Faith in Sweet Auburn: The Next Chapter

A Thesis Proposal Submitted to the Photography Department

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Masters of Fine Arts

Savannah College of Art and Design

By

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May 27, 2015

Thesis Committee

Professor Forest McMullin, Chair

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I. Introduction

As I was preparing to move to Atlanta in 2011 I fell in love with Auburn Avenue after reading Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn: A Saga of Race and Class by Gary Pomerantz.[1] While I had been to Atlanta prior to the move and I had visited Auburn Avenue I had no clue that so much of Atlanta's African American history was rooted in this street. When I finally relocated from Pasadena California to Atlanta one of the first excursions I took was to Auburn Avenue. I did not find the street that Pomerantz had written about but rather I found a street from Courtland Avenue to Boulevard that looked as if it were abandoned. There were the bright spots like the King Center, the Apex Museum and the Auburn Research Library but the majority of the buildings was in disrepair, littered with graffiti and not occupied with thriving businesses. I was disheartened and encouraged at the same time as I could see signs of the street trying to remember its great past while also struggling to redefine itself.

My immediate reaction was to begin to research what happened and what was happening along Auburn Avenue. My research led me to become seriously concerned about this historical treasure and its future as a site of memory. This work is a direct response my concerns as it led me to ask the question: How will Auburn Avenue balance being a site of history and teller of the old stories while simultaneously being the epicenter of urban renewal? Those who engage this work are invited to question and think with me as we chart the changes along Auburn Avenue in relationship to its historical significance for Atlanta, Georgia and the United States.

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[1] Pomerantz, Gary. Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn: A Saga of Race and Class. NY: Penguin Books, 1997.

[2] Phillips, Andrea. A Creator's Guide to Transmedia Storytelling: How to Captivate

II: Thesis Statement

Auburn Avenue is a two-mile long street that is near downtown Atlanta. From the late 1850s to the mid 1960s this street was the social and economic heartbeat of the African American community. In 1957 Fortune Magazine designated Auburn Avenue the richest Negro street in the world. During the mid 1960s Auburn Avenue began to decline after the new interstate connector split the community from the downtown business district and as the city began to begin the process of racial desegregation. The street spiraled downward from the1960s up and through the mid 1970s. When Maynard Jackson became mayor there began a series of attempts to revitalize Auburn Avenue. To date the revitalization strategies haven't produced the fruit city planners envisioned. The street is presently going through another revitalization project, which began in 2011, centered around the new Atlanta Streetcar that made its inaugural run on December 30, 2014.

At its core this work is a hybrid between documentary photography, street photography and photojournalism while expressing itself via a transmedia. "Transmedia [is] telling a story through multiple communication channels at once, particularly channels such as the web and social media..."[2] The story of this project is told through the prints, videos on Vimeo and YouTube, photo albums on Flickr and a blog. The project puts history in conversation with the urban renewal as it lives along Auburn Avenue via the above-mentioned sources. The images online and videos have gotten thousands of views and comments along with the blog. The project is also promoted weekly via Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. Having an active following of over 5,000 followers and frieds

[2] Phillips, Andrea. A Creator's Guide to Transmedia Storytelling: How to Captivate and Engage Audiences Across Multiple Platforms. NY: McGraw Hill, 2012., p. 6.

across multiple social media platforms has added to the popularity and engagement of the work. This work is interactive-real time storytelling as the viewer is invited to walk with me as I do this work, to see what I see, hear what I hear, read my reflections and then ask their own questions while drawing their own conclusions.

Herman "Skip" Mason's major work, Going Against the Wind: A Pictorial History of African-Americans in Atlanta is collection of pictures from 1793 to 1992.[3] Skip Mason's work along with Dan Moore's book Sweet Auburn-Street of Pride: A Pictorial History gives the reader a visual reference of what Auburn Avenue looked like in its heyday.[4] *Faith in Sweet Auburn* is apart of the legacy of Mason and Moore by chronicling the life of a street and a people but this work is not a collection of vintage photos rather it is that of an artist who is visually documenting a time of change in real time. Like the work of Jamal Shabazz who was cognizant of the fact that New York's Brooklyn community was changing in the late 1970s and early 1980she choose to create images that captured the time prior to the crack epidemic *Faith in Sweet Auburn* also seeks to capture a moment in time in the life of Auburn Avenue.[5] It captures a time prior to revitalization and then follows the story to chart what is becoming of the historic Auburn Avenue.

