

# FORCED INTO PHOTOGRAPHY BY METAPHOR OR TO FREE (AT LAST) ALL FRAMED BLACKNESS

A PHOTO ESSAY INTERVIEW BY STEPHEN PASQUALINA

## THOMAS SAYERS ELLIS

Thomas Sayers Ellis co-founded The Dark Room Collective in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1988 and earned an M.F.A. from Brown University in 1995. His work has appeared in many journals and anthologies, including *Poetry*, *Grand Street*, *Tin House*, *Ploughshares* and *The Best American Poetry*, 1997 and 2001. Mr. Ellis is a contributing editor to *Callaloo* and *Poets and Writers*. In 2005 he was awarded a Mrs. Giles Whiting Writers' Award. His first full collection, *The Maverick Room*, was published by Graywolf Press in 2005 and awarded the 2006 John C. Zacharis First Book Award. He is also the author of *The Good Junk* (Take Three #1, Graywolf, 1996), the chapbook *The Genuine Negro Hero* (Kent State University Press, 2001) and the chaplet *Song On* (WinteRed Press, 2005). He is Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Sarah Lawrence College and a faculty member of The Lesley University low-residency M.F.A. program (Cambridge, Massachusetts). His *Breakfast and Blackfist: Notes for Black Poets* is also forthcoming from the University of Michigan Press, Poets on Poetry Series.

SP

What's the story behind these first five shots? Did you speak to the guy? Was he alright? Did he just suddenly fall in front of your eyes?

TSE

I had just finished photographing Lloyd Pinchback, an original member of the Soul Searchers, for my project *The Go-Go Book: People in the Pocket In Washington, D.C.* Lloyd works at the Library of Congress and I shot him there, in the shadow of a waving American flag. I shot him with three different cameras, a Leica Digilux 2, a Hasselblad 500C/M and a Leica R4 SLR—I have a Leica R4. I still love real film. I was sitting on a park bench near the U.S. Capitol building eating a plum when I saw and heard this man, a black man, dash into the water and just sit there in the Capitol's reflection. It was very hot so I just assumed he was homeless and trying to cool off; there are so many homeless people in federal Washington. The postcards and the media hide them but they are there. I couldn't believe the opportunity I was being given, a black man sitting there, like that. Of course I was immediately reminded of the photograph we used for the cover of *The Maverick Room*. Here was my chance. I sat in front of him and shot him and he just looked at me and didn't move. I shot him and thanked him and went back to my seat.

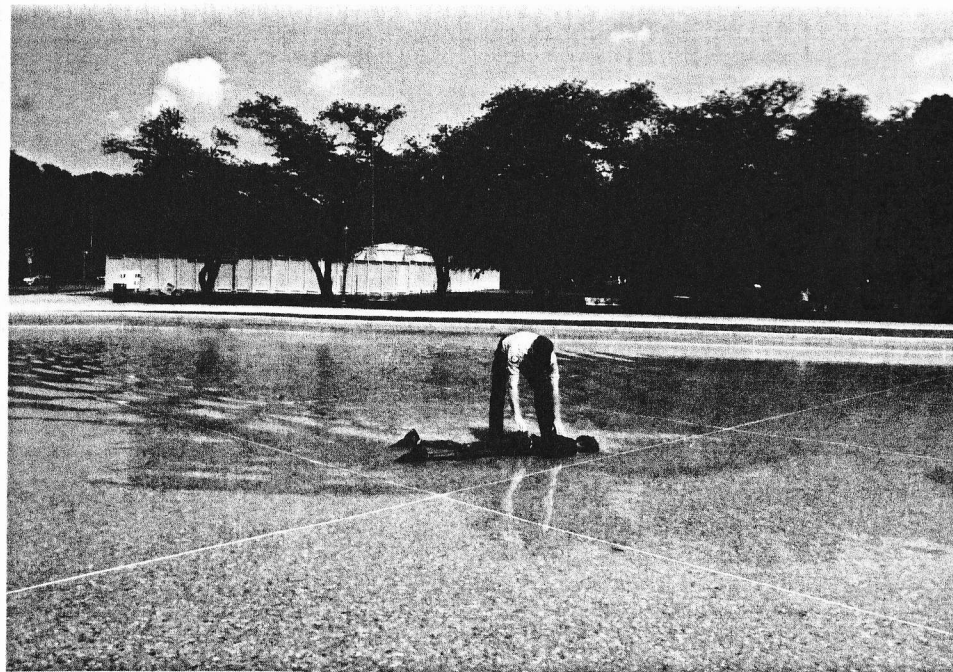
Two minutes later, he turned over, slowly, faced down in the water, whoa! And we all just sat there for a few seconds: me, the tourists, the other people eating in the park. That's when I went into the water and began to shout at him, "What's wrong, get up!" I even kicked him. I had one camera in my hand, the digital Leica, and I couldn't bring myself to photograph him, but I wanted to, and, by then, the guy in the uniform in the photos was approaching us. I ran back to the bench to get my cell phone to call for help, and on the way back to them I began shooting, alternating the Digilux 2 and the SLR. I had to. I hated to, but I had to. And later, the medics and detectives thanked me for recording the incident. The photos, they said, helped them understand what had happened. I felt a little good and a lot bad. I still do. I haven't even developed the photos I shot with the SLR, not yet. I need some distance.



