

ABSTRACT

**AMERICA UNDER CONSTRUCTION:
THE EVER-EVOLVING STATE OF AMERICAN IDENTITY
AS COMMUNICATED THROUGH PICTURE**

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This project examines American identity using C. Wright Mills' development of the *micro* and the *macro* as seen through photographs. The development of identity is often complex, especially as it is a construction of society rather than a component of life that exists within the natural world. The project centers around the creation of a photobook exploring American identity as understood by one photographer. That photobook is submitted as a supplemental file and is referred to throughout the exploration of identity.

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BY

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“It is my intention to present - through the medium of photography - intuitive observations of the natural world which may have meaning to the spectators.”

Ansel Adams

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Capturing what C. Wright Mills (1959) calls the big picture of what is understood to be *American*, both as identity and culture, might seem like a daunting task. In truth, it is simply a matter of understanding how what has come to be known as *micro* and *macro*¹ come together, intertwining and influencing each other to create that ever-reconstructed identity of what is understood as *American* (Mills, 1959). *American* is a conceptual framework designed to represent the collective identity of a group of people, specifically those who call themselves citizens of the United States of America. Photographs from throughout the United States will be utilized as a communicative representation of the *micro*, and in that light, each will then be connected as an underlying and essential component of the *macro*. Each photograph communicates unique and important stories about America, its people, and the identity they cling to, as communicated through the work of one photographer.

The phrase “American identity” is an elusive entity that one could spend a considerable amount of time attempting to define and only scratch the surface. The overall

¹ For the purposes of this study, when I refer to *micro* I mean one of the smallest levels to analyze, the individual. When I refer to *macro* I mean a much larger structure, the context of the culture of American life. Both concepts come from Mills’ (1959) work on the sociological imagination, where he suggests that we need to look at both the practices and biographies of individuals and the practices and historical considerations (large-scale biography) of the society, to understand any phenomenon’s impact on any society. This perspective aligns with the current study on American identity as communicated through photographs. Throughout, the terms *micro* and *macro* will be used together and separately and will constitute the conceptual underpinning that drives this study.

concept of identity is much the same, in that there seems to be a rootedness in socio-historical moments and thus identities do shift as time inevitably moves forward. History, and an understanding of it, often provides us with the necessary hindsight to grasp the shifting meanings of identity. Further, such factors as social location, economics, the weather, and others, all impact one's own identification within a group (Brekhus 1996). It is not the intention of this work to fully capture American identity inclusively and holistically, but rather to capture some components of American identity as told through the eyes of one photographer over a period of years. Identity will be defined and explored from several perspectives, bringing to the foreground the necessary element to back up the works represented in a collection of photographs meant to communicate the construction of American identity through photographs carefully selected for inclusion. The photograph collection should be seen as a stand-alone coffee-table-type photobook, titled *America Under Construction*, which I created as a project to represent American identity (refer to supplemental file containing photobook). This paper discusses the value of such a book, its photographs, and the research regarding photographic representation of a culture as a tool for communication.

Essentially, the photographs are meant to communicate the message of American identity as I see it in relation to my connection to America. Further, the collection is meant to represent the concept of identity as one that exists outside time and space while at the same time existing within it. That is, the photographs represent something both within the context of the time they were taken and within the time they are viewed. Collectively, they are represented as a thematic visual essay meant to represent my perception of what it means

to be *American* in such a way that a viewer can connect and understand *American* within the constructs of their perception. Photographs thus become an essential and valuable communicative tool in the expression of American identity.

CHAPTER 2

COMMUNICATION AND THE MEDIA

The essence of communication is the transmission of messages among multiple individuals, involving both sender and receiver (Lucas, 2008; Verderber and Verderber, 2008). The fields of communication studies looks at both *what* we communicate as well as *how* we communicate, a given message. This often includes dissection of the language people use, linguistics, or even a critical analysis of what a particular Hollywood film may say about a society at a particular time (Barry, 2002; Belsey, 2002). Structural theorists would have us believe that an important aspect of communication is the structures that comprise society, “imposed by our way of perceiving the world and organising experience, rather than objective entities already existing in the world” (Barry, 2002, p. 39). Essentially, this falls in line with the desire to understand how an individual acts in relation to the structures imposed by the society of which they are a part. Communication is at the heart of this domain of considerations since it involves the sharing of messages between people. In this study, the structuralist view, in conjunction with Mills’ (1959) theory of the *macro* and the *micro* discussed above, works to provide a framework for understanding the narratives presented through photographs as they communicate the concept of American identity.

A particularly important area of communication studies is the media, of which photographs are a part. Media act as tools by which to communicate messages, and include

a vast array of modes, including television, radio, print, and even mobile phones (Jenkins, 2006). For my work with photographs, we can understand media as a vessel by which the larger societal structure, the *macro*, communicates its expectations regarding value and behavior to the *micro*, often reaching a mass collective of that *micro*. Media comprise a pervasive entity with significant impact on the lives of people within, and more recently beyond, a given mode's target market. Take for instance the televised unfolding of the conflict in Vietnam. One family was directly impacted as they watched their son shot on camera live (Ryan and Wentworth, 1999). This family, like many others, were ultimately impacted by the larger structure represented by the media, shifting their views regarding America's involvement in Vietnam in the passing of a single fleeting, media-conveyed, moment.

Moreover, this was before the digital revolution took hold, entailing a shift in our understanding of media, in that "new media was going to change everything" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 6). Indeed it has. The media exists today with abilities to reach millions with a single display. Gone are the days when word-of-mouth transmission acted as the primary mode for communicating a message (Rogers, 1995). The media has moved into a digital world in the vast expanse of the Internet, which people all over the world utilize for gathering information and communicating with friends, family, and colleagues, often through activities as easy as pressing a button from the comfort of wherever a person chooses to be (Kawamoto, 2003). Thus, our understanding of media must shift to represent these new attributes involving different types of engaging interaction between people compared to old media that presented the information for the receiver who could either take

it or leave it, rather than engage it (Jenkins, 2006). Media forms are converging rapidly, to a point that many old forms, such as land-line telephones and print media, seem destined soon to become a thing of the past.

For better or for worse, media convergence has “changed the way in which the news is made” (Erdal, 2007, p. 51) and how it is shared with the world. Stories are selected in consideration of all available media, to ensure the greatest coverage, and ultimately the greatest profitability. What once was an industry centered on sharing information has become an arena in which greater effort is being placed on profit margins than on communicating message (Dupagne and Garrison, 2006; Erdal, 2007). No longer are stories drawn out and expanded, rather they exist as sound bites, pieces of information that only provide a tiny part of a story. Advancements in technology being what they are, people can pick and choose which sound bites they want to engage, seeking out further information as they see fit, which speaks directly to American ideals of efficiency and immediacy (Castells, 1996).

