

DIVERSIFYING COLLECTIVE MEMORY

BY LAURENCE BUTET-ROCH

JALANI MORGAN'S WORK FILLS WOULD-BE HISTORICAL GAPS

Toronto-based Jalani Morgan photographs events and individuals that embody the spirit of the people-of-colour/Black community. As a Caribbean-Canadian, he wants to make sure that their realities are well represented for posterity.

“I’m not the expert of anything, except of my own experience,” cautions Jalani Morgan before being interviewed. “I’m not the voice of the Black community. I’m one storyteller amongst all those who need to be heard, spoken to, spoken about and seen.” The son of two Vincentians who immigrated to Canada in the 1970s, Morgan was one of a handful of children of colour attending the local primary school in Scarborough, where he grew up. At the time, he owned a point-and-shoot camera, a gift from his father. “In 6th grade, on multicultural day, I took this portrait of a West Indian classmate wearing what was her parents interpretation of some African country’s traditional wear. I guess I was already fascinated, though unknowingly, by the questions of how bodies, especially black bodies, are seen and represented,” he muses.

He continued to photograph his friends throughout his teens and early adulthood, as a way to memorialize their time together. “I had in mind the moments when you sit down with your

family and look at photo albums. Everyone around you is compelled to share stories. Through these, we remember the places where we lived and the people that we knew. We need to make sure that we document ourselves and our

lives because if we don’t do it, then who will?” says Morgan. What began has a hobby morphed into a commitment and, eventually, a career. In 2014, he quit his job at TD Bank’s collection department. “It got to a point where I couldn’t do it anymore. I was taking away from people, many of which, as far as I could tell, were from my community. I wanted to give, rather than take,” says the 23-year-old.

Since, he has dedicated his time to documenting big and small events that would otherwise go unnoticed or might be distorted, such as the Underground Freedom Train ride held in Toronto on August 1 to mark the day when slavery was outlawed in the British Empire. Though it has been taking place for the past four years, it



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is seldom spoken about—much like the actions of and people behind the Canadian chapter of Black Lives Matter. “The pictures of the movement we see in the media have a distance to them. Photographers are using zoom lenses to get close to the people rather than actually get closer. They act as observers, taking beautiful images, but they’re not getting into the community and building the intimacy required to communicate the spectrum of oppression people of colour face,” reflects Morgan. He approaches his role not as a journalist but as a historian who has the responsibility of broadening

the scope of what is included within our collective memory. “I just want there to be equitable grounds of representation, and that means creating work that’s currently missing from the photo world,” he adds.

For decades, after the advent of photography, the medium was used to create preposterous, degrading, dangerous “anthropological” portraits of people of colour. “It was used to dehumanize us, to create phrenological measurements and establish a dominance of one body type over the other,”

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reminds Morgan. “Though it has since evolved, most of the images of Black bodies shared in the media continue to reinforce today’s stereotypes. For instance, people of colour are often only seen in the sports and entertainment pages. Normalcy, daily life, mundane achievements, and the varied roles we take on are unaccounted for.”

To fill that gap, he’s also undertaken a project to make portraits of different members of his community. Activists, academics, artists, elders, leaders, thinkers and children of various racialized backgrounds are all treated with



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the respect they deserve and as whole, complex and nuanced beings. Applying terms such as “proud,” “grave” or “resilient” to describe the expressions he’s captured, though true, would be reductive. “I connect with the sitter by explaining the responsibilities we share. It’s important to remember that not everyone gets their portrait taken. In fact, it’s quite an unnatural thing to do. Especially when seen within a historical perspective. So, I let them know that by working together, we’re creating history. Hopefully this helps them understand that they are as much a part of this process as I am. I contribute great light and great composition; they bring the mood and the energy exuded,” spells out Morgan.

Not only does he recognize the agency those he photographs

have in determining the way they should be represented, he also gives them ownership over the outcome. “If you’re documenting the human condition, your love for it needs to be way higher than your love for photography. Too often, people are looking to get ‘The Shot.’ Once they get it, they move on,” he notes. “While making a great image matters to me, it matters significantly less than the community recognizing themselves in it.” It’s a lesson he tries to impart to the young photographers he mentors through community initiatives such as the Remix Project, LAMP and We Are Lawrence Avenue. Through giving back, Morgan contributes to building a next generation of photographers that is more diverse than the last, while also ensuring that fewer and fewer perspectives end up silenced. ■