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Other Ways of Being

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OTHER WAYS OF BEING

By

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Bachelors of Science, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2001

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Masters of Fine Arts in Photography

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TITLE: OTHER WAYS OF BEING

MAJOR PROFESSORS: Daniel V. Overturf, Antonio Martinez and Fern Logan

This project is an attempt to photograph difference. The purpose is not to compare or contrast two opposing forces, but to explore how perception about social and cultural differences have aided in creating invisible boundaries that exists between various communities.

The project focuses on a transgressive community know as The 15. The 15 is an organization created for men who practice bondage, domination, sadism and masochism, also known as BDSM. By documenting a community that lives an “alternative” lifestyle, it is hoped that the resulting photographs have the ability to create discourse about societal boundaries and how the idea of difference is perceived and practiced in daily life.

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Introduction

I climb the stairs, there's a food table. A gaggle of men stand eating finger foods. Some are naked, some wear leather chaps. They look at me oddly, it's quite clear I'm not one of them. My chaperone says, "let's go into the dungeons." We enter another room. A hundred or so men were at "play." One man lies in a bed. His arms and legs are restrained to the bedposts. He has electrodes attached to his scrotum; the copper cables extend to a control box where another man stands, twisting and turning the buttons. They both look as if they are in heaven. Several men are chained or cuffed to a tool known as the Saint Andrew's cross. The sound of leather whips against bare flesh; followed by sounds I know as bedroom sounds, pierce the low murmur of the gathered men. My chaperone must have noticed my discomfort and asked me if I was still interested? All I could say was "I've never been interested in this, but I now know what makes us different."

I have always been interested in social difference/division. As a young boy my grandparents would not allow me to go to the playground nearest the restaurant they owned. Distance or age was not the issue, when I asked why I couldn't go over to that playground; my grandfather's response was "you ain't like them boys. They put a whoopin' on you just for fun, you can't go to that neighborhood." I then said "Why? Because I'm not all black like them?" "NO bull dagger, cause you ain't poor like them! You getting older you need to pay attention to things, boy." I eventually came to realize the "things" he was talking about were historically constructed social divides. He came from a time and place when crossing these boundaries had potentially fatal consequences. The separatist construction of varying populations played a significant role in his upbringing and the way in which he navigated the world. What my grandfather spoke of

that day had very little meaning to me at that time in my life. I came from a different time and place, a time when people paid no heed to differences in sexual orientation, ethnicity, or economic background. In fact my parents came from differing ethnic and economic groups. As I grew older I began to see that what my grandfather spoke about was still very much in practice, I had just been sheltered from it. Only then did I understand exactly what my grandfather tried to make me understand. I became fascinated by the idea of how perceived differences shaped the way we form neighborhoods, school districts, cities and, ultimately, how we see ourselves. However, I did not feel it was enough to simply be fascinated by the continued existence of these barriers; I felt they needed to be witnessed and archived. With this in mind, I traveled to San Francisco, to document the men of *The 15*, in an attempt to create a family album that has the ability to honor other ways of being.

CHAPTER 1

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF CONTENT: PRECEDENTS IN DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

The discussions about boundaries with my grandfather has informed and shaped the questions surrounding my entire photographic pursuit. There has been one unifying issue throughout my body of work and that is the issue of difference. In reviewing my earlier photographic portfolios, one critique could be that there was a narrow scope. The focus of my work remains the same; it is a quest to document the social boundaries, which I continue to discover. However, I felt something was missing from these earlier attempts to photograph the communities I entered. I needed to understand what that “something” was exactly, if I were to successfully visually represent the ideas behind my photographic quest. This ultimately led me to graduate school and my latest body of work.

