

FQ PAGE VIEWS selection from *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film*. Pages 122-143 of Chapter Four: Black Maybe: *Medicine for Melancholy*, Place, and Quiet Becoming. Special thanks to Michael Boyce Gillespie and Duke University Press for sharing this excerpt with *FQ* and our readers.

If desire entails the misrecognition of an object choice thought to restore or recuperate a conceived hole in one's self, then, as Berlant notes, "your object . . . does not express transparently who you 'are' but says something about what it takes for you to anchor yourself in space and time."⁸ The anchoring mechanism of *Medicine for Melancholy*, the film's effort to abide the romance conceit and racial calibrations, is bound to a precise space and time: San Francisco in the early twenty-first century. This profilmic city significantly informs the couple's circulation with the material and immaterial traces that structure the everyday San Francisco.⁹ The texture of the city and its cultural geography left a distinct mark on the screenplay. When asked about the initial considerations of other settings for the film, Jenkins commented, "San Francisco was not the original location of the film. Originally, . . . the movie was to take place in New York City or Chicago. In that version of the film, the characters were different, *quite* different. . . . Once I decided the film *would* be set in San Francisco . . . it was impossible to not allow the film to push beyond the simplicity of the premise and include the cultural geography of the place."¹⁰ In *Medicine for Melancholy* the cinematic geography concerns a place impacted by redlining, urban redevelopment, gentrification, displacement, and a dwindling African American population.¹¹ A web of policies and cultures, this San Francisco incites multiple spatiotemporal encounters but not as diametrically opposed forces. Instead incompatibilities, material and symbolic, actuate the city as a heterotopic force that mirrors the film's staging of blackness as a cycling of juxtapositions and ambivalences, but never a singularity.¹²

Shadowed by cultural, historical, and spatial tensions, Micah and Jo's at-

tachment escapade glides with an air of Walter Benjamin's time of emergency. "To articulate the past historically," Benjamin writes, "means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger . . . to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger."¹³ The coupling voyage of Micah and Jo occurs with the stressed inflection of shifts between the diegetic and nondiegetic historical past and present under an eclipse of black futurity dilemmas. Thus the emergency and memory flashes of *Medicine* involve ceaseless historical and cultural processes related to blackness, desire, and the city. In a quiet key the film intones a braiding of becoming, the cultural and cinematic geography of San Francisco, and a politics of desire. With these keywords, composites, and critical filters in mind, this chapter tracks *Medicine for Melancholy* as an enactment of film blackness.

Walk Among Us

The film opens in a bathroom, with Micah splashing water on his face, then cuts to Jo waking in the bed nearby. They eventually dress in silence, with an occasional awkward meeting of looks. This is the morning after a one-night stand. A brief series of shots details the debris from the party the night before as they make their way downstairs and leave the house (figs. 4.1 and 4.2). Hung over in the sun, they reintroduce themselves, although Jo says her name is Angela. Micah suggests walking to a café nearby in the Noe Valley section of the city and she agrees. Once seated there, a markedly enthusiastic Micah attempts to spark a conversation, while Jo appears aloof and annoyed about the prospect of "getting to know you" banter as her responses to his questions are curt. When he inquires whether she has a job and discovers she does not, he asks her how she pays her rent. Mildly defensive, Jo remarks, "Who said I pay rent?" Later she says vaguely, "I'm figuring it out." Their shared cab ride occurs in complete silence as Jo looks forward, oblivious to Micah's occasional side glances, his thirsty attempts to catch her eye and spark some kind of chat. After abruptly asking the driver to stop at the curb, she steps out and walks away, ignoring Micah calling her false name. He discovers that Jo has left her wallet in the taxi, so he uses social media (MySpace) and a telephone operator to track her down. Arriving at her townhouse in the Marina District he remarks that her home is nice and then revisits his previous query about rent:

MICAH: So, you don't pay rent here?

JO: [Shakes head.]



FIG 4.1 Micah (Wyatt Cenac) in *Medicine for Melancholy* (Barry Jenkins, 2008).



FIG 4.2 Jo (Tracey Heggins) in *Medicine for Melancholy* (Barry Jenkins, 2008).

MICAH: Who does pay rent here?
JO: No one.
MICAH: Okay, who pays the mortgage here?
JO: My boyfriend.
MICAH: Your boyfriend?
JO: My boyfriend.
MICAH: And where is he?
JO: London.
MICAH: London?

JO: Yes, London. Would you stop repeating me?
MICAH: All right. So, what does he do?
JO: He's a curator?
MICAH: Curator? Sorry. It just seems weird that as a curator he didn't really have any art on the walls. Like, none. I mean it just seems that they probably have an extra painting or sculpture lying around that he could have brought home. Sorry. Is he white?
JO: Does it matter?
MICAH: Yes and no.
JO: Well, what if I told you he is white and we met in a volunteer program in Bayview. Would that matter?
MICAH: Yes and no.
JO: Oh. Okay. I see now. You're one of those people.
MICAH: Those people?
JO: Yes, those people that think that Black History Month is in February because it's the shortest month of the year.
MICAH: It is.
JO: Black History Month is in February because Carter G. Woodson wanted Negro History Week to coincide with the births of Frederick Douglass and Lincoln, both in the same week in February. Okay, well thank you for returning my wallet. You have to go.
MICAH: Whoa, we're just getting started.
JO: You need to leave.
MICAH: What did I say?

