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3 February, 2023

The Quiet Violence of Life in the Inner City

News channels constantly run stories about yet another murder in the inner city; but we only ever see the blood, gore, stealing, and other violent acts being reported. Photojournalist Joseph Rodriguez asks the question “why [must] one must always show violence and famine to be recognized as a photojournalist.” (Joseph Rodriguez, 208). In his photojournalism project “Gang Life in East L.A.”, Rodriguez attempts to show the “quiet violence” of gang life, particularly the part of gang life that the news does not report on. The effects of living in these environments are especially hard on children. Kids that are raised in these communities often have to grow up incredibly quickly. They are exposed to assault, murder, robberies, and other violent actions that rip them from their childhood innocence. Through his photography Rodriguez does a very good job representing the quiet violence that exists in these communities, how it tears families apart, and how the trauma that children are subjected to changes the course of their life forever.

Set #2 Picture 1 of Joseph Rodriguez’s photo collection “Gang Life in East L.A.” depicts a child in his living room sitting in front of his TV, holding what looks to be a submachine gun. Rodriguez adds further context to the image, stating that the picture was taken “five months after

being shot in his living room.” and that “The doctor said that he would be fine, but his grandmother noticed a change in his attitude” (J. Rodriguez, Set #2 Photo 2). Despite the context being very violent, the picture itself shows the effects that such a traumatic event has on a child in the long run. Anthony Bolin was forced to grow up too fast, and as a result feels that he needs to be familiar with a firearm to defend himself from another shooting. In a perfect society, no child would have to worry about being shot at, but we don't live in one. Bolin was shot in the head at five years old. That has horrible, scarring effects on both children and adults. That incident essentially yanked him out of his childhood and straight into the horrible-cruel world we live in. Richard Rodriguez makes the observation that “L.A., like Miami, has a better climate for child murder than New York or Chicago.” (R. Rodriguez 504-505). This observation seems to hold true throughout Joseph Rodriguez’s photography, as a lot of his photos depict the aftermath of children getting caught up in the violence that is so prevalent in inner city communities.

Set #8 Photo 2 of Joseph Rodriguez’s collection depicts a very young child holding a polaroid photo of his dad, who is incarcerated. Fathers going to jail leave single mothers to raise their children alone with no child support. In these communities, the children of incarcerated gang members are often looked after by members of their community, as oftentimes single mothers have to work as much as possible due to the lack of child support payments. He has probably only met his father in prison, which deprives him of a consistent father figure in his life. This leads to other, older men in their community taking on that role, which more often than not leads to them growing up with their role models being gang members. Young children who are raised in these environments are taught that the only way to protect themselves, their

families, and their community is by joining a gang. The cycle repeats as these kids grow up, have their own families, and then get incarcerated themselves.

Set #11 Photo 1 of Rodriguez's collection depicts a father teaching his three-year-old daughter how to hold a .32 caliber pistol, while her mother looks on. Rodriguez provides further context to the image, explaining how this took place "The morning after a rival gang tried to kill [the father] for the fourth time. This time they [shot] at his house and family." (J. Rodriguez, Set #11 Photo 1). This photo is very compelling, as the smiles on the faces of everyone in the picture are a sharp contrast to the situation this family is facing. The photo looks like it could be from a Christmas morning or a birthday party, where the child is playing with their new toys as their parents look on with smiling faces — but instead of toys, the child is holding a gun. The average person's initial response to this picture is that the parents are irresponsible for giving a weapon to their child. While that is true, the context that the family had been shot at makes the viewer think a bit more thoroughly about their situation. The police will not protect them, and they do not have the means to move away from these violent communities, so what can they do to keep themselves safe? Arming themselves and teaching their family how to defend themselves is the only way for a lot of people living in poverty in the inner city to have any sense of security or safety.

Joseph Rodriguez's photojournalism work succeeds in capturing the parts of gang life that are not shown to people by the media they consume. His focus on the people that live in these communities rather than the violence that is often shown on the news grants viewers with a new perspective that they may not have had before. His photos also draw parallels between the

lives of people living in these communities and the lives of middle and upper class people. This helps the viewer have empathy towards these people's living situation, rather than just clutching their pearls and scoffing at them. It is especially powerful that he showed just how much children suffer from a lack of security in their lives. It is an important perspective for people who do not live in the inner city and it helps them respect their fellow human beings more, especially if such privileged individuals have not gone through the struggles of inner city life.

Works Cited

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