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Critical Review of Practice (PHO705)

Maybe I Will Leave



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FALMOUTH UNIVERSITY | MA IN PHOTOGRAPHY

*Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition*

James Baldwin (1956:88)

## Introduction

In James Baldwin's novel, *Giovanni's Room*, Giovanni tells David: "You don't have a home until you leave it, and then, when you have left it, you never can go back." (1956:92)

Originally from Belgium, I have spent most of my life abroad and have lived and worked in Brussels, Liverpool, New York, Bangkok, and Phnom Penh. Vienna has been my temporary home for some 20 years. With retirement age now approaching, essential questions arise: what does home mean? Will I leave Vienna? Where will I go?

## Project description

*Maybe I will leave* is a long-term collaborative dialogue aimed to reflect on what it means to live as a woman away from one's home country. It focuses on issues of migration, identity, memory and belonging. Ultimately, it is about my own situation as an outsider in Vienna.

My project is a poetical narrative moving between reality and imagination, merging family archives, portraiture, still life, landscape, and text. It will engage the audience in a conversation about multiculturalism and integration.

The persons depicted in my project are not forced migrants, but women, who, like me, came to Vienna either to pursue their career or because they followed their husband. For them, the return home always remains a possibility. As much as they strive to integrate, they remain outsiders, in transit between two homes, with feelings

of fragmentation and in-betweenness. The adoption of a new (temporary) homeland is strongly connected to memories of the place left behind, and migrants often carry in their luggage family photographs and objects dear to them.



Fig 1. Boutriau/Unknown. 2021

Identity is fluid and therefore a difficult concept to define, particularly in the context of migration, and cultural hybridism is a common feature. In his essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Stuart Hall states that cultural identity is not only a matter of a “being” but of “becoming”, “belonging as much to the future as it does to the past” (1996:112). Identities undergo constant transformation. Finding one’s identity is often related to finding a sense of belonging within a certain community. Maria Caterina La Barbera holds a similar view, arguing that “one can actually have several “homes” that only partially match with the physical places “and that “the sense of belonging appears to be a crucial step in the processes of formation and identity reconstruction for refugee and migrant women” (2015:4). Caribbean-born British writer Caryl Phillips acknowledges his “plural self” and “the full complexity of his identity as a member of the African diaspora”. He notes that travel has been important for him to clarify his

“own unique position in the world” and seek “a richer sense of identity “, binding him “not just to a particular tribe, clan, or race, but to the human race “(2004).

## Collaboration

Susan Sontag argues that “there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed”(1977:14).

To avoid objectifying the subjects I photograph and to actively participate in the project instead of being a mere observer/voyeur, I opted for collaboration. In the context of Covid 19 lockdowns, it was not a simple task to immerse myself into the world of my “characters”. The first step was to establish a list of potential candidates, contact them to explain the project and my motivation and engage them in the project. When I first met them physically, I had a notebook and no camera as I wanted to build a trust relationship, get into a deeper level of intimacy, and give people the opportunity to bring something to the table. Five women accepted to collaborate over a period of six months and agreed to share family photographs and objects that were important to them and to take me to places in Vienna that they particularly liked. They also produced a short text about their story and relationship to Vienna. Of course, I obtained their consent before diffusing anything related to them. Below are slides (fig. 2-6) from the presentation I made for Falmouth University in July, showing samples collected through collaboration.

Lin shu



I am not sure I took the right decision  
coming to Vienna  
Maybe I should have stayed with my mother  
She needed me  
And through her  
I would have learned what it meant to be  
old

Fig. 2. Boutriau. 2021

Valérie



I came to Vienna  
because of my husband  
One day I received a letter  
It was quite tough  
In the end I feel enriched  
One day I will go

Fig. 3. Boutriau. 2021

Solange



For a long time I was looking for myself  
from one country to another  
Often I kept quiet  
trying to assimilate



Fig. 4. Boutriau. 2021

Agathe



If I love Vienna so much  
It is certainly  
Because I never stopped loving Douala

Fig. 5. Boutriau. 2021



Fig. 6. Boutriau. 2021

Bieke Depoorter tries to build up relationships with her models before making images. Discussing her project *Agata* (2021), she says she used her model to understand her own life and the complex layers of self. At the same time, the model, *Agata*, says she learned a lot about herself by being photographed. I received similar comments from the women I collaborated with, and they also really enriched my own reflection on existential issues. In the end, the relationship becomes more important than making images. Depoorter also questions the medium of photography. I agree with her that photography has limitations and firmly believe that text and other mediums enrich the conversation.