THE SAGA OF LEE AUSTIN WEBSTER WHO HAD A STROKE IN FRONT OF THE U.S. CAPITOL BUILDING, TSE 2007

**SP** What relations do you draw between your poetry and your photography? How do they work together in your craft?

**TSE** My poems (and poetry) “feed” my photography and my photography “eats” my poetry. It’s essential, well, was essential for me to find my own way to make both imagery and metaphor. I hope I do that differently than the other poets of my generation; I really wish that I didn’t need them (metaphor and simile) at all, but I do—for now, and both poetry and photography have been the right mentors in that aspect of my apprenticeship. The true thing, the craft, that I am learning hasn’t been discovered (by me) yet. Both poetry and photography feel like practice for a greater unknown. They both extend and complete me, as well



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as reinvent me. The poem, so desirous of imagery; the photo, so desirous of metaphor. I love the meeting place, forced and unforced, known and unknown. I don’t privilege either object or either energy, but poems are mostly made inside of me and photographs are mostly made outside of me. How to change that, how to trick them into behaving like one another without Photoshop or a rhyming dictionary. Both processes, the way they give reality a failed new representation, a wrong thinking, feeling and seeing. In this way, both re-imagine reality—and this re-imagining is the first act of all art, change and revolution.

**SP** The subject of every one of these photos is a person or a group of people. Talk about your emphasis on the individual in your photography and in your poetry.

**TSE**

The individual contains everything, all things perfect and imperfect, all of science, all of art, all movement, all of history. The human face is geography, weather and photosynthesis. I always feel like the universe, the entire cosmos, is gathered in each of us, especially in the mask. It truly is time that we rewrote that "the eyes are the window to the soul" comment. The soul is great but there is so much more there. Black masks, natural and unnatural ones, are great too....the layering and un-layering, laboring and un-laboring. I am also drawn to the relationships between people and public institutions, architecture, advertising, etc. I think my pictures are becoming more physical. I am trying to interact more with the subject, to make them respond to the act of being photographed. The individual is also an excuse, a way to widen and approach larger social issues. I am certainly interested in portraiture in writing and photography, and I am cursed with the gift of seeing frames, of having to constantly frame things. At some point, you know, in a work of art the subject vanishes and the medium replaces it with a revitalized echo of itself. That is what I want "folk" to see: their revitalized selves.

**SP**

What's the story with Miss Julie? She looks like a real character.  
(see pg. 39)

**TSE**

I met Miss Julie while I was being driven through the Mississippi Delta. We stopped in a small town called Drew and there she was sitting outside being Miss Julie, representing aging, freedom and a million other things. I began by asking if I could photograph some of the other folks in the community, and that naturally drew her in. I took about twelve photos of her, many of them far too raunchy—I suspect—for these pages. She drank and talked and chased children and held southern court with the other elders. She even questioned a policeman's authority based on something she knew or said she knew about his past. Her lipstick was fire-engine red and her dress was black with red and yellow floating stems and flowers.

**SP**

What about Gerald Townsend? (see pg. 37)

