

AMANI WILLETT & TIFFANY JONES

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“... to carry on stories for future generations, that’s something that is really important.”

Amani Willett and Tiffany Jones have worked together on two projects as photographer (Willett) and publisher (Jones of Overlapse books): *The Disappearance of Joseph Plummer* (2017) and *A Parallel Road* (2020).

This interview is part of a series of conversations I had between 2018-2021 with individuals from in and around the photobook ecology. They initially helped inform my PhD research, and subsequently my working towards the publication *Photobooks &* (2021, Onomatopée). I sought to speak with students, librarians, researchers, curators and makers in all their guises to hear a variety of perspectives regarding the interaction of photography and the page. Now, a selection of these interviews are presented at www.photobookclub.org/photobooks& with the kind permission of the respective individuals in order to contribute to our collective discourse regarding the contemporary photobook.

The conversation presented in these pages has been edited for cogency and clarity. Any citations made should include the interviewer and interviewee as well as date of publication (2021), details of interview locations, format and date are given on the cover.

Matt Johnston

AW: Amani Willett

TJ: Tiffany Jones

Amani, Tiffany, it's so great to have the photographer and publisher to speak to together! I suppose a good place to start is — why the book, and why the book for *A Parallel Road* in particular?

AW: There are a few reasons. The simple answer is that I think in books and a lot of my practice is thinking about how images relate to each other — sequences and pairings and fashioning different sorts of images up against each other to create new and unexpected relationships. So that's integral to my practice. But beyond that, for this project in particular which references Victor Green's *Negro Motorist Green Book* that came out in the 1930s... from the beginning the conceptual idea was to sort of reproduce a copy of that book in all of its guidebook qualities: affordable, accessible, small, something that you can throw in your backpack and has a lot of information in it. And it's meant for the masses, or it has that quality to it. Having that as a background really sets the stage for the images laid on top that complicate the narrative of the original project. So that was the appeal of the book form for me.

Also I've always really loved photography books because as a lover of photography... I don't have the means to buy a lot of photographic images from the artists I admire but the book, although it's still expensive, is a way you can access an artist's work and collect it and come back to it. I can look at it in my living room or my bedroom and share it with friends. So it's a really practical way of experiencing another artist's work. It's also I think one of the fundamental qualities that's terrific about photography — that it's meant to be reproduced and it's easily reproducible. In order to make photography valuable people have spent years trying to figure out how to make it less reproducible: by scratching negatives or putting editions and limits on how many copies you make of something like a print. But really as a medium

I think it's meant to be shared and a book is part of that process. A book has the capacity to reach many people, with the understanding obviously that there are certain communities that collect photobooks and a limit on how much money can be made in artists' books.

This is a book which requires a lot from the viewer I think, it's not a casual book to look through. You have to take the time to invest in the different sorts of images that are being shown and included in the book. It's not a coffee table book. You need a certain amount of visual literacy I would say to experience it to its fullest, so I think it does fit into a particular audience in that way. There's a lot more I could say about this but I'll let Tiffany jump in.

TJ: For me when I start working with a photographer or artist, the only thing I think about is the audience really. And how to communicate, how to assist the artist in communicating their message effectively to the audience. I don't see the point in making books just as elite artworks. It could be done on occasion because collectors like unique objects... there is a market for that but for me, to have books in libraries and to carry on stories for future generations, that's something that is really important. So I try to cover a wide variety of subject matters but they are really all human stories that affect everybody in a sense... so they're accessible to more people. The storytelling aspect is so different I think with photobooks because as Amani was just talking about visual literacy... I don't think that's necessary in the sense that people do understand a story... I don't think you need to have an education and specific visual literacy to understand these books that I like to make.

This reminds me of a conversation with Lesley Martin when she spoke of a spiralling sophistication — that photobooks have become more sophisticated in their use of visual and material language. On one hand this progresses the medium but alongside that there is a certain exclusivity that can be problematic. If this is the case, do we need to provide more ways to reach and support new readers who might have different experiences and expectations?

