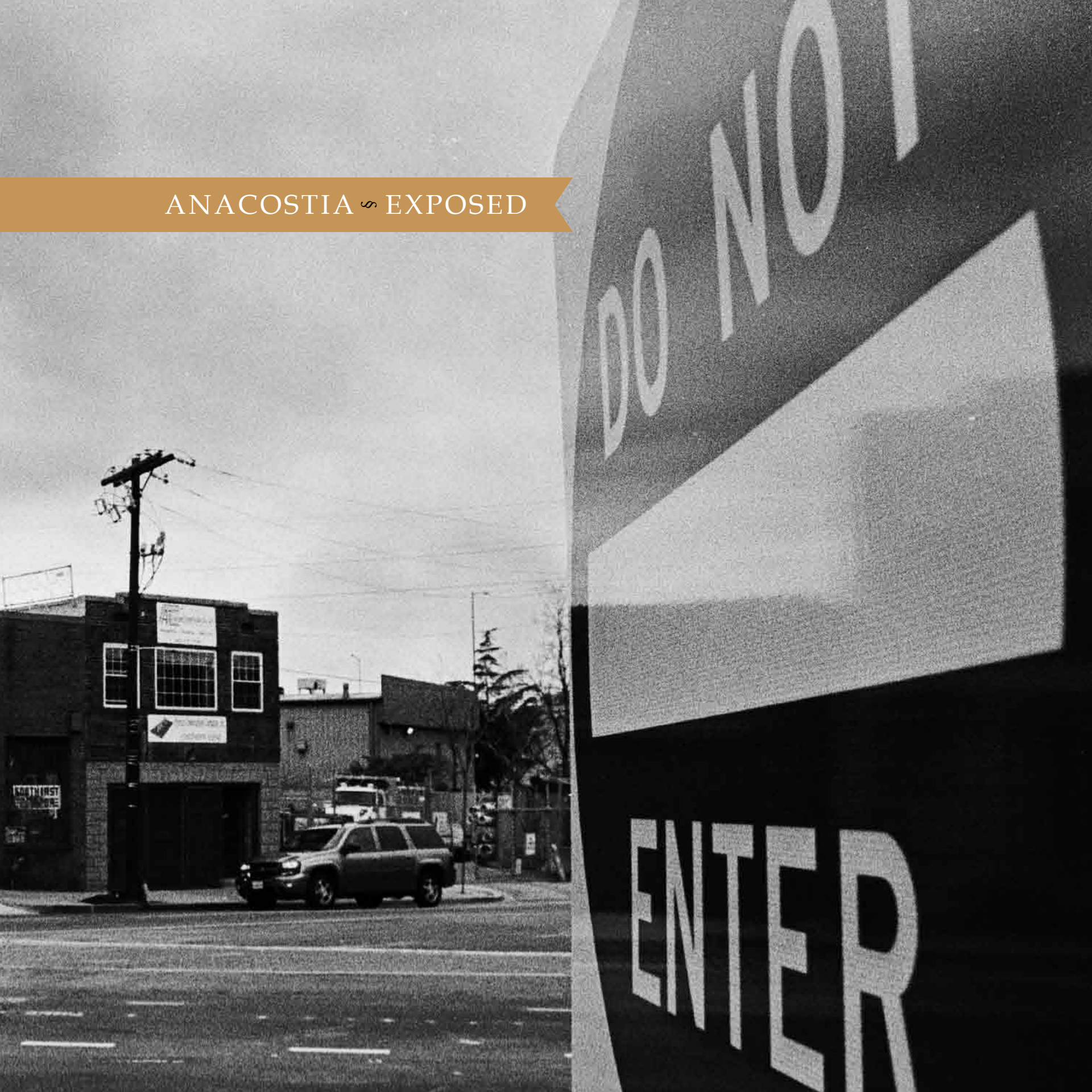


ANACOSTIA § EXPOSED



Anacostia Eintou

Marlene Hawthorne Thomas

God holds
angry fistfuls
grey clouds over forgotten
river bank overflows
a sea flecked with white foam
flooding black owned
sidewalks.



ANACOSTIA § EXPOSED

Photography by Mervyn Smyth

Edited by Fred Joiner

Foreword by Thomas Sayers Ellis

FOREWORD

1

NO ONE KNOWS WHICH CAME FIRST: poetry or seeing. My guess is poetry. I don't mean poem. I mean poetry, the energy that all passionately, crafted art objects (and modes of expression) must contain in order to reach away from their narrow selves, from genre, from medium, from material, from constriction. This is true of dance, this is true of painting and this is true of photography. Poems do not have a monopoly on poetry; they never have. The reach for nuance in art can originate from any number of sources, social environments and cultural intersections. The reach itself must contain the technical rigor of the aesthetic toolbox and the toolbox must vanish and become organic during the reach. The creative process, unlike technique, can not be mapped, not precisely. In turn, photography does not have a monopoly on seeing, it never has. A camera is just one of the many possible extensions of seeing. It is not sight; it is image making. One hopes the door-less chapel at the crossroads (of poetry and photography) is not without balance, mutual respect, and a hungry curiosity. One hopes that some aspect of the person behind the camera

or in front of the page has its subject's back. In other words, to shoot means to be shot and to write means to be written. The apparatus, aperture and alphabet, must switch roles and code switch throughout the creative process. This is what I sense, at work, in all of the aimed and accidental senses—not just sight, viewfinder, eye—of Mervyn Smyth's photography. In many ways he is simply an honest photographer, a human photojournalist. No tricks: a face is a face, a façade a façade, stop sign stop sign. Smyth often employs a geometric perspective, sliding his eye; and this often captures motion, making room in the frame for a more motion or its absence, and for it (motion) to continue not to finish. It is impossible to photograph black people and not capture categories of movement. For the photographer, even running is a species that can become dance, compositional flavor, poetic sequence, the action of life. Add, to Smyth's use perspective, a sense of space. For this viewer, part photographer and part poet, space and perspective equal attitude, a 'tude, something black viewers and culturally savvy Others will immediately recognize beneath many of Smyth's smiling portraits. Smiles may not be the "new anger" but they may very well be the way many of the powerless subjects in Smyth's portraits acquire pride. He, among them, who is not camera ready (in the traditional sense of portraiture), is often liberated from categorical packaging and predictable modes of behavior by his or her own smile. An

imagined, internal comment like, “You don’t know what I think, so just take the damn picture!” is a very different subtitle when born out of the black laughter that is the result of the radical irony of black smiling. Black smiles, with their perform-a-form use of oral persona, gift the poets writing about Smyth’s photographs an extra reservoir of strength to borrow from not a weakness or still-stance of victimization, as well as a sense of line with more maneuvering beneath its surface than the most complex mask.



