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From the Closet to the Beach: A Photographer's View of Gay Life on Fire Island From 1975 to 1983

Documentary representations of queer life in the United States have historically been absent or context poor, especially prior to the onset of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. Noted photographer Tom Bianchi bucked this trend and offered an alternative view of gay life in the 1970s and 1980s through his 2013 photo book, Fire Island Pines: Polaroids, 1975–1983. The work provides a much-needed window into gay life during this period where cameras were regarded as threats, and scant documentary-style depictions exist. Through a content analysis and in-depth interview informed by feminist theory, this study explores the politics of belonging and offers insight to practitioners interested in providing nuanced depictions of marginalized groups.

T. J. Thomson

Introduction

“There’s a piece of American life which not only was invisible and not understood, but it was also subject to an enormous amount of prejudice. It caused an incalculable amount of pain.” This is how noted photographer Tom Bianchi described the country’s social attitude toward queer people during the 1970s and 1980s. “We could be subject to bar raids or arrests, extortion, exposure, job loss, on and on, even in civilized society,” he said. “It was pretty dismal.” Bianchi, a gay man, lived much of the year in the closet while working as senior legal counsel for Columbia Pictures. When he could, though, he’d escape north to Fire Island, where he could express his sexuality and also start to preserve through documentary photographs part of the invisible culture to which mainstream America was blind.

While fictional queer representations existed in cinema and art, documentary approaches to gay life during this repressive period are quite rare and deserve study (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). America’s newspaper of record, *The New York Times*, for example, limited its coverage of gays and lesbians in both words and, especially, visuals, through the mid-1970s and early 1980s (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). During the entire year of 1975, for example, the *Times* published just three photos of gay men—two of the first U.S.

serviceman to purposefully out himself, Air Force Sergeant Leonard Matlovich, and one of playwright Tennessee Williams. The following year, the *Times* published just two gay-related images—one more of Matlovich and one of a bedsheet with “No Gay Alliance of Princeton” written on it. These infrequent and context-poor photos lacked depth and were more akin to sterilized, medical imagery than to a documentary visual record that attempted a nuanced and comprehensive story.

Humans are often reactive to cameras (Thomson & Greenwood, 2017). Some individuals become more reserved when in front of them, while others become more theatrical. Cameras, and the resulting images, have a staying power that affords them potency often mixed with suspicion. This is even more true for marginalized communities, such as the otherwise closeted gay men whom Bianchi documented in the mid-1970s and early 1980s as they escaped to Fire Island Pines for brief reprieves from the closet. “Because so many of us lived in the closet, photographs posed a threat,” Bianchi wrote in the introduction to his 2013 book, *Fire Island Pines: Polaroids, 1975–1983*. “They could be used against us. Jobs could be lost. And worse.” As an insider, though, Bianchi was able to record the experiences of gay, closeted men with both candor and artistry.

Through a content analysis of 350 images, published by Damiani for the first time in 2013 as *Fire Island Pines: Polaroids*, this study looks at the variables of social distance, subject recognizability, focal length, and taboos, including public nudity and an embrace of same-sex intimacy, to explore, through an analysis bolstered by feminist theory, how gay men in Bianchi's photographs constructed their culture, responded to social mores, and exhibited their values and priorities. An in-depth interview with Bianchi following the content analysis also provides depth and offers implications for practitioners interested in documenting marginalized groups.

Literature Review

To better understand the period under study, historical representations of queer individuals will be explored, followed by background on Bianchi and his approach; Fire Island, the environment where Bianchi lived and worked; and a discussion of belonging and the politics of belonging, which serves as the study's theoretical foundation.

Historical Attitudes Toward Queer Individuals

Before the 1960s, explicit U.S. news media references to homosexuality were incredibly rare and, when present, overwhelmingly negative (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). The American press and public ignored the movement for LGBT equality before the Stonewall Riots broke out in the late 1960s (Bronski, 1984). After Stonewall, the U.S. public could not disregard queer identities completely, so it adopted a different tactic. "Western culture could not ignore sexuality completely, so it tried to contain it in well delineated compartments, thereby rendering it non-threatening" (Bronski, 1984, p. 137).

Almost a dozen content analyses conducted during the 1980s noted the U.S. news media's homophobic slant, which "stigmatized gay men as outcasts—deviants responsible for their own plight" (Fejes & Petrich, 1993, p. 404; Gross, 2012). Not until the 1990s did national news associations begin identifying the unchallenged homophobia of their members' coverage and begin instituting education and training programs to better their reporting (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). Thus, Bianchi's work provides a much-needed alternate perspective on gay life during this period where visual depictions of LGBTQ life were absent in the mainstream news media.

