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DE-GENTRIFYING DOCUMENTARY & ETHNOGRAPHIC CINEMAS: DISPLACEMENT OF COMMUNITY- BASED STORYTELLING IN SAN FRANCISCO'S MISSION DISTRICT

"Animals, as they pass through the landscape, leave their tracks behind. Stories are the tracks we leave" – Salman Rushdie (2002)

MISSION MOVIE – THE EPHEMERAL FILM

This essay is about a film that you will most likely never see. Released in 2004, *Mission Movie/Una Película de la Misión*^[1] is - or perhaps was - a bilingual (English and Spanish) docudrama set in the rapidly gentrifying Mission District of San Francisco in the early 2000s, as Silicon Valley began to resurge following a brief economic crash. While transnational capital and investment poured into the San Francisco Bay Area, the Mission District, at that time home to largely working-class immigrant families, became ground zero for displacement and gentrification. The film's tagline pays homage to the cultural and ethnic diversity that made this neighborhood unique and eclectic: "74,643 Residents, 196 Nationalities; 2 Square Miles; One Movie!" The idea of *Mission Movie* was conceived by Lise Swenson, a longtime Mission-based visual artist, activist and

filmmaker. In June of 2002, Swenson brought together a diverse group of nine local artists and filmmakers to figure out how to tell the story of this rapidly changing neighborhood where we all lived and worked. At the age of 21, I was the youngest member of the group. Over the two years that followed, we developed a community-based storytelling model where we worked tirelessly with residents across the district to research, conceptualize, script, cast, shoot, edit and premiere *Mission Movie* in the Mission.

These days, media accounts of entitled yuppies paying exorbitant rents, feuding with local kids over reserving playgrounds and eating outrageously priced artisanal toasts have come to characterize San Francisco and the Mission as a poster-child of capitalistic greed and neoliberalism run amok. Yet few are familiar with the story of how the neighborhood and the city went from being a sanctuary for society's outcasts – hippies, queers, radicals, hipsters and artists (myself included) – to being overrun by tech bros and Silicon Valley millionaires over the last twenty years. The change was sudden and drastic. The second tech boom ushered in a city-wide gentrification and displacement initiatives, of which working-class immigrant families and independent artists like us were the first casualties. What happened to the immigrant, queer and artist communities that once infused the Mission with its character? How did they try to resist this tide of gentrification and evictions that has yet to recede? What happened to their life stories and the “tracks they left behind” after they were displaced?

By revisiting the making and displacing of *Mission Movie*, this essay explores the implication of such gentrifications beyond their physical manifestations, to consider the displacement of artistic traditions and stories of underrepresented minority and immigrant communities like those who once called the Mission their home. As the tragic tale of *Mission Movie* demonstrates, our stories are just as susceptible to displacement, ephemerality and erasure as the lives they narrate. The goal of this essay is to consider the gentrification of community-based, independently-produced films, including documentary and ethnographic cinema, and to compel us to think about what it would take to de-gentrify our stories, histories and communities as we imagine more egalitarian and equitable cities.





MAKING MISSION MOVIE

Sharing Swenson's love and enthusiasm for the neighborhood we called home, as a collective of San Francisco-based artists and filmmakers, we started meeting bi-weekly to conceive and execute the ambitious idea of making *Mission Movie*. From the beginning, our goal was to document and highlight stories of resistance in a place undergoing rapid transition. We wanted to draw attention to the gentrification occurring in the Mission and across San Francisco, along with the plight of the families succumbing to evictions and the growing shortage of affordable housing. Gentrification and evictions are the most visible signs of the otherwise obscured workings of

neoliberalism, globalization and transnational capitalism that have become a prominent feature of urban living across this nation over the last three decades.^[2]