Throughout their exchange, Jo exhibits the same disinterest from earlier that morning. When she asks him to leave, Micah implores her to reconsider, picking up a nearby guitar and playing "Won't You Be My Neighbor" ("Hey there, one-night-stand neighbor"). Though she does not ask him to stay, she smiles and does not repeat her request that he go. She goes upstairs to shower, and when she returns, they agree to start over and reintroduce themselves; this time she tells him her proper name. Their escalating exchange illustrates how racial sincerity moderates the tenor of an address between raced subjects. Their exchange in the foyer suggests calibrating acts of recognition. Beyond chemistry and attraction, Micah's interest in Jo also functions as an assessment of her. His question about her luxurious digs in spite of being unemployed rises to a judgment about her object choice before culminating with the Black History Month contention. Overall their conversation involves two distinct



FIG 4.3 Coupling. Jo and Micah in *Medicine for Melancholy* (Barry Jenkins, 2008).



FIG 4.4 Coupling. Jo and Micah in *Medicine for Melancholy* (Barry Jenkins, 2008).

racial scripts or epistemological purviews (urban legend and institutional knowledge), two distinct politics of pleasure and becoming.¹⁴

When Jo receives a phone call from her boyfriend, Micah gestures to the wall and the stick figure drawing he has placed there. Finally there is some art on the walls. Jo leaves on her bicycle to run an errand for her curator partner and Micah cycles with her (figs. 4.3 and 4.4). When they arrive at the building, she asks him to wait downstairs until she returns from the gallery upstairs: “You have to wait right here.” Micah asks why, and Jo replies, “Just think about it,” as he returns her wallet.¹⁵ When she returns, Jo suggests a trip

to the Museum of Modern Art. He retorts that going to a museum is not what black people do on a Sunday:

JO: Okay, black man. So what do two black folks do on a Sunday afternoon?

MICAH: Go to church. Eat fried chicken. What do two black folks not do on a Sunday afternoon?

JO: What?

MICAH: Go to a museum.

JO: That's not funny.

MICAH: It's funny because it's not funny.

Sunday: the quiet fantasy of the film offers the first verbal marking of time. The unfunny moment cuts to a tracking shot of the pair walking their bikes down the sidewalk as Micah instructs Jo on hip-hop sampling. The expressive culture instruction then cuts to a shot of two faces: the windowed façade of a building and the large image of a black girl hanging inside on a wall. As the camera tilts down from the building into the ambient sounds of the city Micah quips, “MoAD, mama, not MoMA” (fig. 4.5). This is the Museum of the African Diaspora, an altogether different archiving of the modern. The glass-paned face of the building showcases a two-story-tall portrait of a young black girl. Yet the singularity of the girl's image is actually a pixilated mosaic made up of hundreds of photographs. The symbolic import of the whole (the image of the black girl) and its parts (photographs of the black diaspora) bears out what Brandi Catanese identifies as MoAD's foundational ideal of the “universal diasporic subject.” She writes:

Instead of a traditional, single photograph, the image of the girl is a photo-mosaic, made up of what we might call thousands of micro-identifications with the symbolic import of the girl's picture, known within the museum as “The Face of the African Diaspora” and based on Chester Higgins's photo of a young Ghanaian girl in the 1970s. . . . The pictures are from the past and the present, and span the globe, their performative unity making legible MoAD's claims of the Universal Diasporic Subject.¹⁶

The identificatory solicitation of “The Face of the African Diaspora,” an invitation to the parts from a whole, proffers an embodying prompt of diasporic subjectivity. This narrativization cue of universal diasporic subjectivity intersects with the unvoiced anchoring between Jo and Micah as their affection escalates from a one-night stand and begins to slide across symbolic scripts of



FIG 4.5 “MoAD, mama, not MoMA.” *Medicine for Melancholy* (Barry Jenkins, 2008).

blackness. Their coupling drifts from serendipitous desire to a shared history made legible by the museological frame. Yet this frame cannot arrest the tensions provoked by the pairing of “heritage (as an essentially territorializing process) and diaspora (as a formation that always encompasses a deterritorialisation of identities and memories).”¹⁷

As Micah purchases admission tickets, Jo peruses the museum store and picks up a greeting card from a rack. The card has a photograph of two black children playing soccer with a quote below: “Whatever you can do or dream you can do, begin it! Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now!” Ironically the quote is incorrectly attributed to Goethe, but it sounds like something he would say and has circulated as a Goethe saying since W. H. Murray misremembered a passage in his *The Scottish Himalaya Expedition* (1951). This gesture of equivalence in the spirit of Goethe demonstrates a transliterative impulse and not something patently false. This approximation or substitution signals the institutional claims on which MoAD exists.