In fact, Ithiel de Sola Pool’s 1983 predictions about the convergence of the media seem confirmed in the reality of media today:

A process called the “convergence of modes” is blurring the lines between media, even between point-to-point communications, such as the post, telephone and telegraph, and mass communications, such as the press, radio, and television. A single physical means—be it wires, cables or airwaves—may carry services that in the past were provided in separate ways. Conversely, a service that was provided in the past by any one medium—be it broadcasting, the press, or telephony—can now be provided in several different physical ways. So the one-to-one relationship that used to exist between a medium and its use is eroding. (cited in Jenkins, 2006, p. 10)

In many ways the world Pool predicted exists today, at least as far as media goes. Corporations, such as Comcast or AT&T, that once only provided a single service now provide several, including specialized packages purportedly aimed at saving the consumer time and money. Additionally, individual technologies, an increasingly important part of the world of media, are becoming more encompassing, providing single hand-held devices to perform a multitude of functions, such as checking e-mails, keeping calendars, and taking photographs (Jenkins, 2006). Despite Pool's accurate prediction of the erosion of the relationship between media and its use, there is still an argument to be made that "a single device or Web-based application offering multi-media attributes does not necessarily replace or displace traditional media usage" (Dupagne and Garrison, 2006, p. 240). While we are not there yet, I don't think Dupagne and Garrison are quite as prophetic as Pool, a point evidenced simply by the trend of the media industry to make such a concentrated effort to incorporate multiple modes and services under one roof or into a single device.

The evolution of photography, a medium that can be considered early in relation to the relatively youthful age of America, follows suit nicely. Early on, photographs were used by the media to represent an image of what happened to readers of newspapers. It provided a natural, yet voyeuristic, view into the conditions and context of the articles being written, giving people an ability to see what a reporter was writing about. As technology has progressed, images captured in photography have become components of the media at ever-increasing rates. In both news and entertainment media, photography acts as an important historical stage in the development the moving picture industry we know today (Kracauer, 1960). Yet, photography still has value and nuances that video cannot capture, especially

in light of its evolution within American life. It is with this understanding that I chose to utilize photographs as the media form to communicate American identity.

CHAPTER 3

WHY PHOTOGRAPHS?

Americans have been fascinated with photography since its invention in the early 1800s (Reese, 1991). From its inception, the inner workings regarding how a photograph captures a moment in time has mesmerized people. In those early years, it took great skill and patience to get a specific image, often requiring hours to expose to ensure the proper lighting and composition, followed by a lengthy process in a dark laboratory to develop the film and then print just a single picture (Koetzle, 2002; Reese, 1991). Long before the invention of roll film in 1891, photographers such as trailblazer H. H. Bennett “had to struggle with a range of troublesome equipment” (Reese, 1991, p. 3), including a camera the size of a car and a portable darkroom for developing the wet plate glass negatives of his day. Without doubt, the early practice of photography in its early history was an art in and of itself, with each photograph meticulously staged and held for the duration of the exposure time. While stop-action photography was eventually developed, thanks to Bennett, it still was not possible to capture a moment in time as we understand that process today (Reese, 1991).

Today, with the click of a button, in mere seconds one can capture what once took hours. While manual cameras, much smaller than those of early days, still exist and are sold, most cameras used today by Americans are considered automatic in nearly all of their functions. The new trend in American, and world, photography is to use a vast array of

digital cameras, eliminating the need for a dark room, or even a commercial laboratory to develop film (Daly, 2003). All these advances in photography make it possible for photography not only to be an art, but also a means to easily and conveniently document moments in time for future reference.

Photography has evolved to the point that today anyone can point a camera, push a button, and upload photographs to a computer, often never to be seen on printed paper (Castells, 1996; Daly 2003; Hurn, 2008). Electronic photo albums at Internet sites such as Facebook or Shutterfly have replaced the once-common printed collection of photographs. In a way this transition is logical, since an electronic photo album is much more convenient and economical to share with family and friends. No longer is a person bound to the physical location made necessary by the physically present photo album (Carey, 1989; Daly 2003; Harner, 2001; Latham and Sassen, 2005). Further, this allows easy sharing of photographs with, for example, family members or friends who might live far away and be unable to travel to an event, ultimately building stronger collective identities, which in turn impacts the development of a person's individual identity and the ability to communicate it collectively.

This shift in the technology of photography has allowed individuals without training in photography to take up the activity, expressing themselves through photographs they take (Hurn, 2008). Even if many, perhaps most, of these individuals might not have the ability to succeed as professional photographers, their pictures capture something that can never be replicated. The frozen moment, the photograph, is a snapshot of life and hence ultimately an expression of individual identity. It is capable of communicating the thoughts,

feelings, and expectations of a specific point in time (and space) in such a manner that for years to come the very nature of a society's identity can be interpreted and ultimately understood, even though that interpretation can be perceived differently by different people at different points in history. This quality of photography only adds to its uniqueness as an art, and as a tool of communication.

In the end, it is the collective qualities related to photography that can allow it to tell stories about a people. Narratives implied in a single photograph, or collection of them, can range far beyond the current social location of a person or group of people to capture, and thus communicate, where people have been, where they clearly are, and where they hope to go. This of course is highly dependent on the interconnected relationship between society and the individual. The use of photographs is a formidable tool for communicating the collective identities of Americans as well as how one individual photographer may connect to and interpret that identity. Further, this work and the photographic project it discusses are meant to merge sociology and communication, joining a tradition represented by visual sociologist Richard Quinney (1998, 2008), whose ethnographic work using photography and self-reflection laid the foundation for photography's use as an important and essential communicative tool, especially useful in tracking the elusive American identity.

Some might argue that "photographs are a less than ideal means for discovering social facts or documenting broad social patterns; nonetheless, when those facts and patterns have been determined by other methods, photographs have the favorable quality of bringing those patterns to life in a visual form" (Hanson, 2002, p. 236). With this in mind, using photographs seems a logical means by which to explore the concept of identity. So much

has been written on the subject of identity that making an attempt to capture its nuances through photography is not only needed, but appropriate and long overdue. At the time of the 1970s, use of photographs to explain the social world was all but non-existent, yet in much earlier times, for example around the turn of the 19th century, there was a vast amount and variety of research using photographs (Hanson, 2002). Hanson (2002) points out that while recent years have seen a resurgence of the use of photographs to represent social life, research projects that center on photographs as the main tool of methodology often get little respect in the academic community, as evidenced by the lack of research employing photography, especially as it relates to identity. It is this possible limitation in research exploring social life and identity that this project hopes to provide material to address.

CHAPTER 4

DEFINING IDENTITY

America was founded on principles of freedom and an apparent intent to limit governmental control of the personal lives of citizens, as indicated by *The Fundamental Orders* of 1639 (Wilson, 1998). This document, created and adopted in the scattered collection of towns in the area now known as Massachusetts and Connecticut long before the better known *Declaration of Independence* and *Constitution*, was meant to provide a means to connect the towns and protect them from tyranny, ultimately enabling them to become “the first to create a new government embodying democratic principles” (Wilson 1998, p. 5). Understanding this role of government is essential to understanding American identity, even if this element represents a continual effort to strive to ensure separation of government and individual personal choice.² A simple document designed to protect the rights and lives of citizens in 1639 became a forgotten seed in the creation of “a unique political relationship between towns and the commonwealth they created” (Wilson 1998, p. 6). It later became a principled beginning to the political practices we know in the modern era, which relate directly to how we communicate our understanding of history and our beliefs. They also provide Americans with guarantees regarding freedom to express oneself as one sees fit.

² It should be noted that there is much evidence suggesting that some would not be opposed to limiting the separation between individuals and government, both throughout history and today. For the purposes of this paper, I am concerned with the rights people have granted themselves and how these eventuate in perceptions and behaviors. The other is important, but not in this discussion.

Essentially, Americans live in a place where they are supposed to be protected from attack for their personal views, a right Americans have guarded via protection of its most fundamental basis in law, the *Constitution*, ratified in 1787. Freedom of speech is not only held by many to be paramount, but listed as the first Amendment of the Bill of Rights in the *Constitution*, spelled out in 1791 (Wilson, 1998). Throughout their comparatively short history, American citizens have proven repeatedly that having the right to speak up for what they believe has altered life in America, good or bad, on numerous occasions. Whether we think about the battle for women to vote, the battles for equal rights, or most recently the battle for gay marriage, activism and the right to speak out against the government is at the very heart of American identity.