Bianchi and His Approach

Bianchi is the author of more than 20 books and a noted photographer whose work has been reproduced so widely it can be considered iconic (Giles, 1997). New Yorker photography critic Vince Aletti selected Bianchi's *Fire Island Pines: Polaroids* as one of the best photo books of 2013, alongside documentary photo giants such as Sebastião Salgado and Josef Koudelka. (TIME, 2013). Bianchi credits his aesthetic to his childhood.

My eye as an artist had been educated by seeing fine art. I spent a lot of time when I was a kid very happily wandering around the Art Institute of Chicago. That's what my idea of art was—the best. I have had to coin a term because no term existed in the English language to describe what I call "illoptacy," which is visual illiteracy. This may sound harsh, but most people use their sense of sight so as not to bump into furniture as they walk into rooms. They don't really have a sense of aesthetics. I know that even today I'm constantly framing, editing what I see in aesthetic terms, wondering, if I were to take a picture of that, what would I show? (Bianchi, 2016, unpublished interview)

Bianchi said he wanted to be a painter-sculptor, originally but then changed goals when he realized it wasn't economically possible. After obtaining a law degree at Northwestern, he started working for Columbia Pictures, where an executive gave him a camera as a gift. He brought it with him to Fire Island, where he had a house, and started documenting life there. The resulting photographs are largely documentary with a splash of portraiture thrown in.

I'm thinking about the pictures of the people dancing at the party—in a sense, it's staged because I staged myself to view what was happening. I made an aesthetic decision. I'm thinking particularly of a guy in red shorts dancing; you see him from waist down. That's a very carefully composed picture, but it was completely documentary (Bianchi, 2016, unpublished interview). See Figure 1.

Bianchi did not caption any of the images because he wanted to leave them open to interpretation and increase the relevance and interaction between the viewers and the images. "I always thought that my introductory text would be sufficient to describe the atmosphere and give them context, so people could figure out and kind of imagine how to put the pieces of the



Figure 1 Untitled, 201. Tom Bianchi | Fire Island Pines | Polaroids 1975–1983. Medium: SX-70 Polaroid. Reproduced with permission of the creator.

puzzle together themselves,” he said. While individual images might speak differently to different people or have divergent meanings, by investigating through a content analysis the whole scope of Bianchi’s 350 images from his eight years on the island, a more systematic, thorough, and comprehensive view of themes, patterns, and variables can emerge and be analyzed.

Fire Island

Fire Island is a barrier island that buffers the southern edge of Long Island. It has been hailed as America’s first gay and lesbian town (Newton, 2014). Curiously, its neighbors across the bay on Long Island were the towns Sayville and Patchogue, which were known in the 1920s for their conservatism and produced the most active Ku Klux Klan chapter in the state (Newton, 2014). Some decades later, the political climate had not changed. “We called the world we’d left across the bay—America. And we knew that if America knew what we were up to on our remote beach, they would not approve” (Bianchi, 2013). Because of Fire Island’s seminal status in

LGBTQ history and the lack of documentary visuals depicting life on it, the island serves as an ideal backdrop for understanding what was important to queer individuals in the pre-AIDS crisis and how they constructed their community.

Theoretical Underpinning

This study is anchored in feminist theory and, among others, the writings of Nira Yuval-Davis, who explored in her scholarly work belonging and the politics of belonging. Belonging is an emotional connection, one of safety, security, and feeling “at home” (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Belonging tends to become politicized only when it is threatened or challenged in some way and needs to be studied on at least three analytical levels: social locations, identifications and emotional attachments, and ethical and political values (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Other scholars (Gorman-Murray, Waitt, & Gibson, 2008; Van Zyl, 2011) have explored the politics of belonging in LGBTQ contexts but did so either in contemporary times or in locations where LGBTQ individuals are the minority. Since Fire Island was separated—literally and figuratively—

from the U.S. mainland and because LGBTQ individuals made up the majority rather than the minority of the population, this setting provides a unique application of the theory.

Brief overviews of the three analytical levels of belonging as outlined by Yuval-Davis (2006) and a snapshot of the implications for politicized belonging follow:

Social Locations. Gender, race, class, nationality, sexuality, occupation, and religion are examples of social and economic locations. While these categories are nominal in an abstract sense, in everyday practice, they become interval in application where people rank and rate others based on the values of these orientations. Such rankings and ratings are sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, and have definite implications for power and position (Yuval-Davis, 2006). These positions are fluid, dynamic, and organic. They can be claimed, contested, and mean different things based on the sociohistorical context in which their members find themselves. This study examined the social locations of gender and sexuality.