Fig.7. Bieke Depoorter. 2018. Agata.



Fig.8. Boutriau. 2021. Omaima



Fig. 9. Boutriau. 2021. Omaima

In Depoorter's image (fig. 7), Agata looks very relaxed, and one really feels the complicity between the photographer and her subject. In my image (fig.8), Omaima looks tense, and the composition is very awkward. I reshot the portrait a few weeks later, enhancing the composition and playing some music for relaxation purposes (fig.9) Making portraits which "create a degree of psychological intensity between photographer and subject" is a "slow process", as David Company noted in *On Photographs* (2020:88).

Carolyn Drake's practice also embraces collaboration. Playfulness and experimentation are important elements for her, as is illustrated in *Knit Club* (2020) (fig.7). Drake is playing with reality and imagination to convey a sense of mystery that is often unsettling, to enhance her visual story telling, which goes beyond purely documentary photography.





Fig. 10. Carolyn Drake. 2020. from Knit Club



Fig. 11. Boutriau. 2021

## The power of archives, and ethical issues

Some photographers use family archives to enhance their visual narratives. In my project, archival material is used to revisit the women's former selves. Family photographs open a window to the past, tell shared stories, and are an instrument of self-knowledge and representation. They are a bit like ghosts from a previous life, an affective link to the past that trigger some emotional punch, linked to what Barthes called "the punctum".

In *Family Frames* (2012), Marianne Hirsch elaborates on the family album and the familial gaze and notes that "one of the primary elements of the familial look is that it occurs within a closed circle". She then raises two essential questions: "What happens when that circle is enlarged to include other viewers and readers?" "What are the ethics, what are the politics, of this "exposure", this public reading of images that generate their meanings in the private realm?" (2012:107).

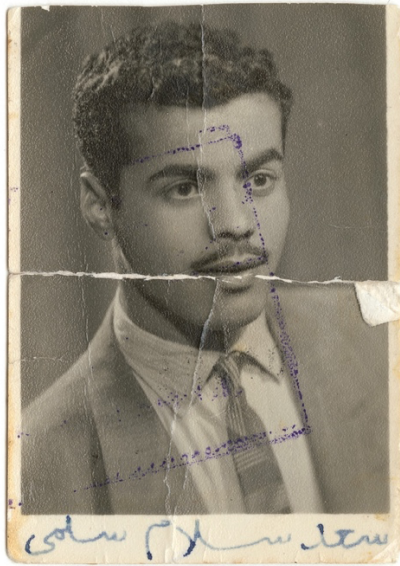


Fig.12. Boutriau/Unknown. 2021.



Fig. 13 Boutriau/Unknown. 2021.

At a portfolio review, I was told that by using the word “expatriate” and photographing essentially non-white women, I was challenging the strongly held connotation of rich white people in a colonial context. I finally chose the more neutral term “outsider”. In *Pastoral Interlude* (2018), Ingrid Pollard is challenging old stereotypes by placing black people (herself) into the traditional British landscape environment where they stand out as 'outsiders'. The result is unsettling as 'they' don't belong in this context. In his series *In My Mother's Clothes* (2010), Nigerian-British artist Karl Ohiri is also questioning stereotypes, placing a white (South African) woman wearing African clothes in a suburban English landscape.



Fig.14. 2018.Ingrid Pollard.



Fig.15. Karl Ohiri.2010, Gold.



Fig.16. Boutriau. 2021

### Building a visual narrative

Charlotte Cotton repeatedly underlined “the role that editing and sequencing play in contracting the narrative of a photographic body of work” (2014: 244), and Jörg Colbert, in *Understanding Photobooks* (2017), devotes a whole section to sequencing. The purpose of sequencing is to create a logical flow from the beginning to the end, to take the viewers on a journey, to get them to see what the photographer saw, to follow the author’s ideas and intention (2017:95). Movement, colors, or shapes are essential to produce a language, a story and create a rhythm. Visual clues are used to connect one image to the other. Collaboration with a viewer is essential in this respect as it is important to check how the images are read. Feedback from my peers and tutors, together with several portfolio reviews at Falmouth, were crucial in this respect.

In terms of poetic visual narrative, Riko Kawachi inspired me a lot, not only aesthetically, but in the way she evokes an emotional response. I love the serenity that emerges from her images. Kawachi's photographs are like haikus around the

simplicities of daily life. Her work is influenced by the Japanese art of wabi sabi. What really appeals to me is her subtle use of light and the ethereal quality of her landscapes.