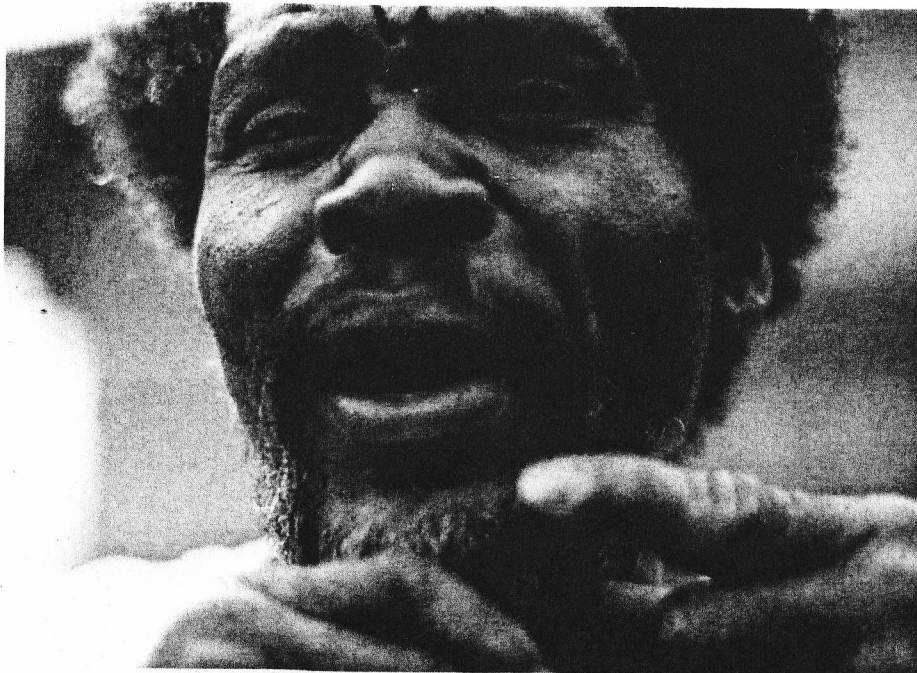


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MR. GERALD TOWNSEND, TSE 2007

**E** Mr. Townsend said that he was the first one ever to wear the Fu Manchu beard style. He grabbed his beard to a point and waved his arm in protest about everything anyone said. I followed him to shoot him because he rarely sat still. What a face and what hands. I have shots of him tearing apart and eating an abandoned beehive...somewhere.

What about the FBI photos? Did you speak to the guy about how he lost his fingers? (see pg. 40)

**E** FBI was suspicious of me and he said so, but I guess the fact that everyone else was getting their picture taken sort of made him step up to the plate and try



PIMP, TSE 2007

to outdo them. I wish I had a chance to redo his photo because I didn't even notice his hand till he lifted it, very naturally, saying "Take this." He caught me off guard and I only had a second to set the manual settings on the camera before he flipped his fingers and sent me, and you, and photography a three-fingered message. I couldn't ask him about his hand after that...

**SP**

What drove you to embark on this photography project? What led you to the places and the people we see in these photos?

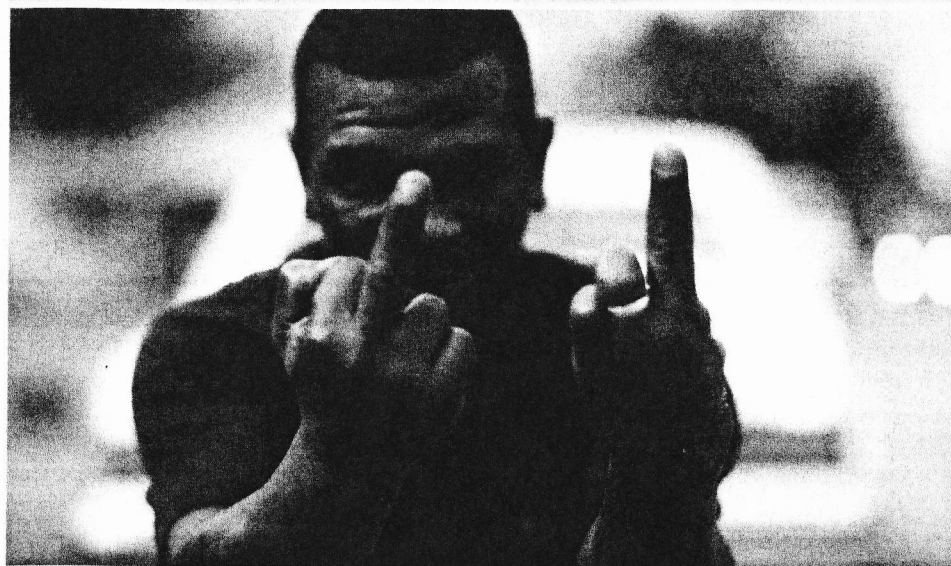
**TSE**

Poetry led me, I mean, passion and poems and readings. I usually use the gigs I get, the travel, to explore whatever's near. It's true that the camera becomes a

