The Importance of Identity: A Visual Criminological Analysis of Intersectionality

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A traditional single-lens reflex camera holds a mirror at the core of its mechanism. The mirror allows for light to reflect whatever the lens is focusing on to the viewfinder for the photographer. This mechanic holds no greater significance other than its intended function to give the photographer the opportunity to preview the photograph before taking the image, but I find great poetic symbolism in it. The photographer and the subject, tied together by their own reflections and a string of light– they are inseparable. This idea became my philosophy as a photographer but also an artist viewing photographs– the images are always informed by the photographer and vice versa.

During the development of this volume of *The Annual Review of Criminal Justice Studies*, I was granted the opportunity to lead a project within the journal that included the chance to work with our authors. With this, I formulated a project that utilized the practice of visual criminology and the participation of authors interested in the concept. The project had authors, who volunteered, take/choose photographs where they identified visual moments–candid or directed– that represent intersectionality to them. After this, they would select 1-3 photos they liked the most and send them back to me. From there the author and I would have a meeting to discuss and reflect on their photographs. The core concept of this project was to gather how the next generation of criminal justice authors and scholars were identifying their personal relationship with intersectionality. Seeing, specifically in photographs, what these authors were choosing as central focuses, but also underlying unconscious decisions, and how/why these details were important photographic choices to each photographer that spoke to the prompt.

There are two important questions I want to clear up before introducing the photographs and the authors. The first of "why visual criminology?" The choice of doing this project using the study of visual criminology started with a personal interest in photography. As a current criminal justice and studio art student, with a passion for photography– I couldn't help but constantly see overlap between the two. I want to take a moment to provide background information on the history of photography to provide context to my answer of why the field of visual criminology.

To briefly summarize a few centuries of photography, it began back in the 16th century where, not photographers, but rather scientists used the phenomenon of a "camera obscura" or a pinhole camera to view eclipses (Dam, 2023, para. 5). From here, its accessibility was limited to individuals who had the money and time to invest in expensive equipment. Notably, in 1839 Alphonse Giroux produced a daguerreotype camera that is argued to be the first "commercially accessible camera." The process "...had an exposure time of 5 to 30 minutes and cost around \$7,000 in today's money. It wasn't cheap, but it was accessible" (Pam, 2023, paras. 13-14). I strongly disagree with this conclusion, as the average working person today would not be able to drop \$7,000 and further, the labor and time to create photos, hence why I do not see this as the beginning of accessible photography. A couple decades later, in 1888 photographer George Eastman manufactured and began to sell cameras. These cameras used roll film, allowed for 100 exposures, were easy to use, and photographers did not have to develop the photos themselves but instead sent it back to the company factory. They were called Kodak cameras and sold for \$25 (Pam, 2023, para. 22). This is where I believe the era of accessible photography began.

For a long time, the history of photography was piloted by wealthy white men. Marginalized and minority communities did not have access to a camera, and if they were ever subjects of a photo it was through white western lens. The stories and complexities of intersectional individuals in history are absent because their identities were not valued by the western world. In our current society, photography has finally become extremely accessible– especially following the invention of smartphones. Smartphones have become a necessity, as most communication can be done on a phone therefore for the first time in history–from working class to wealthy– mostly every person holds a camera in their pocket. This is the heart of "why visual criminology" for me; because now not only well-off wealthy individuals hold a camera, it is those previously silenced marginalized and minority communities who can now document and photograph their lives in the way they chose to. People have been given the ability to tell their own stories through their own lens.

The second question I will answer is "what exactly do I mean by 'intersectionality?" The term "intersectionality" was coined by civil rights advocate and critical race scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw. She coined the term to help explain the oppression and violence African-American women faced (Columbia Law, 2017). Since then, the term grew new life as it helped flow conversations of social justice over the years. Crenshaw spoke in an interview a few days before the AAPF (African-American Policy Forum) 20th anniversary celebration, and Columbia Law transcribed her discussion and response to the transformation of intersectionality becoming larger than a definition of to describe bias and violence against Black women. She explains how "Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LBGTQ problem there" (Crenshaw, 2017, as cited in Columbia Law, para. 3, 2017). She writes how this blanket framework can be harmful, that the idea of just using intersectionality to mean that something is complicated, as an excuse for inaction, is wrong. She sees intersectionality as a tool, whether that be to explain the complexities of these important identity layers to "explain to the courts" (legal/political action) or to implement it into public education (public resources) where people are experiencing "intersectional harm–" so that people can begin to find ways to "...see these problems and better intervene in advocacy" (Crenshaw, 2017, as cited in Columbia Law, para. 4-6, 2017). It is Crenshaw's words that intersectionality is a tool to advocate for the institutions that perpetuate harm to understand the complexity of identity and the importance of that.