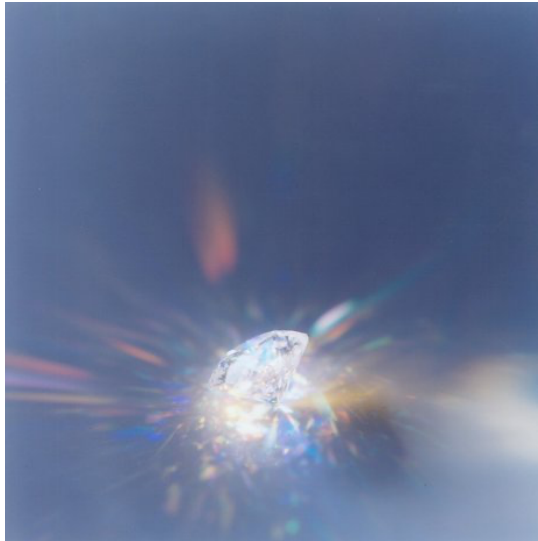


Figure. 17. Rinko Kawauchi. 2009



Fig. 18. Boutriau. 2021

Cotton notes that Kawauchi shapes “subtle, elegiac narratives without the aid of interpretative text”, is “not overcomplicating photographic strategies” and remains “true to the notion that all around us are pictures waiting to happen” (2014: 242-243). This really resonates with me. In my narrative, I reduced the textual elements drastically. Textual elements are the voices of the women I collaborated with and act as an anchor for the viewer. Like Kawauchi, my way of producing images is often intuitive and incidental. I am also constantly looking for symbols that I could use in my stories, to create metaphors and multiple layers of reading, in order to sustain interest of the audience.

I made the conscious choice of trying to avoid clichés in my representation of Vienna. The city is beautiful, with a lot of green places, but at the same time, it has a strange non inclusive atmosphere, with drawn curtains, barricaded windows, and closed doors. I took a more poetic view, based on aesthetics. David Levi Strauss considered

the role of aesthetics in documentary photography. The challenge is how to aestheticize and make the work both politically valid and visually compelling. "To be compelling, there must be tension in the work". The "aestheticization" of an image is what elicits a more visceral, complex response than a simple "acceptance or rejection" of what is being presented (2003:10).



Fig. 19. Boutriau. 2021



Fig. 20. Boutriau. 2021

It is crucial to consider the way in which the stories are read, and to leave space for the audience to project their own experiences so that they remain engaged in the narration. The series should therefore induce emotions, so that the reader would experience what Barthes called the 'punctum' (2010:86), but also include pauses to let the viewer connect things.

In building my narrative and pairing images, I examined Alec Soth's *Sleeping by the Mississippi* (2008). It is a balanced mix of landscape, portraiture and still life, with very little text in order not to disturb the visual narrative. I also studied Dinu Li's book *The Mother of All Journeys* (2007), a mix of family photographs, landscapes, stills and text telling a story of migration. Past and present are constantly mixed, and the viewers get the strange feeling of not knowing exactly where they are in time.

My visual narrative also mixes family archive photographs and images taken in Vienna, with the result that we are constantly oscillating between past and present. As an experiment, I rephotographed portraits of Agathe (fig.21) through a translucent paper to give them a family album touch. However, for consistency reasons, these images did not make it to the final edit of the dummy book.