However, American identity runs much deeper than simply reflecting the political structure in which Americans exist and were born. There are regional nuances and cultural clashes that take hold and energize the evolution of American identity as one that is vast, eclectic, and uniquely encompassing a multitude of heritages. In this paper, I think of social identity as “behavior, cultural attribution, structural location, and self-definition along multiple dimensions of social life” (Brekhus, 1996, p. 518). Further, identity cannot be merely individually or socially defined as an entity. Ultimately, identity at one moment reciprocally represents how we see and define ourselves, both individually and connected to the larger societal structure, and how that very society sees and defines us (Brekhus, 1996; Mills, 1959). To recognize oneself as an American seems to mean functioning individually in conjunction with the larger collective and with historical relevance. This may involve a somewhat forced construction that some might understand as outside natural

existence and is often employed by the powerful for political advancement (Brekhus, 1996; Smith-Rosenberg, 1993). Berger and Luckmann (1967) argue that identity very much aligns with this idea, in that each day people must construct who they want to be and how they want to be viewed by those around them, with distinctions among categories to which a person should belong being simply “a matter of social convention” (Brekhus, 1996, p. 511), rather than a natural occurrence. How and what we communicate thus becomes a key component in how we construct, or are expected to construct, our very identity as Americans.

As noted, identity is not a uniform entity. In fact, many conceptions of identity reflect the social constructionist ideology that “drives a multifaceted literature on national identity” (Cerulo, 1997, p. 390). So many vastly variant types of work have commented on the general concept of identity that we need only use that fact as evidence of its lack of uniformity (Brekhus, 1996; Cerulo, 1997; Fiol; 2002; Peltola et al., 2004; Smedley, 1998; Smith, 1988; Smith-Rosenberg, 1993; Teske, 1997, among others). Each conception of identity seems to focus itself on a different aspect, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, with methodologies ranging along the spectrum from strongly quantitative to strongly qualitative. Ultimately, the identities that develop in a society have more to do with being “products of shifting moral and social boundaries rather than natural unchanging categories” (Brekhus, 1996, p. 511). Nothing is stable in the world of identity studies, which is one reason it is such a difficult and ambiguous arena in which to conduct research. Recently, scholars have renewed their focus on identity, most often in regard to race or sexuality, as

well as the process by which one identifies oneself, a fact that may ultimately have further confused the matter (Cerulo, 1997).

At identity's root is the idea that the physical self gets classified into a category based on perceived similarities and differences in terms of appearance, one of which is a classification we have come to refer to as *race*. Scholars have accepted that the identification of race is simply "a cultural invention, that bears no intrinsic relationship to actual human physical variations, but reflects social meanings imposed upon these variations" (Smedley, 1998, p. 690). Smedley (1998), among others, has spent time recounting the murky path of identity as it relates to racial definitions through history. History and the historical, as Mills (1959) tells us, is indeed important to understanding American identity today, a conclusion that has been substantiated repeatedly (Cerulo, 1997; Smedley, 1998; Smith-Rosenberg, 1993).

It should be noted that a problem in understanding American identity, at least at one level, arguably comes out of the conflicted history of discussions of identity, in that today's world is so intermixed in terms of ethnic heritage and racial classification that the foundation of what we thought we knew about people and how they identify themselves and/or others is seen by some (e.g., Smedley, 1998) as disintegrating. The malleable nature of identity ultimately becomes a part of our understanding and communication of identity. Further, when there seems to be evidence of a strong collective identity, there is great enthusiasm to build on and develop the identity in accordance with the will of those in the collective, rather than merely based on what the leaders might dictate (Fiol, 2002). We must recognize the importance of the relationship between the individual and whatever *macro*

structure we are concerned with, which for this paper, I have chosen to be the people who reside within the boundaries of the United States, and I adhere to the ideologies put forth by the American government. In many ways, identification with a prevailing ideology, a group, or even a government is based on trust (Fiol, 2002). Without such trust, specific identity formations, such as American identity, cannot be fashioned, since without trust, connections between people may not be possible or capable of being communicated. In the end, the choices we make are centered upon an assigned identity in which we live within the context of America's boundaries (Monroe, 2003).

The boundaries that exist both around and within a nation without doubt impact our understanding of who we are. Ultimately, "place and identity are tied together in the sociospatial dialectic" (Harner, 2001, p. 661), a dialectic that is communicated in how the *micro* interconnects with the *macro*. In fact, it is on this point that Mills' (1959) idea of the reciprocal relationship between *macro* and *micro* can be understood in terms of social place and identity. Latham and Sassen (2005) extend Mills (1959) by examining how the space of the social domain is being recreated in new forms between an existence within the traditional national borders we have come to understand and within the more recently created "non-borders" of the cyberworld, important here since the advances in photography have coincided with advances in other technology, allowing for greater interconnectedness between and within national boundaries, thus leading to confusion in how we are supposed to communicate our identity as Americans. Further, there has been a noticeable shift in how people define themselves individually and collectively as they become increasingly aware of ever-present, other, identities in the world at its most *macro* level, and this in turn causes

both separation from, and stronger connection to, a greater social structure of identity (Fiol, 2002; Harner, 2001; Latham and Sassen, 2005).

In the end, however, the symbolic boundaries only act to confuse us “in the construction of valued identities” (Cerulo, 1997, p. 395), which need to be based in something more grounded than any virtual world. For there to be a true civic identity, and thus an American collective identity, individuals must have a strong and rooted connection “with their community and with place” (Harner, 2001, p. 678). It isn’t enough to say that they live within the borders of America, they must in some way connect to the values of the founders, the law, and the current residents of where they live. Place and social location are ultimately essential components in the characteristically imprecise formula that defines Americans and the national identity they share and communicate with one another. Photographs can thus act as a useful means to understand how people communicate the sense of American identity that exists at individual and national levels.

In that light, we can understand Smith’s definition of “national identity as a product of both ‘natural’ continuity and conscious manipulation” (as discussed in Cerulo, 1997, p. 390). At the individual level, the actions a person engages in, as well as interpersonal interactions, help shape their level of “me”-ness.³ At the same time, there is an underlying connection, albeit a constructed one, that emphasizes that people exists within some collective identity, thus creating “we”-ness. Ultimately, members espousing a collective identity hold similar values and ideologies that, when taken together, may be internalized

³ “Me”-ness refers to people’s awareness of who they are as individuals, with regard to identity. Here, that “me”-ness is interconnected with the idea of “we”-ness, which involves being aware of the collective identity and defining oneself as part of it. For further information on these concepts, see a variety of work by Mead and Blumer, who spent much of their careers developing these ideas.

to represent a singular and unified social experience that allows an individual to develop a sense of self that is very much constructed in the presence of the collective (Cerulo, 1997; Mills, 1959). One can no longer exist without the other, and media forms, such as photographs, have much to do with this construction.

