



# Eight Lessons from The Photo Ethics Podcast

## Global Ethics Day 2024

Each year since 2020, the Photography Ethics Centre has interviewed 12 photographers, asking them: “What does photography ethics mean to you?” After four years and 48 interviews, we have distilled eight key lessons that we have learned about what it means to be an ethical photographer. These lessons – ranging from the language we use to the intentions we have – can help photographers, filmmakers, and visual storytellers to reflect on their process, develop their practice, and help to build a more equitable industry.



**photography**  
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# **Eight Lessons from The Photo Ethics Podcast**

## **Summary**

- 01** Visual storytelling is a collaboration.
- 02** A photographer's positionality shapes the stories they tell.
- 03** The language we use matters.
- 04** Consent is a dialogue that takes time.
- 05** Transparency is key for building trust.
- 06** Photography is powerful.
- 07** Good intentions are important, but they are not always enough.
- 08** Photography ethics change.

## 01 Visual storytelling is a collaboration.

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**At the end of the day, you have to work with someone in order to be able to tell a story.**

**- Sarah Waiswa**

Collaboration can take many different forms. Examples include:

- Working with participants to come up with the idea for a story or portrait together. In their work on queer communities, Salgu Wissmath explains that this kind of collaboration is important to mitigate participants' experience of body dysphoria.
- Giving participants a say in how they are seen – or how much of them are seen. Rehab Eldalil does this by inviting participants to intervene in the image through embroidery.
- Incorporating participants' contributions. Justin Carey invites people to contribute in whatever way feels most appropriate for them, with some participants sharing songs, written reflections, or other personal contributions.
- Integrating opportunities for feedback. Jason Houston holds “listening sessions” to share his photographs with community members and listen to their reflections.
- Co-authoring images. Morwenna Kearsley passes her camera around so that many people are involved in making a set of images, and Anthony Luvera facilitates “assisted self-portraiture.”

As Justin Carey explains, collaboration is a kind of “insurance policy” against the reproduction of stereotypes. By inviting the views of other people, photographers are less likely to reproduce their own assumptions about a community, place, or person in the resulting images.

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**I think that one of the ways to work towards being ethical is to be inclusive and collaborative, because then you are automatically encouraging or inviting the views of other people. If you are actively seeking to collaborate, it's less likely to be just your idea, your view, your perspective.**

**- Justin Carey**



Documentation of the making of “Assisted Self-Portrait of Sahai Dejonge” from “Construct” (2018–2022) by Anthony Luvera.

## 02 A photographer's positionality shapes the stories they tell.

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None of us are objective. We all see the world through our own lens. Tara Pixley explains that it is important to understand “what we, as individuals, bring to our media production.”



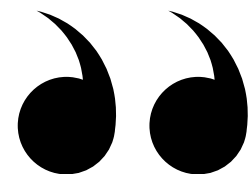
**In your career as a photographer ... you're going to tell hundreds of stories, but the first story you have to tell to yourself is the one about you.**

**- Tara Pixley**

Practicing reflexivity is an important part of this process. This means asking questions like: What assumptions do I carry? Why biases do I have? As Nilupa Yasmin says, “You need to be conscious of your unconscious bias.”

This also means asking questions like: Who am I in relation to the story I want to tell? Am I the right person to tell this story? From photographing in Rwanda, Chrystal Ding learned that “it's possible to do all your due diligence and yet maybe still be the wrong person to do the work.”

**Traditionally documentary photography has been concerned with photographing disadvantaged, underprivileged, exploited communities around the world, often non-white communities by white photographers.**



**- Justin Carey**

Since the advent of photography, our visual landscape has been dominated by images made by white men. Since a photographer's positionality shapes the stories they tell, this means that visual stories have been predominantly told from a white male perspective. Tara Pixley explains that this perspective isn't wrong, "it just isn't complete, it isn't diverse, it is not encompassing the whole of human experience, and it shows."

