James Smith quotes the mayor's letter back to her using The Lens of the Badge as a section heading. Smith expands the metaphor to address how the arresting officers saw Prude, the view of the medical response technicians who were uncaring toward him, the municipal attorneys' myopia when processing information requests "in terms of data to be redacted or included rather than as a human life lost" (2020: 2) and the optics of a Rochester Police Department (RPD) lieutenant calling the county medical examiner prior to Prude's autopsy to prime them with the narrative that his death was the result of a drug overdose and resisting arrest, as opposed to the official homicide ruling eventually established.

But citizens' eyes are subject to lenses, too. I live in Rochester. Technically, I have a Rochester address, but my home is in a neighboring suburb. Rochester demographics are about fifty-fifty Black and other people of color to white people like me. A small city of about 200,000, it seems smaller due

to racial and economic segregation. People whose vocation it is to work with images make up a fraction of the community. For instance, I am part of the image-making community as the director of a nonprofit photographic, book, and media artist space and I personally know one of those whose job it is to process body worn camera videos for the RPD, including that of Prude's arrest. I tried watching the entire video, which was publicly released by a lawyer representing Prude's family, but only made it through about a minute before my central nervous system alarmed me to x-out the screen. It was Prude's nakedness in the cold night, his quick, alert compliance to get face down on the ground, that had me quit. It seemed inhumane enough that those charged with serving and protecting had not offered Prude, naked and unstable, a blanket or coat. Smith observed that "the simple concepts of human decency and dignity appeared to be woefully lacking or non-existent" (2020: 3).

Daniel Prude's treatment by RPD and the subsequent uprising that followed in Rochester—also known as The Image City for its corporate ties to Kodak, Xerox, and Bausch and Lomb—have formed a culmination that follows nearly two decades of my work in the image-making community in Rochester. In the past several of those years, I have been reconsidering empathy in relation to photographic images and the affective accountability of photographers and photobook producers to their subjects.[1] This entails how empathy is created by photographic images and photo-bookworks of art interdependent within the social and cultural systems in which they are made and operate, how empathetic narrative is reified as capitalistic objects like images and books, how reifying empathy as photographic production misplaces the resulting affect, as well as the prospect of empathetically responsible photographic production. Forming key and distinctive examples are two archive photobook projects made as documents of or in connection to The Image City. Both are projects I have been involved with and supported through the institution I direct in Rochester, Visual Studies Workshop (VSW). One is a photo archive project and book by historically significant photographers from the Magnum Photos agency that attempted to artfully document Rochester in 2012 when Kodak announced bankruptcy. More recently in 2020–1, VSW supported the exhibition and newspaper publication of a photo archive project by a native son, Joshua Rashaad McFadden. These bipolar projects show on the one end the capitalist reification of abstract affective response of empathy as definite, concrete form, that images conditioned by capitalistic values and imperial histories protect empathy as a subject through the objects of its production, and that photo empaths attuned to produce *the best* or *most* empathy are privileged over the subjected humans who created the sharing of affect in the first place. On the other end, there is the potential for more long-term caregiving between photo empaths and their subjects through an empathetic documentation and archiving practice.

Empathy Creation in Images and Systemic Interdependence

To consider how empathy is created from photographic images and yet systemically interdependent, let us return to the Prude arrest video. There is an argument for viewing it in its entirety which claims that doing so has the potential to increase my compassion if I train myself to feel with the person suffering. Increasing my compassion is prosocial, meaning I would be more likely to help or intervene in a situation when witnessing another's suffering (Singer and Klimecki 2014: 875). The affective influence of emotion released by the imagery may help me better understand the suffering through my own spontaneous, vicarious sharing in the affect; in other words, it may help me to empathize. But because Prude is Black and I am white, I might be more likely to view him as part of an outgroup and less likely to help because empathetic response is more frequently disrupted with outgroup members (Cikara, Bruneau, and Saxe 2017: 150).

When I'm present to other people, or what I'm reading, or watching, my empathy levels are high to very high. Yet I would not remain present to the Prude arrest video. I fall more on the empathetic distress side of the spectrum so am more likely to freeze in the face of suffering (Singer and Klemecki 2020: 876). Furthermore, I don't believe that my personal viewing of the images could ever bear out enough empathy in me to challenge the systemic or individual racism involved. One recent study I read "clearly demonstrate[s] that anti-Black stereotypes and/or White racial identity may also 'suppress' the impact of empathetic feelings of those who observe or become aware of instances when White police officers use excessive force against Black Americans" (Johnson, Lecci, and Antonia 2020: 64). Through media integration my affective response has long been primed to see the stereotypical view of Black people in terms of criminality, justifiably harmed, or reasonably reacted against in supposed self-defense. I am unwilling to voluntarily view more such images from the thick distance of a laptop or a phone, with my personal socio-cultural identity characteristics. I have, for my forty-five years, been primed enough in these directions such that internally contesting my own reactive, individually racist thoughts and actions toward Black people will be a lifelong process as it is.

Pictures are fictions and interrogating whether we believe what we see or see what we believe is central to their interpretation. Empathy in the beginning formed out of aesthetics, in translation from *Einfühlung*, feeling into things—like art objects or books of images. Now many cognitive psychological and neurological studies of empathy use still and time-based images as part of their evidence-gathering methods. If the spontaneous, vicarious sharing of affect is activated by witnessing the emotional state of another, and if we can study these turns through the use of photographic

images, then an implied framework hinges on recognizing what is outside ourselves and mirroring the recognition inside us, or upon the understanding of what is inside us that primes our interpretation of an external image. It is this inside-outside pivot that is perhaps essential to understanding both empathy and, in more metaphorical terms, photo-bookworks of art.

