AN OPEN LETTER TO CAMERA & PHOTOGRAPHY COMPANIES, including but not limited to:
Canon
Nikon
Olympus
Photoshelter
RICOH
Sony

Dec. 15, 2018

Recently, Sony announced its winners of the inaugural Alpha Female Creator-in-Residence Program, which is a program whose premise is to improve access to the media industry for women storytellers. While there was some effort at diversity among the five awarded photographers, the results failed to consider key aspects of what is destructive in photography today. Several images by the awarded photographers indicate Sony and its contest judges lack insight and the necessary perspective to recognize problematic imagery. For example, one of the awarded portfolios included a prominently featured wedding photo that uses an apparent wildfire as a backdrop for a bride and groom. This was an egregiously tone deaf choice as wildfires destroyed thousands of California homes and lives in the same week as Sony’s announcement. Another portfolio featured images of black and brown people from impoverished nations that exoticized those individuals and communities, rather than telling complex and compelling stories from their perspective.

Disappointed by this announcement, we researched the current state of mentorship and grant programs funded and produced by other camera companies. We found the representation of people of color and women behind the camera to be abysmal, despite decades of calls to make photography more equitable and inclusive. Most concerning, the images themselves lean heavily on stereotype and, as such, are lacking in nuance as photographers continue to regurgitate one-sided understandings of issues, people, and places.

For example:
- Photoshelter recently proudly tweeted its support of a white male photographer’s book project that entirely focuses on a North Kenyan tribe, claiming to capture hundreds of “personalities” in portraits that merely recycle the Western standard of black bodies staring directly into the lens while adorned with headdresses, scarification, and other “exotic” accoutrement.
- RICOH’s Ambassadors are three white men and, of those, the work highlighted is often from communities of color depicted through the white gaze.
- Canon’s current “Explorers of Light” cohort lacks inclusive representation, and among the work of its lauded photographers are images that depict Tanzanian children in the classic colonial photojournalistic mold: exoticized and impoverished black bodies.
- Nikon’s Ambassadors and Olympus’ Visionaries follow a similar trajectory of primarily white photographers often creating images of people of color through an imperialistic lens that renders these humans as stereotypically one-dimensional.

These kinds of visuals fail to account for the effects of historic and continued colonization and the complexities of systemic racial and gendered power structures. These photos come from an uneducated disdain and implicitly-biased approach to depicting people...
of color. As such, they are supporting the ever-present anti-black and white supremacist sentiment the world can no longer ignore. When artists have this reductive intentionality or lacking education around such issues, the images produced will be (and are) subpar. The decision to award artists making such rote imagery suggests that the standards by which the industry measures photographic excellence are pervaded by historical blind spots that ignore the legacy of colonization and dehumanization we must account for in contests.

By relying on tropes of people of color, honed and employed over hundreds of years of colonization and dehumanization of black and brown people, you fail to convey a holistic narrative. That is the damning imperialistic photographic tradition being upheld by these images, their photographers and therefore the camera companies that reward, employ, fund, mentor, highlight and support such work.

Along with the absolute necessity to hire, highlight and fund the work of photographers of color, the entire visual media industry must begin to recognize and account for its continued harmful depictions of women, people of color, queer communities, among other marginalized groups. This means going beyond diversifying the photographers on your payrolls, and it is certainly does not mean increasing the sheer volume of images of black and brown bodies that populate your front pages. It is about actualizing your commitments to elevating work that tells visually compelling, complex stories about people of color.

Fund artists who are advocating for and taking seriously the necessity of diverse perspectives behind the camera. Don’t take tokenized approaches to diversity by merely including 1-2 people of color in your juries, panels, teams, etc. Fund work that takes an intersectional approach and attempts to unpack complex histories of race, class, gender, ability, environmental relationships and other key factors in its depiction of all people. Do not fund work that subscribes to imperialist aesthetics and fails to take or understand a holistic approach to storytelling around marginalized communities. Invest in the knowledge, perspective and expertise of black and brown women, immigrants, refugees, indigenous people — those impacted by and experienced in the breadth of colonization and racism’s continued devastating reach and photography’s central role in reproducing the ideologies that maintain imperialistic power.

**Actionable steps camera companies and photo organizations can take:**

1. Invite an equitable amount of decision makers of color to sit on juries for photo awards and portfolio reviews per year. Have them appear at portfolio reviews throughout the year.
2. Actively engage marginalized photographers (black and brown women, queer/trans/nonbinary photographers) to apply for sponsorship opportunities for gear. This means reaching out to these communities to test out new equipment, sponsoring gear to complete personal projects or to use for assignment work; send these photographers on international trips to create images that are used to launch new product or to create new content for your company.
3. Host workshops to teach photographers of color so we are fully comfortable and knowledgeable about lighting gear so we are able to translate that on set.
4. Hire women of color to your marketing departments and have them reach out to new and upcoming talent on a regular basis for opportunities to try new gear, write blog posts, take over Instagrams, and brag about your gear/company. We have strong word of mouth potentiality that turns into dollars for you.
5. Hire inclusion consultants to work with your company throughout the year to discover the ways in which you can grow into an inclusive company that artists and consumers feel proud supporting.

Whereas individual photographers will likely continue to subscribe to these incredibly harmful ways of depicting marginalized people and places, it is your responsibility as the powerful and monied organizations to change the narrative, to lead by example and to fund and support people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives who value holistic, complex storytelling. For our fellow image makers: we ask that you educate yourself about the visual histories of colonization and anti-black imagery and challenge yourself to actively help correct the narrative. If you aren’t part of the solution, you are completely part of the problem.

In solidarity,

Authority Collective
www.authoritycollective.org

*Readings on the issues presented within this letter:

- NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC: For Decades, Our Coverage Was Racist
- VOX: NatGeo November Cover’s Racist Cliches
- BRIGHT THE MAG: What Would Photography Look Like if it Were Actually Inclusive?
- NYT MAGAZINE: What Does it Mean to Look at This?
- PHOTOVOICE: The Western Gaze & Challenging Harmful Representations
- NEWSWEEK: Inequities Among Photojournalists Produce a Familiar Image
- RE-PICTURE: The Dangers of Unchecked Social Bias in Race & Media
- RE-PICTURE: The Ethics of Seeing
- SCHOLAR & FEMINIST ONLINE: The Racist Writing With Light
- HYPERALLERGIC: Discerning Photography’s White Gaze