

Produced by Plan B Entertainment and distributed by A24, *The Last Black Man in San Francisco* has received an astonishing amount of press since its debut at Sundance earlier this year. Hailed by critics as a “love letter to San Francisco,” “an indelibly beautiful story of love, family and loss,” and “a tribute to the notion of home that we all carry,” what can be gleaned from the exuberant praise and Hollywood platitudes is that the film is also informed, loosely or otherwise, by San Francisco’s rapid gentrification. However, as others have noted (the filmmakers included), *Last Black Man* does not take on this complex subject with rigor. The social, political, and economic conditions of the city, both present and historical, are not scrutinized as much as aestheticized, mythologized, and presented through the whimsical filter of a now-familiar variety of independent cinema.

Loosely based on the real-life story of San Francisco native Jimmie Fails, who plays himself as the protagonist, the film follows Jimmie and his best friend Montgomery (Jonathan Majors) as they endeavor to restore and reclaim Jimmie’s childhood Victorian home in the Fillmore district. Inarguably beautiful, the film is slow-moving—at times, surreal; at other times, banal. Whether skateboarding from Oakland to San Francisco or perpetually waiting for a bus that never arrives, Jimmie and Mont’s experiences are characterized by a kind of peripatetic impermanence. This is further amplified by a narrative that does not follow a linear plotline but unfolds through a series of meandering and melancholic moments. Even after the two have finally found a way to occupy Jimmie’s exquisite old house (thanks to the white residents’ loss of title in a family-inheritance dispute), we are held in a state of simultaneous unease and sedation. These emotional effects are largely achieved through Emile Mosseri’s swelling soundtrack, Adam Newport-Berra’s wistful cinematography, which soaks in the radiant light and texture of the cityscape like a sponge, and Fails’s painfully restrained yet moving performance. In many ways, director Joe Talbot has composed a moving cinematic correlation for the often-dissociative effects of loss and displacement, but against a socially-minded narrative which will not likely inspire viewers to question, nor act on, the graver structural inequalities tied to gentrification’s causes or consequences.

Instead, Talbot’s allegorical style of storytelling gives rise to something meaningful and compelling, employing literary and philosophical frameworks to advance more nuanced representations of Black identity. At its best, *The Last Black Man in San Francisco*, alongside recent films such as *Sorry to Bother You* and *Get Out*, offer cinematic elaborations on ideas of “double consciousness”—what W.E.B. Du Bois described as the alienating experience of seeing oneself through the eyes of another, specifically as a Black man in a white-dominated society. This is illustrated in the eccentric persona of Mont, a soft-spoken poet and artist who works as a fishmonger but spends much of his time writing a play eponymously titled *The Last Black Man in San Francisco*. In one scene, after observing a particularly belligerent interaction between a local group of men posted outside his grandfather’s Hunter’s Point home where he and Jimmie live, he interrupts their aggressions to deconstruct their posturing as if directing actors on stage. Later, we find him in front of a mirror perfectly emulating the hostile speech and cadence of the group—a character study for his play but also a striking meta-performance of the physical subtleties of code-switching.

This omnipresent clique of stereotypical “gangstas” is Talbot’s interpretation of a Greek Chorus, except rather than narrating the story, they incessantly insult the film’s protagonists and test one another’s masculinity. Halfway through the film, the recurring banter of the group registers almost musically, evoking a similar Greek Chorus found in Spike Lee’s 1989 joint *Do the Right Thing*, but reads differently against the dreamy, unpopulated Oakland street scene that Talbot confects, a bereft backdrop resembling the set of *Waiting for Godot*. Jimmie and Mont’s exchanges with the street chorus escalate throughout the film and easily provide its most poignant moments. When the crew member and mutual friend Kofi (Jamal Trulove) is shot, Jimmie confronts the group, blaming them for his death.

A brawl seems imminent when Jimmie and Stunna (Jordan Gomes) face off, but after a tense and prolonged silence, Stunna bursts into tears and the two men quietly embrace. Here, Black masculinity manifests in a profound kind of tenderness.

When we discover near the end of the film that Jimmie has fabricated his story's most affecting claim—that his grandfather single-handedly purchased and rebuilt the Victorian home after the previous Japanese owners were interned during World War II—viewers may feel somehow betrayed, both by their own willingness to believe the somewhat dubious narrative but also because they are robbed of the privilege and right to ownership imbued into Jimmie's character. In this sense, Jimmie's myth reveals much about certain liberal-leaning spectators whose own culpability in the conditions of gentrification and urban displacement are momentarily ameliorated in his tragic but feel-good story.

Inextricably bound to suffering and loss, Jimmie's invention (a product of his struggle with homelessness) prompts the film's principal maxim, which he pronounces flatly: "People aren't one thing." While *The Last Black Man in San Francisco* does well to underscore multiplicities within Black identity, Jimmie's statement also resonates because it signals his own transformation within the film. When it becomes clear that Jimmie's idealized past will never be recovered, we are reminded that notions of self are not bound to fixed origins or absolute histories. Identity is instead a mutable formation, what Stuart Hall once identified as a "production" that is "always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation."

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