As an undergraduate student at San Francisco State University studying visual anthropology and documentary film, being part of this project allowed me the opportunity to put the theories and methods I was learning into practice. Blending techniques and approaches from “ethnofiction,” “improvised fiction” and “collaborative filmmaking,” established by pioneering visual anthropologists like Jean Rouch,^[3] Sarah Elder (1995) and others, we set out to collect ethnographic accounts of daily life in the Mission. We spent a year conducting fieldwork, during which we conducted over a hundred semi-structured interviews with everyone from longtime residents to newly arrived immigrants, from anti-eviction activists to local artists and muralists, and from small business owners to the general manager of the first Starbucks to open in the Mission. We collected hours upon hours of oral histories (recorded, logged, transcribed) to draw from for our project. We also combed through the historical archives and interviewed historians who had witnessed the Mission go from being home to largely Irish, German and Polish immigrants to being dominated by Central and South American immigrants after the Second World War. Using the stories and histories we gathered over that year, we authored a script that became the foundation of *Mission Movie*. The decision to make a feature film, rather than create a gallery exhibition, publish our research in the form of a book or even make a traditional documentary, was motivated by the desire to make the final outcome of this project as widely and publicly accessible as possible, particularly to those who shared their stories with our team.

From its conception to its completion, nearly 200 residents of the city were involved in making *Mission Movie*, most of whom had volunteered their time and labor to see this ambitious project come to fruition. To ensure that we represented diverse points of view as accurately as possible, we formed a “Community Advisory Group” (CAG) comprised of longtime activists, leaders, community organizers, artists and historians who served as liaisons between the core filmmaking team and the various groups and ethnic communities living in the Mission. Members of the CAG diligently worked with us to facilitate introductions with our interlocutors and gave feedback at each step of the project: research, scriptwriting, production and post-production. Financed largely through local fundraisers, individual donations and in-kind contributions, we filmed *Mission Movie* in the summer of 2003 with a cast and crew that largely comprised artists and filmmakers from the Mission and San Francisco with a shared passion for community-based storytelling.

During production, we took on roles we had never undertaken previously. I volunteered to be in charge of casting, costuming, line-production, crowd-control, publicity and occasionally looking after toddlers and pets that belonged to other members of the cast and crew while the cameras rolled. Others also stepped in to perform tasks that pushed us beyond our comfort zone and come up with solutions to problems we had never confronted before. While casting the film, I auditioned seasoned actors alongside novices, ultimately assembling a cast largely made up of local actors and non-actors that either lived in the Mission or had some personal relationship to this place. For instance, the role of a Latinx muralist named Roger is played by a second-generation El Salvadorian artist, Ben Rojas, who grew up in the Mission. The role of a disgruntled Palestinian storeowner was played by a Lebanese cook and caterer based in the Mission. Similarly, two of the four young Latinx kids who go on a rampage to destroy the work of a white muralist grew up blocks from the set of the film in challenging economic circumstances, with parents who either ignored their responsibilities or were absent entirely from their lives. In these ways, making *Mission Movie* was, for the most part, a labor of love. For anyone who came into contact with what we affectionately referred to as the “*Mission Movie* Beast,” it was difficult to remain immune to the infectious energy this project embodied; to not succumb to the pride and joy we all felt about being part of this wonderful experiment in community-based storytelling.

The outcome of our two years of hard work was a quirky bilingual docudrama with an ensemble cast that centers around Clarion Alley, located in the heart of the Mission

(between Valencia and Mission Streets), known for vibrant and colorful murals made by mostly San Francisco-based Latinx artists. Tensions flare when the neighborhood kids take to repeatedly vandalizing the mural of a newly-commissioned artist named Mark, who is white and grew up admiring the artists of color featured in the alley. To put an end to the vandalism, Mark must solicit the help of Roger, a more established homegrown Latinx artist, who also harbors a resentment towards Mark for being an outsider.

This struggle over who gets to dictate public forms of artistic expressions in a racially-diverse, yet economically-stratified, neighborhood plays out alongside the struggles for place and belonging. Despite his white privilege, Mark and his three hipster roommates are not immune to being evicted from the four-bedroom apartment they share in the Mission as the neighborhood is redeveloped. We also see Rene and Rosario, a newly-arrived, undocumented Central American couple with two young daughters, living in the one-bedroom unit above Mark's and confronted with an identical eviction notice. Whereas for Mark and his roommates this notice is a mere inconvenience, for Rene and Rosario the document threatens their livelihood, their relationship and the very foundation of their family.