When images circulate of systemically racist actions like that of Prude's treatment, they are necessarily confrontational but we must allow them entry to our psyche in order for them to have us feel with others. In January 2021 another body-worn camera video was under public scrutiny in Rochester and beyond. RPD officers handcuffed and pepper-sprayed a nine-year-old Black girl in order to command control over her arrest. As usual, there was a public call by the mayor and other officials for more empathy and compassion including from the RPD chief. And as expected the president of the union representing the RPD stated "Those officers and those scenes, they broke no policy[.] There's nothing that anyone can say they did that's inappropriate" (Hong 2021). On the one hand, the images may be viewed with and create empathy, independent of their system of creation, and the suffering seen as unjustifiable, even by the chief of the RPD. The generative empathetic response to the video and subsequent call to more empathy may indeed help more people to feel with others. Yet on the other hand, no matter the level of affective and cognitive confidence we have in our feelings of what we believe to be another's emotions, there is the hegemonic potential to see in the documents what its agents define as acceptable. This incident reveals, then, the interdependence of empathetic documents and their systemic frameworks, but also the problem of failing to acknowledge that interdependence. By calling for more empathy are we only attempting to cultivate more individual *growth*? And if so are we then oblivious to the capitalist function of that cultivation and its systemic domination of even feelings themselves?

Empathetic Narrative as Capitalistic Object

A personal-systemic example will perhaps make both the interdependence and capitalist reification process clear. An artist who had previously been in residence at VSW lives on Pennsylvania Avenue near the Rochester Public Market. On a Saturday night in September 2020, at the height of public protests in response to the video of Prude's arrest, an invite-only party took place at a neighboring house on Pennsylvania Ave. It mixed with another party, an altercation turned violent, and sixteen people were shot, two fatally: Jaquayla Young and Jarvis Alexander, both of whom are Black. The artist connected me with Alexander's family so that VSW's production space might donate prints of pictures of the young man for memorial services. When I spoke on the phone with Alexander's aunt, I felt genuine sadness and

compassion for the family and their sudden, inconceivable loss. She texted me several images. Staff and assistants made 200 hand-size prints and two dozen mounted posters of young Jarvis flexing in his high school football uniform, wearing a green headband that framed his smooth, attractive face in a ring of black curls, as a child in a Superman muscle-costume posturing for the photographer, grinning wryly in the foreground of a selfie, his younger cousin behind him flashing a broader smile. I met the cousin when delivering the prints. As I handed them over to this skinny boy of about sixteen, we briefly locked eyes then simultaneously looked down at the pile of images. A wave of emotion reached me, channeled through the conduit of prints. It transformed the entire hallway corridor, and quickly propelled him back to his apartment, and me to my car. Up to that point, what I had felt for Alexander's family had been sympathy. My feelings turned into empathy when I vicariously shared in the boy's affective reaction to his cousin's image. Despite our transformative interchange and the sharing of affect, we do not have equal share in our community. If I ever encounter him again, we will most likely not recognize one another. But I have the register of sensation and connection to think and write about him now. Whether I participated in doing some good for the family or not, it is the case that the capitalist reification process transforms Alexander's demise and his family's pain in ways that are beneficial to me as a critic and academic and yet are incompatible, incomparable, and virtually impossible to advantage by families of dead, young Black men like Alexander, as if they would care to exploit his death.

The ethics of my anecdotal inclusion of Alexander's memorial images are absolutely questionable but I do so to involve your criticality of the potential for affective misplacement, the reification process (Lukacs 1967), and of me as a more privileged writer. I can use the complexity and empathy imparted by images of a young Black man who was shot and killed as my own creative and intellectual product. What mystifies is the ease with which this reification occurs and yet the systemic complicity of its function is profound and has been part of photography and its larger industry, including its critics, from the beginning. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay describes this in *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*:

> Let's recall. From the inception of photography, it was assumed—and violently obtained—that the people photographed were to provide the resources and the free (or cheap) labor for the large-scale photographic enterprise that from the very beginning was based on capitalistic logic. While it is obvious that there is no photograph without photographed persons, the structure of primitive accumulation was already naturalized in the beginning of the nineteenth century, when photography took shape, that the expropriation of the photographed persons from rights in the photos could be institutionalized as the order of things. Through imperial enterprises of visual surveys of all sorts in invaded and colonized

> places, of profiling and surveillance, and of the ideology and practices of documentary and news, primitive accumulation imposed structures of capital on the photographic commons. This was rarely discussed, as if not to taint the artistic, educational, and informational ethos and values. Photographers, who were also charged with alleviating the violence of extraction, were offered some benefit from the imperial domination of photographic markets, single authorship of their photographs, that is, some privileges and symbolic capital in exchange for which they were expected to act as middle-persons extracting the object of their craft from others. Accorded the right to deprive other participants of their share in the photographs and in the world that they shared and to conceal the exploitative meaning of the photographic encounter, photographers mostly did not enrich themselves; this was reserved for bigger imperial sharks such as collectors, corporations, industrialists, archives, or museums (2019: 282).

Photo-bookworks, particularly those with the express desire to document people, their cares, and suffering, are part of this systemic imperial structure. These empathetic narrative works perhaps intended to do some good in terms of making the lives of less-seen people visible. Several 1930s and 1940s post-Depression books coming directly out of the New Deal Farm Security Administration (FSA) were pure empathy drivers. *You Have Seen Their Faces* by photographer Margaret Bourke-White and popular novelist Erskine Caldwell is a deeply sentimental portrayal of people in the rural South criticized for Caldwell's stereotypical, eugenicist statements made to appear as first-person accounts alongside Bourke-White's propagandistic photography (Holdman 2014: 41). Much more factually conscientious is *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* by Dorothea Lange and her sociologist husband Paul Schuster Taylor, which puts the reader inside the western migration from the Oklahoma Dust Bowl. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by writer James Agee and photographer Walker Evans followed earlier FSA work and was contemptuously inspired by *You Have Seen Their Faces* (Holdman 2014: 42). In her history of empathy, Suzanne Lanzoni recognizes *The Family of Man*, curator Edward Steichen's sentimental effort to universalize humanity after decades of world war through an exhibition and book with the Museum of Modern Art in 1955. That same year *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* by Roy DeCarava brought us inside 134th Street in Harlem and included Langston Hughes's sentimental narrative of day-to-day life there as delivered by his character Sister Mary Bradley.