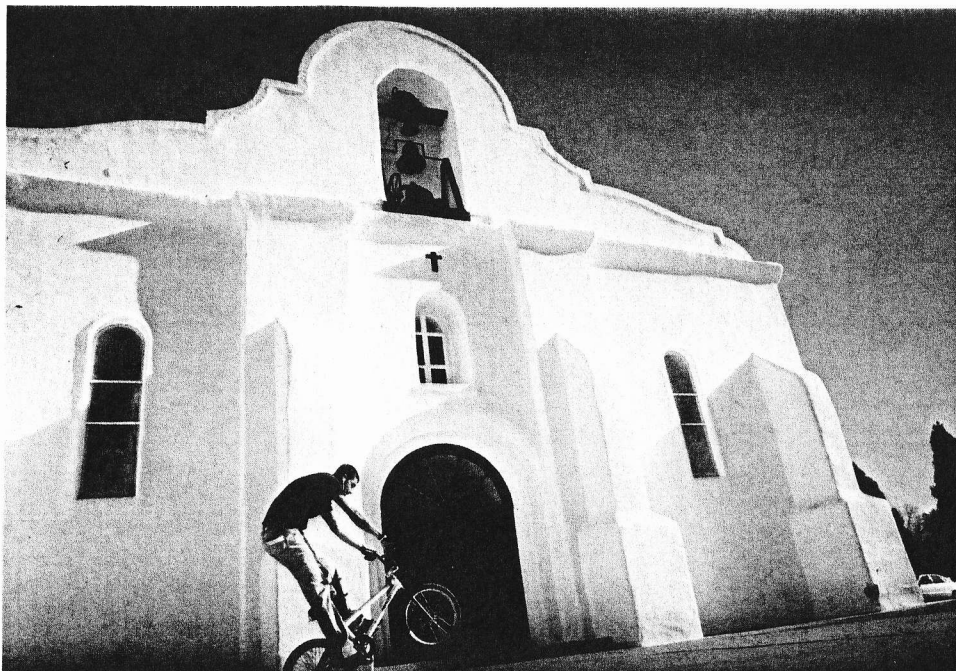


MISS JULIE (DREW, MS), TSE 2007

part of the body, always ready. The pictures, for me, are also better than memory because I like seeing and re-seeing. The “embarking” happened gradually over many years. I got my first camera in 1986. A (Go-Go) trombonist sold it to me out of his trunk for \$40. It was a Chinon with a non-detachable lens, and it’s what I used at James Baldwin’s funeral and during the very early days of the Dark Room Collective. Then I graduated to a Nikon FM 10. Shout out to Jorge Otano who taught me to develop photos in the dark room in the house we rented in Cambridge, Massachusetts. That same room became the house library and the house living room became a forum for emerging and established writers-of-color (that’s what we used to say back then: writers-of-color). All those years of trying to get the light right, as in painting, the perspective too. The best I can do is fail.



FBI, TSE 2007



BIKER BOY AT ISLETA (NEW MEXICO), TSE 2007

**SP** You mentioned earlier the idea of being forced into “framing” things. You seem to allude to that sort of idea in “View-Master” when you write of your experience with poor eyesight, with having to wear glasses your entire life, a “gift” (as you call it) you inherited from your mother. How has your experience with wearing frames contributed to your idea of “framing” and your ability to, as you say in the closing lines of “View-Master,” “make myth with it”?

**TSE** I am “far-sighted” as they say, which means that I see better over distances. A frame is both an inclusion and an exclusion, a real and an imagined border. The frame is almost always a square or some closely shaped, related cousin. Like it or not, many of our memories and our very system of seeing is pack-



MEXICAN CAB DRIVER WITH GUITAR (ISLETA, NM), TSE 2007

aged in a box, what it can hold and what it cannot. The same is true of most stanzas; they are shaped to meet the need of the already square-governed seeing reality. Language and feeling are against this. Certainly “pure” poetry is. I am teaching myself to unlearn framing; well, structurally, the frame, its impression, is necessary but the frame (the cube) as an organizing system must be destroyed if the senses are to be liberated. Isn’t this what Africa taught Picasso...he really did get it, boldly, half right.

**SP** How do you differentiate (if you do) the role of the poet versus the role of the photographer?



**TSE**

I don't have to differentiate, training does. They feel like eyes to me, two eyes, one stronger—perhaps—than the other, a stigmatism somewhere, fixed, in the organic lens, set in the mechanical head near a flash. Alternating strengths, weaknesses, a matrimony of porous focusing, the strained result of blurred sensitivity. Part, part, part, whole.