Micah and Jo mount the stairs to the second floor while inspecting the snapshots that make up “The Face of the African Diaspora” (fig. 4.6). Following various shots of their movement in the museum space, this shot sequence closes with Micah and Jo at the “Music of the Diaspora” listening stations. There is a cut to a point-of-view shot of a photograph on the wall farther down the corridor: “The Door of No Return.” A passageway cut through the stone wall of a former slave fort on Gorée Island off the coast of Senegal, “The Door of No Return” overlooks the shore and the sea. This opening has



FIG 4.6 The parts of “The Face of the African Diaspora.” Jo and Micah in *Medicine for Melancholy* (Barry Jenkins, 2008).

come to represent the exit of the abducted Africans to the slave ships near the shore and the start of the Middle Passage as part of the transatlantic slave trade. Thus the passage symbolizes the trauma of a shift from personhood to thing and property, a crossing over from home to diaspora. “The Door of No Return,” as Dionne Brand contends, “signifies the historical moment which colours all moments in the Diaspora. It accounts for the ways we observe and are observed as people, whether it’s through the lens of social injustice or the lens of human accomplishments.”¹⁸ The photograph is an empty portal with a severe threshold that signifies movement and the inception of the diaspora.¹⁹

In the context of MoAD “The Door of No Return” photograph occupies a place on the sign for the “Slavery Passages” exhibit. A cut from the photograph reveals a detail of the caption: “Choosing to resist or escape slavery has often been punishable by whipping, maiming, branding, and crueler forms of torture, including mutilation and amputation. Still, tens of thousands of people have risked such treatment to be free, and many succeeded.”²⁰ Micah and Jo enter the exhibit through a sound curtain; the nearly pitch-black room with benches features recorded testimonials, accounts of what the sign at the entrance labels tales of resistance to and escape from slavery. Inside, dark to themselves, they listen to an excerpt from Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789), the chapter “Boarding a Slave Ship,” in which he recounts his life in

Eboe (Nigeria), his and his sister's kidnapping, and his arrival on the African coast after being sold to slave traders: "The first objects which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast were the sea and a slave ship. As well as the multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow. No, I no longer doubted of my fate but I was not long suffered to indulge my grief for I was soon put down under the decks. There I received such a salutation that I had never experienced in my life." Notably the "Slavery Passages" exhibit commutes the meaning of "salutations." In the original text the passage is "I was not long suffered to indulge my grief; I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste any thing."²¹ The stench greeting Equiano's nose becomes the greeting from a collectivity and solidarity in the hold. More symbolic than egregious, the abridgment of the passage infers the ethos of adaptation that circulates through MoAD.²²

Billed as a space of contemplation, the room—its sensory deprivation coupled with the sonic adaptation of the Equiano text—compels an immersion in and through black time. Frank Wilderson proposes, "The most coherent temporality ever deemed as Black time is the 'moment' of no time at all on the map of no place at all: the ship hold of the Middle Passage."²³ In the context of the room's staging of the hold, the coupling of Micah and Jo operates in contradistinction to Equiano's record of dispossession. In this way their coupling in the hold suggests an act of fugitivity as well as an affective discontinuity and replotting of Middle Passage epistemology.²⁴ "Slavery Passages" is a chamber of black time travel that also exhibits the performative force of museums to engineer "the narratives and ontologies that they purport merely to commemorate."²⁵ Thus the space obliges a meeting between an institutional conceit, a black spatiotemporality, and the affective force of an autobiography.

The universal diasporic subjectivity imperative is meant to produce an audience through its hailing mission as much as it might appeal to a preconstituted one. This point touches on the complication of categorizing and producing a diasporic community. Michelle Wright contends, "Any truly accurate definition of an African diasporic identity . . . must somehow simultaneously incorporate the diversity of black identities in the diaspora yet also link all those identities to show that they indeed constitute a diaspora rather than an unconnected aggregate of different peoples linked only in name."²⁶ The

“Slavery Passages” immersing frame of black time emanates as a providential fixing, an attempt to quantifiably bind the signifying function of diasporic aggregation. Yet, as Catanese notes, MoAD must manage the local and global dynamics of diasporic identity in very particular ways:

The global rather than local orientation of MoAD seems to anticipate and tactically respond to the persistent diminution of the local black population. In the most pragmatic way, shifting from a focus on African Americans to a wider examination of African cultures allows MoAD to acknowledge black San Franciscans without being inextricably bound to them—or to their gradual disappearance from the city. Technically beholden to a local black population but unable to rely upon this locality as its sole audience or subject matter, MoAD relocates African Americanness within a larger transnational map of connections.²⁷

The museum’s accounting for the diaspora in global terms (“When did you discover you are African?”) cannot fully oblige the demands of an increasingly displaced locality (“When did you discover that black people are disappearing from San Francisco?”). This rhetorical distinction between two not altogether complimentary black futurity poses inflects the stakes of the attachment between Jo and Micah. In *Medicine for Melancholy*, the function of MoAD in the attachment affair is not merely about the transparency of their sameness; it also suggests difficult differences.