This empathetic, art-meets-documentary strategy was foundational for photo-bookworks. The internationally renowned documentary photography cooperative Magnum Photos formed in 1947 around the time much of the above came into print. Magnum continues today and is famed for an approach that is part aesthetics, part journalistic reportage. Though

the photographers have their own autonomous projects and practices, they are often editorially commissioned for stories. In the early 2010s, a group within Magnum undertook a series of road trip documentary pieces called Postcards from America. Fashioned after the aforementioned FSA projects, the Magnum photographers travelled with writers, producers, and videographers in an RV, seeking to document stories without the usual editorial constraints (Schmeltzer 2012).

From the outside, Postcards from America appeared as Magnum photographers *feeling* their way to focal points of American conflict, like the US/Mexico border and Florida at the time of a presidential election. When any world event occurs these days we tend to feel it, bodily. In a conversation with Erin Manning titled "Affective Attunement in the Field of Catastrophe," philosopher Brian Massumi notes:

> The complexity of the interlocking systems we live in, on the social, cultural, economic and natural levels, is now felt in all its complexity, because we're reaching certain tipping points, for example in relation to climate change and refugee flows. There is a sense that we're in a far-from-equilibrium situation where each of the systems we have depended upon for stability is perpetually on the verge of tipping over into crisis, with the danger that there will be a sort of cascade of effects through adjoining systems, like a domino effect. It's a very unstable, quasi-chaotic situation. And there's no vantage point from which to understand it from the outside. We're immersed in it. We're absorbed in the imminence of catastrophe, always braced for it—which means it has become immanent to our field of life. That imminence-immanence is a mode of contact, of direct affective proximity, even if it occurs 'at a distance' through the action of the media or, more to the point, within an increasingly integrated media ecology (2015:113–114).

Magnum's Postcards from America seemed created to express such *imminence-immanence* and for bearing witnesses to an impending pandemonium. Our affective contact with these situations is through the types of images such an autonomous yet highly effective group of image-makers as Magnum can create, as well as where they create them.

Reifying Empathy as Photographs and their Production

If documenting places and people in off-kilter societal, cultural, and economic conditions comes out of a tradition of imperialist visual surveys, and if Magnum's Postcards from America was attuned to delivering artful

reports from states of instability, then with hindsight we in Rochester should have seen the tragedy in Magnum contacting us in early 2012 about a project in the making called House of Pictures—to be housed, as it were, at VSW and by the other photography institutions of the city.

> Rochester, that ultimate company town, struck us as itself a house of pictures. The place that housed Kodak, the place where photography grew up, ate breakfast, slept at night … And when Kodak declared bankruptcy a few weeks before our arrival, we wondered about the differences between a house of pictures and a house of cards.
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> … How different, we asked on the road to Rochester, is the photographer's labor from the engineer's, from the stirrer's, from the weaver's?
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> How, we mused, do we remember the place that manufactured our own memories?
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> (Goldberg et al., 2013: 426)

At a closing event for House of Pictures, in a half-darkened theater a projected diptych paired two images: one of a mansion behind a hedgerow and beside it at equal scale, a dilapidated, two-family home with cracked fiber asbestos siding, a scarred roof, and plywood in place of windows. The mansion, connected by corridors to where we sat, is George Eastman House, symbol of status, culture, and altruism in Rochester. The rundown house is familiar to anyone who has driven around this town. It was one of thousands of foreclosures in the city that year with a median home value of about $35,000; around 75 percent of the foreclosures were located in majority Black and brown neighborhoods with an average family income of $25,000 (Center for Community Progress 2013). Nightly in this very theater, films from one of the world's most prominent film collections are screened as part of the moving image exhibition and lecture programs of the museum. The museum, connected to the house, is named for and formerly the dwelling of George Eastman, founder of Eastman Kodak Company.

A few hundred of us from the Rochester area were in the theater to see what the ten members of Magnum had made to artfully document our town. They had only been in Rochester for two weeks but months before arriving they delivered lists of what they wished to photograph in order for producers to start compiling locations and gaining access to architecture, factories, eateries, high schools, city government offices, funerals, strip clubs, places to wander the streets, various community and club events, and ride-alongs with police. They set up situations to photograph and asked people to unclothe themselves, hold up guns, signs, and plates of food. They convened in a mansion across East Avenue from the Eastman House, where their egos locked horns over locations, styles of picture making, and manners of working. They were hoisted several stories to photograph from

bucket trucks and went underground in Rochester's now-abandoned subway tunnels. They set up a photo booth to make free portraits at the Rochester Public Market on a Saturday morning in late April where crowds of over 20,000 from seemingly all-possible backgrounds mix and buy produce, breakfast sandwiches, fresh roasted coffee, flowers, and whole fishes.

Along the back of the Public Market on Pennsylvania Avenue, the street where Jarvis Alexander was fatally shot, the photographers had coveted "a blue house, peaked roof, crammed up against the fence" (Goldberg et al., 2013: 426). Months before arriving, a Magnum representative had directed the local producer to get them a house in which they would create an installation of their pictures to be viewed at the end of the project.

> We wanted to create an experience that existed outside of formalized institutions and that engaged with a resident community. The country was still in the aftermath of the housing crisis, and the concept of a house, of ownership and residency and identity, was at the forefront of everyone's minds. We figured it would be relatively easy to buy a house in Rochester, maybe a foreclosed one, to bring up some of the printers, and to spend two weeks filling the house with pictures. Maybe we would sell the house at the end. Maybe we would give it to a community group. Maybe we would abandon it and leave the pictures to fend for themselves (Goldberg et al., 2013: 427).