What does it mean to remember and honor African American history in Atlanta? Michael Lomax says, "Atlanta's most notable tradition is that we have no traditions, or at least that

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[3] Mason, Herman "Skip". Going Against the Wind. Atlanta, GA: Longstreet Press,1992.
[4] Moore, Dan. Sweet Auburn – Street of Pride: A Pictorial History. Atlanta, GA: The Apex Museum, 1986.
[5] Shabazz, Jamal. A Time Before Crack. NY: PowerHouse Books, 2005.

we are not bound by traditions and a reverence for the past in the way that some other communities, especially in the South, have been."[6] If Atlanta doesn't reverence it's past will this lack of reverence be reflected when it comes to Auburn Avenue? How will Auburn Avenue be remembered? What will stay, what will go, what will come? What does it mean to be a historic district? These are the kinds of questions that continue to inform *Faith in Sweet Auburn*. The thesis exhibit will feature twenty prints 11 x 14 inches and a sixty-inch TV monitor that will feature five videos from the work. There will be QR codes on the artist statement that will take the viewer to the transmedia outlets of this project, the blog, website, videos and Flickr photo albums. In this final analysis this work isn't meant to dictate a conclusion but rather to raise questions and encourage critical thinking about Atlanta's past, present and future.

[6] Lomax, Michael, foreword in Kuhn, Clifford edt. Living Atlanta: An Oral History of the City 1914 – 1948. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1990., p. vii.

Schedule – Fall Term 2015

Week 1: September 14, 2015 – Thesis Abstract & Outline, submitted to thesis professor

Week 3: September 28, 2015 – First Completed Draft, submitted to thesis professor.
Notes returned by next class

Week 4: October 5, 2015 – Second Draft, Submit to committee members.
Notes returned by next class by thesis professor.
Schedule meetings with thesis committee members as needed.

Week 6: October 19, 2015 – Third Draft, Submit to thesis professor and committee members.
Notes returned by next class by thesis professor.
Schedule meetings with thesis committee members as needed.

Week 8: November 2, 2015 – Final Draft to thesis professor and committee members.
Notes returned by next class by thesis professor.
Schedule meetings with thesis committee members as needed.

Week 9: November 9, 2015 – Review Thesis format with library

Week 9: November 9, 2015 – Thesis Packet due to library (submit online); materials to

Graduate Coordinator of Photography Department

Thesis Exhibition:

Week 3: September 28, 2015 - Framing

Week 5: October 12, 2015 - Installation

Week 5: October 16 – 23, 2015 - Show Dates

Week 5: October 16, 2015 - Reception

The Apex Museum

135 Auburn Avenue

Atlanta, GA 30303

Annotated Bibliography

Baraka, Amir Imamu and Fundi. In Our Terrible Times: Some Elements and Meaning in Black Style. NY: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1970.

How does photography live in the context of the African American community? How do African Americans see and how are their words united with their images? In this book the poet and the photography are brought together to answer the previous questions. This book is the essence of what I would call African American style and aesthetics in photography. The only book that would rival this book is The Sweet Flypaper of Life. These two works one from the 1950s and the other from the 1970s are the foundation of an Afrocentric expression of photography.

Bey, Dawoud. Class Pictures. NY: Aperture, 2007.

The eye of Dawoud Bey is without peer in the photographic world today when it comes to portraits. This work is my favorite Dawoud Bey book. The images give you a sense of what it is to capture the essence of a person in a portrait. Dawoud Bey is one the central figures in contemporary history of photography and this book shows us why.

Davis, Clarence. A Chronicle in Black and White: Memoirs of a News Photographer 1965-2005.

In this work Mr. Davis chronicles his long career with the Daily News in New York. He was a celebrated photojournalist who was the lone African American photographer on staff at the paper for over twenty years.

DeCarava, Roy and Langston Hughes. The Sweet Flypaper of Life. Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1984.

This is the bible for many African American photographers. The copy I have was published in 1984 but the book was originally published in 1955. This is a must have book as it sets the foundation for how African Americans use word and picture to tell a story. The story telling tradition in the African American community comes to life in this book and it is a clear example of how African American artist tend to see and talk about the world and their work.

Duganne, Erina. The Self in Black and White: Race and Subjectivity in Postwar American Photography. Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2010.

This is a good overview of how African Americans were presented during this time. She puts Roy DeCarava's work in dialogue with the work of Bruce Davidson and you see how these two photographers went about their work quite differently. This is an interesting take on how African American artist approach their craft in contrast to white photographers(DeCarava versus Davidson).