After over four minutes of no dialogue, Micah and Jo leave MoAD and its grounding of displacement, dispersal, and the global. Their silence echoes the chapter’s opening consideration of the ponderous potentiality of black quiet. Outside the museum, instead of retrieving their bicycles Jo asks that they walk a bit. Through continuity editing they walk down Mission Street and arrive at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, the city arts center. As they enter the complex and move toward the Yerba Buena Gardens, the camera pans and tracks their movement to the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial. Entitled *Revelation*, the memorial features a large waterfall with a walkway beneath. A cut to the interior details the walls of the walkway that are lined with photographs and Dr. King quotes etched in granite and glass. The camera hovers behind them in the chamber beneath the falls before turning to the wall and lingering on the following quote: “I believe that a day will come when all God’s children from bass black to treble white will be significant on the constitution’s keyboard. San Francisco, CA, 1956.” Micah and Jo move together down the corridor as they continue to read passages under the falls (fig. 4.7). Their



FIG 4.7 Under the waterfall. Jo and Micah in *Medicine for Melancholy* (Barry Jenkins, 2008).

movement through the memorial space highlights the jeopardy of negotiating between the social function of memorialization and the architectural imperative to adapt over time and remain significant to future generations.²⁸

Guided in speechlessness, their walk from the museum to the memorial occurs as a soundwalk that exhibits the immateriality of quiet contemplation and interiority while also being attuned to the city environment and its swirling rhythms. Like the acoustical design of the “Slavery Passages” exhibit, the water masks sound in the walkway. Water links the baptismal contemplation of the walkway and Equiano’s account of a journey across the sea as their walk down Mission Street invokes an arc from slavery to freedom, the Middle Passage to the civil rights movement. The walk from the hold to the mountain-top, a spatiotemporal bridge and a historiographic passage, moves between two distinct institutional historiographies and memorialization strategies. Yet the conjoining of these two sites does not suggest a linear or progressive reading of African American history as a heroic narrative arc of struggle to progress.²⁹ More than strictly historical determinism, Micah and Jo are still drafting their attachment chronicle.

From a shot of the characters drawing closer under the waterfall there is a cut from the MLK memorial to Micah and Jo walking side by side toward a bridge as the score emits the rising sound of an organ and a pizzicato string ensemble. Piano and drums join the piece as Micah and Jo slowly draw closer with each step. Micah reaches for her hand and pulls her to the side of the bridge (fig. 4.8).³⁰



FIG 4.8 “Le Rallye.” Jo and Micah in *Medicine for Melancholy* (Barry Jenkins, 2008).

MICAH: It looks like L.A.

JO: Never been.

MICAH: Yeah. Like the view from the hills. It’s like the hills in L.A.

JO: This is a one-night stand.

MICAH: It’s only been one night, can’t do nothing about that. I mean, it is what it is.

Jo’s non sequitur is the first address and evasion of their coupling; an attempt to break away from the Cupid vibe and set a limit. In spite of the ethereal convenience of their coupling, its fantastical timelessness, Jo briefly breaks the spell with a moment of truth-telling. The scene then cuts to Jo playfully dashing to a nearby carousel (the Children’s Creativity Carousel) with Micah following.³¹ The sequence ends with shots of them laughing while riding the carousel steeds with the full swell of the music.

While the narrative premise of intimate strangers might allude to several films, this plot coupled with the sound signature of Dickon Hinchliffe’s “Le Rallye” precisely signals Barry Jenkins’s inspiration for *Medicine for Melancholy*: Claire Denis’s *Friday Night* (2003). Set in Paris, *Friday Night* tracks the coupling of strangers, a man and woman who cross paths one evening during a public transit strike due to a citywide ride-sharing initiative. Laure has just packed up her apartment in preparation for moving in with her boyfriend, and Jean is a man who needs a ride. The spatiotemporal quality of the film narrativizes a Paris of relentless estrangement and intimacy in the time

of now. Denis insisted that *Friday Night* “could not be ‘once upon a time,’ it has to be now.”³² Thus the use of “Le Rallye” in *Medicine* acts as a temporal and intertextual animator. Like *Friday Night*, *Medicine for Melancholy* occurs in what George Clinton called “once upon a time called right now” with an equivalent affective sense of acceleration.

Writing on *Friday Night*, Elena Del Rio draws on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s proposition of rhizomatic intensity and examines the couple’s perpetual state of “betweenness”: “The film shows that the possibility of moving does not depend on one’s own individual will or control, but, more precisely, on the willingness to let oneself be carried away by the inevitable flow of movement (of perception and affection) taking place everywhere in and around our bodies.” The coupling of Micah and Jo parallels Del Rio’s assessment of Jean and Laure as a pair whose alliance of desire “relies on its own unmotivated force/desire as it traces a wholly unforeseen trajectory.”³³ In the context of *Medicine*, the MoAD–Yerba Buena sequence alludes to constitutive rhythms that compel Jo and Micah’s “unmotivated force/desire.” *Medicine for Melancholy* enlivens the Denis incentive with black time and becoming. In place of a traffic jam, *Medicine* substitutes another kind of congestion trigger with the incremental clustering of temporalities, discourses, and attachments in the MoAD–Yerba Buena sequence: diasporic museology, civil rights memorialization, an intertextual gesture toward the now.³⁴ Their trajectory, loaded and random, through spatiotemporalities ultimately boosts the film’s staging of romance, but this sense of romance effectuates something other than the lore of lost souls and soul mates. *Medicine* problematizes the politics of pleasure that inform the literary tradition of the black romance.