When you internet search "empathy and photography" a Magnum Photos site documenting a conference and part of their Theory & Practice archives is first in line. It describes empathy as "both an objective and a tool in documentary photography" (Magnum Photos 2020). Which is why obtaining a possibly foreclosed house in which to work and present your local engagement makes sense. Being situated within the house's walls, within a *real* neighborhood, engaging with the neighbors and the street, could provoke the spontaneous sharing of affect, vicariously, in a part-evidentiary, part-phenomenological exercise. It could obtain the objective and be the vehicle of emotional connection for both the photographer and photography viewer. Hence when the local producer, a colleague of mine at VSW, couldn't get a house, some of the photographers drove around town to look for one, and found the Blue House. They approached those dwelling in it but the tenants had concerns about their landlord and the installation. Though it fell through, the Blue House was to be one of the project's symbolic houses of pictures. The others were the eleven-bedroom mansion where the photographers communed together, shuffling and discussing their daily proof prints on an editing table, a well-documented overnight homeless shelter and food pantry caring for thousands of Rochester citizens each month called House of Mercy, the large room of photo prints they presented at VSW at the end of the

event, and of course, George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film (Goldberg et al., 2013: 426).

Each of the ten photographers had the lofty, preconceived task of making 100 good pictures to contribute to an archive box of 1000 prints. It was made in a limited edition of five copies, one of which was presold, sight unseen, for $20,000 to George Eastman House.[2] In part the archive boxes would fund the entire enterprise of producing, traveling, housing, feeding, and printing pictures for these ten photographers working at this level of integrity in the photographic field. Other local institutions, including VSW, contributed perhaps another $150,000 worth of in-kind assistance and support for the venture. The irony that the price tag of a prepurchased box of a thousand images digitally printed on paper was just under the median annual income of a family living in a neighborhood where they wished to paste-up the pictures in a possibly foreclosed house was lost on no one. Not least of all the photographers, who made it so flatly obvious with the pairing of houses there on the museum screen at the closing event. Or perhaps it *was* lost on everyone involved, certainly myself included.

Those producing, displaying, and publishing works of art have generally understood for a generation what those who are empirically studying empathetic response to figurative art have begun to document as distinguishable contextual frames that prime that empathetic response:

> first, the *pictorial context* of the image, i.e., the relationship of the emotionally salient aspects (affective affordances) to the pictorial field or structure as a whole, second, the *spatial and experiential context* of the presentation of the image, and third, the *cultural-social context* of the actual experiential situation, in which the viewer's personal dispositions interact with cultural factors and form expectations
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> (Kesner and Horáček 2017: 4)

Regardless of the pictorial context of the House of Pictures images, the idea that the spatial and experiential context was for Magnum to wallpaper one of the city's thousands of foreclosed or low-income rental homes seems utterly careless to me now, especially since the cultural-social context of the project sets a majority white audience upon a majority Black neighborhood in order to see the photos. To repeat the aforementioned Deputy Mayor Smith, "the simple concepts of human decency and dignity appeared to be woefully lacking or non-existent" (2020: 3). We as (white) producers and audience were so concerned with the potential for empathetic transference that we sought to exploit a Black neighborhood in a city that is one of the five worst places to live when African American.

There is an early twentieth-century advertisement for camera flash sheets that stated: "Kodak knows no dark days."[3] But the photographers with Magnum were only in Rochester because the formerly blue chip Eastman

Kodak Company had faced gloom on the horizon for a decade. In the previous nine years, Kodak had closed thirteen manufacturing plants and shed 47,000 jobs, many from the Rochester suburbs. The month I moved to the city in 2003, 3,000 people were laid off and Kodak's dividend was slashed by 70 percent. The Postcards from America book that came from the House of Pictures project is called *Rochester 585 716*, the phone area codes of the region. A thick archive of a thousand images was designed in the fashion of a phone book. It is the people's version of the photographers' archive box and the message was clear: Rochester had gone the way of the telephone book. The photography industry that once held epic potential for shared connection and was a wayfinder to myriad service economies was outmoded. As a container metaphor it clearly spoke to the analog era, the time when Kodak was relevant and their market share dominant. Kodak gets grief for sitting on its 1975 invention of the digital camera for decades, and for foregoing what would have been at least a half-century of revolutionary digital image product development. But the picture is both more complicated and simple than that (Shih 2016). The lifespan of the film industry's corporate patriarch had peaked, grown gray, and was dying and this had a lot of its photographer progeny reflecting on the death of the Great Yellow Father.[4]

At the time of Magnum's Rochester visit in 2012, seemingly everyone working in photography had for the past few years been making sad-beautiful pictures of decay and decline. Sites of tragedy beckoned. Photographers descended on postindustrial cities to make what has since been termed Ruins Photography or, more critically, Ruin Porn (Woodward 2013). Detroit, the largest US city to file for Chapter 9 bankruptcy protection, was a favored destination for this type of work. In February of 2012, a large but slim photo-bookwork was published out of Italy, bound in brown paper with a plain sticker affixed to its hardcover, labeling it *Found Photos in Detroit*. It is a massive coffee table book metaphorically meant to be read as a banal archive folder. In its introduction the Italian photographers, Arianna Arcara and Luca Santese, note, "[W]e found these photos on the streets of Detroit. We took them and started to sift between the thousands of Polaroids, letters, prints of photographic evidence, police documents, mugshots and family albums" (2012: preface). Of its eighty pages and 167 photographs, roughly half are images of people, all but one of them of only Black people. The other half of the images are virtually all of homes, some in states of wreckage, or domestic interiors including several documents of bloody violence. Because the photos were literally taken from the streets and therefore subject to the environment, the emulsions are cracked, wavy, aged, and discolored from weathered moldering that brought unexpected patinas of sometimes bright color and abstract forms to bear on the picture planes. These surfaces are highly exploited in the last fifth of the book, where, as its end draws near, the bright hues and water damaged inflections overtake the entire double-

page openings in ecstatic bleeds to the edges. On the publishing blog of Alec Soth, the Magnum photographer who first spotted the Blue House in Rochester, writer Vince Leo reviews *Found Photos in Detroit*, and ruminates on the theme of abandonment. "The only thing we know for sure about these photographs," he states, "is the most important thing to know: they have all been abandoned" (2012). The photographers also note in the publishing credits at the end that they found the photos "abandoned in the streets of Detroit" (2012: postcript). To Leo "the message is clear: It is Black culture, their houses, their rule of law, their very selves that have been abandoned. Like homeless ghosts, the social reality of these photographs haunts Detroit and America, signifying a despair so deep that abandonment is the only method left to represent their loss" (2012).