During my graduate course work I read the essay, *Displaced Sympathies*, written by Andy Grundberg. The essay, which is published as the forward in *Bill Burke's: Portraits*¹, discusses how Bill Burke uses the tool of portraiture to create discourse about something far greater than the individuals he represents in his images. In this essay Grundberg states, “ Bill Burke’s portraits make sympathy a primary issue-or, perhaps more precisely, they make problematic the question of where our sympathies should be placed. Are the individuals we find in his pictures of our own kind, victimized by some larger force, like the old lady with the broom, or do they represent some Other, a foreign species that exists in a world apart from ourselves?” (Grundberg 1999)

This passage became instrumental in helping me redefine my idea of visualizing difference. Grundberg states that Bill Burke’s portraits had the ability to provoke

questions of Otherness and belonging in the viewer. This idea helped me decide how I could use portraiture to question the social divides, which exist between different social classifications. My past attempts, which were informed by the photographers of the Depression Era, appeared as mimicry of a visual style and attitude that did not allow room for interpretation. Much like Dorothea Lange's famous photograph, *Migrant Mother*, (figure 1) images I have created in the past provoke sympathy in the viewer, but do not ask where their sympathies lie. These images served as an indictment of difference without questioning how that difference function to create stigma. Because of the ideas presented by Bill Burke's images and Andy Grundberg's analysis, I started to redefine my approach to documentary photographic practices.

With this new perspective in mind, I began to formulate a project that moved away from photographing in a modernist, transparently subjective mode to one of stripped down, nearly scientific inquiry. My initial goal was to have which allows the photographs to be viewed as data, not as an artistic expression. To do so, I came up with the idea of photographing the contrasting neighborhoods of my hometown. Similar to Irving Penn's *Worlds in a Small Room*, I planned to travel from neighborhood to neighborhood with a portable portrait studio and photograph the individuals, which made up the varying communities. Through this process I hoped to create a visual representation of the demographics of Peoria, Illinois. By constructing a visual map I hoped to create a group of portraits that had the ability to provoke questions concerning, what role does the historical perception of difference plays in the formation of the neighborhoods I planned to archive. I also wanted to examine the visible differences,

which allow us as humans to identify or disassociate from various groups, cultures, or communities.

I found this project to be a perfect way to discuss the issues in which I had become interested. However, I quickly realized the project was too large in scale to achieve in the time I had to complete my thesis. Because of this fact, I will save it for later date. However, the preconception of the Peoria neighborhoods project steered me in a direction that allowed me to stop creating photography, which only mimicked. Prior to this time I had perceived difference in very strict and explicit terms. This was very limiting, it allowed me to see race, and by default, class as the only boundaries that separated communities and cultures. I was blinded by the traditional ideas of segregation.

After coming to the realization that the neighborhoods project would not be possible, I further researched an alternate path for examining the divides found within society. This research took me back to Andy Grundberg's essay, *Displaced Sympathies*. Another passage from the writing became very instrumental to me. Grundberg states, "Geography doesn't matter. Burke's eye is so strong it creates an Appalachia of the mind where ever it alights" (Grundberg 1999). This idea became very important, because it made me realize that race was not the only way to examine the question I propose. It opened my mind. Because of this I was able to recognize the community that ultimately became the focus of my thesis project.

At the same time I realized I needed to move away from race as the visual indicator of social division, a common interest in historic photographic processes led me to Jordy Jones and Marty Tackett. This relationship resulted in the discovery of a sub-culture of which I had not previously been aware. The couple introduced me to *The 15* of

San Francisco. *The 15* is a social and sexual fraternity for men who engage in Bondage, Domination, Sadism, and Masochism (BDSM). *The 15* association was started in an attempt to create a safe place for men interested in BDSM and leather sex to socialize without scrutiny. It was created in 1980 and is listed as the longest-standing gay male BDSM association in the western United States. The name, *The 15*, comes from the by-laws, which states that up to fifteen men called “fraternals” can have voting rights within the organization. The group also consists of non-voting members called “associates”. In this sense, *The 15* is very similar to other more commonly known fraternal organizations such as the Elks or Eagles. To this day *The 15* holds well attended monthly parties for the Leather community. There are currently over 140 associate members worldwide.