Yogita Goyal argues that while the idea of romance is often framed in the ahistorical and apolitical terms of the eternal or the ontological, the black romance’s ideological nature evidenced in twentieth-century African diasporic literature renarrativizes the compulsory sense of romance with attention to issues such as racial uplift, nation building, redemption, and recuperation. In *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature*, she writes, “Impure at its very origin, romance inevitably implies a repatterning and rebeginning, rather than the birth of something wholly original, as the writers of diasporic romance compose narratives that function both as recovery and as an imaginative projection. In this respect, romance allows these writers to collapse time and space to give us a whole, or to shine a beam of light onto one moment,

or even to give us a progressive history read backwards from a future point of redemption.” Goyal refabulates Benjamin’s designation of temporality with regard to “ruptures” and “simultaneities” to what she identifies as “diaspora time”: “While nation time links past, present, and future in a march towards progress, diaspora time emphasizes the breaks and discontinuities in such a movement, recalling the trauma of the Middle Passage and looking forward to the Jubilee.”³⁵ In the case of *Medicine for Melancholy*, diaspora time portends the film’s accented distinction of diasporic love time. Micah and Jo shift away from the one-night stand regimen and hanging out to something yet to be quantified. But the historiographic and agential capacity of the black romance with the gathering of spatiotemporalities during their MoAD–Yerba Buena stroll indeed concur with Micah’s reply to Jo’s dismissal of what has been growing between them: “It’s only been one night.”³⁶

Destroy This Memory

The carousel cycles down and “Le Rallye” fades from the score as the film cuts to the pair arriving at Micah’s studio apartment in the Tenderloin. While Micah is in the bathroom, Jo looks at a framed poster on the wall; it features an excerpt from a city planning survey with “lies” stenciled or “tagged” across it (fig. 4.9). It demonstrates a core principle of protest art, a graphic rebuttal to specious policy:

san francisco is now developing programs to correct blighted and congested conditions and to deal with an accumulation of housing that is continuously aging and deteriorating faster than it is being rehabilitated or replaced. The study area contains an estimated 1008 residential structures, many of which are in various degrees of deterioration and in need of rebuilding or replacement. More than 50 percent of the structures are past middle age with an estimated average of sixty-seven years. It is this condition which results in neighborhood blight and calls for both major public improvement and private rehabilitation and reconstruction.

Leonard S. Mosias for the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency, “Residential Rehabilitation Survey Western Addition Area 2” July 1962

Micah returns to the room and sees Jo reading the poster.

MICAH: You familiar with that?

JO: Um, kind of. I’m a transplant.

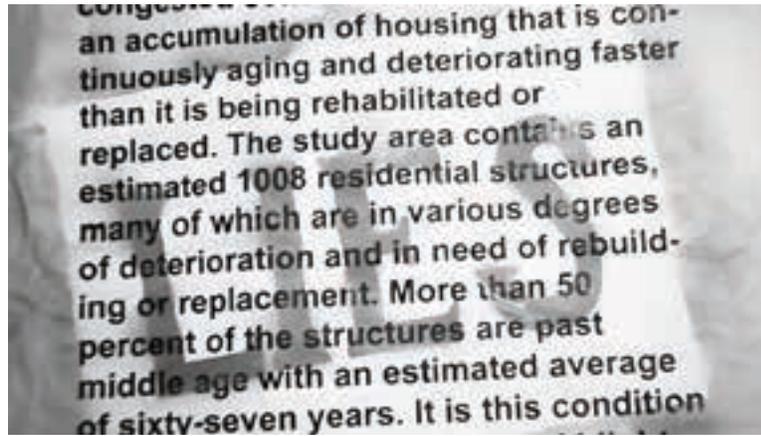


FIG 4.9 "LIES." *Medicine for Melancholy* (Barry Jenkins, 2008).

MICAH: Born and raised. My folks lived out there. Imagine the Lower Haight with nothing but black folks and white artists.

JO: Hum. But why would you put it on your wall? I know you're not supposed to forget, but it's not like you would forget without seeing it every day.

MICAH: It's not like that. You know people just walk around this city like everything is so perfect and it's all good and everything. This just reminds me, you know. Poor folks still got it hard. Like, if you look at Mission Bay, and this poster is still relevant. I'm just saying. [Pause.] You want some tea or something?

JO: [She nods.]