With this understanding of intersectionality, and through the mode of a visual criminology, I want to challenge the contemporary stereotype that knowledge producers–authors of academic and scholarly writings– are simply that, a name for a citation. I want to use this project to explore two main ideas. The first idea is informed by Kimberlé Crenshaw's words that intersectionality is a tool to advocate for equality and equity and the complexity of identity, not a blanket term that excuses inaction because layered identity is "too complicated." The second being that the intersectional identities of academic authors deeply weave into the essays they write. Their nuanced experiences are key elements that developed their voice and the subject they choose to write about. By bringing attention to three of our authors and their relationship with intersectionality through a visual avenue, readers can begin to see why they chose to write and their motivations for critically assessing social justice issues.

The three authors from this journal that volunteered their time and labor to help me complete this project were, San Francisco State University authors Eli Lehrer, Jasmine Kimbrough, and Gabriel (Gabe) Singer. All three were given the same previously mentioned prompt and guidelines, from there these authors met with me individually for a discussion to review and reflect on their photos. These discussions were crucial to gathering exactly how these authors— the future of academic and social justice scholars— visually pictured and understood the concept of intersectionality.

## Eli Lehrer

In response to the prompt, Eli (he/they) shares three images taken in a directed manner that are stories of themself, their experience and how that informed their understanding of their personal relationship with intersectionality. These stories also informed what they wrote for this journal. Directed images are photographs where the photographer intentionally stages what is in the photograph, whether that be people or inanimate items.



Starting in no particular order, beginning with the image of Eli's personal items: jewelry and pins, a stim toy, and a weekly pill organizer. It is important to note that for the sake of the image, Eli told me how he actually moved these items from their regular place in their everyday life, and positioned them for this photo, for the sake of capturing pieces of intersectionality that show up in their life. This may seem small, but this is an incredibly important part of the image.

"This is just a thing I see in my bathroom everyday."

For Eli, intersectionality is a part of their everyday life. For composing this image he had to look in the background of his routine to see what things represent their relationship with intersectionality. This is how it is for so many people as well. So failing to recognize intersectionality or push it aside, because it is "too complicated" is akin to ignoring the very way people live every single day. Beyond the arrangement of these pieces themselves, these small possessions are much more than objects to Eli. They represent their chronic illness, being neurodivergent, and their trans and nonbinary identity– all layers to their individuality. This image is a visualization of how intersectionality represents key layers to Eli's identity and way of life.

The next image is a photo of a book page with the bolded letters "I DIDN'T ASK FOR THIS" there is text below this with some of it obscured by a container of testosterone gel. Eli first tells me about the placement of the gel and why it covers the body of text. This is because, at the time, Eli published this anthology chapter in a larger work under a different name. Hence why the testosterone gel is placed the way that it is. However, Eli preferred the harsh juxtaposition the message holds with the testosterone gel covering the feminine name. Eli then tells me more about the content of the book chapter pictured. It's a personal story where Eli writes about his experience being assaulted as well as compares their work as a nude model and non full service sex worker to their time as a student, pointing out that he was at higher risk because he was on a college campus. Eli explains to me how this deeply personal essay is a direct predecessor to their work in this volume of ARCJS. Eli explains that,