Two years ago I would not have chosen or even recognized this type of organization as a viable option for a documentary that had the ability to speak to my ideas of differing communities. While the subject matter certainly has a great deal of visual intrigue, I would have felt the subject matter too salacious to be able to convey and reiterate the deviant sexual acts performed within leather culture, which would render my intentions impotent. However, as Jordy and Marty began informing me about their lifestyle and specifically *The 15*, they continually interchanged the terms *community* and *family*. This new notion of family intrigued me and led me to think about how the simple act of photographing Jordy’s transgressive community could speak to how we negotiate being in terms of difference.

I soon realized I would have to return to research before making any photographs. I still had trepidation about being able to photograph this group without creating a body of work that would only address the more controversial aspects of the community. I knew

sexual acts would play a role in the overall representation, however; I needed to understand how they would function within the viewing experience. Many precedents have been set with this type of photography. One of the most influential photographers from my photographic studies has been Diane Arbus. I became interested in Arbus not because she photographed “freaks” and other communities on the outer edges of society, but because of the manner in which she approached and recorded the various subjects. Each Arbus photograph holds the potential for exploitation, yet she manages to quell this issue by treating each individual subject the same. The nudist is approached the same as the Mexican Dwarf (figure 2). Because of this democratic style, the photographs perhaps unintentionally, become more about the act of looking at those people in society we were trained not to look at too closely. Judith Goldman reiterates this point in an essay entitled: *Diane Arbus: The Gap Between Intention and Effect*. Goldman states, “The mesmerizing power of Arbus’ photographs is derived from her choice and more importantly, from her handling of the subject. Each picture acts like a visual boomerang; freaks and lonely people scare us into looking first at them and then back at ourselves” (Goldman 1974).

I found this to be similar to the ideas Andy Grundberg posed about Bill Burke’s work in Appalachia. Both photographers suppressed concerns of sensationalism by utilizing its potential effect, not ignoring it. From this, I began to realize that sensationalism is not something to be feared, but something that must be incorporated when photographing those who exist outside of what is deemed “normal”.

Understanding the work I have made in the past was a crucial first step of toward a new documentary direction. However, as I traveled to San Francisco, I worried I would not be able translate the conceptual ideas into a new practical methodology. I feared that

as I began making images of *The 15*, I would instinctively revert back to what was comfortable. However, entering a community that was so foreign made it easier to create a body of work that would reflect my shift in intention. Being completely naive to leather culture forced me to move away from making images in the manner I had grown accustomed. In the past I found myself in places that felt familiar, with *The 15* everything was new, every aspect of the culture was something to be explored and documented. Each moment I spent making photographs of *The 15* was a learning experience. In a sense, I was gathering data, not just collecting images. I found that the moments between shoots were as valuable as the research leading up to the actualization of project. It was during these down times that the members of the community educated me about the intricacies of their lifestyle. I would then attempt to transcribe these conversations into a photographic form. I feel this forced me to work in a more methodical fashion. I began photographing people and objects from a scientific standpoint rather than an emotional one. This somewhat forced shift in technique, worked in a way in which my intentions and results are harmonious.

CHAPTER 2

ETHNOGRAPHY AS A VISUAL STYLE

I did not have Robert Mapplethorpe in mind at the outset of the *Other Ways of Being* project. As the most noted photographer on the subject, one would think Mapplethorpe's sadomasochism photographs had a great influence on the work I produced during the course of this project. However, while Mapplethorpe and I have both photographed the s/m community, I feel the intentions and approaches taken renders the two bodies of work different.