Rogers (1995) talks about how media provides the principal arena in which citizens of America get information about who they are supposed to be as Americans. In essence, media tells people what their American identity is supposed to look like, based on the ever-shifting and contested formations of social location, behavior, and societal practices communicated through media. That is, the culture Americans are supposed to adhere to, the activities they participate in, and ultimately how they are supposed to define themselves, comes directly from those gatekeepers acting within *macro* structures to affect life at the *micro* domain. If the media is essentially the symbolic representation of what we as members of a collective are supposed to believe, it would seem to drive the very existence of the “real life” it is supposed to be emulating (Castells, 1996; Cerulo, 1997). It is with this understanding that “media objects become a viable ‘other’ in the building of self, and they outline the ways in which human-to-machine relationships mirror purely human relationships” (Cerulo, 1997, p. 399). The use of photography, a form of media well established in American life, is a tool that strongly illustrates the symbolic nature of media to represent the ever-reconstructed American identity.

CHAPTER 5

THE PHOTOGRAPHIC JOURNEY

For this project, photographs have been used to communicate key moments of American life and connect them to the underlying features involved in the American conception of identity. They exist at the heart of the connection between an individual photographer and the American society in which they operate. A unique quality of the photographs in the photobook collection is the fact that they were not taken for the purpose of being included in a collection such as this. Rather, they should be seen as capturing moments that make up the life and times of an American photographer, both professionally and personally. While most were not taken expressly to communicate identity, they ultimately do because they are snapshots of life over the years for one *micro* case. In connecting the photographs to larger themes of identity, the relationship between *macro* and *micro* and how they reciprocally act to represent a broader picture of identity will be established (Mills, 1959).

All photographs were taken by a single photographer engaged in acts of daily life. Thus there may be what some might consider missing key components of American life, such as illustrations representing gay rights and ethnic identity. Since this project is not trying to be inclusive of all American life, this may be less of a problem than it might otherwise be if more conventional methodology were to be employed. The specific methodology selected for this study is critical ethnography, which is defined by Thomas

(1993) as “a type of reflection that examines culture, knowledge, and action” (p. 2). For the purposes herein, I am examining the component of culture understood as the American identity. More specifically, I am examining what lies beyond the surface of what the photographs in the photobook represent about American identity rather than simply detailing the contents of each photograph.

While the use of photographs in ethnography has often been limited to a record-keeping device (Fetterman, 1998), I seek to use them as a tool of communication in which to “describe, analyze, and open to scrutiny otherwise hidden agendas, power centers, and assumptions that inhibit, repress and constrain” (Thomas, 1993, p. 3). As a participant within the culture I am studying, I am both a driving force and subject being studied. It is my hope that through the practice of ethnography I can move beyond the superficial knowledge of what people see in the pictures, connecting each slice of life represented to a larger social issue that lies beyond that which is seen. Thus, in the spirit of ethnographic investigation, the slice of life described by linking individual and society is enough to present a narrative of a component of American identity (Fetterman, 1998; Mills, 1959; Quinney, 1998; Thomas, 1993). Ultimately, at the center of this project is the telling of stories regarding what it means to be *American*. Even though the perspective of only one photographer is represented, that perspective includes a vast array of styles and skills that have evolved through time, just as American identity has.

Most of the photographs are shot in a style that can be described as somewhat journalistic; that is, they are shot to “capture the moment,” rather than posed, which is important in capturing identity, since much of life (and hence identity) is unplanned and

spontaneous. Life, and the identity of the society in which one lives, appear messy and often exist absent clear understanding until long after an event has passed (Lamert, 2002; Quinney, 1998). Hindsight thus becomes essential in utilizing and framing photographs within the context of both the time they were taken and the time they are viewed. Further, using photography to tell the story of identity allows us to see more clearly the relationship between the lives of individuals and the forces of society in regard to the development of identity (Hanson, 2002; Mills, 1959). In the rare moment that a posed shot is included, it is meant to speak to the desire of Americans to remove the chaotic nature of life and manipulate the message they wish to communicate.

It is worth noting that some might note a potential bias in this project (Fetterman, 1998; Thomas, 1993; Wimmer and Dominick, 2006). The fact that as photographer I selected my own work for the photobook, albeit in consultation with others, is the source of this bias. While I believe I have the ability to separate my personal feelings from objective evaluation of the photographs, this often is difficult to do and may in fact lead to a perception that the photographs do not speak to the collective nature of identity beyond the individual (Hurn, 2008). However, this feature remains an omnipresent and accepted practice of participant-style ethnographic work (Fetterman, 1998; Thomas, 1993). Further, this is not a limitation of the study, but an enhancement. The very nature of ethnography is designed to introduce the narrative of a culture, of American identity.

As tools of ethnography, the photographs were selected based on the quality of the message of identity as I perceive them, and so it should be noted that this project is not meant as an expression of the art of photography, but as a contributing factor in

documenting key components of American life as seen through the eyes of one photographer. The nature of a photograph communicates in wordless narrative multiple stories at one time, centered in the context of the viewer. As photographer I see the context in the conditions of capturing the moment as well as the suggestion it provides for a viewer. Both are important in conveying the message of American identity as I see it. Photographs taken over twenty years of experimentation were considered, including error shots often dismissed as inappropriate for public viewing. Every photograph I have taken over the years was painstakingly examined and those selected were based on my estimation of the ability of the photograph to communicate some aspect of American life, for the presence of certain nuances, and for clarity of message.

Identity is framed in such a way that we can hopefully gain a better understanding of how the *micro* operates within the *macro* as it relates to a particular theme within American identity. To assist with the process of framing each photograph in light of its communicative properties, short captions or historical quotes have been included with some photographs and/or on some pages to illustrate an aspect of the context of the moment captured (see photobook in supplemental file). Since the photobook is designed to let the photographs tell the story of America, not every photograph has a caption, and, in fact, as the book progresses, there are fewer captions, reflecting an effort to allow the photographs to communicate the messages suggested by the pictures without the hindrance of words. In this spirit, it is through the interpretation of the pictures that one should be able to grasp and understand what it means to be American. This fits nicely with the idea that, no matter

what the subject of the picture, “there are always two people in every picture: the photographer and the viewer” (Adams, 2009).

Decisions regarding captions have plagued me from the start. I originally considered including a detailed caption with each photograph, but realized that the words are not the narrative, the pictures are. While what I see in each picture is important, especially as an ethnography, my intention for the photobook is to allow the viewer to view them without my narrative so they can create their own. In part, it is according to this reasoning that the captions decrease in frequency as the book progresses, allowing a framework to be set early on that will allow viewers to then make up their own minds regarding the messages of each photograph and section. To further alleviate this concern, brief summaries of the sections as I see them connecting to the larger social structure are included after the biography, with a note in the introductory statement informing the viewers. This will allow them to make the choice whether or not to use my narrative or their own as they seek meaning with regard to identity as they view each photograph.

Additionally, I am aware that some may view the very creation of such a book, and the captions, or lack of them, as an opportunistic way to express my views through an unconventional method. In some ways they may be correct since the availability of the photographs was indeed convenient. However, this is a common concern with participant ethnographic research that is heavily based in perception and available resources and should not demean the validity of the collective identity communicated through the photographs (Fetterman, 1998; Thomas, 1993).

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION: THEMATIC SECTIONS OF THE PHOTOBOOK

The photographs in the photobook have been categorized into thirteen thematic representations, a number selected to honor one historical configuration important to America, in that when America was born there were thirteen colonies. Each theme is meant to represent some component of American identity and each was developed from the pictures and not beforehand. Had the categories been decided before examining the full range of photographs, it would have limited our understanding of American identity as reflected between the connection of the *micro* and the *macro*. This is also an important methodological goal of the ethnographic approach, to tell the story from within the body of work rather than from outside (Fetterman, 1998; Thomas, 1993). Essentially, this collection is an ethnography that has persisted as an activity for more than twenty years, much like the work of Quinney (1998), who has spent his life exploring meaning in the world through the ethnography of his life, often using photographs as a representation of that meaning of life and identity so desperately sought.