Identifications and Emotional Attachments. Identities are narratives, whether individual or collective, that help people distinguish to themselves and to others who they are and who they are not (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Tension exists between the processes of being and becoming and are heightened when the emotional components of a person's identity are challenged. As an identity is questioned, marginalized, trivialized, or rendered invisible, the more threatened and less secure the individual feels, which is one reason why people might resort to violence, either self-violence or violence directed at others, to protect, defend, or cope with a threatened identity.

Identity narratives and emotional attachments are formed through repetitive, performative actions, such as the tea dances, house parties, and romps to the meat rack that Bianchi and his fellow islanders organized. These practices chain individual and collective behavior and foster a sense of unity, camaraderie, and belonging. This study examines the exhibitionistic/voyeuristic elements of queer identity during this time as well as how same-sex intimacy was both flaunted and celebrated.

Ethical and Political Values. Ethical and political values relate to how one's social locations, identities, and emotional attachments are valued and judged. They concern how boundaries should be normatively constructed, how inclusive

or exclusive they are, and how permanent they are. In this case, the study explored how social distance was enacted and whether—through the variable of focal length—Bianchi's subjects functioned as props in scenic landscapes, unidentifiable cookie-cutter shapes, or nuanced individuals who commanded attention and dominated the frame.

The Politics of Belonging. The politics of belonging relates to the concepts of entitlement and status and the ordering of individuals and groups into "us" and "them" groups. Due to the forces of cultural and psychological heterosexism, homosexuality in the United States has historically been denied, denigrated, and stigmatized (Herek, 1990). Cultural and psychological heterosexism seeks to make homosexuality invisible or at the least, to trivialize, repress, or stigmatize it (Herek, 1990). For Bianchi and gay men like him, the politics of belonging forced them to flee their repressive origins and search for a space more amicable to their identities.

I grew up attracted to males in a hostile world that rejected men like me as queers. Survival required me to imagine the world otherwise. I dreamed there might be a place where boys like me could play in the sun, walk on a beach holding hands, and even fall in love. (Bianchi, 2013, p. 6)

The Pines was that space for Bianchi: "Most of us came from an Eisenhower era suburb we were beyond anxious to be free of" (Bianchi, 2013, p. 9). The study's various variables, including social distance, bodily exposure, recognizability, and intimacy, allow an exploration of how belonging was politicized and how Fire Island offered an alternative existence for the queer individuals who resided there.

Research Questions

Considering how the Pines functioned as a place for closeted queer men to escape and behave differently, the study's first research question concerns itself with social mores and taboos, specifically those related to social distance, clothing or its absence, and voyeurism and exhibitionism, as measured through focal length.

RQ1: How do Bianchi's subjects in *Fire Island Pines: Polaroids* respond to societal taboos of the time?

Since homosexuality was largely invisible in news media depictions during the study's time frame, the second research question explores whether

this invisibility also filtered into Bianchi's depictions of his subjects.

RQ2: How identifiable are the gay men in Bianchi's *Fire Island Pines: Polaroids*? Is the viewer asked to view them conceptually as part of a larger group or, more specifically, as unique and distinct individuals?

Considering how shallow and often context poor the news media's depictions of LGBTQ individuals have been historically, the third research question explores implications for visual journalists working with sensitive populations.

RQ3: How might practitioners learn from Bianchi's approach in working with and documenting marginalized populations?

Methods

This study adopted a two-pronged, mixed-methods approach. The first, a quantitative content analysis, was paired with an in-depth, qualitative interview so that both breadth and depth could be achieved. The content analysis provided a systematic understanding of Bianchi's images and the content within them. It illuminated broad themes and patterns that could be integrated into the subsequent interview so that the "how" and "why" questions, in addition to the "who," "what," and "where" ones, could be explored.

Population Description for the Content Analysis

The study's population is 350 color photographs created from 1975 to 1983 by Bianchi during his time on Fire Island. Bianchi captured his experiences with a SX-70 Polaroid camera, and the images were publicly available for the first time in 2013, when Damiani published *Fire Island Pines: Polaroids, 1975–1983*, which has not yet received scholarly attention. Except for 18, all the images reproduced in the book are the same 4" x 5" size as the original Polaroids. The remaining 18 either fill an entire 9" x 10.5" page or occupy an 18" x 10.5" double-page spread.