For a more complete visual representation of our world, we need diversity at all levels of the image-making process – this includes photographers, photo editors, curators, contest jurors, and board members. When making decisions, for example choosing a winning image or hiring a photographer, Justin Carey says that you need to look around the room: "If everyone in the room is the same as you, there's a big problem there."



From the series "Reaching Out into the Dark." By Justin Carey. 2019.



### 03 The language we use matters.

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This includes both verbal language and visual language.

Verbal language used to describe photography and photographic processes are often steeped in violence and colonialism. Words like “shoot,” “capture,” and “aim” parallel the language used to describe hunting. Ideas of the photographer as a “hero” who “does justice” to a “subject” and is a “voice for the voiceless” are increasingly challenged as paternalistic and othering. As Rehab Eldalil says, “It was a lot harder to call someone that I know very personally a ‘subject’.”

Photographic visual language has also been heavily influenced by colonialism, especially when it comes to the representation of the Global South, low and middle income countries, and people of color.



**Photography and colonialism sort of ran hand-in-hand. Their inventions came about at about the same time, and have really suited one another.**

**- Pete Brook**

To avoid replicating colonialist visual language, look at how a community has been represented historically and how it is most often represented today. What are the visual tropes that exist, and how can we challenge them through our photographs?

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**There's a lot to unpack and a lot to think about in terms of these ... visual regimes that keep repeating themselves and we ingest them, but it's because we are used to seeing them. ... I think we need to open up and think about how certain places are being represented, and if we feel like we can add to that, then that's what we should do.**

**- Tamara Abdul Hadi**

Nadia. Embroidered photograph of Nadia by her cousin Mariam. St. Catherine, Egypt, 2019. By Rehab Eldalil.





## 04 Consent is a dialogue that takes time.

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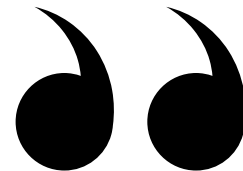


**Ultimately it's about a conversation, a really, really in-depth, honest conversation, and it's about allowing yourself the time to have that conversation.**

**- Jess Crombie**

In order to give their consent, participants need to be informed about why they are being photographed, where the photographs will be seen, and any possible risks and ramifications of participating.

**I think the key to any story that photographers work on is to be transparent with the people you are approaching. Just share with them your intentions, show them what you're working on, why you're doing it, where it's going to be published.**



**- Laura Boushnak**

Approaching consent as a conversation creates space for participants to voice their concerns, ask questions, or state their preferences. As Smita Sharma explains, "different people have different priorities ... different reservations."

This is not a conversation that takes place just once. Instead, it is an ongoing conversation with participants, which ideally continues throughout the process of project design, execution, and exhibition. Anthony Luvera explains that participants may change their mind and “withdraw that consent.” Daniel Regan adds that one of the benefits of doing longer-term projects is that they “give participants space to think and rethink about how they take part.” Additionally, the work may change over time and we may need to follow up with participants if there are any new or unplanned uses. As Chrystal Ding explains, “Over communication has never done anyone any harm, but under communication definitely does.”

Informed consent conversations can be supported by different tools. For example:

- Consent forms. Martha Tadesse designed her own consent form, written in a language that participants can understand. Danielle Villasana’s consent form includes an addendum section where people can include information about their preferences for how their images are used. Tara Todras-Whitehill’s consent form has a section which makes clear the participant’s option to retract consent.
- Project websites. Michèle Pearson Clarke creates a website for each project she begins, so that prospective participants can find information about participating in the project online and in one place. Justin Carey created a website to publish one of his projects. He gave participants access to it before it went live so that they could see how their images were being used and flag any concerns.
- A smartphone. When working in places where people have limited digital access, it can be difficult to gain informed consent to use a person’s image online. Smita Sharma uses her smartphone to show people how their images will be accessed and seen online. Sharing examples of all the ways that a person’s image may be used – i.e. screenshots of Instagram, photographs of billboards, or copies of a magazine – can illustrate the consent conversation and help to increase a participant’s understanding about what they are consenting to.