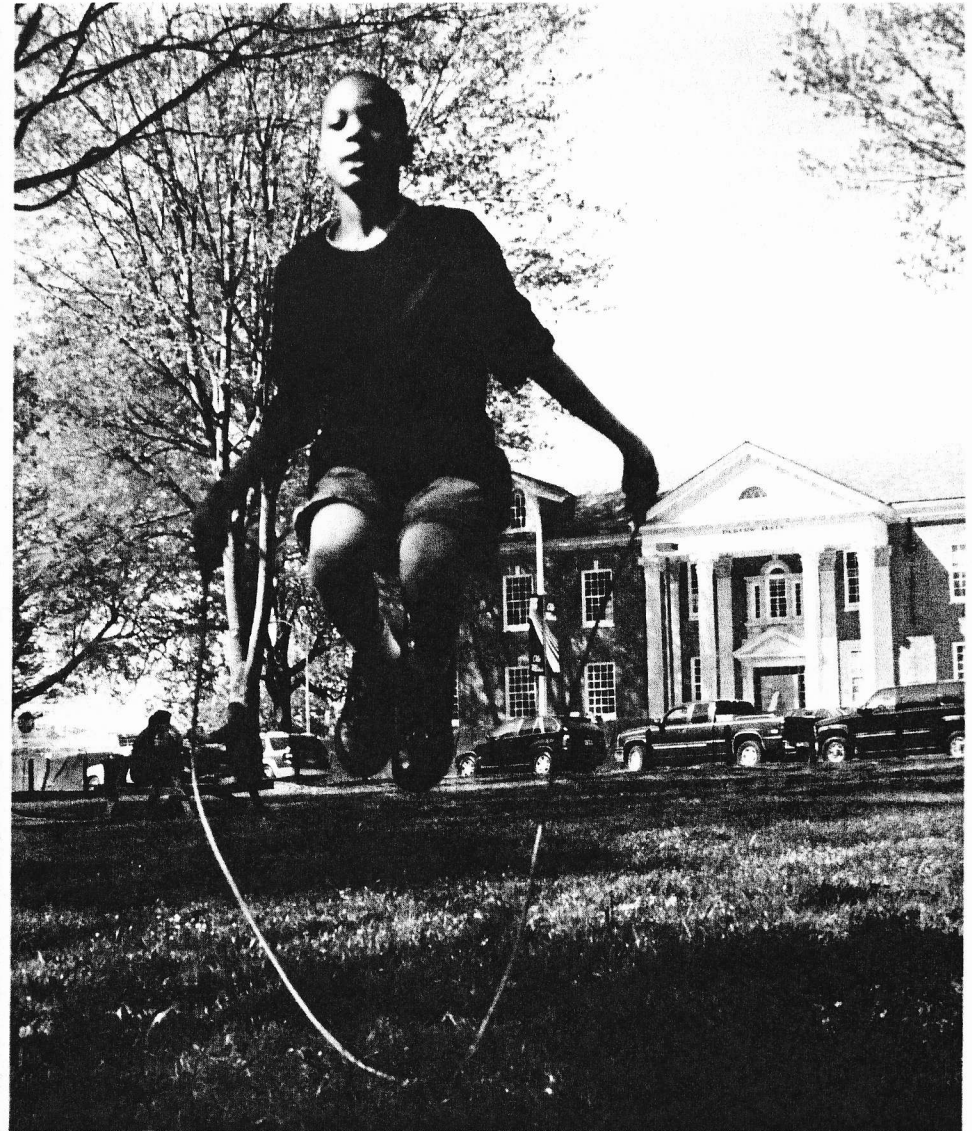
I have been lucky too, to have been photographed by some really passionate and talented photographers; and I was, indeed, taking notes. Last year I recognized Elsa Dorfman near Bryant Park and asked her if I could photograph her and she said "Yes" right there on the spot and she invited me to visit her studio in Cambridge where I photographed her and her giant Polaroid camera. Then she photographed me, wow. I have been photographed by Bruce Weber (for *Interview*), Amy Arbus, Kwaku Alston, Zeke Berman and Jati Lindsay and watching them all was an education.

**SP**

One of the connections I make between your photography (and photography in general) and your poetry is the concept of the fragment. As you said, these photos allow you to "re-see" fragments of time that you once experienced first hand. You have a very distinctive, fragmented method of reading your poems. What connections can you draw between the photographic fragments we see in print and the poetic fragments you voice?