The conversation circles around the value of memory. For Jo the poster is a superfluous reminder of an absence of which Micah is always aware ("It's not like you would forget without seeing it every day"). He responds with a series of allusions and hesitant declarations before trailing off to a dejected close. Who are the people that walk around San Francisco basking in all things good? What do these people who believe in the perfect city have to do with the poor folks who are still struggling? What is the connection between Mission Bay, the Western Addition, and the declaration that public policy is a lie? "I don't know, I'm just saying." Forgetting is a luxury that Micah can neither afford nor condone. Born and raised, a native son, he tries to articulate a history and a memory, but the poster speechlessly offers the only clear tell.

Micah's comments intimate an everyday survival, the way his melancholizing and critical black memory direct his constitutive knowledge of the city's affective flows and his grounded perception of loss and erasure.³⁷

The poster continues to critique redevelopment plans in San Francisco, then and now. Following World War II public and private sectors sought to position San Francisco as the capital of the emergent global flows of the Pacific Rim. Formed in 1948, the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency cited in the poster was created as a result of congressional legislation in the 1940s and 1950s that gave cities more authority over redevelopment financing. By the 1960s this measure had generated a significant collusion between the private and public sectors. The poster refers to a history of urbanism and city initiatives that disproportionately impacted working-class neighborhoods and communities of color under the auspices of renewal and redevelopment.³⁸ Dated July 1962, the poster refers to the second phase of the Western Addition project, whose first phase began in 1953. Once known as the "Harlem of the West," the Fillmore (a part of the larger Western Addition area) was subjected to urban renewal that began after the war and would for decades contribute to the erosion of the community's economic and cultural base.³⁹ Micah remembers that *improvement, rehabilitation, and redevelopment* operated as code words for displacement and erasure. Of course one of the key things that enabled these top-down urban planning frenzies was a disavowal of the material ways antiblack racism informed poor housing conditions, low employment rates, and wealth disparity. The statistical accounting took precedence over a concerted policy of social justice.⁴⁰ Hanging the poster on his wall is not about never forgetting; it is about remembering that many communities in San Francisco, now and then, have not been the intended beneficiaries of the city's future. These communities have not even warranted being classified as collateral damage.

The poster articulates San Francisco's new diaspora, those who could be or have been displaced by city initiatives that prioritize economic growth over sustaining local communities and histories. "A vicious circle is created in which the poor are continuously under pressure of displacement," Peter Marcuse writes, as "the wealthy continuously seek to wall themselves within gentrified neighbourhoods. Far from a cure for abandonment, gentrification worsens the process."⁴¹ The poster records a time of struggle against how gentrification acts as an edict of temporal sovereignty, a manufactured sense of the new and the old as the demarcation of the past and the future becomes directed by market forces. Sandhya Shukla notes, "That unrelenting focus on the future is of course prescriptive rather than analytical. Its teleology of

coherence and efficiency relies on conceptions of the past as full of unmanageable chaos. As this is applied to the modern metropolis, future dreams of greater global community rest on constructed pasts of dislocated peoples and incompetent economies. The past in neoliberal narratives of what is possible in the city is either residual or nostalgic (and therefore irrational). Neoliberalism provides the logic and the alibi for the form of ‘urban renewal’ that is gentrification.”⁴² The history of redevelopment in San Francisco is littered with premature autopsies that have been coupled to this refabulating rhetoric of progress and premeditated inevitability. In fact these intimations of erasure and progress are serendipitously evident in the MoAD–Yerba Buena sequence that precedes the visit to Micah’s apartment.

The San Francisco of *Medicine for Melancholy* does not subscribe to the classical function of place in cinema. The film suggests another option for cinematic place, neither strictly extradiegetic nor idle backdrop nor merely profilmic. This other possibility entails how the couple’s trajectory through the city encounters several cartographies of urban history.⁴³ The city thickens the stakes of fantasy for these desiring black subjects. This is vitally evident as they walk through MoAD and the Yerba Buena Center complex, a significant site of urban renewal, gentrification, community activism, and displacement. Once considered the skid row section of San Francisco, the south of Market Street area (SoMa) had been targeted by the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency (sfra) after the success of the Western Addition plan. SoMa was part of a development plan devoted to a new city center that included what would eventually become the Moscone Convention Center and the Yerba Buena Cultural Center. After acquiring almost half of the land, sfras faced opposition from the Tenants and Owners in Opposition to Redevelopment (toor), a community organization formed in 1969 that primarily comprised poor, working-class, and senior residents. The central concern for the toor was sfras’ promise of low-income housing for the displaced residents.

The issue came to a head when the toor filed a restraining order in federal court against sfras that would stop all demolition and relocation action until a binding agreement could be reached between the two parties. In April 1970 the court ruled in favor of the toor and issued an injunction that cut federal funding of the redevelopment project until an acceptable relocation plan was in place. In spite of the ruling sfras colluded with the San Francisco Housing Authority to fast-track those residents in the planned Yerba Buena area as the majority of SoMa residents along with those displaced residents

from the Western Addition still on the long waiting list were never relocated to affordable and acceptable housing.⁴⁴

The transvaluation of the diaspora in the couple's stroll sustains a multi-accentual sense of capital: slave trafficking and the displacing force of the real estate market. Their movement in the MoAD–Yerba Buena Center sequence moreover entails a navigation of dispirited spaces, reclaimed land that still abounds with reified histories of race and class.⁴⁵ The unvoiced consequence posed by Micah is whether cultural memories can be redeveloped. Immediately after the discussion of the poster he elaborates on these politics of place. While he gets water for them from the kitchen, Jo asks from the other room, “Do you even like it here?”

