

Grant Proposal for Project: Reclaim the Lens

Abstract

My proposal for a social prescription for mental wellbeing is a participatory photography series for trans people of color who feel that their narratives, whether of pain, healing, or joy, are excluded from mainstream media. Drawing on the power of aesthetic distancing in art therapy, Boal's theory of form theater where narrative power is placed within the audience, and Foucault's ideologies of biopower, I elicit the usage of photography and the narratives of trans people of color as a mental health intervention. The project will be entirely voluntary, contain a contract for consent and distribution, and will offer reimbursement payments for specialists hired to guide participants. Specialists will include: film photography teacher, counselor or health community worker with experience working with LGBTQ+ groups, and project lead, who may work in conjunction with myself. The individual series may be titled by participants, but the theme of the project is *reclaiming*, through the act of reclaiming their identities through a lens.

Theoretical Framework

Project *Reclaim the Lens* draws on a variety of aesthetic, biopolitical, and sociological theories to support its rationale, construction, and implementation. First and foremost, the therapeutic role of aesthetic distancing is central to this project as part of a classic art therapy methodologies. The idea of determination, i.e. *I am X identity* or *I identify with X trauma* requires a constant embodiment that can be taxing for an individual. The practice of aesthetic distancing, however, frames identities, labels, and paradigms as tools that can be used at will to inform an experience or creative practice (Sommer, 2023). Specifically, it gives space between the subject and the experience so that the individual can process, reflect, and create something meaningful, regardless of whether it is productive only for them or for society. This has been utilized in various forms of art practice, including in traditional art therapy: "...drawing, painting, sculpting, making

collages, creating personalized papier-mâché masks and engaging in other practices can help them unlock their emotions and translate them into something real...making art can activate reward pathways in the brain, reduce stress, lower anxiety levels and improve mood” (Kuta, 2022), and in drama therapy: “The drama therapist works to help the client see the continuity of and interplay between the everyday and the dramatic, the imaginative, the intuitive, the expressive part of the client’s psyche” (Landry, 1983).

In the context of *Reclaim the Lens*, participants will be given an opportunity to evaluate themselves from a distance: what labels have been prescribed to be versus which ones do I actually identify with? What items, places, or poses connect with my narrative? What *is* my narrative when told in my own voice and camera, or through a trusted individual that shares a similar identity? The photography series is not meant to mandate an answer to these questions, but give participants the tools they need to explore, implement, and reflect.

Following this, Augusto Boal’s method of *forum theatre* is critical in fostering transformative and translational relationships between performer and audience – a parallel framework that can be applied in the process of photography, where the subject of a photograph is captured through a seemingly “objective” lens that is then presented to the viewer. In his model, Boal democratizes theater: audience members are not passive, and are instead encouraged to join actors on stage in order to offer a possible “solution” to the problem at hand, transforming spectators into “spect-actors” (Sommer, 2023). Hence, this relieves audiences of the obligation to be passive, perhaps everyone can also play a part in the therapeutic process – and perhaps they can play the largest part themselves. Here the ‘patient’ is not a passive recipient of treatment” (Boal, 1995).

Similarly, in photography the model or muse is often defined by the photographer, told where and how to pose, and is subject to the stylistic choices made by one who essentially writes the plot. This isn't necessarily always restrictive – the subject and photographer may have a shared vision that allows for collaboration. But afterwards, creative direction and editing is often left to the “expert.” In introducing a participatory photography series, the project aims to create an equalized stage where the subjects of the photos are also the photographers, and that they are engaged in a space with people of shared experiences.

Finally, and thematically, Foucault's theory of *docile bodies* is a key aspect of this series in the way that it positions agency in individuals against the backdrop of expected compliance in society. Foucault theorizes bodies as made compliant – that is, made docile and obedient through the external structures of societal norms, governmental laws, and punishment (Foucault, 1977). Autonomy is seen as a threat in a world where the body, or *biopower*, is seen as an object to control and discipline in order to provide labor and maintain current power structures. As discussed in class, art can be viewed as a rejection of disciplinary control, and can even be weaponized by individuals to resist deindividuation and compliance (Sommer, 2023). Furthermore, the transference of discipline into the subject's hands creates agency in that they are able to mold the “rules” of the artistic discipline – in this case photography – into one that is self-serving yet accessible to the community, is honest, and most importantly, is not coercive.

This is especially important for transgender people and people of color, two identity groups that have historically been marginalized in the paradigm of Western colonial power – even more so for trans people of color. From personal narratives as well as those shared within the community, despite the diversity of our experiences, we have shared one common understanding: that our existence itself is resistance. To render ourselves visible despite our vulnerability is an act of courage, but also a rejection of binary norms, heteronormative and White principles, and of

governing structures attempting to discipline our bodies through laws. In a study conducted with gender-diverse individuals on coping and self-perception through photography, it was found that “participant photography is a successful way of prompting reflection on resilience. Approaching resilience as a dynamic process, versus “a static unitary property of the person” (Bowling et al., 2019). This project similarly aims to showcase resilience, but through the hands of the participants rather than a single photographer.