What Leo identifies as a system that has abandoned Black people with the ruin and abandonment of photographs themselves is how the photographers, photobook publisher, and the photobook critic transfer their own understanding of the difficulties that they imagine those "unmoored from the ties" of these photographs face. In other words, it's how the photographers empathize: damaged and discarded photos of people equal the psychic and physical pain of the damaged, discarded souls figured therein. The comments on Leo's review reveal how deeply the photographers are convinced that photographs as a medium connect viewers to the photograph's subjects. Soth acknowledges that "photographs of people use people. It makes us uncomfortable. But it is also what makes the medium so potent"; Soth continues: "this friction between aesthetics and real life/lives gives the book a disquieting energy that makes it come alive" (Leo 2012). Another commentator imagined a narrative wherein the people depicted or their amateur photographers were either foreclosed upon or evicted and had to unexpectedly move and leave their cherished possessions. Arcara and Santese commented themselves, describing how, when they stumbled upon their first Polaroid for the archive lying in the street, "as photographers, we felt powerless in front of this material by far stronger than any image we could shoot" (Leo 2012).

Deeming these pictures abandoned may be a generous view of their ontology and perhaps a cautious word choice to evade questions of authorship. Because as paradoxical as it seems, documentary photography requires authorship as much as art through the embeddedness, the access, the intimate disclosures revealed by its authors. A different view of the found objects is fully acknowledged in scare quotes by the photographers describing the pictures in relation to the economic and housing crisis symbolized by Detroit echoing the juncture Magnum found itself in for House of Pictures: they are the "aftermath" (Leo 2012). It is a perhaps more apt descriptor of the photos and the people and homes forming their subject. Just like the foreclosed Rochester house desired by the Magnum photographers, these leavings were the remnants of a slow, systematic destructive event taking place in postindustrial US cities. Aftermath is a record of the period of time

following a disaster. Calling the found photos abandoned asserts they were left alone and uncared for. Abandonment hints at blame for those who left their belongings for someone else to come along and look after them. As noted above, the Magnum group was all too comfortable abandoning their proposed creation for the pictures to "fend for themselves." The Detroit found pictures' literally damaged surfaces had a romantic patina (what one photo friend calls "the art sauce"[5]) that aestheticizes and strangely justifies, perhaps inadvertently, the psychic and physical harm of those treated worst within the American regime. But Arcara and Santese and the Magnum photographers did what many people would justify doing. They documented destroyed worlds in order to caretake the aftermath's continued existence through the formation of an archive. Azoulay recognizes this as a longstanding move:

> The role of institutions such as archives and museums in the 'preservation' of the past is the effect of a vast enterprise of destruction conducted at the expense of and as a substitute for destroyed worlds. Fueled and justified by the pursuit of the new, what is destroyed is produced as past and elaborate procedures of salvage and preservation are devoted to extract and study cherished samples of proof of bygone times and their own progress. The 'past' consists of discrete objects, documents, and relics detached from what were or could have been the sustainable worlds of which they were part, and whose destruction is often justified for the sake of their rescue. If what they preserve is extracted from living worlds, and if living worlds are producing objects whose destination is the museum and archive, their study cannot be confined to what is in them but should include what role they play in this enterprise of world destruction …
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> (Azoulay 2019: 19–20).

Assembling documents of these individual lives and objects in the flat, seemingly nonhierarchical space of the archive book or box turns any opportunity for the private sharing of affect into the constantly surveilled and usable registers of the public and the state, as if it were possible to separate them out in the first place. Allan Sekula writes that "Every portrait implicitly [takes] its place within a social and moral hierarchy. The private moment of sentimental individuation, the look at the frozen gaze-of-the-loved-one, are shadowed by two other more public looks: a look up, at one's 'betters,' and a look down, at one's 'inferiors'" (Sekula 1986, 10). Arcara and Santese's methodology enacts this public vertical scale by literally *looking down* at the ground of the public domain for images "abandoned," presumably by and of Black people.

Similarly, Azoulay's notion of "regime-made disasters" asks us to be attentive to a differential body politic, under which the "forms of being governed by that regime—as citizens, as noncitizens, or as flawed citizens—are different" (Azoulay 2012: 30). A regime-made disaster,

according to Azoulay, is one that is "generated and reproduced" by regimes founded in such differential rule (Azoulay 2012: 32). Such regime-based disasters don't happen all at once and may not be recognized as such by citizens other than their victims, or they may be viewed as a necessary or uncontrollable circumstances. Over-policing, redlining, subprime mortgages all fit the bill of regime-made disasters in a capitalist system. In these disasters, though, Azoulay points out that not only are some groups protected by their privileges, but those who are "deprived of [such] protective fabrics" have their "victimhood … preserved through visualizations that associate them with the position and figure of the victim in the long term in what I call 'archival acceptability'" (2012: 32).

> Archival acceptability is the form violence takes as it is generated through imperial shutters. It entices people to act differently than they would have acted if the crimes did not benefit from a plausible acceptability. The violence of the archival acceptability is powerful because it lures people to commit acts that in other circumstances would appear lucidly as the crimes of appropriation, looting, dispossession, deportation, and ethnic cleansing (2019: 204).

