

# WE THE PEOPLE: Portraits of Resistance and America Reconstructed

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A photographic/storytelling project that is still in the midst of itself with an ending that is yet to be known.

I would, therefore, like to come before you and speak of myself.

—Lillian Hellman, from a letter to the  
House Un-American Activities Committee,  
May 19, 1952

We are in the throes of dark and broken times. The urge to either retreat into solitude and despair or to find distractions to numb the pain is intense. Both in and out of the consulting room, violence, turbulence, fear, rage, political disillusionment, and grief in reaction to this dark period in our nation's history arise beyond the ability to contain them. We have been here before. I find myself shutting down and without the capacity to think.

The management of violence is a shared task. Hanna Segal (1987/1997) asserted that psychoanalysts who believe in the therapeutic power of speech must not be silent in the face of human suffering. But words for me have felt empty and dead. Toni Morrison (2005) reminds us that these are the times when artists go to work. As I have done before during times of professional, sociopolitical, and personal crisis, I have turned to my art practice to occupy my own absence and to give form to my experiences (see Bassin, 2017). In doing so, I join other artists and activists resisting helplessness and dissociation. While artists are used to working in solitude, we instinctually know that we live and thrive in the shelter of others. We face the darkness in the company of others and grieve with them. Through my work with veterans who seek to transcend the community of silence and lack of recognition for war trauma, I have come to appreciate the need for civic public mourning, some kind of national response to the profound grief we carry as victims and perpetrators of violence.

## THE PROJECT

Every Friday since the election of President Trump, I have invited others to join me in my photographic studio to collaborate in the creation of their own unique portraits of resistance to the daily onslaught of obliteration and silencing. And in my consulting office, I remain a relatively quiet, witnessing presence, creating room for unspoken stories and identities to find a compassionate home for emotional truths to be recognized.

As a psychoanalytic practitioner, attention to the esthetics of affect regulation is well within my experience. And as a photographer, I challenge myself to evoke and represent the visual testimonies of those who agree to stand between the black velvet background and the camera. I do so in the hope of not adding to or diminishing whatever injury or suffering those telling their stories may endure. I attempt to bring the safety and compassion of the consulting office into my studio.

What follows here is a description of the procedure I have used and continue to use. I ask each of my portrait partners to illuminate and animate their experience of themselves, in response to the current sociopolitical environment, through posture, gesture, gaze, costumes, props, lighting, and occasional cultural references. As they position themselves between the camera and the black velvet background, we discuss the impact of historical traditions of racism, sexism, ageism, xenophobia, nativism, and/or homophobia on their subjectivity.

We work for a few hours until their emotional truths are exposed, externalized, communicated, and captured in an image. During the session, I share the photos as we create them on the camera's digital screen, setting up opportunities to reflect on what has been portrayed, and allowing breaks for my portrait partners to reframe themselves. Similar to a psychoanalytic engagement when the therapeutic dyad recognizes the presence of something emotionally powerful and attempts to give it form, these photographic sessions, for many of the sitters, captured moments of emergent selves not processed through the fantasies and fears of others.

Creating these portraits is a relational activity—not imposed or taken, but freely given and illuminated. As Teju Cole (2018) observes, "A photographic portrait records a human encounter. The

photographer's intent and the sitter's agreement, and vice versa are made visible." I try not to impose anything, but to support their vision and esthetically render their experiences through photographic craft, such as changes in lighting and composition.