MICAH: What?

JO: It seems like the city just pisses you off.

MICAH: Nah, I love this city. I hate this city, but I love this city. In the hills, the fog, any man who can find a street corner has got himself a view. San Francisco's beautiful and it's got nothing to do with privilege. It's got nothing to do with beatniks or hippies or Yuppies. It just is, and you shouldn't have to be upper middle class to be a part of that.

During Micah's love-hate monologue on his ambivalence about life in the Bay Area a brief montage of five high-saturated color images of the city is shown. Together these images illustrate a part of the San Francisco tourist imaginary: hills, fog, Victorian houses, pride flags, and a beach. These postcard abbreviations of the city are stock approximations of an everyday “Wish you were here” San Francisco, a place of vacation marketing and real estate brochures. Micah's reproach that access to the view is an inalienable right that cannot be purchased resonates with the sense that access to the experience of the city has become tied to an elite or upper-class privilege. When experiencing the view becomes a matter of class and social hierarchy, then your quotidian space or everyday geography is in the process of being merchandised into a lifestyle you may no longer be able to afford. The rising cost of sightlines leads to the feeling of trespassing in one's own neighborhood, a neighborhood that has become a “location, location, location” affair with greater surveillance, policing, and other material and psychic costs of everyday life. Micah despises gentrification because he recognizes that it has a tendency to operate as the exclusivity of a branded everyday for an upwardly mobile and consuming class of people. This new class partakes in the accrued cool of spaces and cultures whose histories are refabulated in the revisionist terms of capitalism and ob-

solescence. Ultimately locals are revised and coded as outsiders and space invaders in a public attuned to newly arriving and ordained insiders.⁴⁶

The redevelopment projects by the city planners treated the city as an untapped resource to be refined and cultivated. The historical and cultural traces are evident only to the extent that these residues in plain sight contribute to a branding, a marketing of an exclusive future, the trafficking of local flavor for new market value and the lure of “new city users” who exercise what Saskia Sassen describes as a “claim” to the city: “The new city users have made an often immense claim on the city and have reconstituted strategic spaces of the city in their image: their claim is rarely examined or challenged. . . . The new city of these users is a fragile one, whose survival and successes are centered on an economy of high productivity, advanced technologies, and intensified exchanges.”⁴⁷ In this way the semiotics of the city, its system of histories and cultures, are repurposed as anecdotal enablers of a renaissance and a subsequent erasure to come. Micah argues that these new users are guided by a measure of manifest destiny and the core values of privilege that thrive on arrogating the everyday.

When Micah leaves the room to shower, Jo searches his MySpace page, where she sees a torn photo booth strip of Micah and a (white) woman embracing. The image has been photoshopped and captioned, “I want my fuckin’ heart sewn back together” (fig. 4.10). The native son has wounds as pressing as neoliberalism and the flows of global capital. When Micah returns, he and Jo eventually make their way to a cuddle that accelerates. The foreplay resembles a shipwreck, with the handheld camera jaggedly rocking to their motion. The awkward tonality of their framed movements is matched by the opening swirl of strings from Gypsophile’s “The One I Dream Of” (2012) on the soundtrack. The song and the camera abruptly decelerate to an acoustic guitar and the vocalist’s entrance: “You are a sun / You are a sea.”

They awake from a postcoital nap and go grocery shopping for dinner. As they walk back to Micah’s apartment from the Rainbow Grocery in the Mission District, an urban history of San Francisco, working-class communities, bohemianism, venture capital, and a dotcom boom trails them. The camera’s handheld observations from an obstructed distance tracks them from across the street as they move down the sidewalk. The sound of a group talking begins to rise over the ambient sounds of the city as they draw near the open door of a storefront. They stop at the doorway and look in as the film cuts to the interior. Micah and Jo are at the AIDS Housing Alliance and become outside observers of a Housing Rights Committee meeting (fig. 4.11).

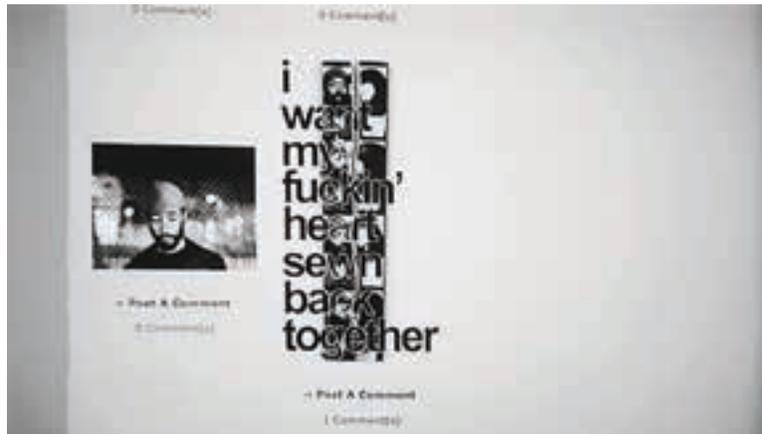


FIG 4.10 “I want my fuckin’ heart sewn back together.” *Medicine for Melancholy* (Barry Jenkins, 2008).



