

Photographers documenting unrest need to examine their motivation

With the [Black Lives Matter](#) movement spreading across the country, the majority of images seen in mainstream media are from white and non-Black (read [here](#) on why capitalization matters) photographers. Where I live on O‘ahu, most [local coverage](#) has come from non-Black people of color and white people. Yet there are a multitude of [highly talented Black photographers](#) across the country. [Devin Allen](#), [Patience Zalanga](#), [Lynsey Weatherspoon](#) and [Michael McCoy](#) are among the many showing powerful, personal work on social media. Many freelance Black photographers are working without compensation. It’s important to acknowledge the [mental toll](#) this can have on their community.

The racial imbalance of our field isn’t surprising, and it’s [far from new](#). The foundation of the photography industry was built off of the pain and oppression of Black people, Indigenous people, and other communities of color. For decades, National Geographic [painted marginalized communities as “savages”](#). Despite acknowledging this in 2018, they [fell back on racist cliches almost immediately](#). Photography has been around since the 1800s, yet it’s taken over 200 years for the industry to begin addressing these systemic issues. We’ve barely even grazed the surface. How long will it take for us to truly transform this culture?

These exploitative, demeaning forms of storytelling have shaped how the world views marginalized communities. It has forced white people to see them as “others.” The popularity of [human zoos](#) in the 1950’s — a horrific exhibition which put my people from the Philippines on display for white entertainment — is a result of that. This painful history is the reason why

marginalized communities distrust the media. Why would they place their faith in us when their ancestors were used by photographers for profit and praise? Non-Black photographers must keep this in mind before and when covering the protests happening across the country right now.



Protestors interact at a demonstration in Chicago over the weekend. (Photo by [Vashon Jordan Jr.](#))

This issue of [colonized, imperialistic photography](#) is prominent in every single marginalized community. From Black culture to Native Hawaiian culture, every marginalized group [has been exploited in some shape or form](#) — whether it's images of children starving in Africa, or images of sexualized hula dancers ([despite it being a deeply sacred tradition](#)) used to attract tourists. Whenever blood is shed in these communities, white photographers swarm in like mosquitos. Some excitedly use images of dead Black and Brown bodies to win awards, completely overlooking the fact that they're human beings with grieving loved ones. If media outlets kept that same energy towards documenting tender moments between [Black](#)

[fathers and their children](#), Native Hawaiian, Native American, Samoan, and Filipino teenagers [graduating high school](#) in the face of COVID-19, or Muslim women [enjoying every day life](#), our world would be a different place. Instead, we live in a world where marginalized communities are deducted to nothing but another hunting trophy for a white photographer's accolades.

As a Filipina from Hawai'i (*the proper use of Hawai'i includes an ['okina](#)*), I can't speak on behalf of the Black community. While Asian and Black people are both oppressed, I will never understand what it's like to be Black in America. But I want to hold people like myself and other non-Black storytellers accountable. We have to explore and discuss these uncomfortable truths in order to grow, without the Black community telling us to do so. That's why during this time, it's particularly important to examine your motives when documenting other communities. Here are some questions you should ask yourself before covering the protests:

1. Are you there to honor George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, Nina Pop, and the thousands of other slain Black people?
2. Do you genuinely believe in the cause or are these images just another addition to your portfolio?
3. Will your photos add to the systemic issues of our industry?
4. What will your presence add? Are you taking up space or getting in the way?
5. If you're white, why are you the best person to photograph this versus a photographer of color?
6. If you're a non-Black person of color, have you confronted your own internalized racism? What have you done to dismantle it?
7. Did you do any research or take time to build connections if this isn't your community, or are you going blindly on a whim?
8. Were you an ally before this, or are you just declaring

yourself one today?

9. Do you live with anyone who could be infectious, or someone who is high-risk?
10. Could you be infectious or are you high-risk?
11. Do you need to travel on a plane or drive a far distance in order to get there? What possible risk could you bring to those you're photographing?

If you don't have a good answer to any of these questions, the best thing you can do is stay home.

I often hear photographers claim they're "documenting history" as a way to justify their presence in marginalized spaces as an outsider. But you must remember that it isn't your history to document. The Black Lives Matter movement isn't an art project that you can gain profit and accolades from. It was created because the Black community is in deep pain. They're tired of living in a world where saying they want to live is a political statement. They don't owe you their bodies so that you can benefit from their plight. By insisting that you are the right person to photograph this, you are assuming that there are no capable Black photographers to document their own history. This feeds into the age-old [white savior complex that has plagued the industry for decades](#) — a toxic lesson taught to many photojournalism and documentary students.

Beyond the protests happening now, [it is crucial](#) that you give Black people, Indigenous people, and other communities of color space to tell their own stories. Without them in charge of their own stories, you risk telling a subconsciously [biased, single story](#) regardless of your intent.

When I worked as a photography assistant for a New York Times article in 2019, I was the only local person on an all-white, New York-based team, with no control over what was written. I was never consulted by the writer about local culture or asked to fact-check. My job was just to hold photography equipment, schedule shoot dates, and suggest restaurants. The resulting

article, [“Wanna Be Less Racist? Move to Hawaii,”](#) completely exploited my home, got facts wrong, and erased the [racial struggles](#) that the people of Hawai‘i face.

The writer and editors saw nothing wrong with the story and title, despite its explosive backlash. It quickly became a cautionary tale about the dangers of [parachute journalism](#). They were able to leave, while I was left infuriated and traumatized, scrambling to fix the broken relationships it caused between me and my community. I almost quit photojournalism after that. But I know that I cannot fully place the blame on them. I should have been more conscious. I was blinded by the excitement of working for my dream publication, and I hold myself accountable for that. While it still stings to this day, I’m grateful that it helped me realize how deeply problematic this industry is. Now, one of my personal rules is ensuring that every local story I work on is by and for the people of Hawai‘i. No one else. Having the communities you document reflect on who makes up your team changes everything.