Just as psychoanalytic work is structured through a variety of "techniques," photographic approaches arise from the craft of enlisting light and framing. During a photographic session, I respond to the visual stories that my co-creators express through the development of specific esthetic strategies to support the task. Yet while self-possession of the portrait by the sitter was and is my goal, the photos are also shaped by the art of photography to support their vision. I move in and out, to and from my sitters *while* composing a tight frame to create a close-up that might draw the viewer in. I provide an array of props in addition to asking the participants to bring meaningful objects of their own. Included in the accessories are a variety of American flags and conventional symbols of patriotic America—an oppressive body politic whose designs incorporate stitched restrictions cut out of red, white, and blue fabric. The flags, in combination with the *minimalist*, nonreflective, light-absorbing black velvet background, created a standard frame for all the portraits. And while I wanted to illuminate the unique iteration of each sitter's experience, I knew I wanted to pull them together in communion and community. I selected chiaroscuro lighting, reminiscent of Rembrandt, to reflect the movement from disappearance and appearance of subjectivity or from appearance to disappearance. The light caught the sitters, creating a diffuse—even ambiguous—indistinctness, providing a certain timelessness to the final portraits. Many of the portraits in this project were photographed with only a part of the face visible. That fragment, that which is visible, is thus just the starting point for the engaged, imaginative viewing partners to explore a multiplicity of responses and contribute their experiences. The "incomplete image" invites the audience to enter into the portrait and, hopefully, find something of themselves in it.

The final photos emerged from an interactive editing process whereby my co-creator and I mutually decided upon those images that are alive, have a strong enough presence to command attention, resonate, and speak not only to the individual's subjectivity, but to the social climate as well. Each sitter is tasked during the

session to apprehend and appreciate aspects of him- or herself in the images that might have been without verbal language.

## THE ROLE OF PORTRAITS IN TIMES OF CRISIS

A portrait! What could be more simple and more complex,  
more obvious and more profound.

—Charles Baudelaire

A portrait is an open door. It can remind us of our ethical duty to the other. “The face speaks to me, and thereby invites me to a relation,” as the philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas puts it.

—Teju Cole, “There’s Less to  
Portraits Than Meets the Eye,  
and More”

Each image is just one of many taken during the portrait-making/storytelling session: Each is one of many successive approximations to finding resonance and recognition. Emergent forms are captured and repossessed as they are “recognized” by the art maker as a generative illusion of fitting with an object. This fitting, according to Christopher Bollas, is an aesthetic moment and a form of witness (Bassin, 2017).

Each photograph is as distinct and individual as each sitter who takes ownership of his or her portraits—confrontational, dramatic, heroic, mournful, and defiant—the emergence of self not processed through frames of the fears of others.



**Here I Am: Portraits of Resistance.Ausar.1**

**“I will study what is difficult until it becomes simple. I will discipline my  
focus for the upliftment of my people.”**

**Ausar Olugbala**

**Photo by Donna Bassin. 2018.**





Here I Am: Portraits of Resistance.

Deion.10

“Hi, I’m Dee. I’m a young, black queer teen who loves happiness, love, and music.

And when I see this photo I see what some of America doesn’t see, and that is what I call Black Joy. But then, America today begs to differ. What I want America to see is that love is the key, and it makes the world go ‘round... You just have to open her eyes.”

Deion Session

Photo by Donna Bassin. 2018.



Here I Am: Portraits of Resistance.

Dominic.6

“What I feel is the expression of where we are in the moment we are currently experiencing. Suicide rates are higher than the rates during the Great Depression, Fentanyl overdoses have left 72,000 dead, and we have just inflicted PTSD with a generation of immigrant children whom were caged over the summer. In my portrait I was the hurt and pain that my clients, my family, and friends have experienced. What I felt in that moment was the anguish of the parents who are not able to sing lullabies to their kids. What I hope is that we can use art like yours to start difficult conversations in order to begin to heal.”

Dominic Canova

Photo by Donna Bassin. 2018.





