

Cultural Identity as Visual Subject: Comparative Approaches in Contemporary Documentary Practice

Jani Grigoryan*

Multidisciplinary visual artist, documentary photographer and videographer, Jersey City, NJ, United States of America

ORCID: [0009-0006-3352-4427](https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3352-4427)

* Corresponding author: grigoryanjani@gmail.com

OPEN ACCESS

Citation:

Jani Grigoryan (2026). Cultural Identity as Visual Subject: Comparative Approaches in Contemporary Documentary Practice. *Am. Impact Rev.*
[10.66308/air.e2026069](https://doi.org/10.66308/air.e2026069)

Received: January 15, 2026

Accepted: January 27, 2026

Published: January 29, 2026

DOI:

[10.66308/air.e2026069](https://doi.org/10.66308/air.e2026069)

ISSN: 3071-124X

Copyright:

© 2026 Jani Grigoryan. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0).

Abstract

This article examines how contemporary documentary photography and videography represent cultural identity, with particular attention to diaspora and heritage-based communities. The study compares three methodological approaches to identity-focused documentary work, the portrait-centered approach, the environmental/contextual approach, and the collaborative or participatory approach, and evaluates the strengths and limitations of each for representing identity honestly rather than reductively. The analysis draws on comparative visual practice across diaspora and minority-community documentation and proposes a set of criteria for evaluating whether an identity-focused documentary project depicts its subject as an active participant in meaning-making or as a passive object of the photographer's gaze. The article concludes that methodologically self-aware documentary practice, combining subject collaboration with attention to environmental and historical context, produces the most reliable and least distorting record of cultural identity. The study establishes that documenting cultural identity, particularly within diaspora and heritage communities, requires a methodological framework that goes beyond the technical capture of visible cultural markers. Three approaches were compared: portrait-centered, environmental/contextual, and collaborative/participatory.

Keywords: documentary photography, cultural identity, diaspora, visual anthropology, heritage documentation, participatory methodology, ethnographic photography, visual representation

Relevance of the Study

The relevance of this study is determined by the growing role of documentary photography and video in representing cultural identity within diaspora and heritage communities worldwide. As migration, displacement, and transnational family networks continue to reshape how communities maintain cultural continuity, visual documentation has become one of the primary tools through which identity, memory, and tradition are recorded and transmitted across generations.

At the same time, the methods used to document cultural identity vary significantly, and not all of them produce an equally accurate or respectful representation of the community being photographed. A photographer may approach identity as a fixed set of visible markers, clothing, ritual, architecture, captured from the outside, or may approach it as a lived, evolving practice that requires the collaboration and interpretive input of the people being documented. The difference between these approaches has direct consequences for whether the resulting body of work functions as genuine cultural documentation or as a surface-level visual survey.

This problem is especially significant for diaspora communities, whose identity is often defined by the relationship between an inherited homeland culture and the realities of life in a new country. Documentary work that fails to engage with this dual context risks flattening a complex, actively negotiated identity into a static or nostalgic image. Therefore, establishing clear methodological criteria for identity-focused documentary practice is important both for the professional development of photographers working in this field and for the communities whose cultural memory is being recorded.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to compare methodological approaches to documenting cultural identity in contemporary photography and video, and to identify the criteria that distinguish documentation which represents identity as an active, participant-shaped process from documentation that represents it as a static visual subject observed from the outside.

Materials and Methods

The materials of the study include contemporary approaches to documentary and ethnographic photography, principles of visual anthropology relevant to the representation of cultural communities, and comparative examples of diaspora and heritage-focused documentary projects. The study applies methods of comparative analysis, classification, and generalization (Rose, 2016) to distinguish between methodological approaches and to evaluate their relative capacity to represent cultural identity accurately.

Results

Cultural identity, unlike a physical object or event, is not something that can simply be pointed at and recorded. It is constructed through practice, memory, relationship, and context, and it changes depending on generation, geography, and circumstance. This makes cultural identity a particularly demanding subject for documentary photography and video: an image can capture visible markers of identity - dress, ritual objects, gesture, architecture - without capturing the meaning that the subject themselves attaches to those markers (Barthes, 1980). The central methodological problem, therefore, is how to visually document something that is simultaneously visible and interpretive.

Three broad approaches can be distinguished in contemporary documentary practice addressing this problem: the portrait-centered approach, the environmental or contextual approach, and the collaborative or participatory approach. Each treats the relationship between photographer, subject, and cultural context differently, and each carries distinct strengths and risks.

Table 1. Methodological Approaches to Documenting Cultural Identity

Approach	Core Method	Strength	Risk
Portrait-centered	Individual or family portraiture, often studio-influenced or posed, focused on the subject's presence	Foregrounds the individual; strong emotional and psychological connection with the viewer	Can isolate the subject from the cultural and historical context that gives identity its meaning
Environmental / contextual	Subject shown within community spaces, homes, places of worship, or public cultural events	Preserves context: place, community, and material culture are documented alongside the person	Can reduce the subject to a representative 'type' rather than an individual
Collaborative / participatory	Subject participates in decisions about how, where, and in what context they are photographed or filmed	Reduces the imbalance between photographer's outside view and subject's own understanding of identity	Requires more time, trust-building, and access than observational approaches

Source: developed by the author. The portrait-centered approach is the most widely used in diaspora and heritage photography because it produces immediately legible, emotionally direct images. However, when used without contextual grounding, it risks presenting identity as an aesthetic quality of the individual, a face, an expression, a garment, rather than as a lived relationship to history, community, and place. This is a common critique of identity-focused photography more broadly: the subject's visible characteristics are foregrounded while the social and historical structures that produced those characteristics remain invisible (Hall, 1990) (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Example of the portrait-centered approach. Source: Photograph by Jani Grigoryan, 2025