**TSE**

The obvious connection is that I am always trying to include breathing, and some evidence of multi-directional movement, inhaling and exhaling, a visual respiratory system—photographs and poems that, though flat, aspire to a certain amount of organic interaction with the "atmospheric condition" of both art and life. Breathing (and thinking) are both fragmented functions, each a lovely machine. I often feel so surrounded by reality that I want to take it apart and put it back together again, piece by piece. I am probably a plumber at heart. Reading a poem, well, when I read, I like to orally move between the text to challenge what it (the text) expects. I am trying to reawaken the d a m n thing, to recreate the experience of the creative process, not mere memory. The text just lying there, waiting to be read, needs multiple breaths or else it'll



BOY JUMPING ROPE (OXFORD, MISSISSIPPI), TSE, 2007

just lay there and not need me to reach the listener. I like teasing the corpse, a jab here, a stab there. That's some of what you hear. Audio autopsy.

SP Where does that fragmented speech pattern we hear at your readings come from?

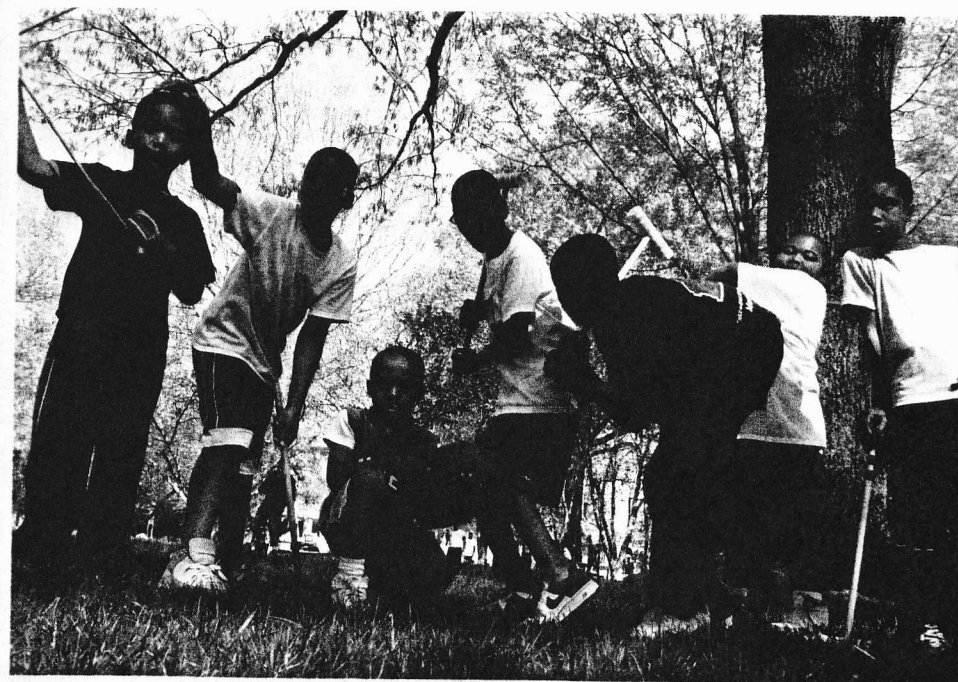
TSE There can only be one and only one answer at the bottom of the answer pool: I don't like English.

SP Talk about the different effects of the tight-cropped shots (like we see in *Mr. Gerald Townsend* and *Glydab Fists*) versus the more zoomed out perspective shots (like *Biker Boy* and *Lee Austin Webster*), especially as they apply here with your focus on the individual.

TSE I like to exhaust the possibilities when I shoot, so I always take an extra amount of shots—to play it safe. However, in the case of *Glydab Fists* and *Gerald Townsend*, there wasn't anything to extend the meaning or metaphor of the image near either of them, so I didn't need it, and they became the subject and context. Certainly much of the power in the *Lee Austin Webster* and the *Biker Boy* is derived from where they are, so I automatically see (from the moment I lift the camera) the photo whole. I never thought to just photograph the biker boy without the church or Lee Austin without the Capitol...or its reflection, although I had to when he turned over into the water, but then the water and its many meanings became a part of the metaphor...

SP How do you balance, as you have here in these photographs (to borrow a phrase from T.S. Eliot), "Attachment to self and to things and to persons, detachment/ From self and from things and from persons" in your poetry? Or do you? And if you do, what kind of an effect does a zoomed-out shot like some of the *Webster* photographs have on your poetics versus a tight crop like we see with *Miss Julie*, for example?