Finley, Cheryl, Laurence Glasco and Joe E. Trotter. Teenie Harris Photographer: Image, Memory, History. Pittsburgh, PA: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011.

Teenie Harris is one of the most accomplished photographers of his time. He has the most complete document of a community of any urban photographer in the history of photography. He spent his entire career documenting the Hill District of Pittsburgh. Teenie Harris is the ultimate documentary photographer.

Gardullo, Paul and Michelle Delaney, Jacquelyn D. Serwer, and Lonnie G. Bunch III, edt. The Scurlock Studio: Picturing the Promise and Black Washington. Washington DC: The Smithsonian Press, 2009.

The Scurlock family had one of the most successful and thriving photography businesses in the entire United States. This body of work captures the spirit of the African American community in Washington DC with a vibrancy that is a testament to what Afrocentricity would define as the spirit of African photography. The book has wonderful text to support the pictures. This is an epic work of photographic history.

Higgins, Chester. Echo of the Spirit: A Photographer's Journey. NY: Random House, 2004.

What does it mean to be an African American photographer? How are African American photographers formed in connection with their African heritage? These are two central questions that Chester Higgins answers in this book. You can see him growing and become the world-class photographer he has become. He shares his journey in such a way that it inspires the reader to chart his or her own journey as an artist.

hooks, bell. Art on My Mind: Visual Politics. NY: The New Press, 1995.

This book represents some of bell hooks earliest reflections on art. The book provides a lens of analysis that takes on patriarchy, sexism and racism as they manifest themselves in the art world. This is classic bell hooks that can serve as a central text in any art / photography criticism class.

Jezierski, John Vicent. Enterprising Images: The Goodridge Brothers, African American Photographers 1847-1922.

The Goodridge Brothers Studio was without question the most significant and longest thriving African American photography studio in North America. The story of the visionary William C. Goodridge and the story of his family are amazing. They created amazing images and were excellent businessmen / women. This book tells the story of one the most important photography businesses in the history of photography.

Keita, Maghan. Race and the Writing of History: Riddling the Sphinx. NY: Oxford University Press, 2000.

While we dabble in the history of photography we have not asked or interrogated the racist roots of that history. This book presents a tool of analysis to help the reader inquire about how racist the enterprise of history making has been and is because today's history is built on yesterday's racist constructions. The reader is invited to literally re-write history and be more inclusive of the people and people groups that were left out of history by racist historians. This project is a must if photography hopes to see the multiple ways photography has developed and been employed by diverse ethnic groups.

Kelbaugh, Ross J.. Introduction to African American Photographs 1840-1950: Identification, Research, Care & Collecting. Gettysburg, PA: Thomas Publications, 2005.

While this book introduces the reader to African American photographs fro 1840 to 1950 it's real focus is how to research the work of African American photographers. The book is a primer for the activity of a researcher. If you were looking for a guide for finding the hidden gems of African American photographic history then this book would be a good starting point.

Kuhn, Clifford M. and Harlon E. Joye and E. Bernard West edt. Living Atlanta: An Oral History of the City, 1914-1958. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1990.

You hear Atlanta come to life as the stories of the old streetcar are told and how race and class shaped the city. This work is an oral ethnography of the historical landscape of time that cannot be forgotten.

Lewis, Levering and Deborah Willis. A Small Nation of People: W. E. B. Du Bois & African American Portraits of Progress. NY: HarperCollins Press, 2003.

W. E. B. Du Bois took an exhibit of photos to the Paris Exposition in 1900. This book is collection of the photos he took and other photos from the period that he drew from. The book gives a complete photographic record of the kind of image DuBois was presenting of African Americans as a civilized free people. These images were part and parcel of the argument being made to America and the world that African Americans were indeed civilized human beings.

Marberry, Craig and Michael Cunningham. Spirit of Harlem: A Portrait of America's Most Exciting Neighborhood. NY: Doubleday, 2003.

Harlem is alive in this work. The book consists primarily of environmental portraits supported by text. The book gives you a feel for the vibrancy of the African American residents of Harlem and how they have shaped their community. This is a perfect book to put in conversation with the work of Roy DeCarava as these two young artist have updated his work and done so in their own unique fashion.

Mason Jr., Herman "Skip". Going Against the Wind: A Pictorial History of African Americans in Atlanta. Atlanta, GA: Longstreet Press, 1992.