The film explores the contradictions around race, class, immigration status and belonging within other intersecting stories in the Mission. In addition to Mark, Roger, Rene and Rosario, it features the story of George, a Palestinian refugee who owns a bodega in the Mission. To the horror of his activist daughter, Nadia, and aspiring hip-hop musician son, Joseph, George routinely racially profiles and calls-out African American and Latinx kids who frequent his store. Then there is Antonia, a second-generation daughter of Mexican immigrants, who owns one of the most successful restaurants in the neighborhood, where Rene and Rosario work. Unlike other immigrants featured in the film, who are seen as struggling to make ends meet, Antonia's restaurant is thriving, as the appetite for ethnic cuisines grow and yuppies flock to the Mission in search of "authentic" cultural experiences. Antonia also benefits from the undervalued and expendable labor of undocumented immigrants like Rene and Rosario, who speak only Spanish and hesitate to call out exploitation by their boss, fearing retribution and deportation. Ironically, Antonia's sense of accomplishment in becoming the most successful Latinx businesswoman in the neighborhood is dampened by the unchecked wrath of neighborhood kids who repeatedly vandalize her shiny new SUV, assuming it belongs to one of the tech yuppies patronizing her restaurant.

Antonia's experiences represent the immigrant investment in the "bootstraps" myth (which my own South Asian family has subscribed to wholeheartedly), that despite one's background, America represents the land of opportunities where anyone can prosper through hard work; while frequently – and paradoxically – disparaging other disenfranchised immigrants and minorities who fail to achieve similar levels of success, presumably for not trying hard enough. As anthropologist Shalini Shankar documents in her seminal study of Silicon Valley and the tech boom that led to economic prosperity in the San Francisco Bay Area in the early 2000s, which disproportionately favored already middle-class Asian and South Asian immigrants, working-class African American and Latinx immigrants were systematically excluded (2008).

In the climactic scenes of the film, we see self-absorbed characters like Mark and Antonia learning to rely on others in their neighborhood for help and to find solutions to the vandalism. When Antonia's SUV is towed by the city just before a long weekend, Roger calls in a favor with the tow lot to retrieve her precious vehicle, which leads her to reconsider her perception of Roger as an unsuccessful artist and a failure. Mark ultimately reimagines his new mural, incorporating the portraits and stories of the neighborhood kids who had, up until then, felt threatened by his presence, thereby inviting them to participate in the process of authorship and ownership of public art.

Reflecting the lives and struggles of the Mission's residents, *Mission Movie* weaves together a rich tapestry of stories from a neighborhood comprising people from diverse

cultural backgrounds and experiences, all articulating competing claims for citizenship and belonging to a place that is historically defined by constant change. While it is easy to assume a myopic position on who should be held responsible for whose disenfranchisement, in reality, these competing dynamics of race, class, gender, legality, power and belonging are more nuanced and require thoughtful contemplation, which the film offers. *Mission Movie* implores its audiences to look beyond the daily interactions we have with our neighbors and question our relationship to the places we choose to inhabit, those we call “home.”

On June 4, 2004, nearly 2500 residents of San Francisco gathered in a popular outdoor recreation space, “Mission Village,” which was simply an open lot on the corner of 18th and Florida Streets. They came for the first – and only – public screening of *Mission Movie*. Given the number of community members involved in making the film, and the sense of ownership we all felt, it was important for us (the core *Mission Movie* team) to host the first public screening in the Mission itself. Like the production of the film, organizing the premier gala was also a collaborative affair, in which local community members pitched in to help distribute flyers, hang posters, invite local politicians, make popcorn, manage traffic outside the event and erect screens upon which the film was projected after sunset. That day, I felt very proud of what we had accomplished together. It was a joyous evening. In a post-9/11 climate of extreme divisiveness, irrational fear and hostility towards immigrants and outsiders, this moment felt like a triumphant one. A diverse community came together to tell our stories and make our presence visible.