The themes for each section will be discussed in the order in which they appear in the photobook, in terms of both content and meaningful representation for communicating identity. The order was selected based on a natural progression of life and structure in America, beginning with the nature we seek to control and ending with hope for the future, America's children. Within each section there is an attempt to capture both current and

historical representations, which is not always possible since it is based on the work of one photographer as she connects with the larger social structure. Also, each section has differing numbers of photographs, illustrating the idea that identity seldom is based on uniformity, as well as the limitations involved in using only available photographs. Finally, it should be noted that many times a photograph could possibly be assigned to more than one category, but in such cases it was framed within the theme it seemed to most represent.

Cover and Introductory Statement: *America Under Construction*

The front cover photograph, a picture of the Washington Monument being repaired, is meant to symbolize the idea that from the beginning America was meant to be an evolving entity with many ways to look at and express itself (see cover of photobook in supplemental file). America changes and grows constantly, with each shift in political structure, with each new resident, and with each departing resident. America is so infused with nuances that one could likely fill volumes with the photographs from daily life that are relevant to revealing identity. For this book alone, 366 photographs were selected to represent slices of American life; this particular photograph seemed to sum it all up perfectly.

On the first page as the book opens, the viewer sees an introductory page designed to frame the work in light of American identity. This is done in a manner befitting the general population and respectful of academic tradition, avoiding words that might alienate a non-academic viewer while including concepts that the academic arena will appreciate. The photobook is meant to exist as testimony to my understanding of “my subjects as an

active sector of society” (Escudero-Espadas, 1995, p. 129), a society of which I consider myself a part. Further, it moves beyond the academic world into the very place where American identity exists.

This introductory page frames the content for the viewer in an effort to balance raw emotion as they see the pictures and the conceptual frames in which each picture exists. Additionally, the photographs are the narrative by which to communicate their own significance as it relates to identity without my words of explanation. I do recognize that not every viewer is “in my head,” which is precisely the point. The viewer is given the opportunity to connect with the larger structure of America as well as with another individual, namely, the photographer. With this in mind, the viewer is able to examine each picture individually and collectively as a representation of American identity under construction, seeing it through their perception rather than mine. This introductory page permits one to partake of the purity of the photographs in their expression of American identity, without taking away the eclectic, often scattered, nature of that identity.

Section One: *America’s Beauty*

The first section contains an array of fourteen nature shots, reflecting the idea that since the world began with nature, it seemed fitting that this book’s conceptual journey should begin there as well (see Section One of photobook in supplemental file). By images of nature I mean organic and inorganic structures, and do not include representations of animals (left to a section of its own). This strongly connects to American identity since Americans, including me, take great pride in our natural resources, as evidenced in the

dedication of lands as national and state parks. These locations are meant to protect the nature of the boundaries we occupy so that they can be enjoyed by future generations.

Often people travel to different places just to see the sights, the wonders of nature, essentially becoming amateur ethnographers themselves, as they chronicle their construction of identity through the choices they make as to where to travel and what to photograph, just as I have done. Specifically, this section represents my travels along my ethnographic journey, including photographs from Niagra Falls, Michigan, Wisconsin, Missouri, and Illinois.

The first page of the section begins with a quote by trailblazing photographer H.H. Bennett, whose nature shots have inspired many through the years. As an ethnographer, and photographer, I can see great meaning in this historical American. By pioneering the use of new technologies to communicate the wonders of nature, Americans were for the first time able to see the vast nature that America's lands had to offer. My photography is meant to communicate much the same message, except in the modern world in which I live, people are connected to the images I have taken since others have taken them as well, albeit from a different angle or with a different focus. Wherever a person resides within the borders of America, there is nature, even within the most *micro* sense of gardening and meticulously sculptured lawns, which are not represented here for the simple fact that they are not part of my frame of reference. I mention this to represent that there is more to nature than simply exists here, and this is an essential component to understanding the "we"-ness of *American* as it is associated with nature. I am more acutely aware of my place in the

collective identity of America by recognizing how my perception of America is different than my fellow Americans.

Section Two: *America's Animal Kingdom*

The animal kingdom is vast and exciting, and is represented here by thirty photographs from different domains, fauna (see Section Two of photobook in supplemental file). Americans have a fascination with animals, breeding them in captivity and domesticating them for home life. This section encompasses a spectrum of animal existence from wild to captivity and includes depictions of interactions between animals and people, who are also part of the animal kingdom. The section begins with representations of zoo life and continues through animals in the wild, ending with an ironic image of a car with a deer on it. This last seemed fitting as a transition to the next section, which, among other images, has to do with the domain of transportation.

The formulation of American identity as it relates to animals is important, beginning with our own existence (often discounted) as part of the animal kingdom. To be sure, some have drawn attention to this fact, but most see *Homo sapiens* as existing somehow above all other animals. While this may play out in life as a reality, the photographs showing domesticated animals with their human counterparts is designed to balance out and show how there is a connection, even if it does represented differential power. Additionally, people's identities are rooted in concepts constructed in biology, or the perceived notions of biology long used to classify people into groups for subjugation. Much as we trap animals in zoos and homes, people often feel trapped by the very structure of American

existence (Mills, 1959), ever seeking the freedom to experience life without those structures, like the butterfly or the bird that flies unbound by any constraints.

Section Three: *The Building and Moving of America*

This section includes forty-six photographs representing America's infrastructure, including transportation and dwellings as well as the construction of these (see Section Three of photobook in supplemental file). The section exhibits an array of different places I have visited, which helps connect my *micro* existence with society as a whole. There is an emphasis on Chicago and the Midwest because that is where I happen to have lived most of my life. I intended this section to be systematic and eclectic at the same time, partly because of the difficulty in determining a natural flow among the photographs. Simply put, it was my hope that each photograph would naturally flow to the next, but that is not how things turned out. For instance, bridges can at one moment be connected to structures dealing with water and transportation, as well as simply being structures in and of themselves. Houses and buildings come before the transportation components, simply because in history people found places to live before they found ways beyond walking to get from place to place. From there, however, deciding on an order became more difficult, since deciding what came next was not as simple as deciding what historically came first. These parts of our society are eclectic in that we have so many different ways to move from place to place and the chosen progression ends up having more to do with the aesthetics of presentation than any logical flow relating to the ideas of transportation and structure.

Infrastructure is an important part of American life in that without roads and vehicles, traveling and communicating would be difficult, though not impossible. The final picture, a scenic shot of Washington, DC, acts as a transition to the next section, since it captures a wide view of the White House visually situated in structures representing the infrastructure of the city, at the same time, the White House, as the residence of the President, symbolizes collective identity, both civic and political. American identity rests in the ability to see connections between the very structure of our buildings and transportation systems and the ways in which we utilize those systems. Photographs depicting construction are meant to remind the viewer that the identity of Americans is constantly being constructed and reconstructed as the context of society shifts.

Section Four: *America's Civic Mindedness*

This section involves representations of Americans in civic activities (see Section Four of photobook in supplemental file). There are twenty-three photographs in this section, beginning with a picture of a fireworks display and a quote about patriotism, both of which lie at the root of the conventional view of American identity. This is followed by photographs of police officers and how they interact with people. I have captured moments of volunteerism and political action, with images of collective action, protests, and campaign fundraisers, to express how I interconnect with this aspect of American life.

