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Senior Project

May 1, 2021

Acknowledging The Darkness To Flourish In The Light:

Striving and Surviving

Black men have always been looked at under a microscope that has already been tainted to project a negative, “hood-like” persona upon us. To America, our skin color says it all. We’re constantly judged before we can even utter a sentence or take a breath. In this series of work, I’ve put the viewer in my shoes as a black man living in America whose life has been intertwined with one of the country's most historical terrorist attacks, September 11th. In order to give a concise idea of the perspective of a black man, I’ve interviewed and photographed various black men on their experience in America to highlight the adversities we face together, as well as the battles we independently fight. Altogether, this project is meant to share the life experience of black men in America by sharing and amplifying the voice of the stories told through photographs and texts.

This work intends to accomplish a couple of things. Those things are to tell me and my family's story, and hopefully try to connect to the other people who are in the same situation as me (9/11 children) and tell the story of what a black man goes through in America in today’s climate. As I’ve grown up, my eyes have opened up to how aware I have to be as a black man. The idea of double consciousness is something that I’ve slowly become aware of as I’ve grown up. Double consciousness is “a concept in social philosophy referring, originally, to a source

of inward “twoness” putatively experienced by African-Americans because of their racialized oppression and devaluation in a white-dominated society”(Pitman). Before I even knew of this idea from WEB Dubois, I slowly got the inclination of it through my family and what they’d tell me. The idea solidified for me when Trayvon Martin was murdered. Skittles, Arizona, and a hoodie. These are the items that gave the sign that Martin was “up to no go”. This opened my eyes because I could’ve been Trayvon. I am Trayvon. I have to keep my eyes open at all times and realize the American society is not friendly towards me and I have to successfully navigate through that.

This project provides more questions to the white American society as to why they indulge in racism and view black men as a threat. The perspective of the black man that is shown throughout this project brings up questions regarding inequality and racism. Another question that is provided is how our culture affects our lives. As black men, we can quickly fall into a stereotype by wearing hoodies and durags, but we also get judged when we wear suits and a durag. Once again the microscope of racism is upon black men. Within Frazier’s book, *The Notion of Family*, Dickerson says” We are wrestling with internalized life experiences, perceptions of ourselves, and familial personas developed by socio-political baggage”(. This is very true for the black community as a whole and as a black man, this sums up what we have to go through. It brings back up the idea of double-consciousness and how we always have to be aware.

As I’ve been developing this project, I’ve been getting more into reading, understanding, and relating to photo books. The two books that have helped me form a connection to similar ideas are Deana Lawson’s *Monograph* by Aperture and Latoya Ruby Frazier’s *The Notion Of Family*. These books of work are important to my project and understanding of my own project

for a couple of reasons. These works show me that what I'm exploring in my project isn't something minuscule or unnecessary for me to explore. It's important to dig into your history especially if you have one that leaves you with unanswered questions. Frazier says "Grandma Ruby would never talk about the past, so I made this portrait of her as a way to hold on to a fragment of our history. For decades she endured and suffered wrongs without weakening"(Dickerson,75) I understand that our community has trauma from the past, but that shouldn't stop us from telling that story. The more silenced we become, the more things will get swept under the rug. This is the only way to change history and the injustice that we face in America.

Another reason is as a black person with this situation I've been put into, I have a unique story encompassed with a talent allowing me to tell my story and amplify others. Losing my mother on September 11th at the age of one and a half has left me no conscious memories of her. Over the years, I've found my way of connecting to her through archived photos, videos, and the stories that people tell me of her. Latoya Ruby Frazier's work in *Notion of Family* allowed me to realize that my purpose as a photographer is to maintain the family memories and bond through photos as we face trials and tribulations. The body of work has also empowered me in a different way on being a black man in America and what that means. For my project, I've been discovering myself and my culture. I've been exploring what it means to have tragically lost my mother and what that voice serves for a black man as he goes through this roller coaster called life. Black men have been seen as a threat for the longest time and I wanted to explore and voice what we, as black men, think of how America perceives us and what we have to do to survive. James Baldwin declares that the creative process is "The state of birth, suffering, love, and death, are extreme states: extreme, universal, and inescapable. We all know this, but we would rather

not know it. The artist is present to correct the delusions to which we fall prey in our attempts to avoid this knowledge”(Dickerson,153). It’s up to us, black artists, to seek out the cruel truths of our society and bring them to light.

John Edmonds’s work, “Hoods” (2016) and “Durags” (2017), has influenced me even before I started my project. I was drawn to these bodies of work about two years ago. It caught my eye at the time because I’d wear my durags to class and in public. Even though I was on my own, I always heard my parents’ voices in the back of my head telling me that I look like a hoodlum or like I’m from the streets with my durag on. This led me to do more research on the history of durags and headwrap to see how it was first used and how its usage has evolved in numerous ways. In “Durags”, Edmonds talks about the origins of do-rags coming from American slavery when women wore headwraps in the field to protect them from the punishing heat.” As time has advanced, the durag has transcended into being a statement of fashion as well as to “to create and preserve certain hairstyles”. As you can see, this has been a part of our culture since the beginning, but America has distorted its meaning and has linked these garments with negative connotations that you must be up to no good. These connotations have evolved from judging black people based on their skin color to judging based on skin color and appearance. The way you hold yourself might set you apart from the stereotype, but 9/10 times, you’ll be judged by the pigment of your skin. I wanted to highlight that fact and the double consciousness that we have to have as black men when we are in the public eye.