After years of struggling to identify with the United States as my new homeland, particularly in the midst of a war I vehemently opposed, led by a questionably-elected, lying, hate-mongering president I did not support, this moment made me feel like I belonged here among this community of artists and misfits who came from all over the world and believed in the power of community-based storytelling. The evening also made me nostalgic for my childhood in India where we grew up watching community-organized theatres and shows in neighborhood playgrounds and parks. In India, the tradition of community-based oral storytelling dates back centuries, long preceding the global popularity of Bollywood cinema. In an era of hyper-connectivity, individualized consumption and rapid demographic change in global cities like San Francisco, *Mission Movie* reaffirmed our faith in the power of grass-roots organizing, network-building and community-based storytelling, from its conception to completion. It proved to us that it was still possible to work collaboratively, author our own narratives, control our own

representations and experience a sense of empowerment from this process. We defied the conventional hierarchy of filmmaking and storytelling that remains the norm in Hollywood (and elsewhere), in which a privileged few dictate how we are shown and represented on screen.



Figure 2: Mission Movie Gala Premier Announcement



DISPLACING *MISSION MOVIE*

“Not to own the means of production can lead to premature death, but not to own the means of representation is also a kind of death. For if we are represented by others, might they not, one day, hose our deaths off memory’s laminated floor?” – Viet Thanh Nguyen (2015).

Following the success of the community gala screening, *Mission Movie* went on to screen at several international film festivals and won numerous awards, including “Best Feature Film” at the 2004 New York International Latino Film Festival. Yet despite the excitement generated by these awards and the novelty of the community-based model of collaborative filmmaking that we had orchestrated, no mainstream or independent distributors stepped forward to acquire *Mission Movie*. Unlike our experience at community-based venues and film-festival screenings, when Swenson and I showcased our film at the American Film Market, an annual event in Santa Monica attended by major American media distributors where new feature films and TV shows are acquisitioned and distribution deals are negotiated, most were uninterested in the process of community-based filmmaking. The distributors we met cared only about the return on investment and whether acquiring a film – paying for promotion and publicity, paying to secure music licenses, and paying the filmmaker for their labor – was worth the cost. Would the investment generate enough revenue to realize a financial profit?

As Swenson and I moved from room to room, meeting to meeting, we practiced variations of our “elevator pitch” on mostly white, middle-aged, male executives in designer suits and ties. Within minutes they each sealed the fate of our film with a resounding “No, thanks!” Dejected and disheartened, Swenson and I drove back to San Francisco from Los Angeles in silence. We both understood that despite having figured out how to author and tell our own stories, we did not yet control the channels through which our stories could be circulated and shared. These were the days before crowdfunding and online streaming platforms. For independent filmmakers like us, securing a distribution deal was the only way to have our work seen. As years passed and the core team disbanded to pursue other projects, the prospects of distributing *Mission Movie* grew increasingly bleak. Following Swenson’s unexpected death in 2016, any remaining hopes of releasing the film publicly, even in a limited capacity, also vanished.

As I mentioned in the introduction of this essay, *Mission Movie* most likely will never be seen publicly again, despite being an important community-based, collaboratively-produced representation of life in the early 2000s in the historically significant Mission district of San Francisco. In fact, we were not even legally allowed to hold the screening with the nearly 200 residents of the Mission and San Francisco who came together and invested their time, energy and money into making *Mission Movie*, because we had been unable to raise the funds needed to secure rights to the music used in the film. Following the advice of legal experts, none of the cast and crew were supplied with copies of the film, as it might have jeopardized any future distribution prospects.

It pained Swenson not to be able to share the film with its creators. She was torn between her loyalty to the community she had worked so closely with and to the film itself, holding out hope of finding an eventual distributor and repaying the debt she incurred while making *Mission Movie*. Our inability to distribute the film devastated Swenson, both financially and personally. This used to make me incredibly angry at the hierarchy of media circulation, controlled by the very few corporations and individuals in positions of power. Over the years I have arrived at a zen-like acceptance about the impermanence of *Mission Movie*, a film that exists as more ephemeral than as a concrete, archival document chronicling life in this vibrant and important neighborhood. After Swenson passed away, her home and belongings were taken over by her next of kin, who disposed of most of the *Mission Movie* archives before any of the core team could figure out a plan for preserving it.