TSE That's what I am learning: how to make lines that are emotionally and visually



BOYS AT OLE MISS, TSE 2007

closer in proximity, in shape, or linguistically to whatever I am telling, showing, or sharing. Removing the stance of having the poem be "about" something and of having it always (the contemporary trend) looking back at an experience and regurgitating it helps a lot.

I am trying to give the new work the cultural behavior of the subject area. In this way I am, I hope, eliminating the extra distance (a zoom if you will) between the language and what the language is about. I tried this in "Marcus Garvey Vitamins" from *The Maverick Room* but I think some readers might have been thrown off by some of the vernacular, which—contrary to academic beliefs—belongs in poems and does not resist being written.





Is there a photographic perspective that you privilege in your poetry?

There's no name for it but I do privilege all perspectives and entrances to rooms (stanzas) that are not the main entrance. I am so tired of poems that begin with:

The

A

I

And pronouns

I want the writer to lead me into the house of the poems as non-linear as possible: backwards, chimney, bedroom window, etc.

You seem to demonstrate that ambition in much of your work. The poem I have in mind is "Or," in which you connect words like "born poor" and "Corporate" with the title conjunction, then close with an ominous stanza of "terror or border./ Or all organized/ minorities." Where and how do we see this kind of privileging of the "other" in these photographs, which, I would think, present a much more bare-bones, "objective" approach that presents the possibilities of turning these individuals into subjects or objects for our pleasure, our ridicule, our sympathy?

The last person I am thinking about is the viewer when I take a picture; I really don't care what the viewer's mind does with the work. All I can do is present the most open or closed composition; besides "shooting" happens so fast. And so much of what goes into a picture and a poem has already happened in the photographer years ago. "Privileging," as you say, is a theoretical construct, an idea born from some "semblance" to hierarchy. Certainly, then, the medium itself is being privileged. The "other" cannot be seen from any vantage or disadvantaged point than the one that the viewer's taste, style and class allows. There is not an "other" without an "another." Which are you, the looking you? I always feel like both, other and another. They are already subjects and, in my photographs, they fix one aspect of that being, boldly so. The thinking that occurs after that does not concern them or me. In taking the photo, we've

performed a finished act and added another subject to the many subjects that they must be to be "many."

SP

I imagine it is always the fear of the artist that his or her surroundings, profession, financial pressures, etc. are constantly working at appropriating the artist into convention, the poems that begin with pronouns, as you say. How do you work against those ongoing appropriating forces and how would you suggest a young artist work through them?

TSE

In my poems, I try to either start the engine very fast or to have the poem already be in motion when the reader comes to it, already moving, already happening. Certain parts of speech just stand still waiting for the big push and those words need other words to start the progression or reversing of the language. Other words can only matter or move when they are placed between certain other words...these words bring motion and I don't mean verbs. I mean a certain way of feeling the language already leading the reader, without explanation, on his or her way. Young writers should begin with words that don't need the reader to get going. The is the age of multiple breathing, asthma, hiccupping, stuttering and the bi-polar couplet. Imagine what might have happened had Romeo stuttered; stuttering tells us so much. Those not-so-poor kids might have lived. Young poet, you must destroy tragedy!

SP

Talk about the relationship between these photos and the title of the photo essay, particularly the second part of the title, "To Free (At Last) All Framed Blackness."

TSE

The second part of the title is about struggle; struggle and possibility. Nothing wants to be framed, nothing in motion and I love adding motion to my pictures, especially the portraits. They are never just sitting there and I am always talking to them first, long before I lift the camera...then all of a sudden, *snap, click, shutter*, and they've been framed. Allowing the movement is one way of freeing them from as much of the "framedness" as possible. Artistically, the frame imprisons, captures, limits. A good picture contains the sadness of the

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trapped subject filling the medium with something bolder than the technical; a good picture fights its own flatness. Blackness, for many awful reasons, rarely frames itself.