As an aspiring photographer, I am interested and intrigued by Robert Mapplethorpe's s/m photographs. The acts represented in Mapplethorpe's images do not interest me, although they do grab my attention. What not only grabs, but also retains my interest are the elements of beauty, elegance and craftsmanship found in the work. The subjects found in the photographs seem to take a secondary role to light, form, tonal quality, and style. In this regard, the content of the photographs appears to be more about beauty than the s/m community. As Andy Grundberg wrote: "There is wide spread belief that style is replacing substance in contemporary life. This attitude is not simply rampant among fundamentalist and philistines; it can also be found in sophisticated precincts of the art world" (1999). Grundberg continues, "If style and its permutations, fissionability and taste, are major topics of the art of the late 1980's, then Robert Mapplethorpe is perhaps the most topical artist of the times" (1999). I interpret this passage to denote that the actual subject of Robert Mapplethorpe work is style, an assertion that appears prominently in many of his best-known images. I feel Mapplethorpe's collection of photographs supports Grundberg's analysis. The subjects found in Mapplethorpe's photographs were selected because they fulfilled his idea of perfection and beauty. The

subjects were lit and posed in a manner to represent an idealized vision of Mapplethorpe's s/m culture. In an interview before his death, Mapplethorpe addresses this idealized group of work. "I am left with a diary of photographs I have taken over the years. I don't write, so that's it. I would rather go through the pages of my life, so to speak, and see people the way I would like to have seen them. Some of them are lies, some of them are nasty people, but they don't look nasty in the photograph. But I would rather have a group of people that I wouldn't mind meeting, if I had never met them, to look back on as opposed to a collection of people I didn't like. That's my approach." (Kardon 1987)

My strategies and intentions for the same subject matter were vastly different. Artist intention dictated the use of varying approaches to s/m. While Mapplethorpe's intention was to create an idealized version of the lifestyle he lived, I entered a community that was completely foreign. It was my goal to create a photographic record of people, places, and ways of living I had never encountered. Unlike Robert Mapplethorpe, I am an outsider in the gay s/m world. I was not photographing close friends or familiar places. Everything was new to me, for this reason I see my s/m photographs not as an artistic expression as it was for Mapplethorpe, but an ethnographic study of transgressive community. Due to these differences, I feel the only common thread Mapplethorpe and I share are photographs of men in leather.

As opposed to Mapplethorpe, the beauty of the images I created is secondary to the subjects found within my photographs. Although I place great weight upon photographic craft, the content or information found within the photograph has always

held the most intrigue. This is why I feel *Other Ways of Being* is more similar to the work of J.T. Zealy's commissioned slave portraits.

In 1850 Louis Agassiz, the renowned natural scientist began researching the theory of polygenesis, the belief that different racial groups came from separate origins. In an attempt to prove this theory Agassiz commissioned J.T. Zealy to make portraits of the African-born slave populations of Columbia, South Carolina. Agassiz believed photographs could be used as scientific evidence in support of the hypothesis; European whites and African blacks were physiologically different and therefore are created from separate origins.

The collaboration between Agassiz and Zealy resulted in fifteen daguerreotypes. The photographs have the appearance and feel of data or evidence, they resemble the photographs we now use to record and identify convicted criminals. The photographs show frontal and side views of nude male and female slave (figure 3). The nudity while somewhat shocking, is blatantly scientific and not for titillation. This easily made distinction, distances this use of portraiture from commercial or artistic uses, which ultimately leads the viewer to an analytical reading. The expressions on the slave's faces seem to reveal a detachment or perhaps helplessness from the event. Zealy shed the trappings of the early portraiture. Like archeological specimen; the slaves were placed in front of the camera, and literally stripped of clothes and figuratively of identity. Through this process these portraits inadvertently reveal the circumstances that led to the production of the photographs and of slave life.

Although the photographs could not prove separate origin, J.T. Zealy fulfilled Agassiz's request. Zealy produced images of slaves that Agassiz could use to analyze the

physical characteristics of those found in the photographs. While doing so Zealy's images proved Agassiz's hypothesis false, but much more importantly recorded the inhumane nature of slave-master power relationship. In effect, the daguerreotypes elicit the opposite response than initially intended. In the essay *Illustrious Americans*, Alan Trachtenberg discusses the effect of Zealy's approach to the Agassiz commission: "The photographer takes no pains to portray them or to elicit an expression. Obeying his commission to present them as bodies rather than persons, as biological specimens, Zealy allows them to be as they are: black slaves constrained to perform the role of specimen before the camera" (Trachtenberg 1989). Trachtenberg goes on to analyze the result Zealy's approach evokes. "Our viewing of the pictures becomes an imaginary form of what Hegel describes as the "master-slave relation," the intersubjective dialectic between persons in unequal social positions. Zealy's sitters are the illustrious Americans. They make starkly visible what is usually hidden within the cultural ideals of American selfhood and identity-the weighted distinction of race, gender and social class" (Trachtenberg 1989).