The environmental or contextual approach addresses this limitation by situating the subject within recognizable cultural space, a church, a community center, a family gathering, a public commemoration. This method strengthens the documentary and evidentiary value of the image, since the viewer receives information not only about the individual but about the community structures that sustain cultural continuity. The risk of this approach lies in the opposite direction from portraiture: an overemphasis on setting and ritual can turn

the subject into an illustration of a culture rather than a specific person within it, echoing the long-standing critique of documentary photography as a practice that can reduce its subjects to types (Sontag, 1977) (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Example of the environmental or contextual approach. Source: Photograph by Jani Grigoryan, 2025

The collaborative or participatory approach attempts to resolve the tension between the first two by involving the subject in shaping how they are represented, for example, allowing subjects to select locations, objects, or moments that they themselves consider meaningful to their identity, rather than relying solely on the photographer's external judgment. This approach is more time- and trust-intensive, since it depends on an ongoing relationship between photographer and community rather than a single session, but it produces documentation that is less vulnerable to the charge of imposing an outside interpretive frame onto the subject's own sense of identity (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Example of the collaborative or participatory approach. Source: Photograph by Jani Grigoryan, 2026

Table 2. Comparative Analysis: Diaspora Identity Documentation vs. General Portrait Photography

Criterion	General Portrait Photography	Diaspora / Heritage Identity Documentation
Primary subject	The individual as an aesthetic and psychological presence	The individual as a carrier of collective memory and cultural continuity
Role of context	Often minimized or neutral (studio background)	Central - homeland references, ritual, language, and community setting shape meaning
Temporal frame	Single moment, largely present-focused	Layered: present moment read against inherited history and tradition
Photographer's position	Can remain purely observational	Benefits from cultural familiarity or sustained collaborative access
Risk of misrepresentation	Limited to aesthetic distortion	Can misrepresent an entire community's identity, not only the individual depicted

Source: developed by the author. This comparison shows that diaspora and heritage documentation carries a higher representational responsibility than general portraiture, because a single image is frequently read by the viewer as representative of an entire community rather than of one individual. This is particularly relevant

for diaspora communities whose public visibility in mainstream media may already be limited, meaning that a small number of images can disproportionately shape outside perception of the culture as a whole.

A further distinction can be drawn between documenting identity as heritage - customs, dress, language, and ritual inherited from a homeland - and documenting identity as a lived, evolving negotiation between that heritage and the realities of life in a new country. The first framing risks presenting cultural identity as static and preserved in amber; the second framing, though more difficult to visualize, more accurately reflects how diaspora identity actually functions across generations.

Table 3. Criteria for Evaluating Identity-Focused Documentary Work

Criterion	Indicates Reductive Representation	Indicates Methodologically Sound Representation
Subject agency	Subject is purely observed; no input into framing or context	Subject participates in decisions about how identity is shown
Historical grounding	Identity presented as timeless or unchanging	Identity shown as shaped by specific historical and migratory circumstances
Individuality	Subject stands in for the whole community	Subject retains a specific, individual narrative within the broader context
Contextual accuracy	Setting, objects, or rituals staged or altered for visual effect	Setting and context reflect genuine community practice
Generational awareness	Single generation treated as representative of the culture as a whole	Differences across generations within the same community are acknowledged

Source: developed by the author. Applying these criteria in practice requires the photographer to move beyond a purely observational role. Sustained engagement with a community - attending events over time rather than as a single assignment, building relationships that allow subjects to express which aspects of their identity they consider significant, and returning to a community across multiple projects - produces documentation that better satisfies the criteria in Table 3 than a single external visit can. This is consistent with the broader argument in visual anthropology that the ethical and evidentiary value of documentary images depends heavily on the depth of the relationship between image-maker and subject, not solely on technical or compositional skill (Edwards, 2001).

Video introduces an additional dimension to this methodological problem, since duration, voice, and movement allow the subject to articulate their own understanding of identity directly, rather than relying entirely on the photographer's interpretive framing of a still image. A short documentary sequence that includes a subject's own words about what a ritual, object, or gathering means to them addresses the participatory criterion in Table 3 more directly than photography alone, though it requires different technical and interpersonal skills from the documentarian.

Conclusions

The study establishes that documenting cultural identity, particularly within diaspora and heritage communities, requires a methodological framework that goes beyond the technical capture of visible cultural markers. Three approaches were compared: portrait-centered, environmental/contextual, and collaborative/participatory. Each was shown to carry distinct strengths and risks. The comparative analysis demonstrates that diaspora and heritage documentation carries a higher representational responsibility than general portrait photography, since individual images are frequently read as representative of an entire community. The proposed evaluative criteria - subject agency, historical grounding, individuality, contextual accuracy, and generational awareness - provide a practical framework for assessing whether identity-focused documentary work achieves an accurate, non-

reductive representation. The study concludes that sustained, collaborative engagement between photographer and community, combined with attention to environmental and historical context, produces the most reliable record of cultural identity as it is actually lived rather than as it is externally perceived.

References

1. Barthes, R. (1980). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Hill and Wang.
2. Hall, S. (1990). Cultural Identity and Diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Lawrence & Wishart.
3. Sontag, S. (1977). *On Photography*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
4. Rose, G. (2016). *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
5. Edwards, E. (2001). *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums*. Berg Publishers.