Azoulay affirms that photographers and photography viewers, with our integrated media viewing from a distance, are, however virtually, among the protected and privileged, still set apart from those experiencing the disaster. No matter how deeply felt our *affective proximity*, it remains contiguous as opposed to interior. Though we may be governed by the same democratic regime, our gaze is shaped by a differentiation that is structurally imposed. Images documenting the aftermath of regime-made disasters can be seen as another objective and tool of the regime effectively perpetuating the differential treatment of those involved.

If we understand a photograph or photo-bookwork to be more than its intention or the viewer who identifies with it, if we understand that that an image is part of a regime, however democratic, then no matter the level of empathy imparted, the images remain subject to that regime's hegemonic interpretation. At the end of Sekula's above-referenced essay, which contributed a social history of police images to documentary photography, he suggests Walker Evans's "1938 *American Photographs* can be read as attempts to counterpose the 'poetic' structure of the sequence to the archive" (1986: 58). Evans became a new kind of photographic empath, one who induced the sharing of affect between images in their order and disjuncture from one another in sequence. Individual images, more prized by collectors, museums, and archives can't singly gloss the sweeping work. By structuring the work as a book-length photographic sequence, its ontology leans literary. Yet making the work more individually authored does not make it any more independent from the American regime. Or for a more

recent example consider the highly authored work of Gregory Halpern, a Magnum photographer based in Rochester, who has been widely recognized for his darkly romantic photo-poetic bookworks, including his 2016 award-winning title on California, *Zyzx*. Halpern's work descends from Evans and often includes empathetic portraits of people he encounters in public, a good portion of whom are people of color whom we understand, from the beautiful-suffering of their weathered and affective appearance, to be socially marginalized in some way. When I asked him publicly about the power of such portraits to *other* those recorded, he stated plainly that he viewed the portraits he made as representative of himself, more metaphor for his thoughts and feelings, than a sign of another or a group.[6] Yet if we view the work as more than its authorship, one can imagine the dominant US political regime of late 2016 interpreting the empathy imparted in *Zyzyx's* pages differently than Halpern accounts for it. Perhaps they could be used as touchstones reflexive of fear and anxiety over addicts in California's border-crossing streets and sanctuary cities, living out in the crumbling public infrastructure, never mind that the regime's differential treatment by way of longstanding structural policy had denied public services or destabilized the systems that exiled the people there in the first place.

When assuming Azoulay's position that a photograph is part of a regime, "one comprehends the limited nature of common categories such as 'compassion', 'pity', 'empathy', 'rage', 'concern', 'empowerment', and 'victimization', which in fact describe only a single axis of relations between the photographer and the photographed while erasing all other relationships that were inscribed in the photograph" (2012: 39). And as Sekula points out, perhaps those following the course set by Evans may "fail to recognize the degree to which they share Evans' social fatalism, his sense of the immutability of the existing social order" (1986: 58). Such *immutability* to me is most prevalent in the prominent photo-bookworks, rewarded for their single authorship, that frequently assume an intimacy with and access to a *place* as the framework of their design. Despite the sensitivity of their image-making approach, it is far less empathetic to categorize anonymous citizens under place names, which is what happens with these bookworks. We can file Halpern's *Zyzyx* under "California," his *Omaha Sketchbook* under "Nebraska"; Soth's *Sleeping by the Mississippi* or *Niagara* under "Mississippi River" and "Niagara Falls"; *Found Photos in Detroit* under "Detroit"; Evans' *American Photographs*, Robert Frank's *The Americans*, Stephen Shore's *American Surfaces,* Zoe Strauss's *America*, Halpern's book *A*, and so many others under "America"; and of course *Rochester 585 716* under "Rochester." This place-based strategy effectively continues the colonialist project of documenting people and land while calling dibs on regions and exploiting them economically. We champion Frank et al. as the photo empaths of their eras, particularly when they identify with the most vulnerable citizens of the times. They did the hard work of empathizing, either in the photographing or

the editing and sequencing of the images, and they are rewarded for it with notoriety, sometimes financially, and with further opportunity and access. Such empathy imparted through photographic practice increases its own cultural value through its documents, and encourages others to hit the road,[7] claim regions and people as their own, and visually maintain those othered by the regime in their relegated places. In this way, to continually justify one's empathy is also to justify and maintain one's privilege.

Empathy and Accountability in Photo Archive-Bookworks

In archival studies, Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor argue that archivists have *affective responsibilities*. "From the approach of a feminist ethics of care, archivists are seen as caregivers, bound to records creators, subjects, users, and communities through a web of mutual affective responsibility" (2016: 24). Though I single out Magnum Photos, without a doubt there are several Magnum photographers who practice affective responsibility in photo archive and bookwork projects. Zoe Strauss's life's work with the *Under I-95* project in Philadelphia and her *Homesteading* project for the 2013 Carnegie International, Pittsburgh share the work with the people and community they record. Carolyn Drake and Olivia Arthur both appear to approach the communities they document from a feminist ethics of care. Susan Meiselas's *Encounters with the Dani* and *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History* historically accounts for the exploitation of the people and places depicted. It is not surprising that Meiselas focused the majority of her time as part of House of Pictures on in-depth work with one factory, Hickey Freeman, a suit manufacturer and tailoring company that employs workers descended from dozens of countries.

The feminist ethics of care approach also describes Joshua Rashaad McFadden's bookworks and growing archive of portraits of Black men. McFadden, himself a Black man who grew up in Rochester with grandparents who worked for Kodak, a mom who gave him a camera at seven, and a dad who, concerned with his education, moved him to the Rochester suburbs for high school, was twenty-two years old and in college at an HBCU when he learned of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin's unconscionable murder. It was February 2012, the same month the planning for House of Pictures was in full swing. McFadden singles out Martin's murder as the catalyst for the project that became his first photo-bookwork, *Come to Selfhood*. "I just could not understand it, that is, until I realized that, with Travyon Martin, it was this idea of the black hoodie, what he was wearing. The fact that he had brown skin and wore a black hoodie made him 'highly intimidating and suspicious' to George Zimmermann," Martin's killer (2016: 4).