"I [Eli] started this line of academic study because of my experiences being assaulted" The lived experiences of a person can inform a huge part of the work they do. Understanding the importance of intersectional experiences helps understand the motivations behind some authors' work. Eli, specifically, identifies sex work as a layer in their intersectional identity, and an important layer that informed their publication. However, the continued motivation and passion to advocate for sex education in institutions of higher education (IHEs) comes from IHE inaction and the continued assault and harm done on campuses. One important detail Eli wanted to share and have included with this image was a story of their wife, Anaïs, who was a victim to sexual assault on a CSU campus, and how a factor in her decision of whether or not to report the incident was Eli's work. This is because it happened during the semester Eli was revising their paper for ARCJS. He tells me that experience had him directly face the way a lack of good options and good support on IHE campuses fosters harm, and how the lack of resources created a chain of events that culminated in even more harm on Anaïs, a transgender woman (a high risk demographic, Eli explains). It is stories like hers, like Eli's, like so many students, that inform

Eli's work into advocating for better preventative and responsive measures to sexual assault on IHE campuses because of its intersectional importance.

The last photo is of a bookshelf, there are two shelves of books from various authors. Eli tells me how this collection holds fiction and nonfiction, and is their favorite among other shelves and books in their home. One thing Eli mentioned to me was the importance of this last photo because the prompt asks for what intersectionality "represents" to you. Eli sees this as more than their identity, they recognize other perspectives and experiences and use that to educate themself on the nuance of intersectionality. Fiction and nonfiction, reading and learning about stories and lives of scholars who wrote about their identity.

"It's [about] learning from other people and learning about other experiences" The experiences of these other scholars, like Eli, help build and inform their knowledge of intersectionality. Furthermore, Eli sees the understanding and what would represent intersectionality as beyond their own identities and complexities, hence the importance of being open minded and continuing to teach themself.

Eli sees intersectionality as a huge part of their identity, but how other people's unique relationship with intersectionality informs their life, their academic studies, and what they advocate for. Understanding intersectionality helps understand the motivations towards Eli's work and why these images are a visualization of intersectionality to him.

## Jasmine Kimbrough

In response to the prompt, Jasmine shares images and stories of herself, her experiences, and her journey in life. The three images are meant to be seen together, in no particular order, but as one piece. These pictures were taken in both contemplative and directed styles. Contemplative photography is a manner of photography in which the photographer takes an image of the way the world is, just as an observer without disturbing or changing anything.



In no particular order, beginning with the image of the two women, this is a photo of Jasmine and her mother. They are centered in the photo and affectionately looking and holding one another. Beginning here, Jasmine chose this particular photo to highlight something that took her nearly her whole life so far to accept– that she was the product of her mother. The way she looks, acts, and believes is a reflection of the women who raised her and that was a hard pill to swallow when Jasmine was younger, because of the American expectation and mainstream standards that being a woman of color was a negative thing. It was in highschool when, like most people, Jasmine was locked in her house (because of COVID-19) when she began to accept herself and strengthen the relationship with her mother. Finally, being outside the influence of others, she began to really look at herself, and explore her identity and learn to love it. There was a moment where Jasmine saw her mother, and saw herself in her, and came to the resolution of:

"I want to look like you. I want to be like you."

The image highlights intersectionality through Jasmine's identity as a young woman of color, and how it was a woman of color who lifted her up and helped her accept and love that layer of her individuality.

The next image is a photo of a set table full of food. The food was cooked by Jasmine, the photographer, and a friend, for a Christmas celebration. Jasmine notes it is important to understand there is an inclusion of some store bought food from Jollibee, a Filipino chain, as well. The image is taken from high above the table to include every bit of food and table setting Jasmine and her friend prepared, with love, for their families and friends. The importance of this image comes from the history of Jasmine's life. Growing up the daughter of a single mother, money was tight and celebrations were not always like this. There was always the understanding to cook with what you have- no need to buy from the store if there was food at home- and to save what they could.

"Buying food when we had some at home... It was seen as a greedy thing." This was also true for the friends and community Jasmine grew up with. As their families began to grow out of financial struggle and instability, they began to have the time and money to cook an abundance of food. Jasmine explains to me that in Filipino culture cooking for family is a love language– so to have been restricted from that growing up was hard. But now, being able to do so shows a familial journey out of hardship, but also is a beautiful display of generationally learned traditions that are derived from her culture. Jasmine chooses to take photos of food constantly, because it was not always something she could do. The photo is a celebration of financial stability, the time they have to practice culture and tradition, and is full of love for friends and family. For Jasmine, intersectionality informs every bit of this photo because intersectionality highlights and recognizes the intertwined layers of class, race, and culture to Jasmine's everyday life, which is a truth so many others live.

