

# AYANA V. JACKSON

10 On a trip in 2009 to Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires, and Lima, I gained insight into an area of interest that I had sporadically delved into in the past—the presence, or more appropriately, the lack of presence of people of African descent in the Americas. While Brazil has a more visible connection with many countries across Africa—as a result of varying degrees of economic and cultural exchange—in the rest of the Americas, the silence of the African presence is as resounding as the spectre of invisibility.

Ayana Jackson's photographs foreground some of the issues and themes which highlight this historical disconnection. Influenced by the discourse of Double Consciousness that promotes the idea of Black emancipation and self-articulation espoused by W.E.B. Du Bois, Jackson is also conversant with the notion of the Black Atlantic, put forth by British theorist Paul Gilroy, as a transnational concept which goes beyond specific ethnicities or geographical locations. Her documentary practice is part of a growing interest in exploring African identity beyond a centralized dialog that has, up to now, positioned African-American and Black British life as indicative of all African Diasporic experience. Through her images, Jackson not only asks questions about the social, economic, and political role Africans in the Americas play in their communities, in their society, and in the global African/Diaspora, but also the platforms available for engagement with their cultural heritage.

Jackson's work over the past decade has revolved around two primary themes of exploration. The first prioritizes the expansion of the African discourse outside of its current geographic and experiential boundaries. The other focal point attempts to deconstruct a static and derogative presentation of

Africa. In so doing she highlights the interconnectedness of shared experiences across music, fashion, as well as everyday realities. She demonstrates—by photographing in regions as diverse as South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, Colombia, Nicaragua, and Mexico—that in a global world, our contemporary conditions are, in effect, similar.

Within this context Jackson's critically acclaimed and ambitious photographic survey *African by Legacy Mexican by Birth* remains significant. The result of a three-year collaboration with writer Marco Villalobos, the series combines writing and photography to excavate the story of the 600,000 estimated Black Mexicans in the country today. This rich combination of text and image expands the potential of the photograph, especially in its use of portraiture as a framing device to record and document the African presence in Mexico. Jackson's use of portraiture is an appropriate genre successfully employed by her predecessors such as James Van Der Zee, Roy de Carava, and more recently Dawoud Bey, as well as early African photographers such as Seydou Keita and Okhai Ojeikere, who used the medium not only as a tool for self-representation, but also as a means to challenge social stereotypes. Jackson's work also enriches our knowledge of a historically alienated and invisible group within Mexican society. Her follow up series *Agua Dulce*, a similar investigation into Afro Colombia and Nicaragua, serves as a next chapter in this evolving research.

Jackson's series *Full Circle* explores the influence of Hip Hop—long considered a quintessential African American popular art form—and its manifestation in Ghana as Hip Life. While Hip Hop's roots are known to come from traditional African drumming and call and response performance, few studies have looked at the

genre beyond an American or Western discourse in which other "authentic" versions are considered derivative. In *Full Circle* Jackson focuses on the younger generation of musicians among whom she found less difference in dress, attitude, and musical style to the mainstream American versions. In this way, *Full Circle* goes beyond American boundaries to present the development of a global phenomenon that has given birth to a Ghanaian brand of music, fashion, and lifestyle in which local and global culture collide.

In her series *Commuter Vans and No Man's Land* and *Portrait of a New Guard*, created in South Africa and Kenya, respectively, Jackson continues to cross and blur boundaries whether cultural, geographic, or racial. Her work unequivocally engages a wider ideal, a different world, one which is aware of the resources at its disposal, in which mobility and a sense of interconnectedness contributes to another vision and narrative of Africa and its Diaspora. Jackson forms part of a generation of artists who own their stories, highlighting the complexity of the Diaspora, its history, and how it lives today.