AW: To go to Lesley's point first, she is right, the sophistication has spiralled upwards and that is in a

vacuum — in this community of bookmakers and artists and photographers who are seeing these books and the way the images are being used... and they are responding to that. And so it has increased the sophistication of the book. Now for my mum for example, she isn't really part of that conversation so for her to come in now and see where photobooks are compared to 20 years ago when everything was much more conservative with an image on a page... that could be quite confusing. Books are now vehicles for narratives and stories and there is a real marriage of design and material as being just as important in conveying that message. And so I do think they are more complicated than ever in really exciting ways. But then there is also this idea of audience and reach and the wonderful thing is that they potentially can reach a huge audience — but there are so many barriers. You're not going to find *A Parallel Road* in Barnes and Noble or some major bookseller and see it on the front rack. Your casual viewer isn't really going to come across this book necessarily, so how do you reach those other audiences? Outside of these large coffee table books, **how do you reach an audience that's beyond the small book world that we are all invested in to a certain extent? There's always this issue with photobooks and whether it is just about photography in which case it's just limited to that community, or does it have mass appeal? Is it about a subject that goes beyond photography that other people can relate to?** So that's one key question in terms of thinking about audience.

TJ: Design also plays a huge part, cover design in particular, with accessibility. I really like to use covers which tell a story completely, in a way that is maybe a summary of the work or it is something that is going to stick with people in some profound way as a representation of what's inside. People can really click with it and it's a way to access the material. But it's like you say, some of the audience might look at the book for only two minutes. I think with *A Parallel Road* it's a story that we all already know in a sense but the multiple layers really have this psychological effect and I think you can have a profound experience with it. And there is something else with this particular book...

as we know there are no road-trip books by Black photographers that we are aware of, and the Black experience has not really been documented in this way, so the timing of it was so important I think. Amani came to me asking if we should do this book now or whether it was a bad time because of the Black Lives Matter movement. So timing of the subject matter makes it more accessible I think as well. And that's something I consciously think about often. Is the moment right for this book?

AW: I think that's great and just to add to that, the first book Tiffany and I worked on together [*The Disappearance of Joseph Plummer*, 2017], in terms of audience it seemed more simple. I felt like I understood who our audience was more clearly because it was the photo world and the photobook community. That was who I envisioned buying this book. And then with this new book it was complicated because we were talking about race and I was thinking... does a 25-year-old English person know about Rodney King? I was thinking about audience much more with this publication than I had in the past. There are so many different people who might come across this book and they might understand some references or might not and that's something we had more of a conversation about than I had previously.

I think with all my projects I see them as these emotional journeys and this one in particular I was thinking about how, even if people don't understand the history or it isn't their experience, if you can relate to people on an emotional level there is something there for you that you can get out of that experience. So I tried to think about that a lot as we created this project and tried to get that emotional balance of something that is terrifying and scary but also not being gratuitous and not being too much.

TJ: Yeah we had a lot of arguments about what sort of image might actually be detrimental to the purpose of the book.

And when you're having those conversations, how much are you involving other people in that process... how much for a book like this are you engaging with different sorts of readers in working towards publication?

AW: Through the process Tiffany and I would have conversations about particular sequences and images and edits and we would both spend time with it. I would also show it to a certain set of trusted people that I share work with which usually includes photographers, my wife who is not as invested in photography, and also with this book I showed it to family members and people in the Black community to get their read and to see if they felt it was something that was not... I guess overstepping any boundaries...

TJ: Or that could be hurtful...

AW: Yeah, or could be read as opportunistic or... I just wanted to be really mindful of the subject matter and the group that I was talking about because we didn't want this to be exploitative in any way. We wanted it to be informative.

TJ: We've had a huge response from readers. A lot weren't aware of the *Green Book* which really informs everything in *A Parallel Road* because when you read the contents of the *Green Book*, it's chilling with these pictures overlaid. I think people have really responded to that. We have received emails and the way people are talking about it on social media, online and sharing the work, they are discussing this profound affect the book had on them and their perspective or viewpoints.

There are a lot of invitations for people to go further with the book, with a list at the back of the book referencing archives, police reports and so on — to further investigate and educate themselves. Are you finding that people are going on to use this as a starting point that it is sparking more reading and learning?