MERVYN SMYTH’S WORK IS DAMN-NEAR casual and quite cool because it does not imitate cinema. It does not borrow from the giant that has picked the pockets of poetry and photography since *The Last Laugh* (dir. F.W. Murnau, 1924). Smyth does not juggernaut his subjects; they remain central to the pictorial energy and never become secretaries to photographic theory or innovation. His photographs do not over poeticize or romanticize real moments as invented, poetic ones, the way a bad film often

employs slow motion when it wants to whip out a poetic effect. Anacostia deserves realism and Smyth delivers. His folk look like folk not like shiny objects from the world of buying or selling, although buying and selling, being bought and being sold is partially what gives them their art world and aesthetic authenticity. It is easy to pick up a camera and advertise but Smyth is not an advertiser or a Venus fly-trap full of charms from kingdom camera. His best work is not afraid to display the limits of living in certain sections of Southeast, D.C. in the same frame with the liberating feeling of being a survival-section in a famous city ravaged by many things including black and white flight and its sly reversal, black and white gentrification. Former mayor, Marion Barry, lives in Southeast, D.C. The neglected eastern branch of the Potomac River, the Anacostia River (also known as the forgotten river) helps to fortress Anacostia and many of its troubled settlements. Smyth does not shy away from this type of fortressing and seeks to explore the types of community within the equally fortressing frame. Sometimes there is room in the photo for someone else to move in, sometimes not. Power (or the lack of) is not created by choice of angle; it is achieved via levels of comfort, by a natural and seemingly non two-faced trust. If there is any Orson Welles in Smyth or any shadowy exploitation, it is well integrated (not hidden) into the communal arrangements of the individuals in the

photographs containing more than two subjects. This is especially true of photograph of the classroom of students. The word LEADERSHIP on the wall, its P obscured by something. A student standing and absorbing the knowledge that might raise his already half-raised black arm and black fist even higher. i Geometry, the structural body, a physical scaffolding, appearing and disappearing as it does (on dark skin not in shadow), becomes the poetry. Photography and painting were once all about light, about getting the light right but Smyth gets the darkness right, the texture of reality not of dream. If there is cinema, any rumor of it, it is a noire-verité akin to the integrity or anti-integrity of *Portrait of Jason* (dir. Shirley Clarke, 1967). We know that many of the folk in Smyth’s work—those who have lived in the noble shadow of the legacy of Frederick Douglas—are blessed with a double and triple consciousness that does not escape the visual suction of Smyth’s style. In fact, many of them look as if they’ve just finished photographing him, as if they’ve just finished playing a few rounds of “I’ll take your picture and you take mine.” A good photograph can continue its subject. Unknowingly, we come to the camera asking to last, to not be left behind. In this often silent exchange, the activism and the service of poetry begins. In exposing Anacostia, the photographer often creates a percussive response in which we can (almost) hear many of the brothers and sisters in Smyth’s photos.

3

If it's the photographer's job to preserve the integrity of his or her subject then, in *Anacostia Exposed*, it's the poet's job to preserve the integrity of the images and all of the possibilities of representation found within and outside the frame of the image. The reader must be left with the experience of wholeness, even if it's just an impression, wholeness within ward, wholeness within utterance, wholeness within quadrant, wholeness within line, wholeness within community, wholeness within stanza, and wholeness within city. The process must seem seamless, across genres, lyric, even if it is rendered in book form or by way of the turning page. Flatness is, indeed, the enemy of collaboration and the moment *Anacostia Exposed* is opened, the battle against such representation begins. While it was already known that good poems must also contain, at times, a visual prosody, Leopold Senghor, Senegalese poet, politician and cultural theorist, argued that similes (imagery) must also contain rhythm. The poets who have been chosen to respond to and extend the exposure of Anacostia (which is really an exposure of things enacted upon Anacostia) are poets who take

our eyes and ears on breathing walks, poets who know the difference between Washington and D.C. and D.C. and the District; poets with a sense of wholeness that has not been trumped by the 100 ft. wide avenue-like distances between people and public institutions. Often their homeruled words, heated by a wireless humidity, are the result of witnessing, or often commentary—a need to look out for the next generation. Warning and celebration. From the prefacing, warning waters of “flooding black owned,” *Anacostia Exposed* is part biblical written and visual meditation and part tough naturalistic journey. A photo-religious tour de force. There are times when the poems add a tone of ritual the photographs can't help but lack. What does one think when one sees a large, empty chair at the “Bottom of DC.” The person or the myth that once occupied such a seat may be away (for now) but one hopes the words (as force of memory) will be back, a “resurrected dignity.” Every empty chair is still a seat. Some of the poems seem to locate a prosody meant to give Anacostia its deserving historical fit in literature. For instance, it is difficult to tell the exact year when many of the photos were taken. They are either timeless or frozen in a previous time thanks to the truth and falseness of pictorial artifice. The same is true of many of the poems as the poet must settle in a place “in the tradition” to tackle and express this, the old in the new. Thus many of the poems effectively sample styles and tones from the late

1960s and 1970s. When successful, this nod to the elders is a necessary revitalization, one reminiscent of aspects of rebirth, perhaps even renaissance because while thematically many of them sound like the empowered past, structurally the poems take advantage of recent formal architectonics. The choice of a black aesthetic in many of them is immediately evident. They look alive, like they are moving, like they are refusing to be still for our eyes, like a mini march on Washington, like a moment or position of Hitchcock's famous sliding credit sequence at the beginning of *Psycho*. Imagine a stanza like—

*brown skin sweet song funk
drum clap free hand junk
head nod waist wind kick
sound fire body smile crunk*

tossed into an iPod on shuffle mode. It looks as if it already has been, as has the energy of the limbs—hypotenuse, leg—in the photo it accompanies. A lively theorem. A poetics of options pervades *Anacostia Exposed*. You get to choose (if you want to) between either the weight of the bible or the weightlessness of the speaker's voice in “Little Miss May.” “Street Corner Prophet” offers a dreadlocked crown or a winter crucifix for those in need of re-transforming Jesus into known kin, to bring him home, a messiah no different from one of your boys. In the pursuit of nuanced

tension, poems often offer options (dual ways of rethinking experience) but they are still poems and can still fail depending on the reader's willingness to open. The people in the photos are offered the same options poor people are always offered in art, a chance to be read, saved, captured, continued. That's all.