Unitizing Decisions

The sampling unit is Bianchi's 2013 book, *Fire Island Pines: Polaroids*, and the coding units are the individual Polaroids reproduced in the book. Since this study is concerned with meaning making of LGBTQ individuals prior to and during the onset of the AIDS crisis, a sole context unit was added that only images depicting people should be coded. This resulted in a pool of 292 images with people in them.

Population Selection and Justification

This study adopted a census approach where every possible unit from Bianchi's 2013 book was included in the analysis. The scarcity of comparable data, the uniqueness of the images, and the feasibility of comprehensive analysis led to the decision to forego studying a subset of the population. While media depictions of gay life abound, press coverage during this period, such as in *The New York Times*, was shallow and often relegated to text-only stories. When photos were included, they were often mugshots that lacked context. Bianchi's insider status gave him unparalleled access to depict the experiences of otherwise closeted gay men, and the resulting depictions are unique and worthy of comprehensive study. Further, Bianchi's approach, in his own words, was different. "They are unique artifacts," he wrote in a June 8, 2016, e-mail interview:

And the subjects—so many of them gone—have held them (the images) in their hands as they came out of the camera. They are different from a photograph in that they bring us closer to the experience. You are in the same moment discovering the image as the people in them.

This contrasts with the approach of press photographers, who had no such accountability to their subjects. Unlike Bianchi, who as a resident of the island had reoccurring interactions with his subjects, press photographers can photograph a subject once and then never see them again. The subjects, too, might never see the images the photographer creates, lessening the accountability and transparency between subject and photographer. Thus, both Bianchi's approach and the images he made differ significantly from the images and approaches of 1970s and 1980s press photographers, and because they offer an alternative perspective on life during this time period and how visual storytellers interact with their subjects, they can provide valuable insight for those interested in systematically and comprehensively understanding them.

Coding Procedure

The study's design follows quantitative content analytic best practices as outlined by Krippendorff (2013) and Neuendorf (2002). Specifically, it employs an a priori design, was externally coded, and used rigorous intercoder reliability standards. In June 2016, two second-year doctoral students—one in communication and the other in journalism—received 50 hours of coder training and practice using similar

photographs made during the same time period by another gay photographer, Crawford Barton, who lived and worked on the West Coast. Coders were not shown any of the study's research questions or hypotheses to prevent explicit or implicit bias. Further, they coded independently from each other and from the researcher so that "consensus by conformity" was avoided. After each round of training, discrepancies were noted, and the codebook was adjusted. After three rounds of training and three revisions to the codebook, each coder was assigned 160 of Bianchi's images so that a 10% overlap could be tested for intercoder reliability. Following coding, the overlap was tested using Krippendorff's alpha, and only variables that had achieved $\alpha = .85$ or greater were retained for analysis.

Conceptualizations and Operationalizations of Variables

In addition to the demographic characteristics of age and gender, four appearance variables and one action variable were coded.

Appearance Variables

Using Hall's (1963) typology for proxemics as a reference, a *social distance* variable ($\alpha = 1.0$) was created with two possible values: (1) subject is alone, or (2) subjects are with others. A variable for *exposure* ($\alpha = 1.0$) was included to explore whether the subjects depicted in the photos were clothed, partially clothed (bare chests for women; exposed buttocks for men), or fully naked (visible genitals). Drawing on Thompson's and Bowen's (2009) visual framing typology as a point of departure, coders recorded the approximate *focal length* ($\alpha = 1.0$) of each image. Images where the full bodies or body parts of Bianchi's subjects filled the frame were coded as *subject(s) dominant*. Images where the full body or bodies of subjects were visible but occupied 1/3 or less of the frame were coded as *background dominant*. *Recognizability* ($\alpha = .868$) was an emergent variable included to explore whether the subjects depicted were photographed in such a way as to be identifiable, e.g., from the front, with an adequate exposure, etc., or unidentifiable, as in the case of silhouettes, turned faces, and behind-the-back shots.

Action Variable

A variable for *intimacy* ($\alpha = 1.0$) was included to gauge whether the subjects were shown in any state of arousal or whether sexual activity was shown occurring between two or more people. Since each of the salient variables was nominal in nature, chi-square tests were processed through

SPSS. Additionally, adjusted residual statistics were obtained to determine whether images with certain characteristics were under- or overrepresented.