To, "make starkly visible what is usually hidden within the cultural ideals of American selfhood and identity" (Trachtenberg 1989) is the driving force behind *Other Ways of Being*. Agassiz and Zealy unintentionally created a historic record of how social difference was perceived and practiced during antebellum America. In order to produce a body of work that would provoke a similar reading as the slave photographs, I approached photographing the men of *The 15* with a similar scientific inquiry.

Throughout the project I felt more like an anthropologist than a photographer. Much like an anthropologist traveling to the Amazon Rainforest in hopes of discovering a lost tribe, I traveled to San Francisco in hopes of learning about and recording a culture

vastly different from my own. The BDSM world is far from and alien to my own, because of this everything and everyone I encountered was new and became material to be recorded and preserved. The more time I spent in the community the more knowledgeable I became. The group of men taught me about the signifiers they used to represent their affiliation to leather culture. They explained the different types of “kink” they participated in, and the tools or as they refer to them “toys” used in these various forms of s/m. Finally, they began to demonstrate the various acts of taboo sexual activity. As I learned more about the culture, I began to record each aspect in an attempt to create a visual representation of the communities’ common identity. After spending three weeks in California photographing, I returned home with approximately one hundred images. While sorting through the images, I noticed several themes emerge within the photographs I had taken. Each image seemed to fit into one of two different categories: portraits and still life. Combined, these two seemingly separate groups merged to form a complete representation of *The 15*.

There were two different types of portraits: Head shots and full-body. As a photographer, I am very familiar and comfortable with making close-up portraits. Using this scientific style served two purposes. It helped me to ease myself into the community and establish rapport and also created a record of individual members. After learning more about the culture, I realized that these images also functioned as a record of the signifiers used to represent their affiliation with leather man culture. One example from this group of portraits is “Brian 2011” (Figure 3). This image depicts the profile of Brian Green, an associate member of *The 15*. In this image he is wearing his favorite leather cap, a leather vest with *The 15* insignia sewn on the back, no shirt and heavy silver

jewelry. This image is not only a visual record of Brian Green, but also functions as a tool to analyze the ways leathermen represent themselves to each other and those outside of their community.

The sexual acts that members of the group participated in ranged from bondage and the use of whips to the lesser-known act of voluntary electrocution. From a scientific standpoint, I felt it necessary to record such diversity. The full-body portraiture came as a result of learning about different types of kink and from my desire to record the individualism that existed among the group. One image that resulted from this is “Joel 2011” (Figure 5). In the image Joel, a middle-aged man, stands bound by a custom-made leather straight jacket. His eyes avoid the camera; his head is cast downward in a submissive manner. This photograph was made directly after I witnessed Joel bound to a pole for two and half hours. I did not give Joel any direction while photographing him. The pose he chose for the photograph was identical to the way he stood when he was strapped to the pole. Through his pose and attire, Joel denotes his position within the community. Joel is what is known as a bottom. A bottom is an individual who prefers to be dominated. In Joel’s case, he prefers to be restrained and beaten.

The second category that emerged when viewing the group of images as a whole was a set of still life photographs. These still life images consisted of the apparatuses used during sexual activity. Most of these objects are hand crafted and custom made for a specific use. I was drawn to the ingenuity and beauty of the crafted pieces. One item that particularly interested me, is called a Parachute (Figure 6). A Parachute, in s/m terms, is a device that restrains yet supports male genitals in a pouch. Once the penis and scrotum are locked into place the pouch is suspended from the ceiling immobilizing the wearer. In

this image the utilitarian device is displayed much like an artifact found in a museum collection catalogue. I attempted to photograph this article in a manner that would provoke analysis of its possible function and in turn analysis of the acts performed by the leathermen.