4

ANACOSTIA IS NOT AN OFFICIAL OR unofficial member of the souvenir sites of Washington tours. It does not appear on any postcard and is never mentioned during nationally televised sporting events (Nationals, Redskins or Wizards) or July 4th concerts. U.S. Senators and their interns do not commute from Anacostia. The last finished Metro line, the Green Line, snakes through it fearful of its own garden. It does not glow the way the monuments glow. If it wasn't for all of the churches, it might have been swallowed up by liquor store darkness a long time ago. Behind the marble: Anacostia. Historically, it does not make money for Washington's powerful although many of its residents have historically worked, as servants, for

Washington's powerful. "Yes'm." Poet Kyle Dargan may have nailed it when he wrote,

*"Anacostia
is where
D.C. comes
to bleed"*

but it is certainly not where Washington comes for anything else. It might be where Washington comes for blood. Blood being synonymous, in this case, with blame. Absolutely, Anacostia needs a better relationship with the rest of Washington and the rest of D.C. Is the photograph of the slanted stop sign at the beginning of this book a message to the rest of the city or a watchful eye or both? The sign is a fact of law and lower class black communities are associated with lawlessness. Picture of truth, picture of lie. The viewer, being trapped as viewer, must choose. And how are we to read the photographic symbolism of the man walking away from the mural of what appears to be a mother or wife and her teenage son? This accidental intersection of real and imagined meaning is all too familiar for many Black Americans. Is the mural a weeping one? No answer, not yet, to that call and response, but a closer look reveals that the man has either been handed his walking papers, is going to make that paper, or is (perhaps) carrying a grocery list for his family or better yet: a job application. The narrative

possibilities are numerous. In another pair of photographs of black males of different ages, both cross their arms in the coded sculptural stance of urban manhood. The younger one imitates the older one. The older one has hair. The younger one is bald, and smiling and wearing long sleeves. The older one has bare, muscular arms, tattoos, and is wearing a watch. Knowing "what time it is" no doubt gained from having been there and done that. There is a fence behind the younger one. He still belongs to someone, is being protected, is the future. The older one stands out in the open as if in a yard, as if on parole, as if recently released.

*Arms crossed don't mean
Nothing 'cept my arms crossed
u dig?*

The narrative possibilities are numerous and the role of the poet is to invent truth, to add another angle of vision to the sky. The Anacostia River, for now, is a recovering dead library. Here, with a "dark wink and corner-cut smile," a visiting photographer and a community of local poets have pledged to help repair the Necostan sky.

Thomas Sayers Ellis
September 2009





Song For Anacostia

Fred Joiner

The 94 hums
up the rough side
of Stanton.

open windows blare
drums in the pocket,
the breakdown
of the perfect groove.
Washington's View

The 90 salsas across town
into the forgotten
bottom of DC,

a car alarm echoes
protest on MLK

two porch griots wail
their pain and pity.

on the corner,
two preachers
can be heard
through the sanctuary walls,
one reading scripture,
the other raptured in a moan.
the smell of last night's first drink
poured out in a crooning ballad
for the missed and missing
a song for a father,

a song for a mother unchilded,

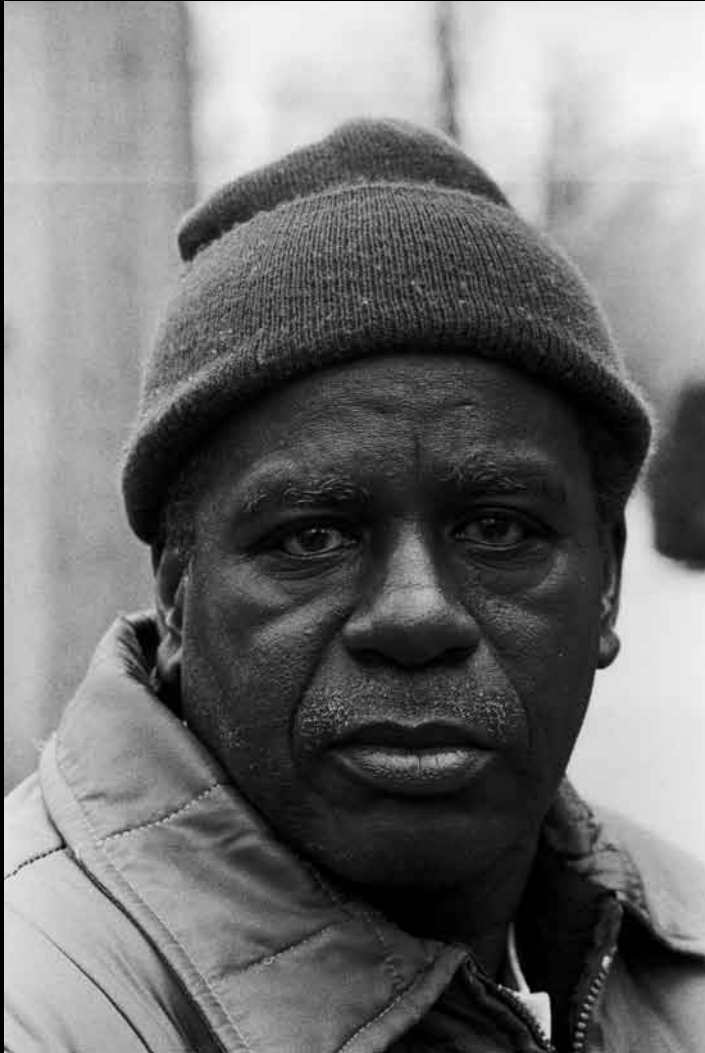
a song for a child
playing ahead of the beat,

a nursery rhyme
for every teddy bear
rooted at a street sign.

this is the sound of blues breaking
the broken, back together;
the sound of chaos, organizing;
the sound of breath forming
words in vinyl's backspin

these are the sounds
gathered in blood,
shed for remission of
silence and sadness.





Images of Kin

Tony Medina

South East Benin mask
Face like a road map of kin

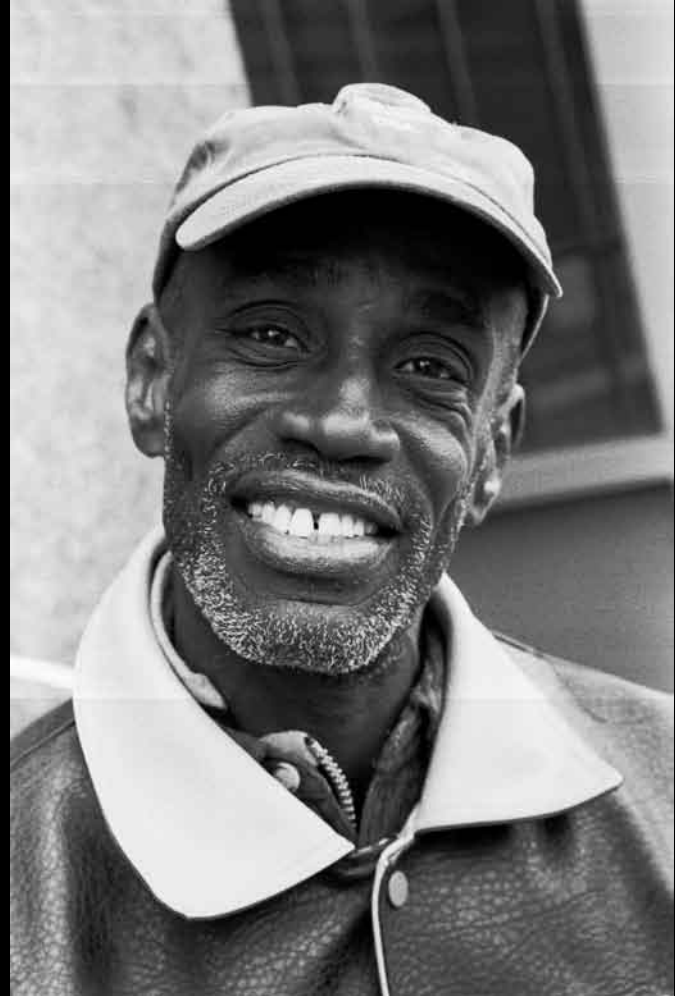
Brought back from the past
Resurrected dignity