In-Depth Interview

Following the coding process and data analysis, an in-depth phone interview with Bianchi was conducted the following month. This interview probed into the photographer's connection with his subjects; his methods, processes, and approach; the social mores of the island; and implications that his approach has for documentary photography. Bianchi was also interviewed about salient patterns and themes uncovered through the content analysis. The interview was recorded, and a verbatim transcript was produced for analysis.

Results

RQ1: How do Bianchi's subjects in *Fire Island Pines: Polaroids* respond to societal taboos of the time?

Bianchi's subjects broke taboos related to social distance and intimacy, exposure, and voyeurism/exhibitionism.

Social Distance and Intimacy

Subjects in Bianchi's photographs appeared more often with others than by themselves. In 175 instances (59.9%), individuals shared the frame with others, while in the remaining 117 images, the subjects were alone. These results are impacted, too, by the focal length of the SX-70 camera Bianchi used. Bianchi classified his camera's lens as wide angle, which required him to be in close proximity to his subjects to fill the frame with their bodies. "I was pretty much right there," he said. "I was looking to see what filled the frame" (Bianchi, 2016, unpublished interview). The subjects dominated the frame in an overwhelming 242 instances (82.9% of all images), while the background was the dominant element in only 50 shots (17.1%). Subjects exhibited sexually intimate behavior either alone or in groups in just under one-fourth of Bianchi's images. Intimacy between two characters led with 45 depictions (15.4% of all images), followed by solo intimacy with 12 instances (4.1%) and intimacy between more than two characters with 8 occurrences (2.7%). A significant relationship exists between social distance and intimacy ($\chi^2 = 57.002$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$), and since a majority of the subjects who shared the frame were same-sex and in close proximity, if not touching, this evidences that Bianchi's subjects shirked societal

norms regarding male-male intimacy and proxemics. “We had a sense of reckless freedom,” Bianchi said. “Imagine that, we were all kids from the suburbs, very repressed, and finally, we find ourselves in the sandbox and there’s no mommy and daddy to tell us what we may or may not do” (2016, unpublished interview).

Exposure

Subjects were partially or fully nude in more than one-fourth of Bianchi’s images. Partially nude subjects made up 11% of the depictions with 32 occurrences, while fully nude subjects made up an even greater 15.1% with 44 instances.

Considering that Bianchi created 233 images (79.9%) in public spaces and 59 (20.2%) images in private spaces, and that subjects were fully or partially naked while in public in 66 images (26.1%), Bianchi’s subjects bucked the norm of nudity being relegated to private spaces.

I was told that one of the things you might do with your career, not something you have to do, but something you might consider, is being fearless fearless and extravagant in your depiction of that (sexual) energy, so I have, and that’s an extraordinarily political act. (Bianchi, 2016, unpublished interview)

Voyeurism/Exhibitionism

As measured by focal length, Bianchi was close enough to his subjects that their bodies dominated the frame in 242 of the images (82.9%). In only 50 images (17.1%) does the background dominate the frame. This evidences a voyeuristic intent on the part of Bianchi, who photographed from close enough so that his subjects’ bodies dominated the image frame. It also evidences an exhibitionistic streak in 26.1% of his photographs, where, because of the close subject-to-camera distance, his subjects knew they were being photographed while either fully or partially naked. Adjusted residuals in the cross-tabulation for these variables reveals that clothed subjects when alone were significantly underrepresented ($AR = -2.6$) while fully naked subjects were significantly overrepresented ($AR = 2.5$) compared to the expected distribution.

I think I have them (voyeurism and exhibitionism) balanced in my own life. Perhaps I’ve included myself in my pictures in rather radical ways. I’m a massive voyeur because I love photographing sex. I love photographing the beauty of it. I love photographing the beauty of the body. (Bianchi, 2016)

Dismembered bodies, e.g., the faceless shots of torsos that abound in Bianchi’s work, are often considered a form of sexual objectification. Concern for the anonymity of Bianchi’s closeted subjects is likely a driving factor here, but such framing can also function as liberating in addition to objectifying, since body image is central to queer identity (Morrison, Morrison, & Sager, 2004) and because men’s bodies weren’t highlighted or celebrated for their sexual nature in mainstream U.S. culture. Thus, Bianchi’s framing served a liberatory purpose as well as a sensual one.

RQ2: How identifiable are the gay men in Bianchi’s *Fire Island Pines: Polaroids*? Is the viewer asked to view them conceptually as part of a larger group or, more specifically, as unique and distinct individuals?