This is not saying that we can’t ever document communities outside of our own. There are [ways to do this](#) sincerely, respectfully, and wholeheartedly. Taking the time to fully understand cultural norms and taboos, along with building genuine relationships before picking up the camera is key. But we have to prioritize photographers from those communities getting the work first. If you’re offered a paid assignment, kindly decline if you can and recommend photographers who understand the culture. These storytellers can easily be found through [Diversify Photo](#), [Authority Collective](#), [Natives Photograph](#), [Native Agency](#), and [Women Photograph](#). This also applies to Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color documenting different communities. Our oppression does not make us exempt from creating problematic images.

An example of this was when the fight for [Mauna a Wākea](#) (the most sacred mountain to Native Hawaiians) reignited in 2019. I

was tempted to photograph the police action, but after talking to friends and examining my place, I decided not to. I'm not Native Hawaiian. I can never completely feel their pain as an ally. There were also various talented Native Hawaiian photographers onsite already, such as [Kapulei Flores](#), Sydney Lyons, [Cody Fay](#), and [Kaipo Kiaha](#), who are all deeply rooted in Maunakea's significance to their culture. Out of respect, I waited until I was invited to volunteer for the [Mauna media team](#), only documenting lighter moments during [protocol](#) and around [Pu'uhonua o Pu'uhuluhulu](#). I understood that those painful images were not mine to make. As outsiders documenting different communities, we always have to keep this in mind.

If you do decide to photograph the protests or must do so for work, remember that photographs can cement moments in history for forever. If you photograph a person of color in a vulnerable position, it forces viewers to see them a specific way. Even if they're an honorable, local hero who saves lives, viewers can't see past what you present to them. As Nana Kofi Acquah [said in an interview](#) with Danielle Villasana for Medium, "The child you photographed naked with scars on her body running in war is no longer a child – you merely froze a second in her life. But to the world, she's a poor child in a war-torn country, naked, and on fire. To the world, she eternally stays a victim. When you are negatively represented in photographs, it becomes extremely difficult to move on." Capturing the wrong moment can even incriminate and [harm the people you photograph](#), further jeopardizing their lives. The health and safety of the people in our photographs should always be our number one priority. It is our ethical duty.

Instead of photographing dark moments and further enforcing narratives that harm Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color, think about [how you can practice genuine allyship](#). If you decide to coin yourself as an ally, you cannot take that responsibility lightly. It is not a title easily earned. You have to truly put in the work by examining your privileges

and understanding how you can use it to help others. As comedian, activist, television and YouTube personality Franchesca Ramsey states, "[It's not about your intent, it's about your impact.](#)" Separate yourself from your work and explore how you can step up for these communities. [Research ways you can demand justice for George Floyd.](#) If your living situation and health allows you to [safely participate in a protest](#), attend without a camera as someone there for the cause. Research the ways in which you can work towards helping [decolonize the industry](#). Read Photoshelter and Authority Collective's [guide to inclusive photography](#).

Black people, Indigenous people, and other communities of color [must also confront](#) the influence of racism and anti-Blackness in our communities, despite how educated or "woke" we decide we are. My Southeast Asian culture has [its own struggles with internalized racism and colorism](#) that it needs to face — something that I battled with as the darkest amongst my siblings. Because of the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, Asian-Americans have a [complicated history](#) with the Black community. The "[model minority](#)" myth has been used to pit us against other minorities for decades. That tension is unfortunately still alive today with [Officer Tou Thao](#) being one of the Minneapolis police officers present during George Floyd's murder. It's an ugly example of how many Asians and Asian-Americans [attempt to assimilate with whiteness in America](#). Many of us were taught by our immigrant parents to keep our heads down, but we can't do that anymore. It is our job as the next generation to dismantle this silence and speak up alongside our Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other siblings of color. [We have to do better.](#)

Being an ally is a constant learning process that never ends. Even as I write this, I recognize that there are ways I can improve as an ally across all spectrums. I still mess up constantly, but I recognize those mistakes, apologize, and attempt to fix them by [educating myself online](#). It's important

that we do the emotional labor to truly free ourselves from a colonized way of thinking. If this makes you feel uncomfortable, good. Use that discomfort to reflect on your privileges, figure out how you can be better, and do your own research.

In an era where being political isn't an option anymore, be aware of where you stand and what you stand for. I've stopped caring about objectivity and staying silent in journalism because frankly, it is impossible to be complacent and objective over murder. For Black people, Indigenous people, and other communities of color in the field, it's impossible to stay silent about issues that affect our loved ones and ourselves. But because of our intricate connection, our abilities to tell those stories become stronger. That in itself is powerful. As a Brown woman raised by immigrants in America, how can I not be angry over the current state of our country? The mere existence of people of color in America is political.

I'm grateful to have found a circle of compassionate, kind-hearted editors who understand this. For those scared to speak up in fear of losing work, you'll find them too. Even though certain editors will blacklist me because of this, I'm okay with that. Anyone who has issues with fighting for human rights is not someone I want to be associated with. I recognize that is a personal choice.

Always remember that you're a human with emotions before you're a journalist. Always remember that the people in your photos are human beings, not art projects. Say George Floyd's name, Breonna Taylor's name, Ahmaud Arbery's name, Eric Garner's name, Tony McDade's name, Nina Pop's name, Trayvon Martin's name, Sandra Bland's name and every other name of a [Black human being gone too soon](#). Our industry's way of forcing us to stay silent and objective at all times is a form of oppression that dehumanizes us. We must move beyond that and do more than just click the shutter button.

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