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Book review: chocolate city: documentary film

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Book review

Walton, Ellie and Sam Wild (2007) 'Chocolate City'. Documentary film.

Melissa Fernandez

Introduction

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Ellie Walton is from Washington DC and has a background in radio journalism. She has recently completed an MA in Screen Documentary at the University of London and is currently working on a documentary project based on several UK prisons.

Sam Wild is from London and has a background in print journalism (The Times and The Independent). He has recently completed an MA in Screen Documentary at the University of London and a film for the WWF (Switzerland). He is currently finishing a film about wolves in Ticino.

Review

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The city of Washington D.C. is often imagined through its visually emblematic White House. '*Chocolate City*' effectively reveals how the partiality of that vision is produced through the systemic marginalization of its majority black citizens, as well as its Latino immigrant populations. The documentary tells the story of one of the city's regeneration schemes through the plural voices of those most impacted by the financial fancy of real estate: the displaced citizens of a low-income public housing estate and a neighborhood called Arthur Capper. Without making any explicit reference to the way gender, race and class intersect in the creation of social activism and resistance, this representation displays women as the central and assertive denouncers of injustice. Like a growing number of critical urban work fashioned through the Chicago school's community-focused interest, it documents the intersections of inner-city poverty and mobility; but, by situating this larger dilemma within the particularities of one case study, the field of artistic production (such as play-writing and slam poetry) uniquely emerges as a powerful sphere of activism in its organizing and transformational capacity. And, by regularly juxtaposing the landscapes of bureaucracy and poverty, the impact of the currents of 'development' on the daily life and struggles of some low-income city residents becomes palpable.

One of the greatest and most relevant ironies of '*Chocolate City*' has to do with the undemocratic manifestations of power in the center of what is proclaimed as the bedrock of democracy - the American political machine. Right behind the historical monuments, "in your bureaucratic backyard", forced displacement is part and parcel of the Federal Housing and Urban Development Agency's (HUD) Hope VI program. This initiative, which demolishes public housing projects seen as 'in distress' and rebuilds 'mixed income' properties in its place, has been seen as a partner of growing gentrification processes. As legacies of previous urban renewal programs, they push out poor sectors of inner cities now widely associated and perceived as causes of poverty, joblessness, crime, and other social pathologies. This is further combined with a voracious housing market that seeks to create spaces for new development, both commercial and housing alike. The desire is to attract middle and upper class segments to working class or poor urban neighborhoods. Although the multifarious impact of these processes on the urban poor has been widely debated in academic circles, '*Chocolate City*' engages only with those questions that address the changes, feelings, and reactions of relocation from the perspective of long-time residents affected by such mechanisms. In taking this more personalized approach, the complex issues of the lived day to day reality that result from underlying economic forces take center stage.

In revealing “the hopelessness of Hope VI”, the black residents of Arthur Capper understand that, ultimately, it is an economic logic that guides their destiny, effectively subsuming an interest in ‘the bottom line’ under the rubric of a diverse and ‘mixed-income’ community. Feeling that their neighborhood has, in effect, been taken for money, this vision is reinforced by some of *Chocolate City’s* shots. They include: displays of corporate promotion on demolishing cranes and other construction equipment, advertisements of ‘1.8. million dollar lofts’ and short verbal interjections by real estate agents and developers who reveal their interest in catering to a particular and new kind of clientele/audience. The latter are believed to hold the power to resurrect, with new life, a perceived dead city space. This not only belies the history and present life that inculcates those areas, but it also erases the diversity and multiplicity of its inhabitants. It is further complicated by the fact that the city of Washington D.C. is not, legally speaking, a city of its own and thus not subject to the same kinds of protocol and mechanisms required of cities by HUD. Again, through visual perspectives of the white cityscape, the viewer captures the implications of this reality- where the stronghold of the U.S. Congress is not only explained, but implied through its infrastructural grandiosity vis-à-vis the smaller, more worn out edifications of the urban poor. This counter-positioning renders poor, dark bodies invisible.

An important aspect addressed by the documentary had to do with the connections between the African American and immigrant plights of the city. Rather than giving a straightforward account of unity and solidarity, it offers a more nuanced exploration of how both legal and illegal immigration is sometimes seen by African American communities as a competing group, described through similar expressions as those used to slur their own image. Thus, the film impels its participants and viewers to make connections between ‘the nation of immigrants’ and poor urban Blacks’ problems in order to take pertinent action simultaneously. However, in trying to make an important call for action through consciousness-raising, I believe *Chocolate City* leaves out a significant strand of thinking which does not believe in one unitary black political agenda. Mary Patillo’s *Black on the Block*, for example, gives a more nuanced understanding of racial differentiation, suggesting that class categories inform the realm of lifestyle in an interracial fashion that transcends economic trends. Her account of urban history, power and politics sees ‘blackness as a collective endeavor’ but suffused with racial *and* class tensions (Patillo, 2007: 17).

In looking at cities’ histories, Witold Rybczynski has said, “If getting somewhere is as important as being somewhere, then mobility affects our very sense of place.” A common theme of the film is the inherent loss of uprootedness. It presents the residents’ pain when looking at or talking about demolition and physical displacement. Their stories are meant to demonstrate the precarious nature of their situation and the weakness of public housing residents in comparison to the economic power of determinations of the private housing market. By sidetracking these individuals’ lives, the pervasive fear they feel in loss of community is not widely debated. The detrimental health consequences resulting from a sudden lack of social networks cannot be bought nor sold. Of all the damage brought on by these processes, it is the demise of communal ties which figures as the most painful and injurious of all.

It is in this context that a woman activist- playwright’s work is presented as a strong political alternative, bringing not only her community work into focus, but also her own personal views and transformation, through contact with the neighborhood. Her efforts with both adults and children through artistic representations and pedagogical activities offer a way by which to create desired social networks despite enforced physical dispersal. Art is presented as a new organizing medium for residents to powerfully engage in space, rather than through the typical housing-administrative mediation. Her improvisations and staged acts confront the multiple voices, opinions and conflicts that can occur between the displaced residents themselves. It gives voice to those who have been shrunk and overwhelmed by the power of bureaucracy and its set-format meetings. And, it incorporates the transformational role of children as child activists that can use new methods in claiming their own rights through a more highly developed social consciousness. And, finally, it gives all of those involved the tools with which to stretch their cause and engage with transnational efforts such as the poor people’s economic human rights campaign.

Beyond the message the explicitly given of the potential inherent to artistic production in seemingly protracted battles, a second, underlying theme was silently claiming the power of its own medium; that is, the documentary video production and multimedia engagement. Radio transmission frequently entered the film through voice-overs, individual or group activism, or simply through music. *Chocolate City*, from beginning to end, gives what is felt as an accessible account of networking within and across communities through various technologies that enable the opening up of spaces of unification and resistance. Thus, against the official descriptions of regeneration or the reports of displacement which render it permanent, what this documentary ultimately does is present a vision of political continuity beyond physical destruction. In face of the urban street spoken word that pronounces, “less and less people of color and more Starbucks”, the film shows how particular forms of organization can actually bring together more and more people of color (and Hispanic immigrants) despite the Starbucks.

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