Finally, the last photo is an image of Oakland, California, taken from the wing of a plane. Jasmine, our photographer, chooses this photo because you can see so much and so far– it's a sight that we as humans do not see everyday, and that is an important key factor to the dialogue that follows this image. The last time Jasmine went on a plane was when she was eight years old, she explained to me this because travelling was always a privilege and something her family could not afford. Being a student while also working is something that is normal for Jasmine. From highschool to college, there was always a balance between working and studying. This image was taken on a work trip from the past semester in college, but that is not the focus or the main message Jasmine wanted to highlight with the photo.

"It was like a whole new world."

Sights like the one in the photo weren't something she was familiar with, and even though it was a work trip, she explained to me that being able to see this was a monumental moment for her as she realized it was something so new and exciting. That being able to experience new things at 21 and still feel like a kid, that was exciting. Moments like this, things some people may take for granted is what Jasmine wanted to capture. She wanted to immortalize a moment in which she was soaking in what she knew was a privilege– to travel– even if it was for work. Once again, this layer to her experience, her understanding of financial instability and economic classes, and her own, is why she celebrates moments like these.

Jasmine sees intersectionality as the foundation of herself, and in order to understand herself and her journey you have to understand how those elements of race, culture, class, and gender have had an impact on her life. It is the celebration of those intersecting identity layers that is the central focus of these images.

## **Gabriel Singer**

In response to the prompt, Gabriel (Gabe) Singer shares three images taken in San Francisco that are taken in a responsive and contemplative manner. Responsive images are photographs taken in response to something that happens in the world that prompts the photographer to take a picture. Gabe tells me how these images are meant to be seen together, in no particular order, but as one piece.





In no particular order, beginning with the image of the word "MALO" graffitied on the side of a train. Gabe told me how when he walked through this trainyard and when he got to the very back and saw this, he was compelled to take a picture because of the narrative he associated with this. Gabe explains to me how when viewing this photo and reading the graffitied tag of "MALO", which translates directly to "bad" from Spanish, Gabe can imagine a young kid tagging the train with "MALO" viewing it as their nickname, essentially accepting a name that would mean "bad kid."

"They carry that stigma of what society told them and then they act it out, or they put it up on the wall." Gabe sees the implementation of intersectionality as a tool to combat hypercriminalization and classism. Gabe sees Malo (the name he has given this assumed child) as a victim of the classist cycle of poverty and youth criminalization that comes with living in a low-income neighborhood. However, two elements that Gabe recognizes within Malo, is a reflection of himself and also the potential for Malo's life. In a reflective sense, Gabe sees himself in Malo. A young kid, who is influenced and impacted by his environment, feeling unwelcome in conventional public spaces, and becoming a product of the labeling they endure- accepting the identity of "being bad." Gabe sees the other part, how Malo is expressing art, even though it's done by escaping to the very back of a train yard, it's being done. If given the resources or the chance to get out of the cycle of poverty, kids like Malo, Gabe, and so many other impacted youth would seize the opportunity. Reforms and resources like that come into implementation or even just a general understanding of intersectionality and the importance of recognizing complex identities and their fragility play into the larger picture of a person's life.

The second image Gabe shares with me is a photo of an unhoused individual at a public bus stop, using public streetlamps to draw. Gabe took this photo when stepping off the bus because he viewed what this artist was doing as something beautiful.

"He's using the public space to do something creative and purposeful." When taking the image, he did not realize it at the moment, but Gabe tells me how he actually captured a MT (municipal transit) cop stepping into the photo to have the individual removed (the yellow jacket sleeve on the left side of the image)– and that is what made this image extremely powerful for Gabe. This individual is in a public space, causing no harm, yet is being removed because of current stigmas and the hypercriminalization of unhoused individuals. Gabe,

having been system-involved, tells me about his experience with being hyper-criminalized in public spaces and how that affected him. He tells me about how when he was younger he would skate in public places, only to then be arrested for trespassing. This is why this image really connected with him and the idea of intersectionality. As previously mentioned, Gabe sees the theory and application of intersectionality as a way to combat hypercriminalization and also classism. Another important detail of this photograph is the focus on the artistnot the MT cop. As a photographer in this moment, Gabe's own experience plays a huge role in being able to recognize this person firstly as an artist, something unfortunately the general public would not because of the hypercriminalization of unhoused people. Then, furthermore recognizing his removal from the bus stop as the product of hypercriminalization. It is the lack of intersectional understanding that the MT cop and that the general public has towards unhoused people that provoked Gabe to save this image as a representation of the necessity for intersectionality to be widely understood so that people can humanize all members of our communities.