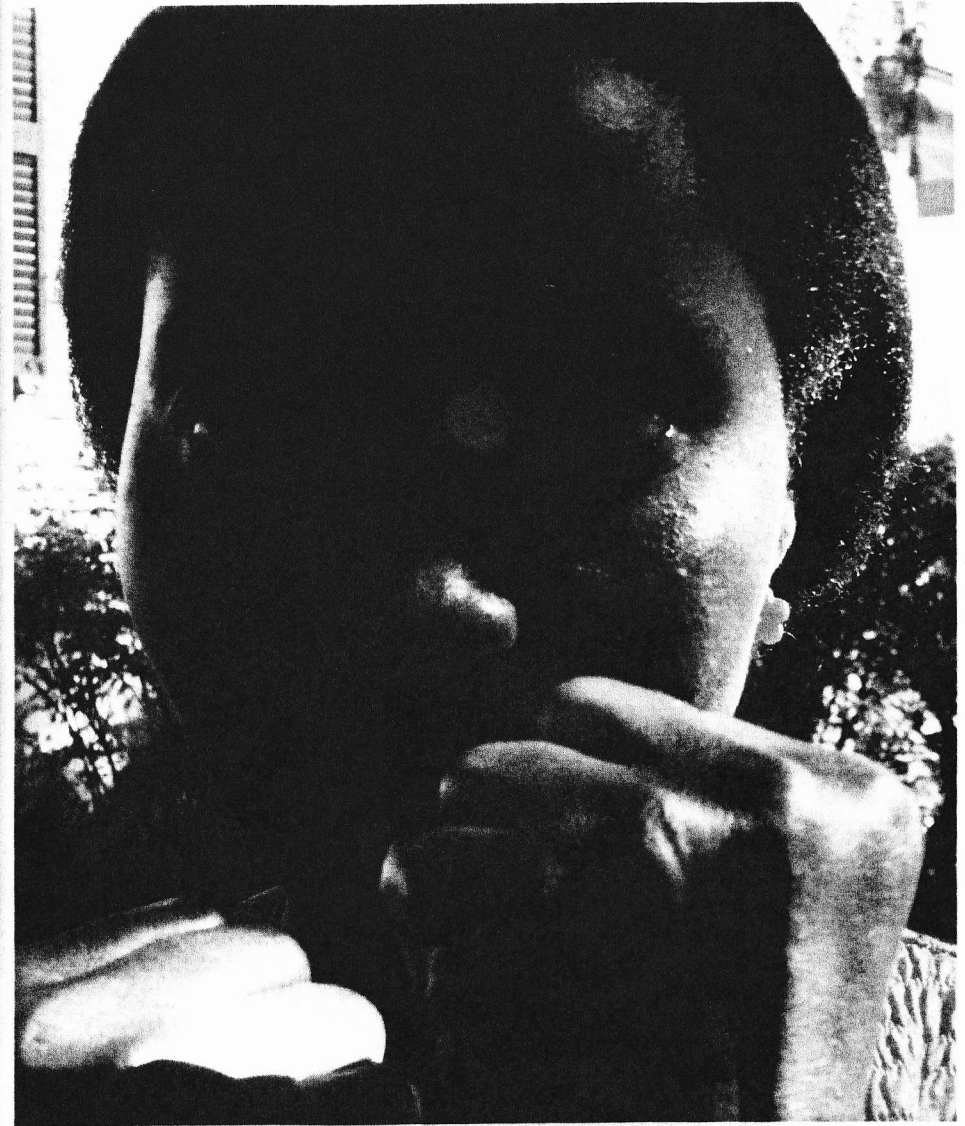
**SP** You mentioned at a poetry reading at St. John's last April that your favorite poem is the one you're working on. Describe your love affair with the creative process.

**TSE** My love affair with the creative process, what we do at night, early in the morning, in the shower, all alone, near the fireplace, on lonely streets, after prayer, in the open windows over a magnificent view of the park, in a tree, in a swing, in the back of a parked car, behind the crowded church, is private and remarkably X-rated. Would you trust me, come to me again, surrender, if I told?

We, the creative process and I, fly through the universe...almost one yummy body. We remember to play, to take with us what we think and what we feel, what we see and what we read. I speak of us as one, as a lovely mechanized or organic produce, as trust...the rudiments of open agreement and disagreement, of trying to let go of control. Being in the making of the continuance of a gift is undescrivable, the gathering pours in and out at the same time, the pouring is living and losing, alive-living and alive-losing. When I am making, caught up in the rising of timeless connectedness, I am dot dot dot.

**SP** Is it alright if some of your photos get cropped in the journal? I'm still toying with different combinations and orders for the photos, so their sizes are up in the air right now.

**TSE** Cropping, as a general rule, is bad—but it does (to me) depend on the picture, what it will allow, how much the inside edges, the spaces surrounding the central image will give back to reality. Art, the framed world, is selfish and wants to keep it all, but we control freaks have a different agenda. Ultimately your cropping question is one of triple permission and triple collaboration—between you, me and art. "Can't we all just get along?" Blackness can handle it and survive. Can art in America?



GLYDAH FISTS, TSE 2007