Following our experience at the American Film Market, I arrived at the realization that as a young, queer, immigrant, working-class artist and aspiring filmmaker, I controlled neither the medium nor the means of my representation. The entire ordeal dissuaded me from pursuing film school and a career in mainstream filmmaking. Instead, I chose to pursue a career in anthropology, an enterprise equally replete with its own set of racial, class and gender hierarchies, yet one in which I learned how to think critically about structures of power and representation, and more importantly one in which diverse perspectives are ultimately valued. I have continued making ethnographic films as part of my anthropological practice, taking key lessons about financing and distribution from my experience with *Mission Movie*. Unlike the more traditional commercial route, with a major difference being that ethnographic films do not require a large financial investment, nor am I expected to garner a certain “return on investment” through distribution of my films.

It has taken me over fifteen years before I could write about the experience of making *Mission Movie* and begin to unpack the trauma of such a thorough rejection from mainstream media distributors. The failure of a collaboratively-produced, community-supported effort to secure a distribution deal implores us to question the traditional distribution models available to independent filmmakers, ethnographers and storytellers. The works of many filmmakers operating on the margins – especially feminist, queer and filmmakers of color – are intimately familiar with having their work relegated to the realm of ephemerality.^[4] Films like *Mission Movie* that fail to hew to the typical conventions of production and distribution are routinely undervalued and rendered insignificant by reviewers, festival programmers, media executives and other content curators in positions of power.

Despite the ever-growing popularity and proliferation of independently-produced films and media, access to funds and resources needed to produce, promote and distribute films like *Mission Movie* seems to exist within a perennial “culture of scarcity.” An anointed few are repeatedly lauded for their efforts, while others equally deserving will toil in obscurity, cultivating an unproductive and ultimately toxic sense of resentment towards those who have managed to secure the ever-elusive distribution deal. By the very nature of how mainstream and independent film distribution models are structured, the organizations and corporations that possess the means to circulate cinematic content *per se* hold the power to regulate culture. However, they are often disassociated from working-class, rapidly-gentrifying immigrant communities like the ones featured in *Mission Movie*. In major cities across the country, this contentious process of who gets to tell whose stories is playing out, not unexpectedly, against the ongoing struggles over who gets to live where. Displacement and gentrification of families and communities take place in concert with displacement and gentrification of their stories and their storytellers, of which the Mission District and *Mission Movie* are a textbook example.

In efforts to counter economic and housing inequality and resist gentrification, first, we should consider what it would take to degentrify our stories and support our storytellers, like Swenson. At the same time, artists and filmmakers must also think through questions of sustainability and our obligatory engagement with systems of media distribution that are driven largely by exclusionary politics and financial motives. While *Mission Movie* failed to gain traction, more recent efforts at community-based storytelling to address gentrification and displacement offer some hope. The San Francisco-based Anti-Eviction Mapping Project [<https://www.antievictionmap.com/>]

and the Brooklyn-based Chinatown Art Brigade [<http://www.chinatownartbrigade.org>] are two such examples of community organizers using digital media to create archives of urban communities and neighborhoods in transition.

My experience with *Mission Movie* has also led me to rethink my own approach to filmmaking and how I distribute my films. The films that I have made since making *Mission Movie* were produced on minuscule budgets, without expectations of financial returns, and were distributed by companies that make them freely-available via online streaming services, including YouTube and Vimeo. My 2007 ethnographic documentary about memory and belonging among gay South Asians in diaspora, entitled *Milind Soman Made Me Gay*, is distributed by Frameline, a San-Francisco based LGBTQ focused distribution company. Frameline has made the film available for free online streaming as part of their “Frameline Voices” initiative that aims to give more visibility to diverse LGBTQ voices with “an emphasis on films by and about people of color, trans and gender-expansive persons, youth, and elders.” Any de-gentrifying and sustainability plans for cities like San Francisco must also consider support for non-profit organizations, arts associations and media companies like Frameline, many of whom are being priced out of the communities they serve.