Flesh of onyx majesty
when black men embrace
one another as family
I mean when we close like spoons
the devil swallows his tongue









Brothers Gonna Work It Out

Tony Medina

We righteous Black men
Patrol the soul of this 'hood

Raise young bloods proper
To be the kings that they are

Crowned glory of our future



**Connect
To join together (love)**

**Spiritual
Principles**

Loving

GENERATION

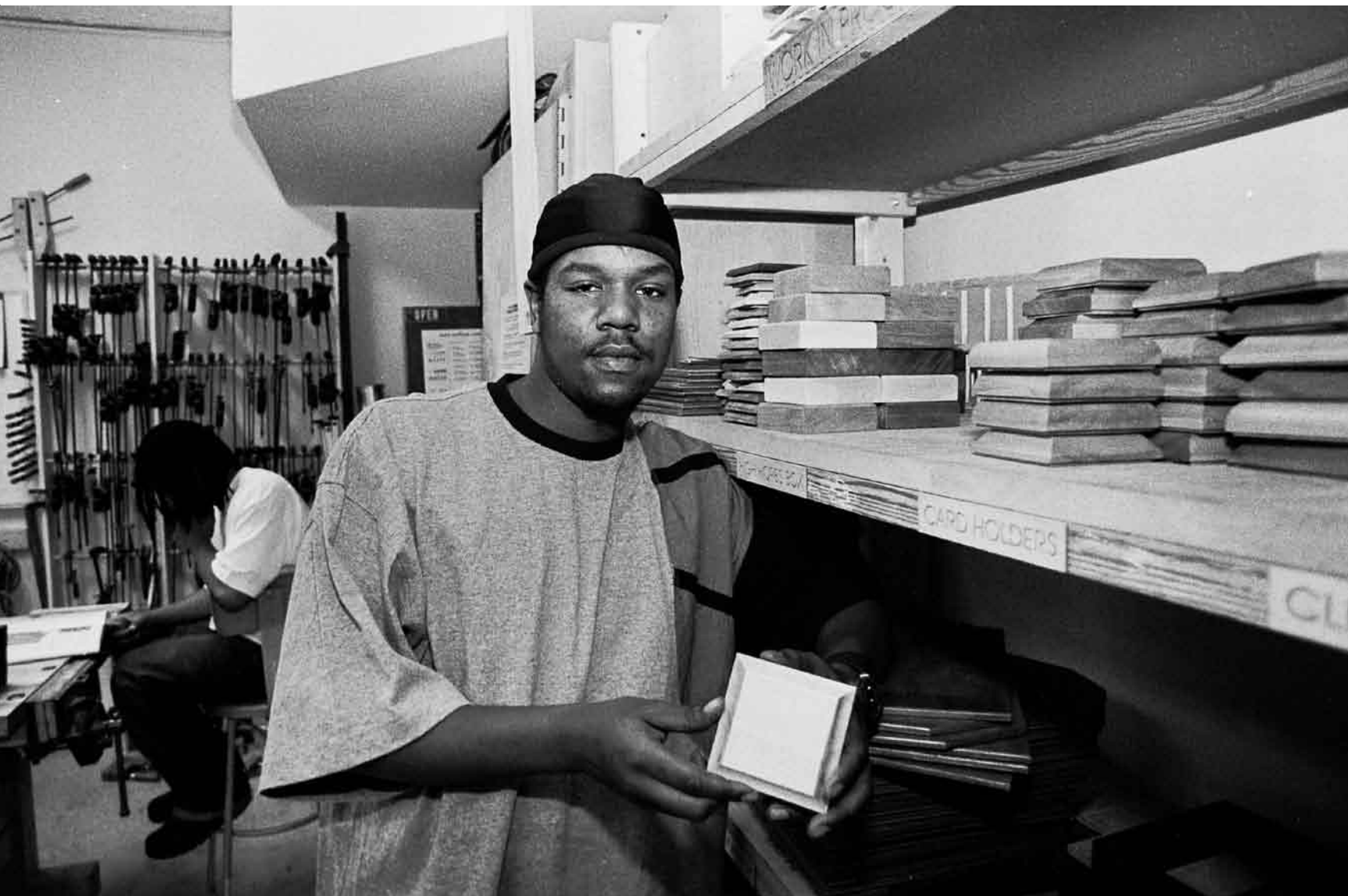
LPTM

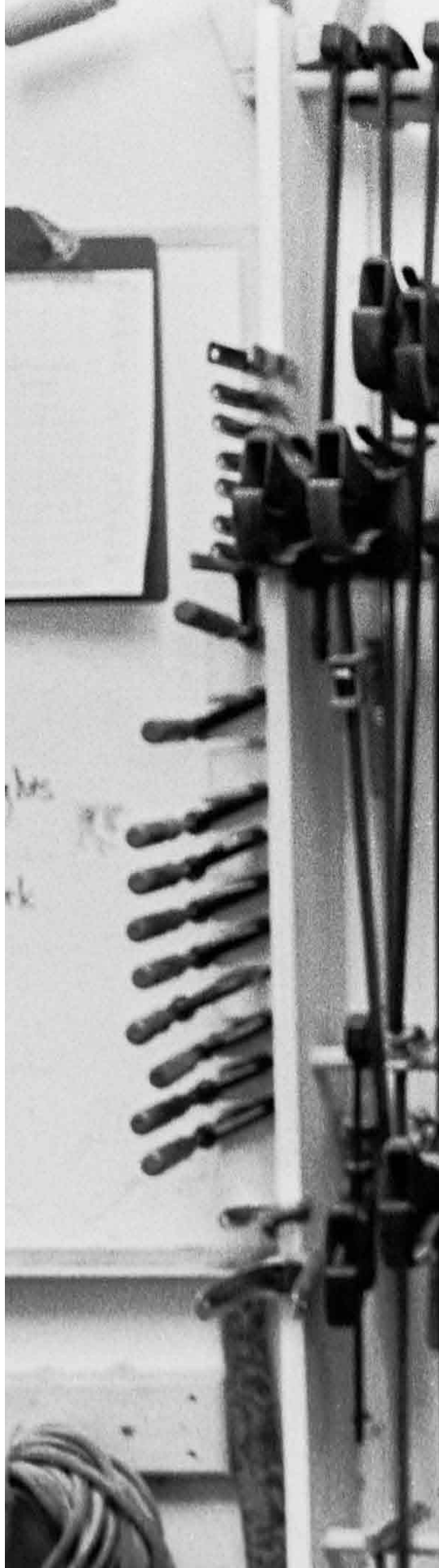
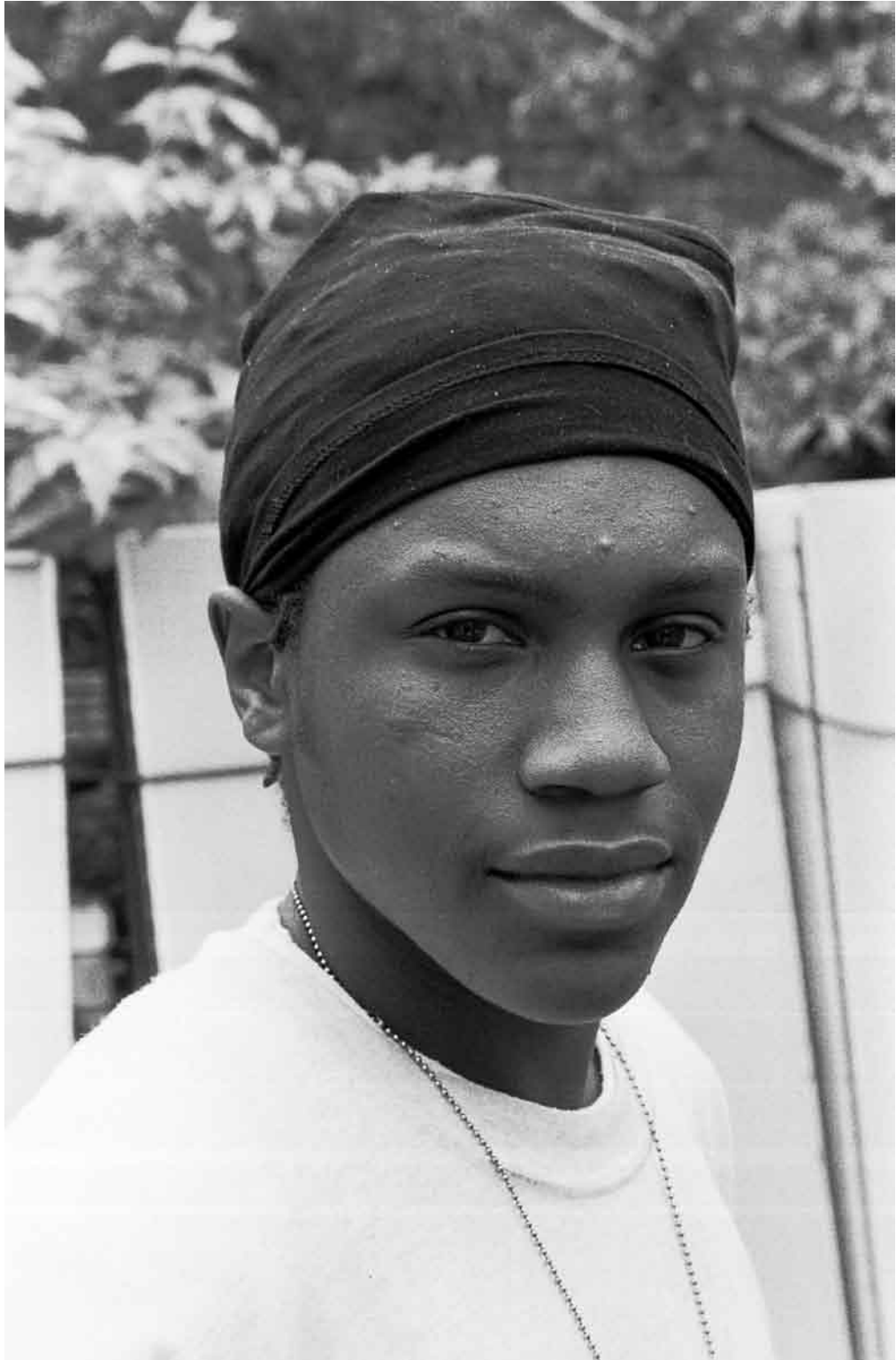
GENE

Language

Discipline













Lazy Hazy

Tony Medina

Daze

Summertime on stoop

Forehead sweat like ice cream tears

Hiding from the sun

Wishing for the rain to come

Cool us like johnnie pump spray











Free town · forgotten brown

Fred Joiner

hands reach cross our Jordan · feet walking sidewalks to nowhere · DC's Savannah sun · shining first light · South East

From Belfast to Anacostia

Kirsten Kearney

A wall, held together by stars
chained with bars
yellowed with age
advertises 'counseling,
marriage, weddings and funerals.'
The whole nine yards of life.

And now on a red brick road
a family cluster
granddad and grandson
dreadlocked friends eat ice-cream
dogs and cats chase each other
round and round the houses

The kids of Anacostia come out to play
hand in hand
as the trucks and the shiny cars
make their way along Martin Luther King Jr
and their long strong legs take great strides
along the wall of the afternoon.





If there is no struggle, there is no progress.
Those who profess to favor freedom
and yet depreciate agitation,
are men who want crops
without plowing up the ground,
they want the rain
without thunder and lightning.
They want the ocean
without the awful roar of its many waters.
This struggle may be a moral one,
or it may be a physical one,
and it may be both moral and physical,
but it must be a struggle.
Power concedes nothing without a demand.
It never did, and it never will.

We are fighting for unity;
unity of idea; unity of sentiment,
unity of object, unity of institutions,
in which there shall be no North, no South,
no East, no West, no black, no white,
but a solidarity of the action,
making every slave free, and every free man a voter.

Our minds are made up to live here if we can,
or die here if we must;
so every attempt to remove us,
will be, as it ought to be, labor lost.
Here we are, and here we shall remain.

