

BLACK OBLITERATION AROUND THE CORNER: THE GENTRIFICATION FILM

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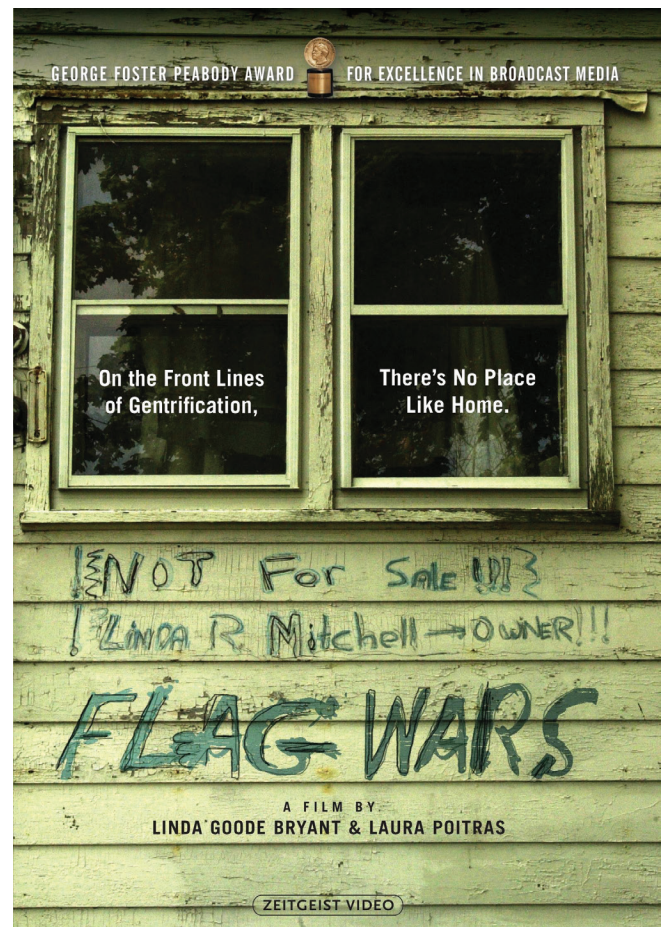
I moved to Columbus, Ohio, in 2003, the same year that *Flag Wars* was released. Laura Poitras and Linda Goode Bryant's well-received documentary depicts the conflicts that arose when (white) gay residents moved into an area in the city called Olde Towne East, displacing Black homeowners. *Flag Wars* featured white newcomers asserting that no one was willing to move to the neighborhood—when, in fact, Black people were already there. The new residents' disgruntlement with older African American homeowners unwilling to sell could make them seem quite unsympathetic, but they were also experiencing homophobia in the city—some of it from their new neighbors.

The presentation of this binary of competing interests between Black and queer folks was what made the film such a landmark in gentrification documentaries and a frequent pedagogical tool. But that framing may mask, as David K. Seitz has argued, how race, queerness, and class are all mutually constituted in neoliberal cities that strive for people to be “normal” in family structure and capital.¹

However, the scene that lingered most with me after watching *Flag Wars* was an elderly Black woman, Linda Mitchell, who was derided for being unable to financially or physically maintain her home. She was met not with help but with contempt. She reminded me of my grandmother, who was a bit of a pack rat with cherished family memorabilia and often struggled to find affordable, trustworthy people to do work on her home. Unlike my grandmother, Mitchell had substance-abuse issues, and she had no children to help support her. Film critic Ty Burr suggested at the time that her challenges made Mitchell unrepresentative, but I think that, but for the vagaries of fate, my grandmother could have been her—vulnerable to a city infrastructure that

care little for her history or family memories, interpreting her reticence and wry humor when she was threatened with displacement as incompetent obstinance.²

However, I agree with Burr that this film does not always provide needed context. In contrast to common-sense interpretations of what this kind of documentary does, Poitras and Bryant's cinema verité approach actually renders some of these people unknowable. Poitras said in an interview that she makes verité documentaries “because they are able to capture and reveal human struggles and



Laura Poitras and Linda Goode Bryant's *Flag Wars*, a landmark in gentrification documentaries.

Courtesy of Praxis Films.

Film Quarterly, Vol. 75, No. 1, pp. 79–83. ISSN: 0015-1386 electronic ISSN: 1533-8630 © 2021 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions>. DOI: 10.1525/FQ.2021.75.1.79

dramas as they unfold in the moment.”³ A possible consequence of this approach is that the dense histories that led to this moment, space, and conflict can remain opaque.