## 05 Transparency is key for building trust.

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When a person agrees to be photographed, they are putting their trust in the photographer. Trust is important in the photographic process, because being photographed can be an experience in vulnerability – especially if a person is sharing a very personal story. Therefore, one way to build trust with the people we photograph is by demonstrating vulnerability ourselves.



**Trust is established not when the picture's being taken, but in between the moments that the picture is being taken ... Sometimes it takes putting the camera down, looking someone in the eye, and telling them something really personal. That's a part of being human. That's a part of letting someone know you're right there with them, and you feel what they feel. And you, too, know what pain feels like, or you, too, know what it means to be vulnerable.**

**- Mallika Vora**

For example, when Justin Carey was working on a project about loneliness, he felt “uneasy” when people revealed the struggles that they were having, while he stayed silent about his own. He realized that he had to exhibit vulnerability himself, if he was asking others to be vulnerable.



**I was actually just getting people to give me all their revelations without giving anything back. ... I wasn't being as open and honest myself with my own input into the work as I was hoping to elicit from other people. So that had to change. ... Before I got other people to show me theirs, I had to show them mine.**

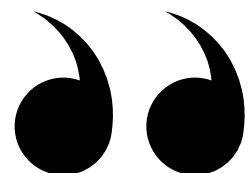
**- Justin Carey**

We can build trust with our audience by being transparent about our relationships with the people we photograph and our intentions behind telling a certain story.

For example, Mallika Vora photographs feminist protests because she is also a feminist and supports the protestors. Mallika is aware that she is telling the story of the protests from her own perspective. Rather than presenting her photographs as an objective representation, she believes it is important for her audience to understand her positionality in order to interpret her images. She explains: "when you have to create this other layer of secrecy or obfuscation in the name of objectivity, then it's dishonest."

Transparency with the audience is not always easy to achieve in editorial or documentary photography, because many publications still hold on to the ideal of journalistic objectivity.

**If you're selling a product ... I'm not pretending I'm doing anything but selling something and there's something really transparent about that. Whereas the transparency in editorial and photojournalism is so dicey.**



**- Annie Tritt**

## 06 Photography is powerful.

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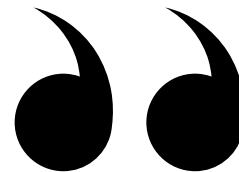


**The one thing about photography is that it's universal. You might not speak the same language as someone, you might not understand whatever text is written ... but you can see an image. And that right there has the power to translate so much more.**

**- Brent Lewis**

Photographs are powerful tools for communication. Therefore, photographers hold a lot of power by determining how someone or something is represented through imagery.

**We have a lot of power when we're holding a camera, especially in communities that we don't belong to, and we will all benefit by taking some time and just being a little bit more thoughtful about those power dynamics.**



**- Amanda Mustard**

This representational power contributes to a power imbalance between the photographer and the people they photograph. Aware of this power imbalance, many photographers are developing strategies to work to mitigate it. Some work to share their representational power through collaboration.

Others use their representational power to subvert expectations. As a commercial photographer, Waleed Shah works to challenge stereotypes. For example, when photographing a sports car, he put a woman in the driver's seat and a man in the passenger's seat. As a documentary photographer, Mallika Vora works to complicate the visual narrative. She explains: "I want to kind of break past any assumptions that a person looking at the photograph might have about the person in the photograph."



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**There is a lot of liberation in letting go of your power position as someone with a camera, and giving people space to express themselves, and having a say in how they would like to be photographed, or even changing the photograph afterwards.**

**- Rehab Eldalil**

Assisted Self-Portrait of Ben Rodda from Construct (2018-2022) by Anthony Luvera.