This is a tour-de-force as Skip Mason covers the photographic history of African Americans in Atlanta from 1866 to the late 1990s. This photographic record is the key to seeing the history of African Americans in Atlanta. This is Mason's most outstanding work.

Mason Jr., Herman "Skip". Politics, Civil Rights, and Law in Black Atlanta 1870 – 1970. Charleston SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2000.

Skip Mason is the historian of African American photography in the south. He has published a series of books specifically dealing with Atlanta history. This one of his many books that is key to seeing how African Americans saw themselves in the south from an historical perspective.

Mason Jr., Herman "Skip". East Point Georgia. Charleston SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2001.

In this book Skip Mason provides an historical pictorial of East Point Georgia's African American population.

Moore Sr., Dan. Sweet Auburn: Street of Pride – A Pictorial History. Atlanta, GA: The Apex Museum, 1986.

Mr. Moore gives us a look back at the most important street in the history of Black Atlanta. The pictures are classic images that bring Sweet Auburn back to a sweeter day and time. In these images you see why this street was called the richest Negro street in the world in 1957 by *Fortune Magazine*.

Phillips, Andrea. A Creators Guide to Transmedia Storytelling: How to Captivate and Engage Audiences Across Multiple Platforms. NY: McGraw Hill, 2012.

This book defines and explains how to tell transmedia stories. This is the definitive book on the topic of transmedia storytelling to date.

Pomreantz, Gary. Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn: A Saga of Race and Class. NY: Penguin Books, 1997.

The rich history of Auburn Avenue and Peachtree Street is told in this book as the author interrogates the role of race and class in the development of the city. The book tells the story by tracing the family stories of two former Atlanta mayors, Ivan Allen and Maynard Jackson.

Shabazz, Jamel. Back in the Days. Brooklyn, NY: Powerhouse Books, 2001.

Shabazz, Jamel. A Time Before Crack. Brooklyn, NY: Powerhouse Books, 2005.

Jamel Shabazz is the consummate street photographer. His work sets a new standard and aesthetic for street photography. He is the master of the street portrait and the capture of African American culture. While he in the linage of artist like Roy DeCarava he redefines what street photography could look like and how photographers engage their subjects and build relationships with them.

Smith, Shawn Michelle. Photography on the Colorline: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.

In 1900 W. E. B. DuBois compiled an exhibit for the Paris Exposition. The American Negro Exhibit won awards and was DuBois way of showing the world who African Americans really were. He worked with a local Atlanta photographer to do most of the work. In this book the visual theorist and strategist that DuBois was is explored with great detail in the midst of very rich argument put forth by the author. In this work you see how African Americans were using images to save lives and say that African Americans were human while the *Pictorialist* were trying to convince the world that photography was art. This book shows the way two communities were using the medium for very different ends.

Sullivan, George. Black Artists in Photography, 1840-1940. Dutton, NY: Cobblehill Books, 1996.

While most mainstream history books only name a few early African American photographers Mr. Sullivan shows that the list should be much longer. This is a key text that fills in the gaps in the history of photography.

Thomas, Hank Willis. Picturing Blackness. NY: Aperture, 2008.

We see through the eyes of a brilliant African American artist who allows us to see as African American male artist see. An aesthetic is established in Hank Thomas Willis' work that can begin to inform how African American artist see from the snapshot to fine art. An invaluable resource as a modern resource for forming artist interested in African American ways of seeing and constructing art.

Willis, Deborah. Posing Beauty: African American Images from the 1890s to the Present. NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009.

How has African American beauty been represented in photography down through the ages is the focus of this work.

Willis, Deborah. Black: A Celebration of a Culture. NY: Hylas Publishing, 2004.

This is a very important text because it points out the way culture is constructed through photography. If one is to be initiated into an African American way of seeing and framing then this book is essential.

Willis, Deborah. Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present. NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000.

The history of African American photography and photographers is told in this text. This book could read in concert with other history text that don't fully reflect African American photographic history.

Willis, Deborah. Edt. Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography. NY: New Press, 1994.

This is a collection of essay by various cultural critics who reflect on how photography has functioned in the African American community.

Wright, Richard. 12 Million Black Voices. NY: Basic Books, 2002.

This classic book was first published in 1941. Richard Wright uses the photos from the Farm Security Administration to highlight the plight of African Americans. He uses photography to expose the evil of social stratification. This work is yet another example of how African American artist see the uniting of word and image.