As a Senior Project, I believe that something that comes from the heart and something I feel strongly about should be shown. My reasoning for making this project comes down to the need for me to tell my life story. Looking back, it seems that my life has always been in turmoil or at least the biggest events make it feel like that. In the more recent years, I’ve grown as a

person and more importantly, as a black man. My knowledge and awareness of the world have given me unique insight into how I need to live my life. The summer of 2020 was the ignitor for this project. Seeing the onslaught of murders and the abundance of protests, I needed to say something. My voice is so unique because of my situation and I know that I can use my talent and be the voice for the ones that haven't found theirs yet. Not only my voice but also the voice of all black men faced with racist America daily. I want to speak on the matter in my way and incorporate other perspectives to show how problems are unified but can be vastly different. My motivation for the family portion of my project and my drive for photography, in general, is my mother. I want to make memories because I have none of her due to my young age at the time of her death and her friends and family aren't around to tell me about her. I've realized how fragile life and situations can be. As my family goes through our journey, the reasons have intertwined and have pushed me to take more photos of my family even though I highly regret not starting before this all happened. It would've been nice to see the progression.

Prior to the Coronavirus outbreak, music photography was a heavy influence on my work. I managed to make my way on the scene and that was all I knew for a period of time. With the shutdown of the world, that part of my photographic journey was halted. I was at a standstill/artist block that I didn't know how to overcome. The pandemic forced me to sit with myself and for the first time, ask the question "Is photography really for me?". The summer of 2020 was extremely draining to my community, the African-American community. Personally, as a black man, I quickly became overwhelmed by the nonstop murders of other black men by police brutality with social media acting as a catalyst. Compacted with Covid-19 and the separation of my parents, I began to ask myself how I can use these situations to my advantage and not lose myself within them which is when I arrived at this idea for my senior project. I

couldn't just sit back after the year I had, so I had to reflect and make something of importance and meaning. At this moment, black artists need to tell our story through our eyes and voices after being silenced for so long.

My life has been filled with multiple transitional periods that, until recently, I hadn't noticed, and which have had a bigger influence on who I am today than I thought. With photography, I've found a language that forces me to view situations from multiple perspectives other than my own, amplify my voice, and bring up questions that can further be answered through the photographic process. As I move into a new chapter of my life, it's imperative that I use this talent as a tool to create photos that question things like racism, bring issues to light in my way, and maintain a history of photos that tell a story. Due to losing my mother at such a young age, I was unable to retain any conscious memories of her thus leading to the discovery of using archived photos to build a connection and a story of what I once had. By the documentation of the present and the continuation of discovering moments from my past, I aim to analyze and digest information to create work that broadcasts my perception of the world to others.

The aspect of American history that enticed me to make this project has been how history is recited and documented. Growing up, in school, we were always taught the white-washed history of America. The school system fails to incorporate all the historic transformative things that the black community has done to help America progress. The only time we were ever taught about black people was when we were enslaved, hence in a negative spotlight. In order to learn about my history, I had relied on outside factors such as my family, literature, and research. I want to change the negative exposure that the black community is always under. It's important to properly inform people, especially black children, that there is more to being black than

oppression and racism. We are smart, talented, beautiful, and have more to offer than what America tells us. I believe that we're going into an art renaissance that will be heavily influenced by people of color.

Another aspect of photography that informed my work is family photo albums. Family photo albums are a sacred item for most families. This is how you pass down knowledge from generation to generation and keep the family informed on who they are and where they come from. It's been clear that in this generation, I'm the "family photographer". I'm very grateful for my father to have been invested in capturing family memories from before I was born. We wouldn't have known that my mom was going to be taken from us on September 11th and that the memories he was creating would be so vital to her memory living on. Black women, more specifically black mothers, play a vital and essential role in the growth of black men. They are the ones that show us the kindness that the world doesn't. They are the ones that protect our hearts and guide our minds. Without my mother's presence, I lack her voice to guide and console me. Photography has allowed me to use another language to connect with my mother through the photos left of her. Her embrace that exudes through the photos has helped me tremendously in my journey and I've been able to incorporate this feeling within my own photos. I want people to look at my photos and be able to feel a wave of emotions, whatever that may be.

The various contexts included within my essay help clarify my project by compounding the ideas together. Essentially, all of the artists' work that's given me insight as to how I want to construct my project is all working to the same goal. That goal is to accurately represent the African-American community by showing the daily struggles that we go through, but also destroying the negative connotation that is usually built around us. By creating art that pushes the reinvention of American society's view of the black man or black woman into positive ones. Life

experience, as well as art historical references, have informed my work in tremendous ways. I've been able to learn about the tenacity of these black photographers and that personal stories are important and can connect with more people than you know. Seeing the injustices done to my people hasn't sat well with me and it was only right that I follow in the footsteps of the photographers before me to bring about awareness and change. The most important thing is the takeaway. I made this work for people to think about. This series should make you question yourself, what you stand for, and what you are contributing to making this change of oppression happen. There are too many voices that aren't being heard and it's my job as an artist to use photography to speak about what I believe in and show the injustices in a variety of matters.

This project has sparked something within my photographic work that I've never thought to include before. That spark that I refer to is the incorporation of text and video. The interviews I've conducted for this project have made me realize that photos incorporated with a voice are stronger than photos alone. That might not be the case for every series of work that I make, but it's something that intrigues me and adds to my work. For my next project, I aspire to meet, interview and photograph the people in my age range that have lost a guardian due to September 11th. I'm intrigued as to where people have moved, what they have become, how they've been dealing with the loss of their guardian and more. Once again, I think this community has a unique voice and can come together to make a beautiful project as well as show examples to children in similar situations that they'll be okay.

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