The idea of helping people is central to American identity. There seems to be a collective value that to better others is often a way to better oneself. For instance, a group of people helping dig a car out of the snow captures this urge to help others. The news crew

on the same page is indicative of the need of some people to share this image of people helping people with the world. Here is an instance in which my knowledge of the circumstances of the photograph's production may impact my reading of the narrative. Other than the fact that the same car appears in both photographs, there is no way for an outside viewer to be certain that the two pictures are interconnected, except that they happen to be on the same page. This can be especially problematic in that on the opposite page there are photographs of people gathering to passively prepare for some act of service having nothing to do with the active action of digging a car out of the snow. This ultimately can be taken to represent the lack of uniformity in my construction of American identity and how it plays out in the larger structure of the collective identity.

Political action is central to American identity, as the initial act of coming to the “new world” was a political action against what was then the home nation of England.⁴ Seeking freedom of religion, pilgrims made the treacherous journey on the Mayflower and later, to escape the tyranny of continued tax increases, dumped tea in the Boston Harbor. Years later, political action, especially in the form of non-violent protests, took place as attempts to redress various types of inequality, which continues to exist and evolve. The protests represented in the photobook took place in America but are in response to a global issue of human rights abuses. For me, this is a highly important component of my identity as an American who has the freedom to speak out against injustice, whenever and wherever encountered. The reality of life in present-day America is inextricably connected to the

⁴ This is not meant to imply that other nations did not also send people to the “new world” with the goal of colonization. It is merely meant to represent the fact that this particular group holds the greatest prominence in my understanding of American identity in regards to the principles of freedom.

global world, and thus identity often is reconstructed within the context of global interconnectivity.

The final picture is of the Lincoln Memorial in Grant Park, a symbol representing freedom to the many who struggle to find it. Ironically, there is a pigeon defecating on Lincoln's head and a homeless person sleeping in the background. True freedom has trouble existing when there is a lack of funds and jobs in a society faced with rampant unemployment and widespread economic hardship.

Section Five: *Americans at Work*

This section of twenty-five photographs (see Section Five of photobook in supplemental file) begins with people performing what is referred to as “blue-collar” work. There are photographs of people engaging in manual labor, such as painting and construction. I deliberately included a historical representation here, as well as representations of unpaid work that is a necessity of life, such as mowing one's yard. Eventually, the photographic array moves into “white-collar” occupations. This is not meant as a value judgment, just that it naturally flowed to end with someone who is working and educating as a lead-in to the next section.

That said, there is a valid reason to show the evolution of “blue-collar” and “white-collar” work in the direction I chose. American life is increasingly more service-oriented in its occupations, and the photobook acts to communicate that evolution. Work life is a given, often mundane, aspect of American existence. I recognize it as something that has to take place to ensure my ability to enjoy whatever leisure I might have. From my

observations through the ethnographic practice of my life, I have seen that many people feel the same, even if the work they do is something they thoroughly enjoy. Further, these pictures exemplify the connections we make that are necessary to our existence. Without recognition of ourselves connected to others, individual identity is lost, and thus the richness of experience in performing the tasks that make life possible is also lost. American identity centers on the work that Americans have always done to keep life moving forward.

Section Six: *The American Education System*

Education can be seen as a principal, perhaps the principal, socializing agent of society, and this is no different for American society. Not only do children attend school to learn basic knowledge, but also to learn social expectations. The fourteen photographs in this section are meant to briefly encompass a topic about which millions of words have been written (see Section Six of photobook in supplemental file). I have incorporated images from elementary school, high school, and college, though not in chronological order. The section begins with a photograph representing the literal opening of the educational gates at an American university. College life is at the forefront because it is becoming increasingly important to obtain a college degree. As occupations in America become more service oriented, as indicated earlier, a greater power differential develops that is centered upon differing quality of education. Eventually, our society may become so dependent on people who have obtained some level of higher education that those who choose not to follow that path will feel further disconnected from American identity as a whole.

The empty high school auditorium is symbolic of the empty slate of the academic world. There is so much in the world to learn that one must pick and choose how to fill the auditorium of their mind with knowledge, just as this room will one day be filled with students picking and choosing where to sit in order to have some particular view of the stage. Further, high school marks a time of life when Americans typically begin to try new things, such as animal dissection depicted in one of the photographs. Interestingly, high school is also a time in American life when students often say they cannot wait to escape, yet in some cases later willingly return to for reunions at which they can let everyone know how their life has gone.

I distinctly connect this to my existence as an American since my identity was complicated by having attended two high schools, an increasing problem for American youth whose families are able to relocate easily for job opportunities or due to other factors. This constant shifting of social location impacts the development of identity, often leaving it fractured due to violations in trust in the ideals of the collective identity. Gone are the days of the one-room school house that encouraged an internalization of the same American values no matter what grade a person was in.

Section Seven: *American Artistic Expression*

The thirty-nine photographs in this section show several sides to artistic expression (see Section Seven of photobook in supplemental file). There is a significant presence of music photographs, in part due to my repeated presence at musical events. Beyond this, music is a pervasive part of society. It seems fitting that this section should include a

greater proportion of music shots. The remainder comprises photos of theatre, sculpture, and an artistic-style staircase at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Music, like photographs, is a mode of communicating feelings, thoughts, and beliefs. It has acted through the ages as a representation of changes in the ideals of societies. It even has helped to instigate changes in America's values. Many studies attest to the various impacts of music throughout time, but it is important here since it is such an encroaching entity that literally exists in all aspects of our lives, from entertainment, to home life, to work life, and even religion. Music is often used consciously to ignite passion about a cause, such as with U2's song "Walk On," written to honor internationally revered figure Aung San Suu Kyi, who continues to battle against human rights abuses in Burma. I bring this up to point out the fact that even though U2 is a British band (most of the included photographs of performers are American) they have great influence in America, as did other international groups that came before, such as the Beatles. The concert photographed was in America and represents a connection of Americans through U2's music, impacting our collective identity.

The stairwell photograph communicates many messages to me and to the viewers of my photobook. In many ways, life is like a stairwell, always on an upward climb to whatever comes next, even if it may seem as though backward steps are taken from time to time. At least this is how I perceive it from observation of how my own life and the lives of those in my circle have played out. Hurdles appear just as life has hit a plateau, leaving a need to climb the ladder of life once again. This constant up and down in an individual's life impacts one's ability to connect with the larger structure with which we are supposed

to identify. How, then, can a person even trust in a society that is supposed to provide some semblance of trust? The simple and possibly depressing answer is, it cannot. This is especially evident in the context of a modern society plagued by economic crises, experienced individually and collectively. Individuals are increasingly losing jobs and unable to find new ones, impacting the social structure in that they cannot participate in the commerce of life, which ultimately causes businesses to fail and more jobs to be lost, repeating the cycle and exemplifying still further the interconnection between *macro* and the *micro*.

Section Eight: *Religion in America*

The twenty-six photographs in this section represent some aspect of religion and spirituality in America, beginning with parts of a Catholic mass and ending with a very spiritual depiction of the concept of love (see Section Eight of photobook in supplemental file). This section is constrained by what was immediately available to me as an American Catholic, significant due to its status as the largest single religion in America.⁵ Despite this, there is some representative inclusion, at least with respect to Catholic Christianity.