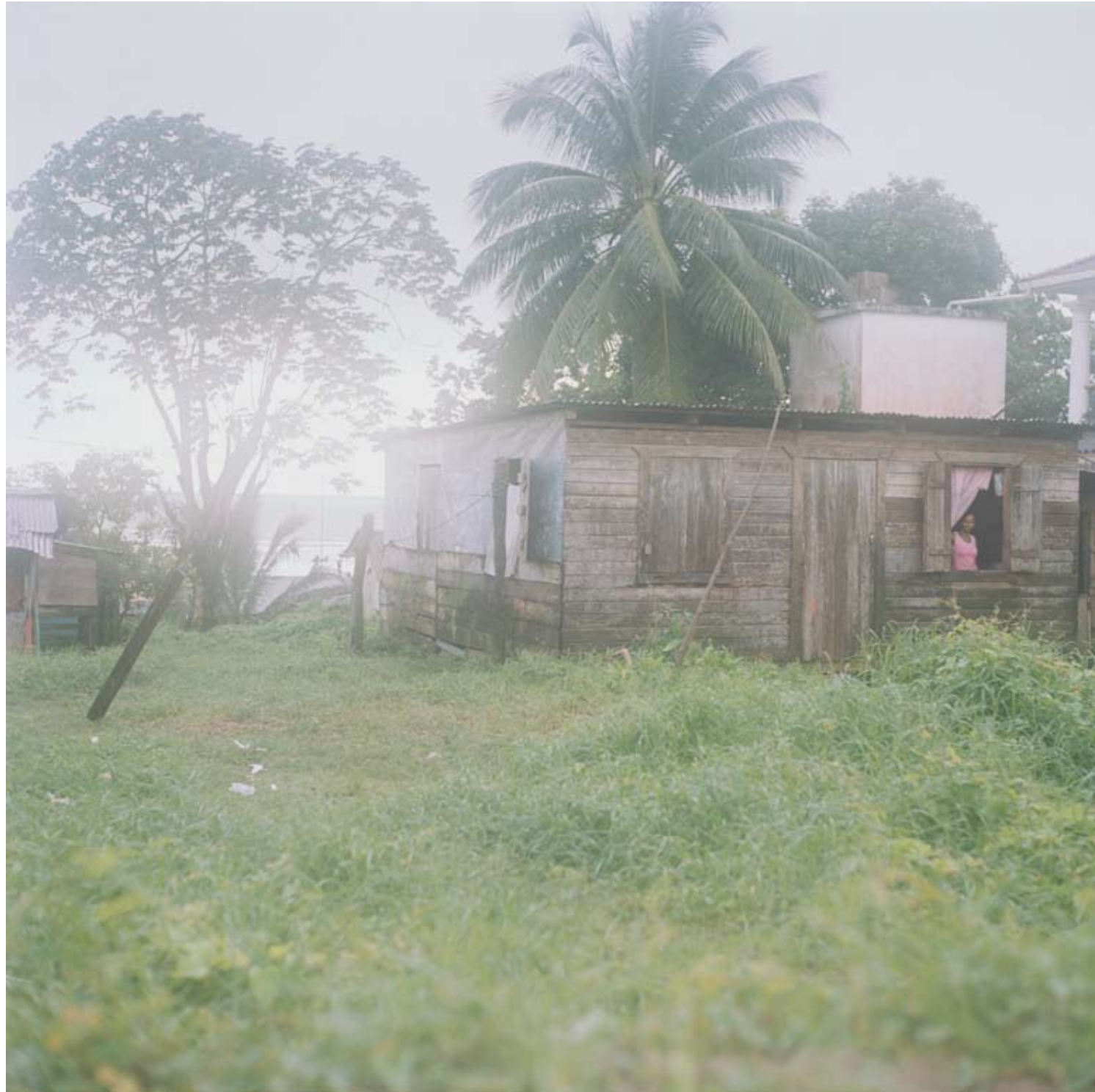
## **Bisi Silva**

*Ayana Jackson was a Light Work Artist-in-Residence in April 2010. For more information about Jackson and her work, please visit her website at [www.ajvphotography.com](http://www.ajvphotography.com).*

*Bisi Silva is an independent curator and founder/director of the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos, Nigeria.*



*Hei Ta, 2007*  
Pigmented inkjet print, 30 x 30"



*Aguadulce VII*, 2006  
Pigmented inkjet print, 30 x 30"



*Aguadulce I*, 2006  
Pigmented inkjet print, 30 x 30"



*Coyote*, 2008  
 Pigmented inkjet print, 30 x 30"



*Looking Glass VII*, 2007  
 Pigmented inkjet print, 30 x 30"