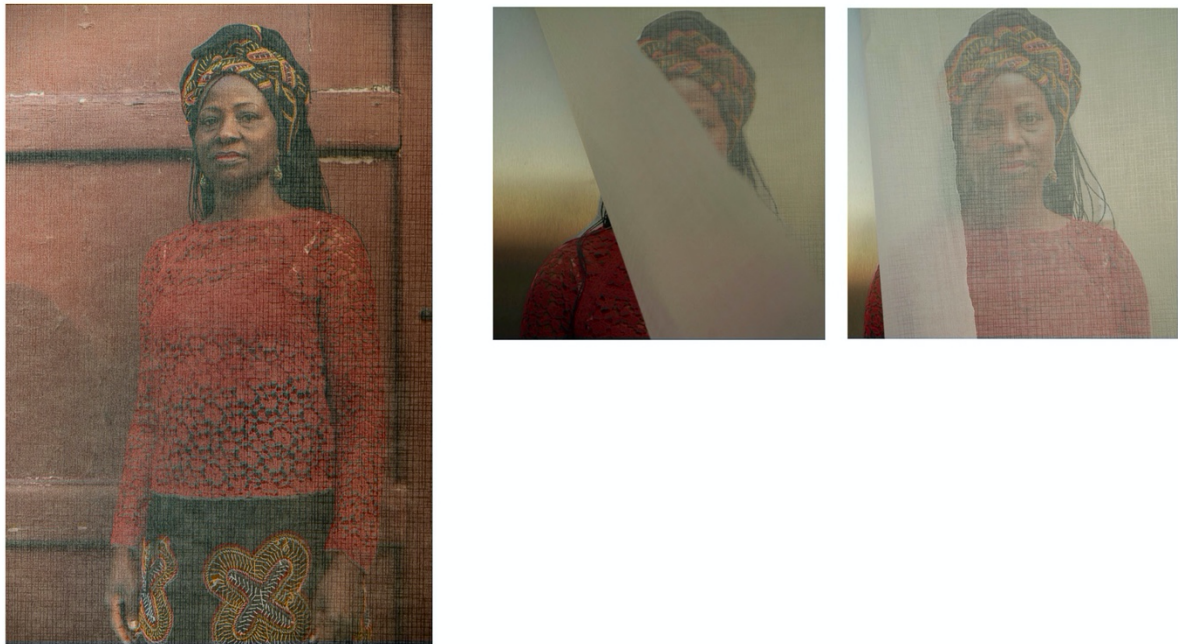


Fig.21. Boutriau. 2021

In *How We See: Photobooks by Women* (2018), Valentina Abenavoli writes that “visual narratives work by imagining there is no time, as well as by diminishing the objectivity of the images themselves. The photographer disappears, time disappears, and images are at the viewer’s disposal and imagination; their absolute meanings (and time) lose the capacity for unilateral power and presence.” (2018 :25)

As Barthes discusses in *Camera Lucida*, the photograph “establishes not a consciousness of the being-there of the thing... but an awareness of its having-been-there”. It implies “a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction of the here-now and the there-then.” (1977:44).

## Target audience

The target audience is anyone interested in migration and identity issues. The topic is universal. In today's world, there is a migrant in each of us.

## Public outcome

### Photobook and dummies

I will produce a photobook as it is the perfect medium to present a visual narrative with some textual elements. The book is an intimate physical object with a tactile quality, and it should be an extension of the project's meaning.

In May, I created a first dummy at *Rencontres d'Arles* with the Director of *Editions Filigranes*. As my project is about identity, I opted for five separate booklets, one for each woman, each cover revealing an intimate view of Vienna. The booklets are inserted into a slip case (see screenshot, fig. 22). I received very positive feedback from the public at *Maison des Arènes*, as well as from my peers.

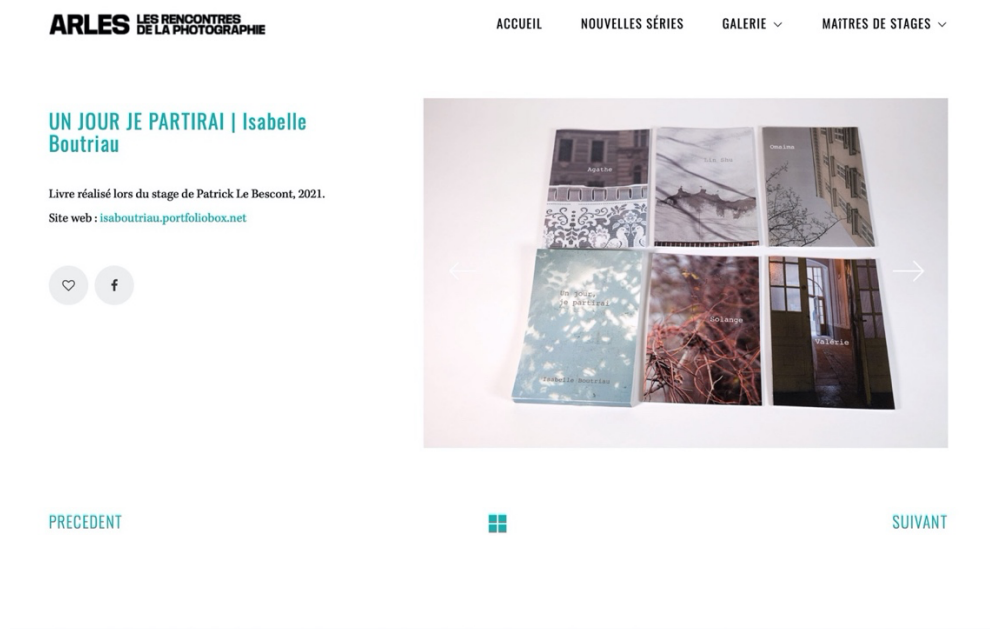


Fig. 22. Boutriau. 2021

As my project developed and gained in depth, I created a second dummy book, using *InDesign*, to be posted online as a flip book. It is organized in different chapters. For the sequencing, I was very fortunate to get expert feedback from Dinu Li.