TJ: I don't think we've heard specifically but with Amani being a teacher I'm sure some of his

students will be involved in some way in looking deeper into the subject matter. But I know that here in London, in the UK, people that I have heard from have definitely come forward and said that they had no idea about this — the *Green Book* in particular. So they are certainly awakened to exploring. And as Amani has said before, this small book doesn't contain everything, this can't contain all the stories about all the people that have been killed and harassed... It would be a tome, it would be way too much to take on. So it is a good starting point.

AW: I would say that what I have heard and the response I have had is that **people have told me their perspective has changed on their privilege. That when they drive or when they think about other aspects of their lives where they have privilege, they have rethought their relationship to their surrounding environment and their ability to freely engage with the environment** in a particular way that other people don't have access to.

I want to shift a little bit now and talk about something crude because I want to talk about money. Of course your thesis Tiffany was partly about cost and the market which was a really refreshing topic for public discussion.

The research I've done into books that are shortlisted for prizes and books in the best-of lists at the end of the year show that their prices hover around €35-€50 with it being rare something is available for the sort of money of *A Parallel Road* (€20). So I'm keen to hear how much cost is front and centre determining choices that are made subsequently, or how much choices that are made are informing cost?

TJ: **The cost was something that we brought up in discussion before even thinking about the materiality of the book because we didn't want to be profiting off this story and we wanted as many people as possible to be able to get it.** Within reason, because of course it's expensive to print, and certainly to print images using high-quality papers. Making a profit on any book is a fantasy in a sense, so it was a matter of trying to start with knowing that we need this to be accessible.

What happens when an important work like this sells out?

TJ: We're going to find out pretty soon.

I'm sure! It's been really well received and spoken about a lot. And *The Disappearance of Joseph Plummer* in both editions sold out too. I'm interested to see what you do then because that is both the success of the book but also an indication of the possibility to extend the conversation and broaden the work's reach...

TJ: We had a print run of 1000 and it was released in December so in a few months... We have about 10% of the print run left available for sale so we haven't actually discussed this in detail but we did previously with *Joseph Plummer*. There, we talked about reprinting it but I personally think that reprinting a book in the same manner is a lost opportunity. I think you can enrich the story by making a variation, so that's why we did the small book to make it accessible at €20 for the 'Cabin Edition'. And a lot of people were disappointed because they wanted the original but this was just a way to extend the story out into a different field. When you have a rich story you can really explore those opportunities, so with *A Parallel Road* we are going to have that discussion pretty quickly but maybe we make some kind of document, a different kind of document.

AW: I mean there is this conundrum which goes back to what we were talking about at the beginning with photography being a medium that is infinitely reproducible — if we think about Walter Benjamin and his essays on photography and reproduction, there is this desire from the collector's standpoint that they want some rarity in books they collect but I guess that's not really my concern. In terms of audience I'm not necessarily thinking about the collector, I'm thinking about what we want to do to make the best we can and the best story we can. And then there are market realities which Tiffany can speak about further, regarding whether it makes sense to reproduce a book. And if you do make it

as a second edition, how likely is it that it's going to sell out because there are so many books now, and how long can people really remember a book? If you make a second edition it might just fester and sit there.

TJ: I think my concern with this book is potentially for libraries, to think about how this would sit for 200 years in a library. Because it's a story that is really important to be in a library. So that's what I'm thinking of right now, not collectors but making it more accessible through various avenues.

And I suppose all of that, and also the previous republications rather than re-printings, situate the book in a different cultural context...

TJ: Yes.

This is a really exciting, but there isn't much in the way of re-publishing going on in the photobook ecology it doesn't seem?

TJ: No, and to me the stories are living, they don't end and so there is an opportunity to take it somewhere else and try and make it accessible to different people. And it works as far as we've seen.

Amani, how do you think of the book in terms of this chronology of a message that you're working with?