The verité approach nonetheless has many virtues, as do the foci of increasingly common gentrification documentaries. The twenty-first century has seen a bumper crop of these films. As gentrification priced out many people who grew up in cities, not to mention those who dream of moving to them, works such as *Whose Barrio?* (Ray Santisteban, 2008), *Gut Renovation* (Su Friedrich, 2012), *Right to Wynwood* (Camila Alvarez and Natalie Edgar, 2013), *Class Divide* (Marc Levin, 2015), *Battle of Soho* (Aro Korol, 2017), *San Francisco 2.0* (Alexandra Pelosi, 2015), *Welcome to the Neighborhood* (Pam Uzzell, 2018), *Frenchtown Rising* (Char’nell Jackson, 2019), and *On the Brink* (Steven Fong and Jeff Shulman, 2019) have highlighted not only displacement but the effects arising from class disparities that have become hypervisible with the proximity of new, affluent residents.

In fictional films, however, gentrification has been a new iteration of what Paula Massood has characterized as

“Black city cinema”—films in which migration and “visual and aural iconography” play a role in defining Black bodies in city spaces.⁴ Some comedies have taken a lighter approach to gentrification, depicting a community that successfully thwarts a developer’s plan to destroy a beloved property or neighborhood. This category includes films such as *Breakin 2: Electric Boogaloo* (Sam Firstenberg, 1984), *Who’s the Man?* (Ted Demme, 1993), and *Barbershop 2: Back in Business* (Kevin Rodney Sullivan, 2004). Subtlety is not a goal of these films: more recently, the horror comedy *Vampires vs. the Bronx* (Oz Rodriguez, 2021) depicts white gentrifiers as literal bloodsuckers.

Aspects of the ephemerality and ambivalence arising from displacement produced by gentrification, while absent in documentaries like *Flag Wars*, is perhaps best exhibited by two recent fictional films: *The Last Black Man in San Francisco* (Joe Talbot, 2019) and *Residue* (Merawi Gerima, 2020). These elegiac works explore how gentrification eliminates spaces for Black men to inhabit.

Both films are based on real experiences. *Last Black Man* director Joe Talbot collaborated with childhood friend



Mont (Jonathan Majors) and Jimmie (Jimmie Fails) share a profound intimacy in *The Last Black Man in San Francisco*.

Courtesy of A24.

Jimmie Falls to tell a story inspired by Falls's own experience of losing his childhood home and becoming homeless in San Francisco. Merawi Gerima's *Residue* was inspired by his return to his Washington, DC, neighborhood, Eckington, after film school and being taken aback by the gentrification under way. Gerima's search for a childhood companion forms the narrative thread of the film, as Jay, his fictive double, looks for a friend named Demetrius and constantly encounters Black men lost to incarceration or violence, or just lost.

It is not as if the city, or any location in the United States, has ever been a cradle of safety or care for African American men. The Great Migration saw massive numbers of Black people relocate to northern cities seeking better options than those on offer in the Jim Crow South, but the city has always been a perilous space for Black bodies. In both films, the sense that there is nowhere to go informs an ambivalence about "home." Jay's parents argue about moving, his father evokes War's "The World Is a Ghetto," and early in *Residue*, a voice-over asks Jay why he is coming back to "this place" since he hates it. In *Last Black Man* Jimmie tells a white woman complaining about San Francisco that "you don't get to hate San Francisco unless you love it." The protagonists in these films are torn between rejection and attachment, rooted in memory and mourning for what has been lost; the films try to capture that affect.

Such in-betweenness hinges on negotiating the vulnerability of Black male bodies in the city—the threats to them as well as their struggle to be vulnerable with each other. The profound intimacy between Jimmie and Mont (Jonathan Majors) in *Last Black Man* is the emotional core of the film. Their sexuality is undefined, but "bromance" is too light a term for two men who hold each other's dreams as close as if they were their own. They are men who seem unhampered by what Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson describe as a "cool pose," a "ritualized form of masculinity" that performs "pride, strength, and control."⁵

As a Black city film, the soundtrack is essential—but in *Last Black Man*, an incongruity in music choices gives a sense of place and characterization. In addition to Emile Mosseri's magisterial, woodwind-heavy score that frames Jimmie as a "deposed prince," one of the most memorably sonic moments in the film is Mike Marshall's soulful cover of "San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair)." There, for the first time, listeners might imagine that Black men are the ones referred to when they hear the lyric that "you're gonna meet some gentle people there."⁶

Jimmie and Mont can be open to each other, and in Mont's case, he can be vulnerable with his grandfather and

in his art. This is not the case for their childhood friend Kofi (Jamal Trulove), who bullies in order to ward off accusations that he is weak or effeminate. Kofi is killed, and Mont decides to write a play to reflect on his death. What put Kofi at risk is something related to their own vulnerability as well: that there are few spaces for Black men to express or fulfill their desires.

Residue is also about intimacy between Black men. Jay (Obinna Nwachukwu) does not have it in the present, but he remembers connections and longs to forge them again. Stock documentary footage and scenes of Jay and Demetrius (Julian Selman) as children are interspersed throughout the contemporary plot. The film focuses predominantly on encounters between Jay and other Black men. He sees men from his childhood sitting on the stoop, recently released from prison, or currently incarcerated, and skeptical of his desire to make a film about the neighborhood and "give a voice to the voiceless." The performance of the cool pose is omnipresent here, as the characters—mostly non-actors—talk about drug addiction, violence, incarceration, and death with a coolness that registers the everyday but not the trauma of it.