The last image is of San Francisco State University's sign at the top of campus that welcomes you to the university, in this image it is graffitied with the words "STOP FUNDING GENOCIDE" with bloody handprints. This was taken by Gabe during the May 2024 Gaza solidarity encampments led by students on SFSU's campus that called for divestment and other demands. Gabe took this picture because he is seeing art, and artists use public space to create- much like the previous two- but this one is different to Gabe. He talks about the privilege of art, and in comparison to the other two, the privilege this artist had to graffiti right on the top of campus, which is a heavily monitored public space. They didn't have to hide in a tucked away corner like Malo, nor were they criminalized for the very action of creating, like the unhoused artist. Looking at things with an intersectional lens a person can begin to take apart or look beyond the graffiti and ask themself why the artist did it, the reason why it's there, the message it holds, and all these things. In order to find the answers to those questions they must acknowledge the complexities that come with identity and the artist. That's when Gabe asks the rhetorical:

"What happens if a young person gets the resources to go to school versus never getting those resources and having to live through their art traveling the world without them?"

Gabe pushes people to consider intersectionality when viewing graffiti or just art and the use of public spaces and who uses them. Gabe sees these student activists and recognizes intersecting pieces of their identity such as the privilege they have because they are students of higher education institutions, but then also the capacity and use of their privilege to protest and demand change.

Gabe sees intersectionality as a tool, like Crenshaw did, and explains its importance for advocating the equity and equality of certain hyper criminalized groups. Gabe identifies the importance of experience and its connection to identity. The idea of digging deeper than the surface level when it comes to nuanced situations is so important and what Gabe sees as a representation of intersectionality.

There are so many small decisions made when an individual takes a photograph. When viewing and analyzing a photo the viewer may jump from the subject, to the framing, maybe the intention, but sometimes forgotten or excluded in a photographic analysis is the photographer themselves. Again, I want to emphasize the golden thread that ties a photographer to a photograph, just like an author is tied to their work. Simply because photographs can be taken in a matter of seconds in comparison to the labor of a book or academic essay, doesn't mean that the intentionality and importance of the photographer's identity is lost.

Contemporary criminology has a tendency to push the audience to only look one direction. For example, bringing up authors again, and their connection with their work. Current academica doesn't really call for authors to make notes or include their lived experiences, but to instead keep the work formal to make it scholarly. This makes it so when these authors' works are read or cited, they merely become another name on a reference page. Even in my own experience, I am guilty of citing authors without ever looking into their motivations for writing or the lived experience and intersectional knowledge they may bring into the work. Simply put, the audience reads what they're given and analyzes that. Visual criminology looks at both; the audience is given the visual to analyze themselves, but also given the detailed analysis of that photographer, which then influences the audience's impression of both. By looking at both the photograph and the photographer, the incomplete story each part would give separately is incomparable to the message and narrative they tell together. So why is it that authors are treated differently? The heart of this project was to shed light on how authors of this venue have their intersectional identities inform their everyday life and representations of who they are; and this includes their work as they use their own understanding and relationship with intersectionality as a tool to combat the current social issues they write about in their critical criminological

essays. This is the key idea, that a piece itself and the person who created it are inseparable, and to separate them would do an injustice to the story that is being told.

I want to end by thanking authors Eli, Jasmine, and Gabe. Thank you for your participation, I am grateful to have had this opportunity to work with you and hold those profoundly personal conversations that you have allowed me to share through this project. The future of criminology is bright. It is illuminated by scholars whose academic journey and passion for justice is intertwined with their unique lived experiences and intersectional identities. As future scholars continue to intersect their academics and written work with their diverse and personal backgrounds, we must do our due diligence by making sure we recognize not only the paper or who is holding the pen, but both, together.

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