Goals and Objectives

The goal of *Reclaim the Lens* is to elevate the narratives of transgender people of color, strengthen transgender community agency-building and improve mental health outcomes, and conduct analysis on photography as an implementable tool in arts therapy. The active participation portion of the project will be carried out over a two week period that can be adjusted and expanded depending on schedules; however, the formulation, gathering of resources, call for volunteers, and follow-up process will be conducted over a two month period. Volunteers will be pooled and snowballed from the LGBTQ+ community in Boston – collaborations include working with organizations such as SubDrift Boston (South Asian Queer creators) to reach out to and display notices of the project for trans people of color in the community (@subdriftboston). Details will be further expanded in the methodologies section.

To provide templates of similar projects, I draw on nonbinary writer and artist Samra Habib’s exemplary queer Muslim photo project “[Just Me and Allah](#)”, Jess T. Dugan’s [book](#) *To Survive on This Shore: Photographs and Interviews with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Older Adults*, and the incredible photography work of [Aki Kame](#), who captures Asian LGBTQ+ nightlife in New York City. These projects were long-term, done by professionals, and not all included film photography as a component. For project *Reclaim the Lens*, this will be done on a much smaller scale, assumes no prior experience of the participants, and will not rely

on editing; rather the process, rather than the product of creation will be what the volunteers are asked to reflect on in regards to how positively or negatively it impacted their mental health, sense of identity, and autonomy.

Proposed Methodology

Participants, who must identify as transgender people of color, will be contacted through community organizations about the project. A minimum of six volunteers, and a maximum of ten will be recruited. In a pre-project focus group, participants will be asked to informally discuss their thoughts on belonging, shared identity, and perceptions both within and outside of the LGBTQ+ community. Sample questions are as follow:

- 1) I feel like I belong in the LGBTQ+ community: yes/no
- 2) I feel like how I'm perceived externally matches my own perceptions of myself: yes/no
- 3) I (enjoy) (feel stressed out by) (am neutral towards) expressing myself creatively in:
 - a) LGBTQ spaces: yes/no
 - b) Work spaces: yes/no
 - c) At home: yes/no

Participants will then discuss their answers and share commonalities and differences to their comfortability.

Following this, participants will be encouraged to pair up with a partner or partner(s) of their choice; the minimum is two people together. Every group will be provided with an inexpensive film camera, and also given the option to use their phones if a device is accessible to them. They will be asked to take photographs of each other over the course of two weeks that contain the theme of *reclaiming*, and explore positive or complex portrayals of their gender identity that they feel comfortable sharing with their group members – this may include pictures of them in their daily life, objects that are meaningful to them, or occasions where they are dressed up, etc.

According to media guidelines, and due to the nature of working with strangers, nudity is prohibited.

The contract of consent and distribution is explicit: limits of each participant will be discussed with the project organizers and group members beforehand; any participant may drop from the project at any time or request a termination of partnership change if a group member does not adhere to respectful guidelines; an anonymous option consisting of photographs either not including identifying information, such as the participants face, or the usage of an alias, will be welcome and gladly accommodated. The photographs may only be distributed with the permission of the participant following the conclusion of the project.

During the duration of the project, a film photographer will be accessible for an initial lesson on the basic usage of film cameras and to be a resource to provide creative direction throughout the two week period. After two weeks, the participants will return and have a session to develop the photos, and a final session to bring their creations back to the larger focus group and to discuss their experiences. They will be asked to compare and contrast the survey they took in the beginning and how they feel the project has impacted them, and what it felt like to perceive themselves from a lens within a shared community, and if it felt empowering, restricting, etc. and whether they feel it has had positive or negative impacts on their mental health.

Budget

The budget for this project hinges on participation numbers. Estimating a maximum sized group of ten people, we may budget ten cameras even if partnerships or small groups may be formed. We will utilize the inexpensive Kodak EKTAR H35 Half Frame Film Camera, which averages around \$50, with a total of about \$500 for ten cameras. For the hiring of an LGBTQ+

trained counselor or focus group facilitator, as well as a creative artist specializing in film, an approximate stipend for the dual hire over the course of two weeks might be \$1000. For advertising and social media marketing fees, project development, and distribution, a \$500 cap could be placed. In total, the project expense is estimated to be \$2000.

Outcomes and Evaluation

The target audience for this intervention is both the LGBTQ+ community and society at large. Participants may wish to share their photography series on social media, submit to a magazine, or even museum. They may also leave the experience feeling like their narrative is not best expressed through photography. The hopeful outcome of the project is to give participants a sense of autonomy with individual(s) who share similar experiences, struggles, and joys in a mutually supportive, healing art process.

The success of the project will be evaluated by a survey during the post-project focus group, as well as a follow-up survey two months after its conclusion. The survey will ask participants if they felt the project was meaningful, how it contributed to their mental health, and how willing they would be to both participate in a similar project again, as well as how likely they are to recommend photography to fellow trans people of color as a healing modality.

Conclusion

In conjunction with the theoretical rationale and methodologies of our class, Rx: Arts for Global Mental Health, *Reclaim the Lens* provides an optional framework for an arts-based mental health intervention, agency-building, and structural resistance. Trans bodies of color are too often marginalized, resulting in long-term negative mental and physical health outcomes. *Reclaim the Lens* attempts to utilize a therapeutic visual arts practice to foster a positive mental health outcome. In the words of Dougan, the “intention is to create work that facilitates intimacy and

encourages empathy, understanding, and critical conversations about identity and contemporary social life,” (Dugan, 2022). In my own journey, whether as a participant or coordinator, I hope that I can reclaim the essence of not only my trans South Asian American identity, but also what it means to be rendered human.

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