FILM LINK: [MILIND SOMAN MADE ME GAY](#)

Similarly, while making my three-part ethnographic film series on Indian masculinities, entitled *Roots of Love* (2011), *Mardistan/Macholand* (2014) and *Sent Away Boys* (2016), I chose to collaborate with Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT) in India, which provided the funding for all three films in exchange for exclusive broadcasting rights. What attracted me to PSBT was that after screening my films on *Doordarshan* (Indian National TV Channel), the organization made all of the content freely-available for online streaming on YouTube and Vimeo. These hybrid distribution models ensure that my more recent films will not suffer the same fate as *Mission Movie*. Online streaming has also allowed me to circumvent the bureaucratic roadblocks and the state censorship apparatus in countries like India, that actively regulate cultural forms allowed to circulate in mainstream publicly-accessible arenas such as television (Gill 2017).

FILM LINK: [ROOTS OF LOVE](#)

FILM LINK: [MARDISTAN \(MACHOLAND\)](#)

FILM LINK: [SENT AWAY BOYS](#)

Yet this model is far from ideal, as it is difficult to calculate an adequate compensation for the financial and emotional cost of making one's work available for free for the world to consume. Being a full-time university professor puts me in a privileged position, able to make such a financial sacrifice. Not all filmmakers and artists can afford to make the products of their artistic labor available for free without adequate compensation – nor should they be required to. Within the academic arena, despite opportunities for professional development that have resulted from making my films so readily accessible, not being associated with a traditional educational distributor is frequently seen as a sign of deficiency, calling into question the legitimacy of my scholarship.

In traditional academic disciplines, such as anthropology and cultural studies, that often value convention over innovation, ethnographic films that are not acquired by a handful of known educational distributors are frequently undervalued in promotional reviews and tenure evaluations.^[5] Just as the case with textbooks, many of these specialized educational distributors underserve their filmmakers, further restricting the circulation of their scholarship by charging exorbitant “institutional purchase and screening fees” that make the films unaffordable to most outside of the academy, including our interlocutors. The project of de-gentrifying documentary and ethnographic film implores us to question current models of academic distribution, along with reconsidering how we value and privilege certain forms of knowledge dissemination over others in the academy and for the purpose of professional development.

Since we made *Mission Movie*, the landscape of film and media production and distribution has shifted drastically, resulting primarily from the emergence of more equitable and diverse channels such as YouTube, Vimeo, Netflix and Amazon. These platforms have allowed traditionally underrepresented filmmakers like myself to break through the initial barriers to entry. Yet issues related to adequate compensation remain unaddressed. We have much further to go before we are able to institute any meaningful changes to how our lives are represented on screen. I remain hopeful, and I am heartened by the autonomy these mediums seem to promise. Yet sufficient attention must also be paid to the preservation and accessibility of films independently produced and distributed prior to the advent of these new technologies, which exist in formats that are rapidly going extinct.

Even in an era of instant streaming, when most forms of mainstream media are instantly accessible, I have found that independently produced documentary and ethnographic films remain inaccessible. Further, as niche indie-film distributors succumb to similar

displacement, these films seem to disappear from circulation with an alarming frequency. While developing my curriculum as a visual anthropology professor over the last six years, I have had to jump through many hoops to access films by pioneering independent queer, feminist and transnational filmmakers, like Marlon Riggs, Richard Fung, Pratibha Parmar, Safina Uberoi and Trinh T. Minh-ha, to name a few. These filmmakers deeply shaped my approach to filmmaking and storytelling. While I aspire to offer the same experience to my students, the inaccessibility of some of their films in a post-VHS, post-DVD world of online streaming makes it nearly impossible to incorporate them into my courses. This, too, is an important facet of thinking about sustainability and de-gentrifying documentary and ethnographic film that deserves our immediate attention.