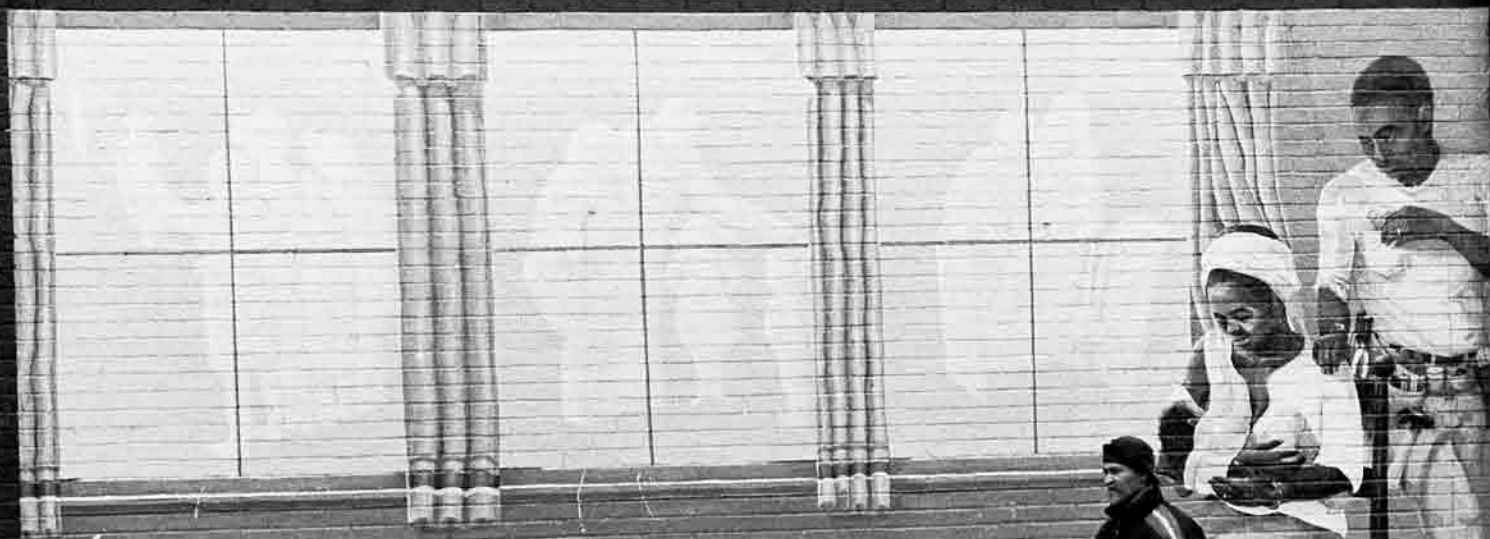
What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July?
I answer:
a day that reveals to him,
more than all other days in the year,
the gross injustice and cruelty
to which he is the constant victim.
To him, your celebration is a sham;
your boasted liberty, an unholy license;
your national greatness, swelling vanity;
your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless;
your denunciation of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence;
your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery;
your prayers and hymns,
your sermons and thanksgivings,
with all your religious parade and solemnity,
are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception,
impudence, and hypocrisy—
a thin veil to cover up crimes
which would disgrace a nation of savages.

Frederick Douglass sought
Anacostia high hills
To rest silver grey head

Derrick Weston Brown

walls speak blood truth
the grayscale song of a camera's
eye says what our words cannot

Fred Joiner

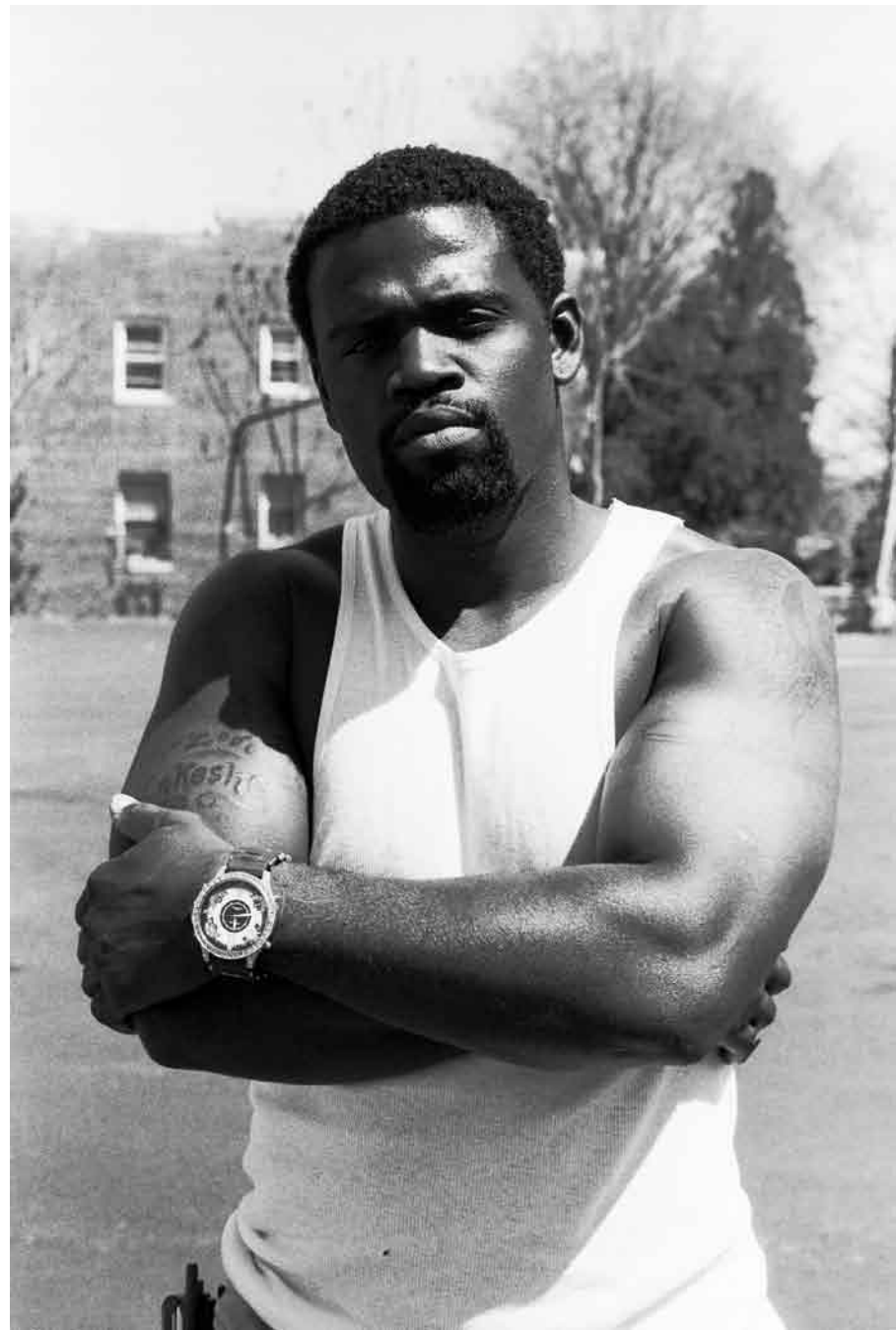


DESIGNED BY: PAUL TROTT
OF: ARTWORKS
BY: WALK STATE AGENCY

ARTIST: JIM
MURPHY
MURPHY
MURPHY

PAINTED BY: JIM
MURPHY
MURPHY
MURPHY





arms crossed don't mean
nothing 'cept my arms crossed
u dig?