Former Illinois Senator Adlai E. Stevenson II once discussed the importance of religion in his life, and I connect to this thought on a personal level because it is unquestionably part of life that exists in both *macro* and *micro* domains. As an individual, I can strongly relate to this, having seen it play out through my life experiences and involvement with religion, namely the Catholic faith. Intrinsically, religion acts as a place

⁵ Collectively there are more Protestant Christians than Catholics, but when the Protestant faiths are considered separately, as they usually are, the Catholic faith ends up having a greater number of people.

where people can make social connections within a framework of moral codes that allow them to become part of a collective identity that aligns with that framework. How they individually participate in religious practice is simply their way of communicating their idea of the collective. The photographs here are meant to express the communication of connectedness among people within a religion.

At the same time, however, religion acts as a conduit for the larger societal structure to communicate its expectations and beliefs about what makes a person *American*. While there is supposed to be a separation of religion and government, this is definitely not the case, as evidenced by the included quote and reference to Adlai E. Stevenson II, a politician. Additionally, the fact that America in part was founded with the express desire to have the freedom to practice the religion of one's choice speaks to the inability to truly separate religion from government. Ultimately, the moral practices of early Christian faiths evolved into tenets according to which Americans can individually connect to the value system of America as collective identity, making religions the moral compass of the collective, whether or not people are readily willing to admit this fact. Ultimately, religion acts as a tool in the construction of society, communicating the messages and desires of the social structure in much the same way that media does.

Section Nine: *Americans and Commercial Entertainment*

The sixteen photographs in this section represent the commercial entertainment industry, specifically amusement parks and Las Vegas (see Section Nine of photobook in supplemental file). People spend a considerable amount of money on entertainment and

thus it is considered an essential part of life for Americans. Major corporate players working in this arena, such as Disney and Six Flags, are included, but of course there are a vast number of other entertainment providers I have not had the opportunity neither to visit nor photograph.

Disneyland was founded by Walt Disney in the 1950s as a location where imagination could be put easily into action. Having been there both as an adult and a child, I can attest to a shift in the way Disneyland does business, which may be linked to the aftereffects of Walt Disney's death in 1966. During my life I saw the place I had once gone to as a child for inspiration and to develop my creativity become a place focused primarily on financial profit. Unquestionably, Disney wanted to make money, but his driving belief, and ultimately what many criticized, was his inability to remain practical about the business aspects of a corporation. From within my circle, many, including myself, commented that if Disney were alive today he would no longer consider Disneyland "the happiest place on Earth." Similarly, we have speculated that he would at least be happy with the fact that he had created a legacy, even if that legacy didn't turn out as he had planned.

Las Vegas is generally considered an altogether different kind of place. Compared to Disneyland, it is an adult's playground that from its inception was aimed at profit. It is not represented by a single corporation, but several working within a collective ideology of power, to provide a place for millions of people to spend their money in hopes of striking it rich. The Las Vegas experience centers on the hopes, fears, and insecurities of its patrons, rather than their imagination and dreams. It promises fulfillment of a person's hopes, then snatches them away by actualizing the prediction that in the end "the house always wins."

Many see Las Vegas as a disease embedded in the identity of Americans, but in some ways it accurately represents the identity of Americans. Those in power politically and financially are at the top, both in Las Vegas and America in general. Everyone else strives to at least have a piece of the proverbial pie, afraid that without it they will fail to provide for themselves or their families. They take their chances, and in Las Vegas they usually fail. In life in general, more often than not people are still limited by the system(s) in which they live, though probably less so than in Las Vegas. However, one must remember the historical significance of Las Vegas. It was founded at a time when there was great segregation and truly did represent the idea that, other than those in power, people could not achieve success, much in the same way they fail to achieve great winnings in Las Vegas. People return to Las Vegas to capture some feeling of how it once was, internalized into our very practices of life and law, and try to live out the hope represented by the select few who actually win big.

Section Ten: *Americans at Play*

Beyond the entertainment venues referred to in the previous section, sports is a major element of American life. The twenty-five photographs included capture this preoccupation (see Section Ten of photobook in supplemental file). The section begins with baseball, widely thought of as “America’s pastime.” This part of the section is expansive, though not overwhelming. There are depictions of other sports such as softball, football, and soccer, as well as activities that involve playing at something, such as a board

game or even climbing a tree. Overall, the section shows Americans at play, enjoying themselves.

As America's unofficial pastime, baseball acts as a quintessential representation of how many Americans enjoy spending their leisure time. For me specifically, there is a strong connectedness to Chicago and the teams there, especially the Cubs. I have been a Cubs fan since I was four years old, when I attended a game where they defeated the Cincinnati Reds. I may have chosen to be a fan of the Cubs because they won that particular game, but my loyalty to them over the years has been unwavering. This is significant in that I, as representative of the *micro*, maintain certain connections with the Cubs, and thus I feel connected to other Cubs fans. Cubs fans as a collective are a unique breed. They will not tolerate disrespect of any kind toward their honored team, or baseball as a whole, ultimately paying tribute to the sport of baseball as a whole rather than simply with respect to the Cubs. There are many baseball fans who change their allegiance based on who is winning each year, or who won the previous year. Cubs fans generally tend not to shift their loyalty from team to team, but do see value in the sport as a whole, participating holistically in the experience of baseball, overall. Through it all, they stand behind the Cubs, win or lose, coming back each year with renewed hope that this year will be *the* year. This may be taken to symbolize the perseverance of many Americans with respect to their daily lives. Much like the Cubs and their fans, we as Americans must keep working at building a better and truly equal place for us all to live.

Ironically, in baseball we can see many representations of equality. For instance, fandom in general does not see skin color or gender, simply including any individual *as a*

fan. When you look at the stands you see a representation of a multitude of races and ethnicities. Further, you see both men and women, fairly equally represented, enjoying the sport and engaging with others based on these common interests. Maybe if the world outside sports could look to how people behave within the confines of Wrigley Field, then difference would merely be just a fact of life and not something around which to build enmity. One can only imagine what the world would be like if the greatest conflict was the baseball team that one supported.

Beyond baseball, I tried to communicate the idea of Americans having fun playing at the games of life. Without enjoyment, life becomes mundane and repetitive. The conscious choice to end with an image of a carved Halloween pumpkin speaks to the playful side of American life that never seems to go away, even as we enter adulthood and are expected to behave responsibly. As an individual, I might often feel annoyed by the constant focus of adults on times of play, but then I am reminded that collectively we need unifying activities, such as baseball or board games, to share in the fun side of life, no matter how old we may be.

Section Eleven: *American Friendship and Comradery*

Twenty-five photographs comprise this section, each showing people communicating with each other, building relationships (see Section Eleven of photobook in supplemental file). This section is deliberately presented for the most part without captions, leaving viewers to fashion for themselves thoughts about the nature of Americans and how they interact. Americans are a social people and they need each other. We engage

in a variety of different types of relationships on a daily basis, each with a different context and purpose. Ultimately, we need to feel connected to each other to further our own evolution of identity as Americans.

While the family has long been thought of as the primary ground for people to learn social expectations, I contend that friendship and peer relationships actually have greater impact, even if they are, chronologically, not the first encountered. Peer pressure, as some might call it, is an important part of the socialization process as we evolve through life. It is our friends, or even acquaintances, who encourage us to try new things, or try to prevent us from trying something that would end up being detrimental to us. Ultimately, it is in friendship, and in such friend-like connections, that the essence of American identity can be communicated. Individually, we do not exist in a vacuum, but rather are made up of the teachings of society and the influences of our friends. These influences create degrees of separation between mutual friends that will eventually lead to a large collective that is understood as “Americans.” We are all linked in ways we cannot always readily understand. The values we internalize are strongly represented in friend relationships we choose to build, even if sometimes these may be fleeting.