[**ACTION ALERT:** IS THERE A FILM YOU LOVE AND VALUE THAT HAS FALLEN OUT OF CIRCULATION? PLEASE ADD IT TO THIS “UNOFFICIAL DATABASE OF DISPLACED FILMS”:

[HTTPS://GOO.GL/FORMS/LTU90JFG5AWE11FG1](https://goo.gl/forms/LTU90JFG5AWE11FG1)]

CONCLUSION: RETURNING HOME TO THE MISSION

Even now, I reflect fondly on the sense of fraternity and belonging that Swenson cultivated among the core *Mission Movie* team through her generosity, patience and willingness to listen. As a queer kid growing up in a sexually-regressive Indian culture, relocating to suburban California with my family in 1995, into an equally closed-minded and homophobic diasporic community, I escaped to San Francisco as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Swenson, along with the rest of the *Mission Movie* team, was the kind of chosen (or “logical”) family I had fantasized about finding upon arriving in San Francisco, having read and watched *Tales of the City* novels and TV mini-series in adolescence with the kind of devotion that most reserve for memorizing scriptures.^[6] Much of what I know about filmmaking and storytelling I learned from Swenson, and to whom I remain eternally indebted. I have since striven to cultivate that same sense of belonging among my collaborators and communities with whom I now work, in India and elsewhere.

Since the time when I called San Francisco my home in the early 2000s, much of the city, especially the Mission District that I had grown to love, has changed beyond

recognition. Gone are the corner stores, the bodegas, the bookstores and the hole-in-the-wall eateries like the ones featured in *Mission Movie*. They are replaced by trendy restaurants, bakeries and barbershops featuring high-end modern furniture and price tags that are out of reach of most of the immigrant families who once lived in the Mission. Shortly after that first public screening of *Mission Movie* in 2004, Mission Village, along with the accompanying offices of CellSpace, the local arts non-profit that managed Mission Village, were evicted, sold off to a developer, bulldozed and demolished. They were replaced by luxury condominiums that ushered in a new wave of “re-development” initiatives and evictions in the surrounding neighborhoods.

As of this writing, Clarion Alley, where we shot a significant part of *Mission Movie*, remains intact. The alley is managed by a collective of San Francisco-based artists called Clarion Alley Mural Project (CAMP). Unveiled in 2016, CAMP’s website (clarionalleymuralproject.org) features archival images of the murals that have appeared and disappeared from the walls of this 560-foot-long alley over the last twenty-five years. Many Latinx and other artists of color who grew up in the streets surrounding the alley, and regularly dropped by the *Mission Movie* set to check in on the film’s progress, have long been priced out of the Mission. Crew and cast members who lived in the Mission while working on the film also have since moved away, out of their neighborhoods and many out of San Francisco altogether. This once gritty and litter-strewn alley where we spent long days and nights shooting *Mission Movie* while complaining about the stench of urine and dog shit between takes, looks a lot cleaner and sanitized now. Today, it is an Instagram-worthy destination for impromptu photo shoots for fashion magazines and tourists looking to experience “authentic” local art.

Despite no longer being the center of communal storytelling as I had once experienced it while making *Mission Movie*, I return to Clarion Alley every time I visit San Francisco. I return to indulge in nostalgia for the time I spent there, a place where I once underwent a deeply transformative intellectual experience. I leave feeling melancholy, yet thankful, for having experienced it. Because I found my logical family there in the Mission, I still refer to San Francisco as my “home” – as the place where “I am from.” No other place that I have lived in so far has taught me as much about the importance and power of storytelling as the Mission. There, under guidance of artists and filmmakers like Swenson, I understood the value of what it feels like to belong, and how art and particularly film has the power to cultivate that sense of belonging. While our homes, our bodies and our stories are susceptible to displacement, dislocation and even erasure, the spirit of storytelling that guides our artistic creations will always persevere.

Share

END NOTES

[1] “*Mission Movie*” hereafter.

[2] See Chomsky (1999); Harvey (2005); Desmond (2016)

[3] See Sjöberg (2008)

[4] See discussion of *Punks* (2000) by Patrick-Ian Polk on Nancy Podcast

[<https://www.wnycstudios.org/story/punks>]

[5] See Collins, Durlington and Gill (2017)

[6] See Maupin (2017).

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EDWIN MARTINEZ



AARON HUNTER



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HARJANT GILL



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