> When that happened I began to think about, again, image and perception, and how my peers and I carry ourselves, how we look and what we want to wear. Then it began to hit home as I thought about how me and my family are not exempt from tragedies like this, how there is no immunity for us. I kept thinking, That's me! That's one of my little brothers, that's my older brother.
>
> I also thought about how our fathers have gone through the same situations.
>
> Why are we not able to simply just be? We are not criminals, yet we are treated as such (2016: 4).

One answer to McFadden's heartfelt question may be in the history of photography as a populist medium where, in the nineteenth-century United States, the growing ease and gratification of making and appearing in a photograph was thought to have other potentially useful aims. Sekula notes the portrait photographer Marcus Aurelius Root's arguments for the utilitarian and moral aims of photographs.

> Not only was photography to serve as a means of cultural enlightenment for the working classes, but family photographs sustained sentimental ties in a nation of migrants. This 'primal household affection' served a socially cohesive function, Root argued—articulating nineteenth-century familialism that would survive and become an essential logical feature of American mass culture. Furthermore, widely distributed portraits of the great would subject everyday experience to a parade of moral exemplars. Root's concern for respectability and order led him to applaud the adoption of photography by the police, arguing that convicted offenders would 'not find it easy to resume their criminal careers when their faces and general aspects are familiar to so many, especially to the keen-sighted detective police'
>
> (1986: 8-9).

Sekula identifies the origins of the classification of types and systems of appearances that ultimately signify brown skin and black hoodie as criminal. Using images as targets is a form of Azoulay's notion of archival acceptability; the violence of imperial uses of images empowers Zimmerman to police his neighborhood and commit extrajudicial violence. It is how a jury justifies the killer's legal acquittal for murdering Martin. It is how the RPD union president sees nothing inappropriate in a nine-year old girl's arrest requiring six police cars and ending with the girl being pepper-sprayed. And yet in the sense of Root's moral exemplars, the target of photography also becomes the aim of Frederick Douglass, one of Rochester's historically iconic and admired figures, who purposefully made himself the most photographed man of the nineteenth century in order to

change visual perceptions of Black men, to have them appear in the highest stature. A similar aim is what led McFadden to create another kind of archive, one that makes public visibility of Black men both empathetic and oppositional.

For *Come to Selfhood*, McFadden made formal portraits of Black men, including himself, and paired them across the gutter with a family photo of their father or father figure. Bound in between the two images, printed on soft, laid paper that is smaller in size than the pages, are handwritten answers to one of McFadden's questions of the men:

- How did role-models play a role in your development as a black (man of color) male?
- Describe the ideal figure (person of character) that represents black male masculinity.
- What are some common perceptions of men of color in America? Then, explain how these perceptions had an impact on you.
- How have experiences shaped who you are as an individual?
- How does a man of color, black man, etc. develop a positive identity within a dominant culture that doesn't fully support people of color?
- Who are black men when they aren't victims of oppression?
- Do you identify as a black man, why or why not?
- Describe who is in the photograph (2016: gatefold).

The stillness and strength of each man photographed against a black background, the brightness of their eyes, the differences in their posture and features, the likenesses with their fathers, some of whom are in military uniforms, or lounge on couches, wear graduation gowns, or pose at discos, prompt the viewer's empathetic feeling for each of them individually. Yet you cannot be in their skin or stand in their shoes because you can't comprehend, if you're a white person in the United States, going through everyday life perceiving and feeling what Cameron Goins writes to be common perceptions of men of color in America:

> —we're violent
> —we're ignorant
> —we're criminals
> —we're loud
> —we're aggressive
> —we sell drugs
> —we trap
> These perceptions impact me every day because as a black male I am automatically stereotyped because of my skin as opposed to my character. I am constantly judged due to the media's perception (McFadden 2016: 24–5).

The term stereotype comes from printing: a metal printing plate cast from a mold in another material like plaster or papier-mâché. It's the ubiquity and repetition of what is made from a mold cast that make it nearly impossible to challenge it with empathy. There is no human depth of feeling, vicarious sharing of affect, or swapping of self-knowledge one can muster to match the industrialized, repetitive impact of millions of images.

As a white man reading McFadden's book for the first time, I noted a flash of recognition that the family photo of Cameron's father, Keith Goins, shows him to be young—maybe nineteen years old—around Cameron's age. In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes wrote about recognizing his recently deceased mother in an image of her as a child, calling the recognition "a sentiment as certain as remembrance" (Barthes 1981: 70). Instead of supposing that Cameron Goins selected this specific image of his father because he had such a recognition, what immediately crossed my mind is that Keith Goins died young. He was probably shot and killed, I thought. In place of rationality, sentimentality, or any induction of empathy or sensitivity to the everyday family photos of fathers in *Come to Selfhood*, my image reference-bank of the hundreds if not thousands of family, school, sports, and institutional photos of Black men ranging in age from fifteen to twenty who had been killed or were being sought by police had long primed who I might see pictured in this photo-bookwork. I got caught denying Black interiority, a challenge posed by scholar and educator Michelle S. Hite (2015). My story of these men is not written by McFadden or those in his archive. A regime-based disaster narrative about them was inscribed in me long ago. As a white reader, *Come to Selfhood* is necessarily confrontational with my individual racism assumed by years of living in a differential system. For Lyle Ashton Harris, a Black artist from the generation before McFadden, it is "a resistant gesture, a dismantling of an embedded history and narrative of Black Masculinity which writes Black men as without fathers, without history, without softness. Simultaneously, it is a constructive act: a building of a visual history and archive of Black intimacy" (McFadden 2016: 7).