Abdul Ali

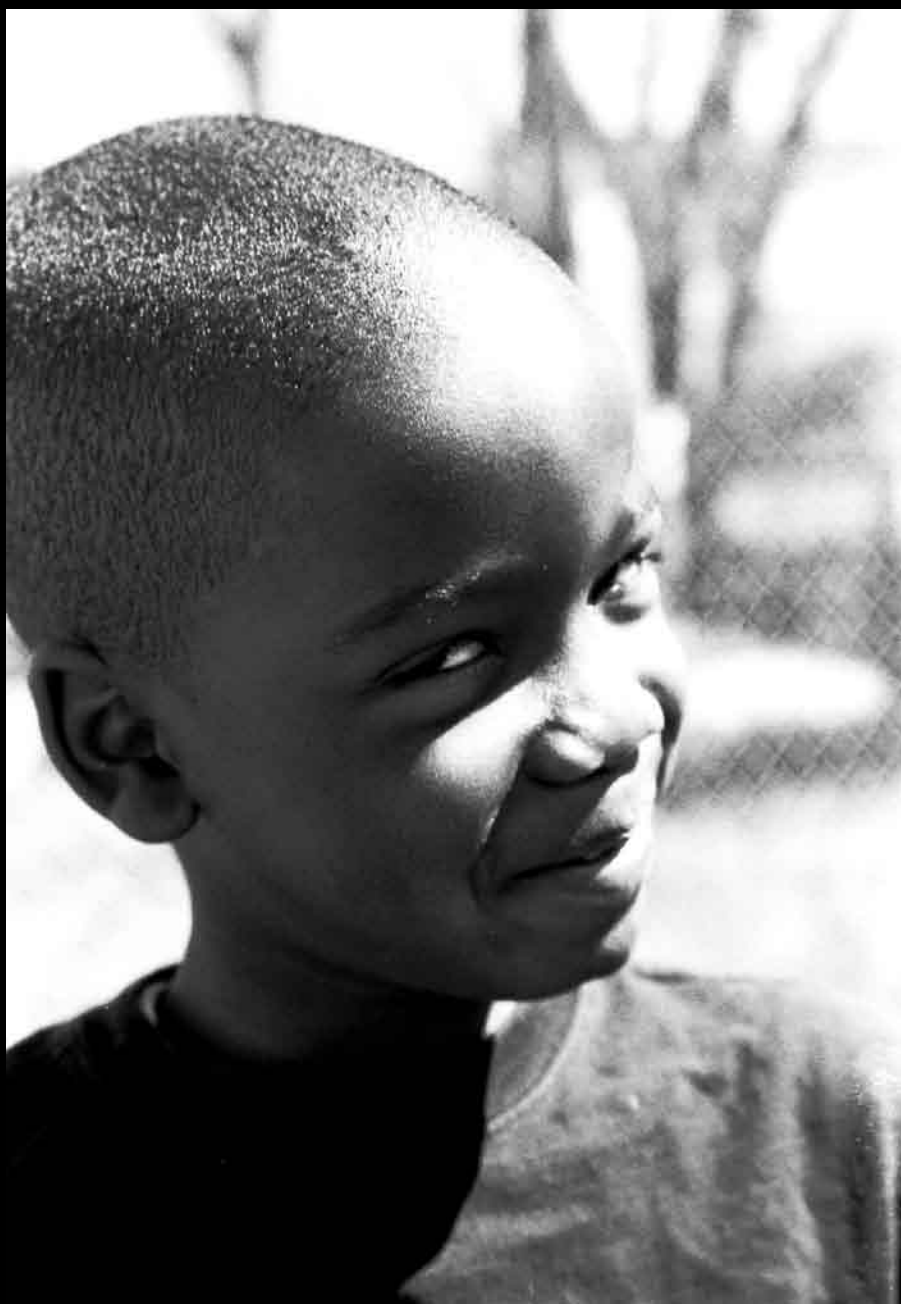
The Charmer

Tony Medina

Between you and me
All of the girls like my smile

The boys be jealous
Call me bubblehead and laugh

The girls roll their eyes and sass



The Little Girl

Alan King

in the black and white print
laughs at the Irish photographer's
accent, a sound far from what
she's used to in Anacostia

far from go-go, youngin'
and you be fakin' like...

it's afternoon when Chuck Brown's
blaring from the lowered windows
of a car passing the liquor store
and Whitman-Walker clinic
on Martin Luther King Avenue

where she poses was once
neglected, now the corridor's
repaved, and a baseball stadium's
erected despite the protests

to the photographer, this child's
no different than the ones
in his country—who, like her,
know the devastation
of war-lording politics



Scrappin'

Fred Joiner

this is how we play
on the South Side

fists clenched into globes
of black fury, but our smiles say

this is just prep
for the real thing

“Hold your hands, son!”

is what we say
when the war is on
for real.

here we take the sweet
with the sour and make mumbo

even the clap of long
gone gunshots our hands
crunk into “a pocket”

a groove that brings a smile
to the face of even the hardest
hard rock







Abettor

Katie Richey

A shadow can be just the thing,
on a day with no trace of shelter
or lemonade.

It can catch you off guard—
Come from behind you,
slip so close it will feel
like there could be breeze,
feel like the temperature
has loosened just for a moment
and he'll be there.

You may not have much to say,
might just toss a ball back and forth.
You may find that just his outline,
the size he mirrors to you,
is all the conversation you'll need.