Slightly more than half of Bianchi’s subjects aren’t recognizable. The subjects in 160 of the photos (54.8%) are not identifiable, either because they are not facing the camera, they are silhouetted, or, in the case of dozens of portraits that highlight a single body part, their faces aren’t visible. Subjects who were fully recognizable made up 81 of the images (27.7%), while a mix of identifiable and unidentifiable subjects comprised the remaining 51 images (17.5%). A chi-square test for goodness of fit confirms that the difference in distribution is significant ($\chi^2 = 65.144$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$). Bianchi said his subjects’ comfort, as well as some pragmatic reasons, determined whether he photographed their faces.

It (faceless subjects) does solve the problem of, “Oh shit, you blinked. Oh god, I hate that expression.” It had that going for it, and it had the anonymity issue going for it for the sake of those who needed to be anonymous. (Bianchi, unpublished interview, 2016)

RQ3: How might practitioners learn from Bianchi’s approach in working with and documenting marginalized populations?

One can draw at least four main insights from Bianchi’s approach when documenting marginalized populations, including that the creators have appropriate intent, be transparent with those involved in the production, offer a unique perspective, and have an empathetic connection with the subjects in some way.

The genius of the SX-70 was that it dovetailed with the problem. I could go to a party and take pictures and throw them out on the table—and I remember doing that so

constantly—and people could come over and take a look. So people started seeing that, first of all, these weren't ordinary, and secondly, they weren't the kind of things you could imagine would be used for blackmail. They were very beautiful pictures of a really amazing group of people. (Bianchi, 2016, unpublished interview)

This following paragraphs evidence several of Bianchi's approaches, each of which deserves further exploration and elaboration.

Intent

Bianchi's own intent with his *Fire Island* images was personal rather than professional. In many ways, he experienced more cognitive dissonance than did the people he photographed because he had to leave and then reenter the closet each time he visited the island. He thus emphasized the residents' carefree sexuality because it stood in such stark contrast to how men, himself included, had to behave on the mainland.

I've always admitted that part of my intention was social-psychological. When I came out there, I saw these amazing people. So talented. So beautiful. So gymned up. So hot. So sexy. All of that. It was like, "If I show you how beautiful you are, will you invite me to your party?" I always found myself standing on the outside a bit. That insecurity, I think, probably served me well. (Bianchi, 2016, unpublished interview)

Bianchi was critical of creatives who produced their work hoping to achieve fame or wealth from it: "There's only really one compliment that matters at the end of the day," he said, "and it's not what a print of yours sold at auction, it's somebody saying, 'Wow. I was a kid. I saw your work, and it helped me become who I am, to come out.'"

Transparency

Bianchi admitted that subjects of visual news media representations often never see the resulting images or their creator again after the images have been made. If the creators of these depictions don't have accountability to their subjects since they might not see them again or might not see how the work is being published, it can create distrust, anxiety, and suspicion that affect not only that particular relationship but potentially also interactions with other news professionals or the industry in general. Instead of using them as a means to an end, Bianchi involved his subjects into the creative process so

they became excited about his work and depictions.

There's a four-page spread (in *Fire Island Pines: Polaroids*) where you just see the torsos of people. . . . That was a peculiarly strange, beautiful day in that there was a light mist-fog that acted as a gauss lightbox. As I took my first pictures in it, I was like, "My god, this is the best color I've ever gotten. It's so cool." That series of torso pictures emerged from that idea. I had them in my pocket, so the next people I walked up to, I said, "Hey, this is what I'm doing today, this is what I'm getting," and they would look at it and say, "Oh god, yeah, that's cool. You can take my picture" (Bianchi, unpublished interview, 2016). See Figure 2.

Unique Perspective

Bianchi said talent alone was not enough. The creator can be skilled, but if the depictions are not inspired, they tend to be formulaic and un compelling.

I had a friend, actually, who was a fairly competent photojournalist. He would take 35 mm pictures and, at the end of each summer, he would invite us all to a slideshow to see the pictures. His pictures were pretty formulaic. He'd have four guys, one guy, two guys, sitting in front of the camera, looking at the camera. Very, very, ordinary group photos. (Bianchi, unpublished interview, 2016)

Such depictions, while technically adequate, were not compelling because the photographer Bianchi references didn't tap into any unique perspective or personal vision, choosing instead to photograph the islanders like he might any other subject across the bay in "straight America."

Empathy

Bianchi maintained a house on Fire Island; he was a local, a regular; and had professional and personal connections with its inhabitants. This afforded him the ability to understand and share the feelings and perspectives of his fellow islanders, which allowed him to portray them intimately and evocatively.