It helps that McFadden, his father, grandfather, and brothers are included in his archive. As he does with all of those he has photographed, he uses their names, and collects their handwritten reflections on perception and emotion. McFadden's is an inside-out project, which is perhaps the opposite of how we are often publicly called to more empathy, from the outside-in—to step from the outside into another person's shoes or skin. The outside-in approach maintains in- and outgroup distinctions whereas the inside-out method assumes a form of internal wholeness being revealed. In exhibitions McFadden requests that viewers reflect upon Blackness and masculinity in writing, making his viewing community, the users of his archive, accountable and binding them to him and those he photographs. In many of the notes I've seen and read, gallery viewers write supportive comments to the men in the

portraits themselves, sharing their perceptions, lifting them up. Others write themselves into the archive, sharing their own perceptions and experiences living as Black men and women.

Like many, McFadden felt the affective reverberations of George Floyd's murder by police but like a documentary photographer, he got in his car and drove to Minneapolis to be there first hand and record the aftermath. He also went to Louisville, documenting protests of Breonna Taylor's killing by police, and to Atlanta, following the fatal police shooting of Rayshard Brooks, and to protests in Washington DC, New York City, and back to the protests following the public release of Daniel Prude's arrest in his hometown of Rochester, where a year prior he had returned to live and teach. He sent the images out to the rest of us via Instagram, the *New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, CNN, and other media outlets. But the pictures don't seem disconnected from his art and photo archive-bookwork practice. There is a sense of caregiving in the work, that he feels responsibility toward those he photographs. He speaks of building "an archive that will articulate the many identities of Black people" (McFadden 2021), for instance the recent inclusion of some portraits of Black men who are also police officers. These images feel participatory, like a world with the potential to be shared.

For his effort, McFadden is earning work from editors and attention from followers. Curators and publishers are taking notice. VSW exhibited his work and helped him publish a newspaper called *Evidence* that references Frederick Douglass's *North Star* and *Frederick Douglass Paper*, nineteenth-century newspapers published out of Rochester (McFadden 2020). McFadden gives thousands of the *Evidence* papers, documenting the named men and their comments in his archive, away to anyone and everyone for free. On the newspaper and bonded to their plastic sidewalk distribution boxes is the Nina Simone lyric, "I wish I knew how it would feel to be FREE."

McFadden's *Evidence* was recently included in a group exhibition with the highly recognized photography publisher Aperture in New York City; at the same time he had prints in a group show on the theme of gathering clouds at George Eastman Museum. The museum has him slated for an early retrospective solo show in 2021. He has and will continue to earn numerous justly deserved rewards and recognition for his hard work of empathizing with people, places, events, and the times. What is worth questioning, however, is whether those currently supporting him, including my own personal and institutional efforts, are once again reifying empathetic documents? Are we using Joshua Rashaad's life's work to maintain some cultural and visibility market share, at a time when audiences appear more openly interested in confronting the US Black experience? Or will we be accountable to share in the caretaking of his life's work? If so, for how long?

In summary I'll end with a final Rochester image. Each year, after five or six straight months of winter and over a hundred inches of snow that

brightens an atmosphere of starkly gray skies, there is the mud season. Revealed when the snow melts are thousands of images—fragments of junk mail, free advertisements, cigarette packs, candy wrappers, dropped scratch-offs and NY State Powerball printouts—formerly obscured and stuck in the mud like paper fossils, flattened and soggy, inks faded or bleeding into one another. In the aftermath that is 2021 the mud season may indeed reveal more "Black Lives Matter" or "Justice for Daniel Prude" related papers scattered around town than the usual post-snow litter. Because we now find ourselves in a kind of mud season of the soul where, after the layers of white wash melt away, images of the wrongly discarded reveal themselves and require taking up. Our Image City moniker may come from the town's celebrated, picture-making past but the moving images of differential treatment toward such regime cast-offs as Daniel Prude and a nine-year-old Black girl in crisis more prominently reveal such experiences to also be identifiable with Rochester. House of Pictures and others have tried to get us feeling with the disenfranchised in our city but because of the reification of empathy, what the project did was have us look at it and its makers. In so doing the photographers get romanticized as empaths, they and their patrons benefit from the affective misplacement that visualizes a perpetual and inescapable victimhood for its subjects, and the surface image of the city as *the* place of and for photography gets further burnished. Whereas Joshua Rashaad McFadden's work shows a photographic practice capable of avoiding empathetic reification. Its subjects and viewers share in the creation and caretaking of their own visualization while simultaneously contending with a hegemonic image of Black men that attempts to predefine them. McFadden's practice stirs the question of how a more broadly shared visualization of the city might appear.

Notes

1 I wish to acknowledge the ideas and resources shared with me by artist and colleague Hernease Davis that greatly informed my thinking about empathy as a subject of and produced by photography.

2 I know the purchase price from working closely with the producer on the project, Rick McKee Hock, who was a VSW staff colleague at the time. https://www.eastman.org/eastman-house-acquire-important-photographs-rochester-10-magnum-photographers (accessed April 21, 2021).

3 https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/eaa/kodak/K02/K0255-150dpi.html (accessed April 21, 2021).

4 Kodak was once called the Great Yellow Father for its paternalistic hiring practices, or alternatively Daddy Kodak, https://www.nytimes.com/1997/11/16/nyregion/deferring-great-yellow-father-kodak-workers -say-layoffs-may-be-necessary.html

5 This is attributable to Dan Larkin or Keith Johnson, both friends and photographers in and out of Rochester. I can't remember who I first heard it from.

6 This public conversation took place at a book launch event on November 4, 2016 at VSW.

7 Thanks to artist and educator Rachel-Fein Smolinski, who in a conversation with me questioned the teaching of Robert Frank's *The Americans* because it made so many of her young, white, male students desire to make work in a similar style.

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