**07 Good intentions are important, but they are not always enough.**

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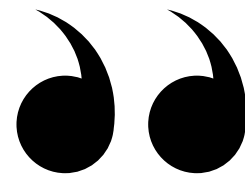
**I think looking at the objective and your own reasons for documenting a subject is really, really important. What we see, quite often, is middle class photographers making a story about working class people, not really to raise awareness of an issue, but really for themselves, and for their own ego, and to elevate their status within photography.**

**- Kirsty Mackay**

Understanding your motivations for telling a certain story is an important kind of self-reflection. This means asking questions like: Why do I want to make this photograph? What do I hope to achieve? Am I hoping to win an award? Am I hoping to effect change?

Yet even the best of intentions can fall foul of ethics. As Arpita Shah says, “Good intentions are not good ethics.” Without knowledge and understanding of the wider context, our photographs may inadvertently do more harm than good. Therefore, it is important to support good intentions with good knowledge.

**When a person knows about the roots of their work ... they have a better understanding of the kind of work they are going to produce and what impact the work could make when it is out in front of the world.**



**- Taha Ahmad**

Research can be an incredibly valuable way of developing our knowledge. This can include a wide range of activities, like reading about the subject, looking at photographs, exploring archives, and talking with people. It can also include building relationships with relevant organizations, activists, or academics who can collaborate or advise on the project.

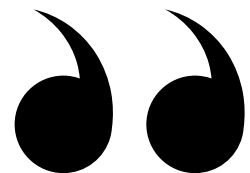


**One thing that I’ve tried to do is to find my value as being someone who is a decent enough photographer, but more importantly understands the subject matter and the issues in a way that allows me to really contribute to the conversation.**

**- Jason Houston**

While some photographers describe how the camera has helped them to overcome shyness, to approach people, and to make connections with others, others point out that the camera can act as a barrier between the photographer and the person being photographed. For example, Fati Abubakar explains that people may “feel like they can’t talk to you like they were talking to you before you picked up the camera.” Therefore, it may be most productive to spend time developing knowledge of a place or community, without a camera in hand.

**A lot of people go in with the camera first. I think that, for me, is a problem. Sometimes you have to spend a lot of time without the camera to understand people, to understand societies.**



**- Fati Abubakar**

## 08 Photography ethics change.

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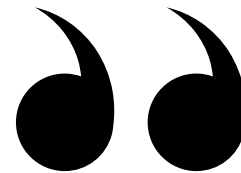


**Photography is a medium that is constantly changing technologically ... as it evolves, our ideas of photographic ethics change as well.**

**- Morwenna Kearsley**

In addition to technological changes, there are social and political changes that shape how we think about ethics.

**We are limited by our knowledge now. As our society progresses and moves, we'll constantly have new knowledge and new understanding and things will evolve and be better. And we really need to be able to move with that and constantly keep evolving.**



**- Hannah Fletcher**

This may mean that past practice does not match up with the current ethical standards of today. This may also mean that current practice today may not be considered ethical in 10 or 20 years time. Therefore, it is important not only to continue to learn about ethics, but to continue to be open to learning – as well as unlearning.

The way that we responded to ethical decisions in the past is not necessarily the same way that we would choose to respond to them today. The key is to be able to reflect on our decisions and to use our experience to inform our practice going forward. This ability to engage in self-reflection is a cornerstone of photography ethics, which enables us to grow and evolve over time.



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**I feel like the photography industry transforms so many times. One moment something is ethical, the next thing it's not. So that's why it's so important to be updating yourself and researching. ... Because ethics is changing, you will make mistakes, and there will be things you need to unlearn. And I think you need to position yourself in a way where you're open to unlearning.**

**- Anne Nwakalor**



Three women embrace as they contemplate the body of a man they discovered after identifying and digging up a burial pit last year. Sinaloa, Mexico, November 2019. Photograph by Mallika Vora for The New Yorker.



This resource was developed through a thematic analysis of 48 episodes of The Photo Ethics Podcast, Seasons 1-4. This research was led by Dr Savannah Dodd, founder and director of the Photography Ethics Centre, during her Practitioner's Appointment within the Centre for Creative Ethnography at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) in 2024. It was supported by the Photography Ethics Centre's advisory team and by Luke Strong. It was funded by the QUB Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Impact Acceleration Account (IAA).

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