No, you couldn't have done it as an outsider. First of all, it would have been suspicious, and we were protective of our community. At the time, we would watch as day-trippers, they were called, people who were just coming for the day, we hoped, at first, that



Figure 2 Clockwise, from top left: Untitled 365, Untitled 362, Untitled 363, Untitled 376. Tom Bianchi | Fire Island Pines | Polaroids 1975–1983. Medium: SX-70 Polaroid. Reproduced with permission of the creator.

they would find the queer village not to be something they would feel comfortable in. (Bianchi, unpublished interview, 2016)

Bianchi's sexuality is a core part of his identity and likely provided easy common ground and trust between him and those he photographed. However, though being an insider was essential, it might be possible to attain insider status without sharing all of the characteristics of the insiders. For example, in this case, a straight man or woman who possessed the necessary skills, who invested adequate time on the island, and who showed respect for the people and their culture could likely also produce evocative imagery despite not being queer.

Discussion

Returning to the theoretical roots of the study, the politics of belonging were alive and well on Fire Island. Bianchi and others like him escaped to the Pines because they felt they didn't belong on the mainland; however, they created their own

politics of belonging where only people with certain attributes or those who performed certain actions were welcome. Inhabitants had to, according to Bianchi, meet one of four criteria to belong: one had to be beautiful, talented, charming and witty, or willing to do menial labor. Categorization, including self-categorization, deeply affects social relations (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wheterel, 1987), and a desire to construct and maintain positive social identities often results in in-group bias (Brewer, 1979; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971).

Whenever an in-group exists, then an out-group must also exist. To belong, to be included, one draws invisible boundaries that separate people based on attributes or actions, and these boundaries organically change and evolve as identities become threatened, challenged, or marginalized. While at first Bianchi said he and his islanders were protective of themselves and wished visitors would not feel comfortable, the dynamic eventually changed as the country's political landscape evolved. "Eventually, of



Figure 3 Untitled, 666. One of the images Bianchi said he made with political intent that highlighted the sexual liberation the Pines' residents exercised. Tom Bianchi | Fire Island Pines | Polaroids 1975–1983. Medium: SX-70 Polaroid. Reproduced with permission of the creator.

course, we realized we were becoming more integrated and people were becoming more comfortable,” he said.

RQ1: How do Bianchi’s subjects in *Fire Island Pines: Polaroids* respond to societal taboos of the time?

The Pines acquired a reputation for being expensive and elitist, but at the same time, it lacked the infrastructure and services offered by larger communities across the bay (Bianchi, 2016, unpublished interview; Hatfield, n.d.). People did not own cars, for example, had to use sporadic water transport to get to and from the island, and had access to few stores and commodities, yet the Pines’s residents were willing to forego these luxuries and creature comforts for the chance to break the social taboos that they could not on the mainland. Fire Island provided an opportunity where the societal prohibitions against exhibitionism, same-sex intimacy, and public nudity could be shirked and where one’s queer and sexually liberated identity could be free from

challenge and threat. This illustrates the power of identity and the price people are willing to pay to avoid cognitive dissonance.

Same-sex desire on the mainland during the mid-1970s and early 1980s was not only invisible but was also misunderstood, Bianchi said. “Back in those days, there were two ways of denigrating gay people,” Bianchi said. “One was to say they’re unspeakable. You can’t even talk about it. And the other was to say, ‘It’s frivolous. There’s no substance to it. It’s an arid, unproductive way of being.’” To respond to the invisibility and the trivializing of the queer experience, Bianchi responded with his politically charged and often sexually laden images. See Figure 3.

I think the pictures are extraordinarily political because we were brave. I think I’m old enough now to be able to say that with authority. We were brave in that we had created for ourselves a beautiful world, and we loved to play in it, and we weren’t afraid of expressing that. That’s a political act. It



Figure 4 Untitled, 539. Bianchi said the pressure to maintain an idealized body type skyrocketed during his time on the island. Tom Bianchi | Fire Island Pines | Polaroids 1975–1983. Medium: SX-70 Polaroid. Reproduced with permission of the creator.

was a rebuke to the world. I think it's Oscar Wilde, who made the observation that creation of beauty is a rebuke to the ugliness of the world. (Bianchi, unpublished interview, 2016)

The frequent nudity in Bianchi's images serves as a testament to the objectification-as-liberation approach that allowed his subjects to celebrate their bodies while also maintaining their anonymity and thus preserve their job security and social standing upon returning to the mainland.