I chose to use the division when exhibiting this work. Each group of photographs remained together, on a single wall, when installing the thesis exhibition. I feel each sub-category contains relevant information, which informs the next. By separating each aspect of the culture I hope to create a discourse within the mind of the viewer that builds as their knowledge of the culture grows. The first set of images the viewer encounters is the full body portrait. I chose these photographs as the introduction to the community because they contain a great deal of information. These images become the primary introduction to the men of *The 15* and the “deviant” activities that bond the group together. By creating this first impression, the viewer is forced to make comparisons between this lifestyle and their own and thus begin to think about the boundaries between different existences. I place the still life images directly after the full body portraits, in part as a visual break between the types of portraits, but also as a way to demonstrate that this project is more about the analysis of a culture and not solely based on their sexuality. I hope the viewer will see these objects as artifacts of a distant culture. Once again, I attempt to persuade the viewer into a comparison between their own lifestyle and the one they are witnessing. Lastly, the viewer arrives to the wall of close-up headshots. These photographs were placed at the end of the exhibition because I feel only there, do they become confrontational. If placed first they become a greeting. After seeing the same men depicting and performing their particular type of “deviance,” the images become

confrontational. Placed at the end of the exhibition, these images above all, although the least explicit, beg the viewers to ask themselves where their sympathies lie.

Together the photographs function two ways. First they are a simple historic archive of a transgressive community. Second, much like Zealy's slave photographs they function as a record of how we perceive difference and how that perception creates the boundaries between all the ways of being.

CHAPTER 4

SUPPORTING TECHNIQUES

I chose to use the wet plate collodion process to photograph this community. This process, best known for its use during the Civil War era during the mid-Nineteenth century, is mostly uncommon in today's era of digital photography. While the historic and modern processes share a common thread, instantaneous images, the similarities end there. Wet plate collodion is very a slow and cumbersome handcrafted technique, which requires a great deal of equipment and expertise to execute.

To create a single wet plate collodion image there are a number of steps one must complete. The first step of the process is to "flow" or coat a clean piece of glass with a salted solution of collodion. Once the collodion has set, but not dried, the coated plate is then sensitized by submerging it in a solution of silver nitrate for a period of four minutes. This and all subsequent steps must be carried out in a light safe environment. Once the four minutes has elapsed, the now sensitized plate is removed from the silver solution and placed in a specialized plate holder. After the plate has been prepared, it is transported, in the light safe plate holder, to the camera and exposed. Once exposed the plate must be immediately developed and fixed. If the plate is allowed to dry at any point during these steps the image will not turn out. This procedure must be carried out for each and every exposure. To perform these steps a number of tools must on hand during each shoot.

As this form of photographic technology has been obsolete over one hundred years, the materials required were hard to attain. I found that the most complicated aspect of creating photographs in this manner was gathering and in some instances, building the required tools. During preliminary research on the process, I realized if this project were

to succeed I would have to construct a number of items. Among these items is the very crucial dark box. As discussed earlier a number of the necessary steps, such as sensitizing, loading the plate, and image development must be completed in a light safe environment. When in the field, a dark box functions as a light safe environment. The dark box I constructed is a 42"x18"x24" plywood box with a cloth shroud. The dark box houses the required chemicals to sensitize and develop each exposure. Another piece of equipment unique to this process is a head brace. A head brace is needed to hold the subject's head still during the long exposures required for correct exposure. Unlike modern film emulsion, which are sensitive enough to allow a photographer to freeze action, wet plate collodion emulsion are very insensitive to light. The estimated ISO for my chosen collodion formula is 2. Due to this low sensitivity the sitter is required to remain motionless for a number of seconds. To combat the great potential for out of focus images, the photographers of the 19th century used commercially available head braces, specifically designed to support and immobilize the sitters' head without being seen in the image. Today these head braces are almost impossible to find for sale, and if one is found the cost is significant. Therefore my only option was to build a brace for this project. To achieve this, I used a small studio C-stand, a T valve, used for plumbing, and a "grabber," which is a claw like device used to extend a person's reach. The T valve was placed on the arm of the C-stand and the arm of the grabber was then placed through the T valve. Finally thumbscrews were drilled into both sides of the T valve to hold the grabber arm in place. Once the head brace was created I was able to begin the project.