At one point, Jay goes to see a childhood friend, Dion (Jamal Graham), who was like an older brother to him and is incarcerated. What begins as a prison scene suddenly shifts to the two having their conversation in the woods. Green leaves become the backdrop instead of a dimly lit visitation room. Gerima's shift to magical realism signifies what realism cannot make available to either the characters or the audience. They see themselves wrestling as children and then they are grappling as adults. The imagined touch produces tears back in the real world of the prison. They mourn together, but Dion's vulnerability is quickly masked by a cool pose again.

In *Last Black Man*, Jimmie also seems to find respite in nature: he escapes the city by rowing a boat and heading for ports unknown. His departure from the city and Jay's phantasmagoric space of connection in the forest seem to suggest a different migration for Black people: that spaces outside of the city offer possibilities the urban may not. The film ends with Jay running, captured on camera after committing an act of violence, and new white neighbors narrating how to frame the event. White faces are never clearly visible in the film. Gerima stated that this was a byproduct of casting limitations. However, this framing aesthetic became a thematic virtue, signifying an interchangeable, invasive presence of residents whose desire is to erase and control.⁷

A white woman tells a male companion that the neighborhood has been "cleaned up" and so does not see much



Merawi Gerima directing Obinna Nwachukwu in *Residue*.

Courtesy of ARRAY.

violence anymore. It used to be called Eckington, she tells him, but now it is called NoMa. Both the eradication of the Black neighborhood's name and the description of it as being clean are codes signaling the erasure of Black residents.

Director Merawi Gerima sees *Residue* as a “weapon” against gentrification.⁸ The idea that art functions in this way is challenged in both films, but nonetheless, *Residue* and *Last Black Man* embrace Black male artistry as a counter to gentrification. In *Last Black Man*, Mont's play counters simplistic narratives about Black men who are discarded in the city, while Jimmie's artistry is expressed through the craftsmanship and creativity he employs in the care of the family house. The film also embraces a very warm, stylized color palette to emphasize the beauty of Black men on the city streets, a counter-aesthetic to representations of Black men as threats. Talbot's film is ultimately a sentimental one—in the best sense of the term. The excesses and the nostalgia

crafted by the film make intimacy between Black men in the city an ideal, and the loss of it something to mourn.

Residue's primary weapon is Gerima's creation of an archive, radically reframing the oral and visual iconography of the Black city film, from popular music to the urban style aesthetic and many other signifiers of everyday Black life. Street parties, little girls with Afro puffs, sparklers, night sounds, and childhood play depict the intimacy of the community, and these representations and sounds bleed into gunshots and images of Black boys and men surveilled and confined by police. Part of the community's closeness is forged by this trauma. Jay is constantly negotiating the hazy relationship between the present, past, and possible future through a sensory memory—dreams and memories that Gerima depicts with a blur effect—that is essential to uncovering where Demetrius has gone. Memory seems to hold the key to the mystery for him, despite tremendous gaps in time and life paths. Alas, it is an illusory

logic, because where they have been together in the past says nothing about the present. That is the harm of gentrification's erasures, a process that lacks care for individual and collective history. Messy memory comes to characterize Jay's attempts to deal affectively with his present, just as Gerima constructs an archive of affective messiness with *Residue* itself.

Gentrification in cities like San Francisco and Washington, DC, is unlikely to be undone. but the pasts it has overtaken also contained harms. Most gentrification films—documentary and fictional—have knowledge of these harms at their center. Neighborhoods that are being obliterated hold traumatic histories as well as joys. Much in the news in 2020 and 2021, the housing crisis is understood as one in which Black men, in particular, face increased vulnerability. These films not only emphasize the standard narratives of threats to Black manhood, like the prison industrial complex and death. Gerima and Talbot draw viewers' attention further, to lost Black male intimacy and creativity. These films understand that the eradication of neighborhood spaces is an assault on friendship and on the dreams crafted through community bonds.

Notes

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3. "Filmmaker Interview," interview with Linda Goode Bryant and Laura Poitras, POV, n.d., <http://archive.pov.org/flagwars/interview/>.
4. Paula J. Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 1.
5. Richard Major and Janet Mancini Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemma of Black Manhood in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 4.
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7. Juliana Ukiomogbe, "Merawi Gerima on His Film *Residue*, an Ode to His Vanishing City," *Interview*, October 2, 2020, www.interviewmagazine.com/film/merawi-gerima-on-his-film-residue-an-ode-to-his-vanishing-city.
8. Nick Vivarelli, "Director Merawi Gerima on 'Residue' as a Weapon for Black People's Rights," *Variety*, September 12, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/film/news/merawi-gerima-on-residue-as-a-weapon-in-battle-for-black-peoples-rights-1234766535/>.