**Here I Am: Portraits of Resistance.Dulce.10**

**“The resulting images remind me of how a lot of young girls and boys go through the same identity crisis growing up. I’m not seen as an American because of my skin tone and I’m not a Mexican in my family’s homeland because I was not born there. I’m proud to be Mexican American, I however long for the day everyone realizes there’s only one race with many beliefs.” Dulce Avila Romero**

**Photo by Donna Bassin. 2018.**





**Here I Am: Portraits of Resistance.Millie.13**  
**"My father came to NY in 1950. My mother in '51. They were assimilators. I lost my culture. My kids lost a language. We've disappeared."**  
**Millie Harris**  
**Photo by Donna Bassin. 2018.**



**Here I Am:  
Portraits of  
Resistance.  
Sufiyah.3  
Photo by Donna Bassin. 2018.**





**Here I Am: Portraits of Resistance.Sufiyyah.7**

**“Living in America has been a bittersweet experience for me. I hate the lack of opportunities and the lack of freedom here in the U.S. Being a black American Muslim I have experienced many unfair and unjust things—being denied jobs because of my race and religion and being profiled by the police. Every day I fight that struggle, constantly trying to prove to the world and society that I am not the ‘stereotype.’ Although it is a trying battle I refuse to give up the fight. My ancestors before me didn’t and neither will I.” Sufiyyah S. Abdul-Baasit**

**Photo by Donna Bassin. 2018.**

## AMERICA RECONSTRUCTED: IMAGINARY CONVERSATIONS

In the midst of what is, art breaks open an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual.

—Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art”

The following series of images are fictional scenes digitally constructed from two separate portraits that seem to cry out in content and emotional pull for an imagined relationship between two subjects. The black velvet background and dramatic lighting of each original portrait create a similar esthetic that enabled me to dissolve the edges of the portraits and seamlessly juxtapose the two. In the interstices of two images digitally united by formal compositional elements there emerges a third, simultaneously connected to its origin but creating a new imagined field of possibilities.

In this fictive new space, the narratives of portraiture are expanded, allowing for complex, unexpected conversations and ambiguous commentaries. These new images are about me as I explored the impact this project has had on me. I created a dialogue with myself, risking frightening awareness of my own unconscious fantasies and inviting self-awareness of the motivations of my project. What do you see? What are the narratives that my compositional associations engender?

As I continue to work on this project, I am aware that I attempt to recognize and make reparation for my own white blindness, following Jessica Benjamin’s (2017) understanding of Moral Law. I know that, historically, before the use of the digital camera, photographers relied on white skin as the standard for film exposure and often struggled to properly expose the diversity of skin tones. My project requires that I engage with others to find a way to create portraits of the diversity that is America. I had to reflect on my interracial relationships and expand my ability to honor the trust that my partners gave me to render them as they wish and not through the lens of white privilege. How do I help others come to their own witnessing without wielding the power that the one with the camera traditionally has, especially as a white photographer?

In viewing these portraits, we face ourselves and our collective tragic past and try to bring into focus those who have remained





Photo by Donna Bassin. 2018.



Photo by Donna Bassin. 2018.



Photo by Donna Bassin. 2018.

outside the dominant frame of white culture and accord to them, as Judith Butler (2009) suggests, the worthiness of a grievable life that matters. I question how this project may contribute to Butler's press to expand our compassion towards the precariousness of others who exist outside of our recognition—or, in other words, to engage with the emotional life of those who aren't considered as having lives that matter.

My work will be meaningful only if I can engage others to look at the losses and suffering registered in the faces of those who participated in this project. I hope that others might see new accounts of history, fierce opposition to being rendered unnoticed and/or obscured by racism/sexism, and promises for the future in these portraits. Yet, the portraits themselves are only the starting point. They are essentially an evocative experience through which the viewer might willingly, empathically, and imaginatively pay attention to the emotional states and the internal world of the sitter. Through this experience, the viewer can take in the life of the other. While photographs appear static—some might say dead—they are alive if they touch and move the viewer into viscer-

al experiences. A photograph “is a function, an experience, not a thing,” said the mystic photographer Minor White (1963, p. 17)

## PHOTOGRAPHIC STUDIO AND PSYCHOANALYTIC CONSULTING ROOM

For many years I have divided my working life between my photography studio and my psychoanalytic consulting room. Photography and psychoanalysis came into their own in the early twentieth century, emerging from and contributing to the development of modernity. As part of their task, both practices sought to make visible that which was not previously seen and illuminating something other than what is usually or manifestly comprehended. Both methods aimed to capture and transform the ineffable into something that can be looked at, worked on, worked over, and perhaps even discarded in the service of making space for new growth. Each involved coming to know the world we live in and ourselves, by the marks we make on the material world and each other.