Despite the cumbersome and slow nature of this historic process, I was drawn to wet plate collodion because the images resulting from this unique and antiquated

chemical process produces an anachronistic glimpse of a world. By transporting the viewer to another time these photographs have the ability to draw attention to the evolution of what it means to identify with or disassociate from the community represented in this project. This temporary removal or displacement allows for viewers to reflect on how we negotiate the conditions of acceptance felt towards other individuals and their relationships. The traditional practice of viewing images of other cultures may bring about implications of social divisions, but with a critical and open mind such images may offer an opportunity to reexamine the boundaries, which historically limit the possibility of celebrating such recognized differences.

CHAPTER 4

OUTCOME

My first publication is one of the most important outcomes of this project. The fact that my images grace the pages of a glossy magazine is not the important aspect of the publication. Accompanying the photographs is a critique written by author Brian Curtain. Curtain writes, “while the series is clearly a document of lives lived outside mainstream norms, the debunking or refutation of norms per se is not at issue here. Robinson’s photographs function as a mirror: asking us to reflect on who or what we are as we negotiate the terms of our relationships and communities; our condition for being, our limits and our possibilities” (Curtain 2011). This analysis is important because it helped me understand the distinction between my earlier work and the images of *The 15*. My previous work could easily be read as an indictment of the status quo, and because of this, the work was one-dimensional, therefore the photographs left no room for multiple interpretations. The most recent images I have created seemed to have moved away from accusation, toward more of a questioning of the status quo. Brian Curtain’s words forced me to reflect on how my change in approach led to a change in the way my images are interpreted; and what this shift in methodology could possibly mean for future projects.

The section of the quote, “Robinson’s photographs function as a mirror: asking us to reflect on who or what we are as we negotiate the terms of our relationships and communities; our condition for being, our limits and our possibilities.” made me realize that if I am truly going to discuss other ways of being, photographing a single community is somewhat limiting. By solely examining *The 15*, I am only referencing the boundaries of sexual practice and orientation. I feel this limits the possibility of understanding how these divides are negotiated. Therefore I now see *The 15* as the beginning of a much larger project. Much like the idea of creating a visual archive of Peoria neighborhoods, I now

plan to create an archive of various communities, which carry a stigma that segregate, and eventually juxtapose them in a manner, which will ask the viewer to reassess and ponder how difference and stigma are practiced in today's advanced society.

I feel this undertaking has been a real stepping-stone in my photographic endeavors. It not only represents the culmination of academic research and photographic practice, it also represents a maturing that has set a new trajectory for the future of my career. I do not see *Other Ways of Being* as a fulfillment of an academic requirement, which was the impetus of the project, but the refinement of a question that will inform every project for the remainder of my photographic career. From the moment I began making images, I pointed my camera at difference, and now through this project I have gained true direction.