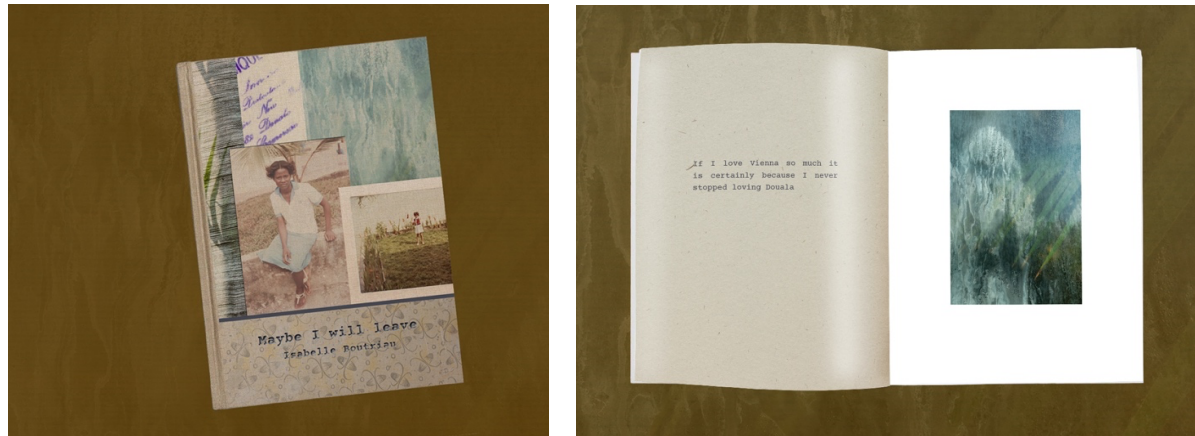


Fig. 23. Boutriau. 2021

As this iteration only focuses on two women, I intend to prepare a third iteration to include the other three women I collaborated with. Creating a book requires very close attention to details, so the next step will be to work in collaboration with a graphic designer. I will then present my work at varied photobook reviews.



### **Book signing event and photobook workshop**

As my previous project about Vienna has been selected to be exhibited during the Vienna photo festival (FOTOWIEN) in March 2022 (initially March 2021, but postponed due to the pandemic), I will take this opportunity to add a book signing event and a poetic photobook workshop.

### **Online Presence and collective exhibition**

Online platforms provide a good opportunity to achieve increased exposure and reach a larger audience. My personal website has a gallery dedicated to my project, and some images are also posted on my Instagram page. I showcase my work through *The Long Exposure*, a collective created together with my German Bight's peers (including a website and Instagram and Facebook pages) and a group exhibition is planned at the *Four Corners Gallery* in Bethnal Green, London, in October 2021.

### **Open calls and photobook reviews**

Some of the images I made during the MA have been selected by Kunst Haus Vienna to be part of the *Rethinking Nature* slide show projected during the photo festivals in Luxemburg, Lisbon, and Vienna, in 2021-2022.

My project has been selected for I SEE YOU, sub-exhibition of Falmouth University's Landings 2021.

I just submitted a series of 8 images for the Source Magazine MA graduates' publication, and I am preparing a larger portfolio for LensCulture and The Eye of Photography. I intend to take part in many other open calls and photobook reviews.

### **Final thoughts**

*Maybe I leave* is an evolving project that has enabled me to confirm my voice as a photographer. It is the first stage of a long journey of discoveries.

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Fig. 7 Bieke Depoorter. 2018. Agata. Beirut. Lebanon. Magnum Photos. Available at <https://www.magnumphotos.com/theory-and-practice/bieke-depoorters-agata/> (accessed 25 July 2021).

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Fig. 14 Ingrid Pollard (2018), from the series *Pastoral Interlude*. Available at: <http://www.ingridpollard.com/pastoral-interlude.html> (accessed 25 July 2021).

Fig. 15 Karl Ohiri. 2010, Gold, from *In My Mother's Clothes*, available at <https://www.karlohiri.com/in-my-mothers-clothes> (accessed 25 July 2021).

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Fig. 23. Boutriau. 2021, Photobook dummy mock-up.

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