*T'ang:
Anacostia Sound*

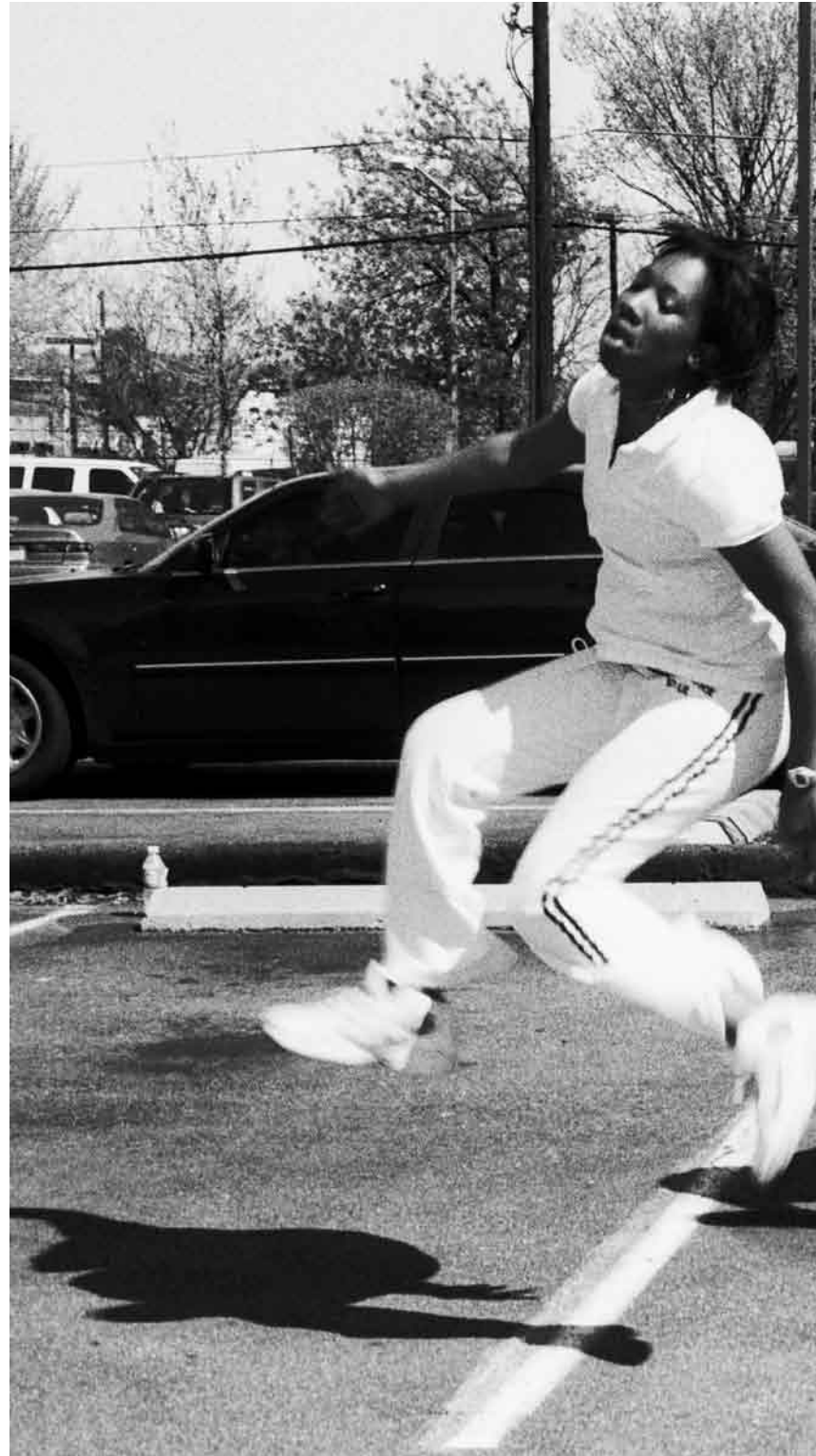
Fred Joiner

brown skin sweet song funk

drum clap free hand junk

head nod waist wind kick

sound fire body smile crunk







Little Miss May

Tony Medina

My granny bought me this dress
So I could look nice for God

She's always at church
Her Bible's older than me

It's heavier than can be

Child, After a Funeral Service

Rosetta Thurman

*Oh Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling
The summers gone, and all the leaves are falling*

every time some
body
dies, a song rises up out of St. Peters
or Anacostia Bible Church or
it doesn't matter really its
the same spiraling stained glass threnody
bursting through church windows
a flurry of hands reaching up to kiss the sky

And if you bend and tell me that you love me

this child steps out into the day
as bright as if God made it
hoping
this is the beginning again
hoping
there is life after death

Then I shall sleep in peace until you come to me

Street Corner Prophet

Tony Medina

Dreadlock halo crown
Jesus show up everywhere

In a black parka
Here in Anacostia

Winter corner crucifix





My Soul to Keep

Tony Medina

We preacher's daughters
Grew up in the church crawlin

Under old church pews
Work Monday to Saturday

On Sundays we go to church









Spring :: Escape

Kyle Dargan

Hope litters the structured
emptiness of Anacostia. Its swell
of children born from an orphaned
river east. It waits no longer—calling
the trees to close ranks
and hoard its cash-money view
from the hill that trumps Capitol.

Behind the curtain of leaves,
brick homes shake free
their plywood scars and patches, tired
of waiting for venture capital to float
down the green line. Anacostia
has its own green, oxygen
in spades. Each small
neighborhood swelling, the sacs
of Southeast's giant lung.

Anacostia is where D.C. come to bleed
and be replenished, to reimbibe
the clank and pop of playground
Go-Go pulse while learning to hustle
and rise above the beltway's grasp.







Givin Back to the Community

Tony Medina

I went to this school

When I was a shawty rock

Breakin in the yard

Wanted to be a rap star—

But a teacher's not too far!

Sermon on the 94

Fred Joiner

the 94 was still
when he walked on

hushed heads, nodding
under the weight
of a day's work

his feet unsure
climb to his pulpit,
between the fare collector
and the drivers seat

he steadies his feet
clinches the railing
like a podium

when his feet find
their rightful place
he eyes his congregation

the 94 heads up Stanton

his rolling
sanctuary labors
toward Bryan Place

“Hold on!”, he speaks
talks himself
out of a stumble,
still preaching his sermon
to the day's weary

he stood there, as if
waiting for his word
to take root

waiting for flames
to reveal themselves;
refusing to be
shut up in marrow.

he was speaking to me
his message did what
all good sermons do

met me at the cross
roads, moved me
beyond doubt

“Hold on!”

I try to divorce
the mess
age from the messenger
but his word
cut through me
like Sabbath sunlight

tonight his words
will conjure comfort,
*softly as in a morning
sunrise.*





SNOW
EMERGENCY
ROUTE
NO STOPPING
OR PARKING
EXCEPT
EMERGENCIES

STOP

P



Anacostia Exposed

is a visual and literary investigation of one of Washington D.C.'s most historic neighborhoods. The exhibition and book are a cooperative effort by photographer Mervyn Smyth, of the non profit arts agency Belfast Exposed in Northern Ireland, and a collective of DC poets galvanized by Fred Joiner, to showcase the culture and energy of Anacostia. The project was undertaken in the spring of 2007, when Mervyn Smyth completed a residency in Anacostia with Honfleur Gallery, through the support of ancillary programs surrounding the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, which featured Northern Ireland that year. Due in large part to the artist's community based work in Belfast; Smyth seamlessly immersed himself in the fabric of Anacostia life.

Both the Honfleur Gallery, through its Social Arts Initiative and Belfast Exposed has the parallel missions to promote photography "to encourage local communities... to record and understand their environment." Smyth's lens in a very short time period has given us an poignant new view into a neighborhood frequently neglected, overlooked, and misunderstood. In recognizing the similarities between Anacostia and communities in Belfast, the Rediscover Northern Ireland program (www.rediscoverni.com), facilitated this cultural exchange between Belfast Exposed and Honfleur, which in turn led to an exhibition of the photographs and companion poems to be presented at Honfleur Gallery in Washington and Belfast Exposed in Belfast. In 2008, as a result of Anacostia Exposed's warm reception on both sides of the Atlantic and the generous support from The Humanities Council of Washington DC, Anacostia Exposed was compiled in book form to act as a documentary piece of fine art that reimages Anacostia in a unforgettable, powerful and uplifting manner.

Designed by Eva González
International Arts & Artists' Design Studio, Washington, D.C.
www.artsandartists.org



