

Gentrification Nation, Displacement, and Ownership

What *'The Last Black Man in San Francisco'* tells us about larger changes in our Cities

Joseph Andrews | @joeandrews2009@aol.co.uk | November 11th, 2019

'The Last Black Man in San Francisco' tells the story of a San Francisco native called Jimmie Fails, who, alongside the loyal companionship of his aspiring writer friend, Mont, attempts to reclaim his grandfather's house from the 1940's.



www.essence.com

The narrative alludes to the idea that you cannot tell the story of larger change without uncovering the individual struggles felt, and

simultaneously, the personal account aims to lift your gaze towards the bigger picture.

Superseding the stunning cinematography, the film unveils social changes occurring in San Francisco; a transition in social class is on route to displace the indigenous residents, welcoming workers for the growing tech industry from far and wide.

Jimmie has a humbling and righteous temperament. His red flannel shirt is a constant throughout, almost as a material manifestation of his undiluted nostalgia. Alongside Mont, they make a powerful duo to connote their dim-lit future in San Francisco.



www.vox.com

The essence of San Francisco is drastically changing, something Jimmie Fails, and Joe Talbot captured 'to a T', with the two friends roaming the city on a skateboard, lugging the existential anxieties they face as they plot their future.

Contextualising the tensions

San Francisco's booming tech sector is no news. New industries bring new populations, morphing the order and structure of things.

They certainly bring progressions, but these are not always without consequence.

The perpetual momentum of the local economy and the repercussions for native populations are accountable for this jaded atmosphere.

As places become economic hubs, housing prices rocket, perpetuating a tricky predicament for less economically able residence.

The necessity of the nomadic approach towards life by Jimmie and his close friend Mont mutters contempt towards these feelings of displacement.

The film criticises the new ambiance, which is sweeping over the city, tailgating new migrators down the steep slopes of the city.

This boisterous temperament of new residents is quickly eroding the tolerant cultural fabric which is so embedded in the city's character.

This friction is evidenced when loud tram passengers point and laugh at a nude man at a bus stop alongside Jamie.

This juxtaposition between openness and ignorance welcomes the viewer's understanding of tensions between new and old residents, pretty much justifying any pessimism felt.

For those film fanatics, the theme of displacement resonates with the narrative of *'Blindspotting'*, another racially orientated film about native displacement.

It follows a narrative I like to think occurs in the same universe; it follows Oklahoma locals as they bear the weight of prejudice and judgement, becoming outsider in their own town. I urge you to get in the know with both films if you haven't already.

Creative Class Backlash

Richard Florida is an economist and theorist who first conceptualised the *'Creative Class'*.

Florida claimed that by branding a place as tolerant and welcoming to diversity, it would be rewarded through an organic in-migration of creatives and entrepreneurs who would stimulate economic growth, thus transforming local economies.

Well, San Francisco was already ahead of the curve as it has a strong reputation of acceptance and tolerance.

As with most wishful predictions, theory does not always equate with practice.

An unprecedented outcome is that this theory primarily concerns middle and upper-class demographics who can afford to setup high-brow establishments and independent businesses.

The detriment to a city is that not only does it unload some of its authenticity as it strides for economic growth, but it also alienates poorer demographics, forcing them out of increasingly expensive areas.



Spoiler alert

The film concludes as Jamie is made aware that his Grandad's house, despite tireless attempts to reclaim, was never built by his Grandad and was never his for the taking.

I see this as a metaphor, solemnly sharing the truth that San Francisco was never really his, along with so many others who grew with the city and were shaped and formed by it.

As Jamie and Mont are left behind, questions about *progressions* that cities undergo are urged to circulate your mind...

What impacts do they have?

Who progresses?

Who is left behind the cultural, social and economic evolution?

The disheartening realisation is that Jimmie's identity has his city at its core, whereas San Francisco, along with so many other cities all over the world, is moving on and is not reciprocal of this attachment.