AW: Well, through the process of designing and conceiving a book there are so many different points that you go through and decisions that you make that could go one way or another. So **there is this exciting opportunity if you are going to remake something to try and reconsider some of the other choices that you maybe put on the side earlier on.** There are different ways of exploring a story right? There isn't just one way. I agree with Tiffany that it presents an opportunity to play with the form and to think about how all these things come together in terms of telling stories.

TJ: And it's an adventure, it's so much more adventurous to take those ideas that were good ideas in the first place that we decided to toss in favour of some other choice. So just to go back and talk about those things again and see what we can come up with, it makes it fun. It's fun for us but also important to think about how the audience will receive something completely differently with the same story.

I have one final area that I'd like to talk about which I think we've touched on quite a bit already and that is the amplification or activation of the work as a way to combat the photobook becoming inert, or mobile only in our own ecology. Amani, you spoke in the Impressions Gallery conversation about situating this book within a photographic community for the role photography and its discourse has played in constructing the landscape you're looking at, and we have ways of amplifying photobooks in this audience with talks, blogs, reviews, awards and so on, but what sort of acts have you've undertaken to try and reach beyond?

AW: Well I think it really does come back again to this idea of the subject matter of the book because some books really are geared towards this insular photobook community and some books do have a potential life outside of that community. So our discussion around this book is about the photobook audience but then there's also the American audience and there is the European audience, there is the collector and there is the person who isn't invested in the photobook but is interested in history and culture and political movements. You can't make [a book] that satisfies everybody but we tried to offer something to many different audiences. I guess the question you're asking, and the harder question, is 'how do you reach those audiences outside of the channels that we're used to?' And with this I think we have been successful in getting interviews with NPR and PBS that were aired. But a lot of the press that has been written is within the photobook community or the art book community...

TJ: There are three significant things that

happened with the promotion of this book I would say. Amani lives in the Boston area and the Boston Globe which is the main daily paper there, they did an interview with him and really we sold a huge number of books out of that. And that is definitely not the photobook audience. And then there was the PBS television piece and the radio. So you are reaching people who would never probably even think about going searching for photobooks. They are not specialty publications, they are more regional. So again with the topic of the book you can access different media to help get promotion. So it does work to know where your audience could potentially be. When we talked about promoting *A Parallel Road* we talked about pushing it in areas where the black population is quite large like Atlanta, Chicago, New York, so regionally focusing where this is a topic people are constantly dealing with.

Is there an element of safety in sticking within our photobook community because people understand our work and will be quite happy to talk about the design intricacies and so on, whereas to put yourself out there beyond the photography world or photobook community is quite daunting?

TJ: I don't know if you've heard the story but Gary Winogrand published a book... maybe it was *The Animals* (1969) and he printed 3000 copies and it was priced at say \$20 and it was sitting in the MoMA in a stack and I think they sold very few, like 100 copies. Then they lower the price to maybe \$3.95 and it still wouldn't sell. So a takeaway from that is that there is a limited market, and that's not going to change.

AW: And then there's another discussion... I'm not sure if you've spoken to bigger publishers like Prestel or Chronicle who are making particular books and having different conversations I'm sure about their audience. I haven't been privy to those conversations but I'm sure that they are interesting and I'd love to be a fly on that wall and hear what they are thinking about and how they are thinking about their market. Even someone

like Elinor Carucci, I think her *Mother* (2013) book may have been published by Prestel and have a fairly decent print run right? So there are opportunities where the subject matter crosses over into something that appeals to a more general audience. Or at least the publishers feel comfortable that the work is relatable.

TJ: Or if you look at Hoxton Mini Press which does like... blasts of books that are low-priced and they know people have an interest in them at £12.95 and they pick it up as a gift. It's like a gift thing that they have going... a little bit like Chronicle. They are designed to be gifted and so I think that's quite a successful way to reach out. But when you're talking about subject matter that is maybe complex I think you have a limited route to people. I'll just add again that photobooks that are about photographers and their egos, they are not really destined to be as successful as books that are focused on the audience. Crafting something that will appeal is a challenge.

This interview is an extension to the publication ***Photobooks &: A critical companion to the contemporary medium*** by Matt Johnston (Onomatopée, 2021).