RQ2: How identifiable are the gay men in Bianchi's *Fire Island Pines: Polaroids*? Is the viewer asked to view them conceptually as part of a larger group or, more specifically, as unique and distinct individuals?

A majority of Bianchi's subjects were unidentifiable. Recognizability was contingent, largely, upon the subject's occupation. Some industries were more homophobic than others.

As a lawyer, Bianchi had reason to stay behind the camera and keep his sexuality discreet. This was less true for the island's many actors, artists, and models. "A lot of the guys were in fashion so they didn't have to worry about being outed," Bianchi said. "I was an attorney. I was senior counsel at Columbia Pictures. I had reason to be hidden, but some of them didn't."

While the subject's comfort and potential desire for anonymity factored into how identifiable Bianchi's subjects were, his fascination with and desire to portray an idealized body type also affected whether he photographed conceptually or concretely. Bianchi was not alone in this fascination. The island's residents faced intense pressure to create and maintain idealized bodies, he said.

Each winter, more of us, myself included, found our ways to the gyms. We discovered our abilities to transform ourselves, and I likened it to butterflies emerging. . . . The gay community was transformed very rapidly

into a place that would cause people's jaws to drop. You'd find yourself at a party with so many extraordinarily beautiful men. (Bianchi, 2016, unpublished interview)

This intense pressure for conformity resulted in greater uniformity and less individuality in Bianchi's images. Even when his subjects appear alone, they function more as archetypical sex symbols than they do as nuanced humans with flaws and quirks. In Figure 4 Bianchi introduces us to the queer male version of the nymph, a mythic creature of beauty resting by the water's edge alongside symbols of strength and position. The image provides few clues to the man's identity since his chiseled and hairy features are so mainstream. The subject's downturned gaze leads the viewer's own eyes down his exposed body so that both subject and viewer might be, simultaneously, lost in the beauty of perfection. The lack of any caption or title reinforces the abstract, idealized group identity at the cost of individuation.

By excluding from the frame subjects who did not fit an idealized body type—because of the many similarities between his subjects, his selective approach to photographing them, and because of their comfort—Bianchi's photographs are grounded more in conceptual rather than concrete terms. This increases their applicability and resonance with viewers. By looking a certain way, Bianchi's subjects visibly demonstrated their unity and belonging. Bianchi's photos serve as a model for aspiring Pines residents. This has positive and negative implications, as it can foster a sense of community though doing so at the expense of creative expressions of individual identity. This is especially salient considering that past research suggests that queer men are more body conscious than their straight counterparts (Morrison, Morrison, & Sager, 2004).

RQ3: How might practitioners learn from Bianchi's approach in working with and documenting marginalized populations?

Bianchi's approach and work abounds in their implications for contemporary visual journalists. First, he photographed people together more often than alone. Past research (Thomson & Greenwood, 2017) suggests that subjects are more comfortable and less reactive while being photographed when in groups compared to when they are alone. If the marginalized subject is stiff or uncomfortable in front of the camera, documenting them interacting with others can help ease the stiffness and stimulate more engaging, natural images.

Second, Bianchi used a wide-angle lens, which necessitated him being in close proximity to his subjects. He didn't skulk around the periphery with a long telephoto lens and document his subjects like an outsider looking in; rather, he was always within close range of his subjects. This made him more of a participant than a casual bystander, which likely increased his subject's comfort.

Third, in addition to considering the elements of intent, transparency, unique perspective, and empathy that are outlined in the Results section, modern visual journalists might also consider how representative their depictions are of the population as a whole. They might do this through a process similar to "member checking" (Creswell & Miller, 2000), where they show the depictions not only to those depicted but also to others in the community to gauge whether they are representative of more than one attribute or type of subject. They might also consider the manifest or latent political nature of their work and the impact it might have among those depicted as well as those who engage with and discuss those media.

Limitations

As with any research study, this one is not without its limitations. While strenuous attention and rigorous care was undertaken in the study's design and execution, not all variables that the independent coders analyzed reached acceptable levels of reliability and so were not included in the analysis. This reduced the breadth and potential for additional statistical testing among variables.

Opportunities for Future Research

Additional research examining whether the media depictions one is exposed to or whether social peer pressure is a more effective motivating factor would be helpful and extend the results of these findings. Additionally, examining and ranking the effectiveness of each of the four factors (intent, transparency, unique perspective, and empathy) identified in this study would serve the practical interests of journalists who seek to visually document the lives of marginalized groups.

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