Crucial to our ongoing work as psychoanalysts, according to Pizer (2008), is the use and growth of what she calls the *nonanalytic third*. This is the analyst’s unique and personal relationship to a body of experience unrelated to our clinical work that serves as a source of enhancement and even an expansion of metaphors used in conversations with our patients. And while the procedures of exposure and illumination in photographic craft and psychoanalysis are different, attention to similar elements between them as well as an application of strategies and methods from each have mutually informed and enriched my practice in both the studio and the consulting room.

Art making, as the well-known South African artist William Kentridge (Maltz-Leca, 2013) has described, is a form of slow thinking, which, over time, constructs meaning. In the interaction between implicit domain, bodily gestures, and art media, an unrepresented memory may become visible. In this process of forming, erasing, and modifying, new forms are captured and repossessed as they are “recognized” by the art maker as an equivalent of an unthought-of thought now seen and eventually known. We know and honor visual thinking in our dreams, and we experience subjectivity as we experience the objects of our culture.

Photography in particular, if practiced with the attitude of the artist, captures the self in the act of attention and awareness. Photography is about the practice of observation. Its nature demands that the viewer is continually intrigued and surprised by new imagery and different interpretations, perhaps more so than in any other art form. Photography requires an orientation that is characterized by curiosity, openness, and looking at experiences as if for the first time. Buddhists call this state the Beginner's Mind, which photographer Minor White (1960) suggests is the optimal state of mind for a photographer. This state, similar to Bion's "listening without memory or desire" (1967/1988), is an active state of receptivity in which one may grasp an image without a pre-formed idea. Similarly, the receptive psychoanalyst must also resist pre-formed narratives in order to listen, Zen-like, as Mitchell (2000) suggests, with an "absence of conscious intentionality." My practice of fresh photographic vision supports my listening with free-floating attention in my clinical work.

It is the attitude, and not necessarily the technique of the photography, that has been useful for my clinical work. The photographer Uta Barth calls the viewer's attention to the act of looking, or the perceptual process of looking at something rather than capturing a particular object (Mirlesse, 2012). Talented portrait photographers must receive their subjects profoundly and respect them, and with the tools available present images to the sitter that provide a deep resonance. They must put themselves into a state of active stillness and open themselves to a place of interpersonal spaciousness to know their subject better. Photography has been, for me, a practice, like yoga or meditation, that hopefully prepares me for those moments where I am struggling the most with the task of listening with compassion.

## AFTERTHOUGHTS

As bell hooks (2000) suggested, when we witness testimonies, we are ethically obliged to imagine the violence they attempt to represent and empathically occupy the worlds we have not experienced but must come to understand and tenderly respond to. Collectively as a society, we need to take in, tolerate, and stay with these testimonies of violence. This dialogue, between those who tell us their stories and those who can deeply listen, hold possibili-



ties, as Solnit (2014) suggests, for the suffering and grief of the faraway to become near. While the grief of others unsettles us, it enables us to experience our own vulnerability, providing an opportunity for us to move from mere bystanders to witnesses who engage with moral activity.

I have come to understand that one never fully heals from trauma. Instead, one mourns and in doing so surrenders to the changes that loss brings. Mourning is not an event, but rather a process in which an individual's life, forever changed by the experience of traumatic loss and ruptures of the bonds of attachment, is held as an ongoing practice.

The Japanese art of kintsugi is a method for repairing broken ceramics with a special lacquer mixed with gold, silver, or platinum. The spiritual practice behind this technique is to recognize and accept the history of this injured object. No attempts are made to hide or disguise what has been damaged but rather to visibly incorporate the repair into the piece. For many of us profoundly impacted by the state of democracy in America, perhaps the acknowledgment that these wounds can never fully be healed will allow for our brokenness to be a part of our wholeness.

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