

Periphery Living--Ashley Tillery

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I have always had a keen interest in the art forms, habits, values etc ... that have their origin in society's fringe. Since attending the 2008 ACSI I have molded that interest into something more tangible and have begun documenting the culture of urban, southern poverty as expressed in Alabama's capital city. So far, I have a 1:30 of edited footage that has been gathered in and around Montgomery's numerous public housing projects and by May I am hoping to have another hour. Some of the things I am looking at in earnest are adornment and social customs. I have discovered that some of these men will paint their own shirts and shoes and in some cases make their own jeans. This ability to make themselves look good on a shoestring budget becomes a cottage industry as other people in the community seek their skill. As far as social gatherings are concerned I am really looking at the spaces where those gatherings take place and what activities accompany the gathering. Events such as rap ciphers, where people come together to engage in a form of rhythmic storytelling, are quite exciting and I enjoy seeing those when I can. Though I must make it clear that these gathering are usually impromptu and happen in the streets as the mood strikes, or the right sound system pulls up in someone's car.

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- **Learning curve**

One thing that has come out of this project which I value beyond any aesthetic or captured moment, is a deeper understanding of the issues which surround poverty and low income living. Believe it or not, prior to this project I had conservative inclinations which desensitized me to the hardships that arise from just trying to survive or even beyond that, the inherent difficulties which surround attempting to be a person of consequence in a world where external validations (gold chains and fancy cars) are king. However, the more I spoke to and observed individuals who have succumbed to that relentless march towards the bottom line the more I realized that they were victims of a result driven system just as much as anybody they robbed or anyone whose weakness (drug addiction) they exploited for their personal gain. Of course, to a wider world governed by middle class values these individuals, unable to conform to the standard modus operandi, are corpora vile (people of no value). Consequently, their cultural contributions are undervalued and consistently overlooked beyond the commercialization of their lowest forms (rap in advertising). I find that to be highly problematic as my social conscience evolves because I believe culture is one crucial benchmark of being human and to ignore, undermine, or disregard someone's culture is to likewise do the same to their humanity.

Conclusions

As it is, many of the people I have met, especially the men will wind up in the jaws of the judicial system or dead. The mere fact that this will be the average trajectory of their lives says a lot about the system in which we live and more importantly how they are perceived by that system. If I had to vocalize that perception I would say that these men and boys are seen as a disposable citizenry. Consequently, their lives are traded daily on the stock market by privatized prisons whose main product is consequence and yet there is no opposition. They live in places

where it is easier to get a gun than a copy of National Geographic but that's a non-issue because many believe "it is in their nature to choose violence over education." They are paraded on the news as predators or some grand social burden and thus, their culture is seen as emanating from a gutter and sadly for the average American such an assertion seems sound. For me, this is not o.k. and yet I don't imagine I will ever be a lawyer, lobbyist or any other form of social engineer. I like people, I appreciate their stories and sometimes bearing witness is start enough. Ultimately, I hope this project will serve as my testimony that my men and boys are human beings with a culture worth understanding. Beyond that , I hope it will be seen by people situated to effectively question the system and serve as a small impetus for change.

These pictures were taken at a freestyle event in Northpass. During a freestyle event, mostly men will rap back and forth to one another or to the world at large about their accomplishments, regrets, or strength. I believe the exercise serves several functions but, I will save those for my next post.







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