Section Twelve: *America’s Foundation*

This section has forty-nine photographs, each communicating something about family life in America, as some know it today or as it might have been understood by some in the past (see Section Twelve of photobook in supplemental file). There are specific subsections comprising photographs of weddings, family, and home life. There seems to

be a common perception in American society that family, specifically certain types of family, are at the root of what we can call American life. The widespread acceptance of this idea is misleading and limiting because there are many types of family. Despite this, non-traditional family types are unfortunately not represented, again due primarily to the fact that they were not readily accessible in my life.

The representations of family life begin with marriage since in America this particular subject holds both great meaning and is the subject of great debate. Until very recently in a select few states, marriage could only take place between males and females. Most take this fact for granted, without realizing that they are denying certain rights and freedoms to an entire group of people. While I have some friends who are homosexual, they are not married and thus they cannot be represented as having had a wedding. Additionally, while I personally see nothing wrong with the idea of same-sex marriage, our society continues to debate this issue, leaving few chances for me to represent the family life of same-sex couples. Thus, a lack of pictures of homosexual couples speaks to their lack of representation in society as a whole. In the end, I was surprised to see that I did not have photographs to communicate my stance regarding this issue. This only speaks to a key point that even those of us who believe themselves to be enlightened by equality can fall in line with the unequal structure of society, ultimately behaving as though we deny the very rights we intellectually understand as universal.

One point of interest in this section is that it includes the only quote from a female to be used in the entire photobook, Erma Bombeck (see Section Twelve of photobook in supplemental file). The quotation is about motherhood, and who better to speak about

motherhood than a woman. This isn't to say that women cannot also speak to other facets of life, as they indeed can. It is simply to note that somewhere along the line as I was selecting quotes for inclusion, I didn't find any spoken by women, a fact that I didn't notice until the process was nearly complete. It is fitting, though perhaps a bit disturbing, that our society maintains the patriarchal identity represented by the historical communication of male ideas. I might have been able to eliminate this had I not decided to use quotations from Americans who had already passed on.

In fact, I did find several quotations by women that communicated some of the ideas I was trying to present, but they were all by women who were still alive or not Americans. The former was a conscious choice, in that since I am living, I needed to show the historical context in which I as well as my fellow Americans exist. This ultimately means that American identity is in many ways wrapped up in the power differential represented by males continually holding positions of power over women, even if that power differential is gradually disintegrating. The exclusion of quotations by non-Americans was also deliberate, though less clearly dictated since logic would suggest that as a collection of photographs meant to communicate American identity, the presentation did not need to be convoluted by observations of those outside America, no matter how relevant or important to my daily life.

Section Thirteen: *America's Hope for Tomorrow*

Children are the hope for the future, and the thirty-one photographs in this section are meant to show children at their most creative, excited, and brave (see Section Thirteen

of photobook in supplemental file). The photographs show kids simply being kids. There are no captions in this section, just a few select quotations. It seems appropriate to depict behaviors of kids with no explanation. Actions do speak louder than words, and it is in this light that the photographs of their actions are left to tell their own stories.

The back cover photograph would also be included here, as it is a picture of a child, if I had not chosen to place it on the back cover. The idea of a child playing with a trash can spoke to me above all others and seemed a fitting conclusion to the photobook. There is a perception by some that life is eroding as the values we hold dear are shifting to encompass greater diversity and equality. Some I have come in contact with have made it clear that living according to the old ways that advocated the ideals of patriarchy and racial superiority are still the best ways to live. As a representation of the future, the child in this photograph, through her game play, is implying that this is simply rubbish. There is a greater future beyond the traps that currently exist, and this photograph specifically seemed to sum that up, just as the cover photograph summed up the entire project.

There are some, of course, who might take this picture to mean nothing more than a child playing. That is doubtless one way to interpret it, a way that speaks to the value and complication of photography as a tool for communication. In one instance, the photograph acts as a conduit for me, as the photographer, to convey my insight to a viewer. At the same time, the photograph allows viewers to draw upon their personal references and view the picture in their own way, which may or may not be how I see it. It is in this reality that photographs become an effective and essential tool to communicate a multitude of

complicated, often conflicting, constructions of American identity strung together within the borders of the United States of America.

Biography: *One American in the Midst of Many*

The biography is a brief synopsis of the life of the author and photographer and purpose for the project (see Biography page of photobook in supplemental file). One photograph is included, a self-portrait taken some years earlier. This was specifically done to emphasize that I took every photograph in the collection. This self-portrait in many ways is how I might see myself, even if the world sees me differently. Ultimately, the biography is an essential component linking *macro* and *micro* together as they relate to identity, since I am one American in the midst of many.

I am ever part of the larger structure of America, even as I understand myself as an individual. How I communicate with the larger structure is directly impacted by how societal messages have been communicated to me. This reciprocal relationship exists, and permeates the way I come to construct my identity within the context of being *American*. The choices I made in selecting certain photographs over others to communicate that construction speaks directly to the impact the larger structure has on my very existence. As a society, we embrace a web of *micro*-level connections that work to build nuances of difference and sameness together under one collective entity. As a nation we share a national heritage that is in many respects unlike any other, built on traditions carried on at the expense of those who came before I am proud to call myself *American*, even as that construct continues to evolve.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

At the conclusion of this study, we can be ever more aware that identity begins and ends with oneself, but it involves many more complexities than simply viewing it in terms of self-identification. In fact, it often involves how the political, cultural, and practical components of daily living impact our very understanding of who we are individually and within the collective context of a society, as well as the very constructions based upon those components (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Berkhus, 1996). Ultimately, at one time we are both who we define ourselves to be and who others define us to be.

The examination of identity applying the tool of ethnography is not necessarily new, but the method in which I have applied ethnography through the use of photography is and it has seen very little practice (e.g., Quinney, 1998, 2008). By employing the participant ethnographic method, the photographs communicate a narrative of American identity that connects myself to the viewer, and both of us to the larger societal structure. In essence, Mills' (1959) *micro* and *macro* come to life in the way in which people become interconnected, both individually and within the societal structure imposed upon us. Ultimately, what I present may be the true American identity speaking through the *micro* representation of American identity rather than the *macro* perspective presented in the media that we are supposed to buy into.

The study of identity employing these methods is far from complete. At the personal level, I see a vast array of photobooks exploring the nuances of identity from different perspectives. Specifically, I have photographs that capture a global identity beyond simply a national one. It is possible that examining identity through photography as a global entity might provide a new layer to understanding the complex nature of the constructions of identity. I would implore other identity studies scholars to think outside the box a bit, seeing the world through the lens of a camera. The moments captured in a photographic image can narrate identity to a potential audience far beyond any words. They can become the tool by which new understandings about communicating identity can begin to take form.

When all is said and done, this photobook captures more than just a collection of pictures. What is left is a pictorial view of identity and connectedness to an American national identity, leaving us with an understanding that identity exists all around us, in everything people do, every moment people share. Photographs capture those moments, speaking volumes with just a single image, a frozen moment. Ultimately, as we try to communicate identity, the photographic image leaves us with a knowledge and understanding for which we can never find adequate words. It is only then that we can comprehend the truest meaning of all, as the great American photographer Ansel Adams once did: “When words become unclear, I shall focus with photographs. When images become inadequate, I shall be content with silence.” It is in the silence that the narratives of the pictures speak loudly to that which is unequivocally *American*, both for the individual and the collective.

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