Figure 1, *Migrant Mother*, Dorothea Lang, 1936



Figure 2, Diane Arbus, *Mexican Dwarf in his Hotel Room in N.Y.C*, 1970

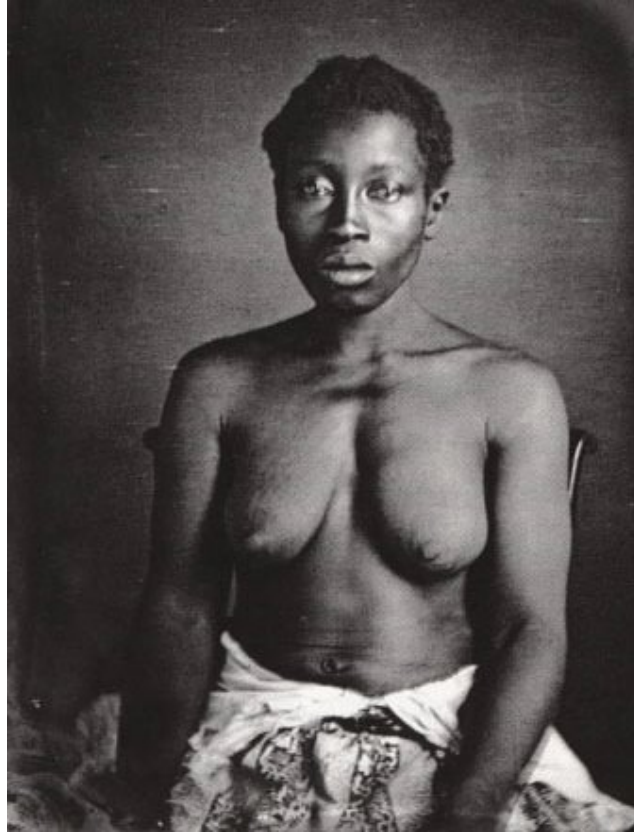


Figure 3, J.T. Zealy, *Delia, Country Born of African Parents, Daughter of Renty, Congo*, 1850



Figure 4, Eric Robinson, *Brian*, 2011

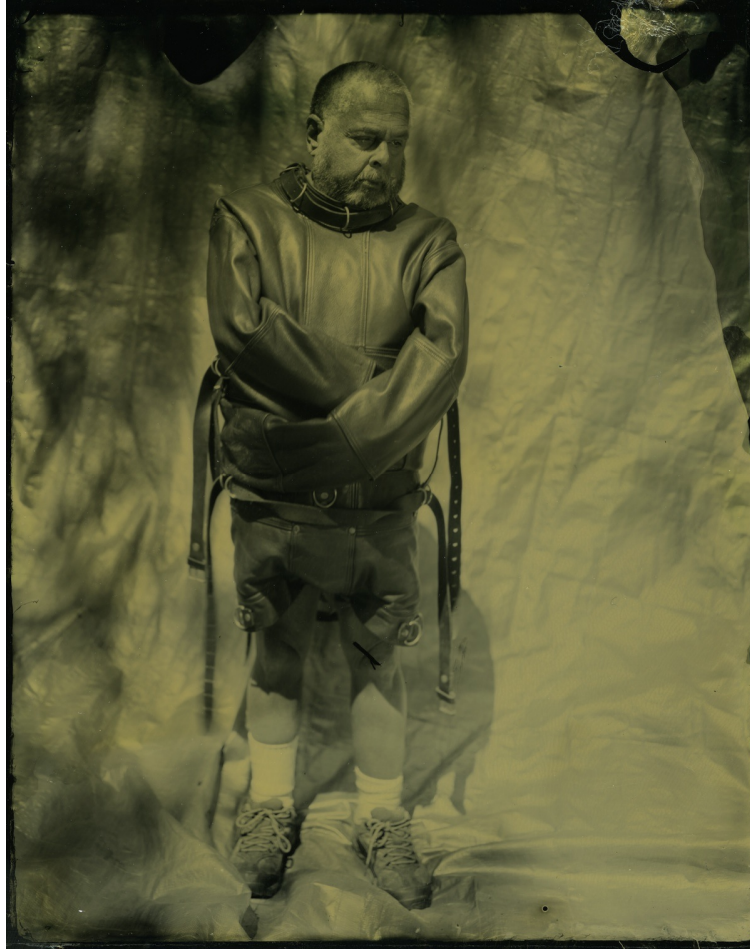


Figure 5, Eric Robinson, *Joel*, 2011



Figure 6, Eric Robinson, *Parachute*, 2010

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