FIG 4.11 Housing Rights Committee. *Medicine for Melancholy* (Barry Jenkins, 2008).

Tightly framed on the faces of individual speakers, the series of shots features a range of people and opinions. The first speaker notes:

Property values mean more than human lives . . . I think that’s what happened in the Castro. As the upscale people moved in, the attitudes became, you know, more of the attitudes of the upper class. There is this sense in this town that we are becoming a city of the very rich and the very poor. We all know people have been pushed out at an alarming rate. I mean, I would say thousands and thousands of people have been pushed out in

the last twelve years from mainly the eastern side of the city where all the renters are.

A collectivity gathered and articulating a time of crisis, the choral montage addresses how rent control went unmentioned in the previous mayoral campaign. They display frustration and skepticism with redevelopment claims of market-rate condominium projects coexisting alongside what is left of the once majority black population of Bayview, a historically segregated and marginalized section of San Francisco near the former Hunters Point Naval Shipyard: “You know what’s gonna go, and it ain’t gonna be the market-rate condos. We’re already seeing that Bayview is gonna go the way that Fillmore did and they’re gonna gentrify the neighborhood and push out the people who are living there now and bring in more upscale people.”

The exchange points to how the escalating loss of affordable housing in San Francisco has forced people out of the city to the East Bay and beyond (e.g., Richmond, Oakland, Vallejo). This trend creates a forced exodus of East Bay residents as more people escape the unsustainability of life in San Francisco. The closing comment of the sequence sums up the distressing nature of the crisis: “There’s a ballot initiative that supposedly is about eminent domain issues but actually will repeal rent control throughout the state. So San Francisco could lose rent control next June. Think of over 350,000 apartments suddenly losing rent control in San Francisco and all the people that could get displaced potentially by something like that. As far as I’m concerned, it’s the end of the whole East Side of San Francisco. The whole East Side will just gentrify overnight, and all of the great things we love about San Francisco would be gone overnight.”⁴⁸ The conceit of Micah and Jo bearing witness to the unscripted *vérité* of the community meeting contextualizes and amends the urgency of their coupling with the crisis of impending displacement. Yet while the camera crosses the threshold to the assembly, the couple remains outside. The sequence ends with a cut to Micah and Jo on a high plain looking out at City Hall in the distance, out of earshot of the community meeting yet inhabiting the conversation. They stand quietly on a hilltop watching an emergency unfold below them.

Gentrification urges discussion of how urban renewal displaced ethnic, working-class, and poor communities for the sake of luring a new consumer citizen to the city with signals of revitalization and new channels of consumption.⁴⁹ But these revitalized zones of capital are no longer dependent on a new middle class, as was the gentrification model of the late twentieth century.

Instead the targets are a more lucrative consumer-citizen: the upper class, if not the 1 percent. As has always been the case, frontier rhetoric abounds as the authorization for how capital enacts deterritorialization measures. In the collateral context of the gentrification of the Lower East Side in New York City Neil Smith notes, “Whereas the myth of the frontier is an invention that rationalizes the violence of gentrification and displacement, the everyday frontier on which the myth is hung is the stark product of entrepreneurial exploitation.”⁵⁰ With growing frequency, redevelopment initiatives generate unequal access to new circuits of capital and rationalize the displacement of established communities.

The grievances of the group inform, and to some extent guide, Micah’s lifeworld view and his romantic overtures. Anne Cheng queries, “How does an individual go from being a subject of grief to being a subject of grievance? What political and psychical gains or losses transpire in the process?”⁵¹ Might his pursuit of Jo in the shadow of melancholy distend the strict sense of loss as the infinite revisiting loss as a quantifiable cure?⁵² Cheng deduces that melancholy acts as regulation and prescription: “We might then say that melancholia does not simply denote a *condition* of grief but is rather, a *legislation* of grief.”⁵³ Micah’s measure of loss concerns the city in manifold ways and trails his overtures to Jo. In this way, the film recounts grievance with an arcing urgency that is particularly mobilized around spatial and black cultural measures of loss and residuals.

All Tomorrow’s Parties

As Micah and Jo close in on twenty-four hours together, the film has focused on a place of urban development and erasure while following the calibrating between raced subjects and a courting of black love. Returning to the apartment and easing into a mellow domesticity, they cook dinner, drink wine, smoke weed, laugh, and continue to endear themselves to one another. In splashes throughout the film, Micah has articulated the history of San Francisco and *his* San Francisco, a city of memory and experience. Yet the film’s provocation of love and crisis shifts from an elusive sense of loss to the exact terms of a dwindling black population in San Francisco. This shift begins innocently enough with Micah fixing the brakes on Jo’s bike. As he encourages her to switch to a fixed-gear cycle the conversation and a dialectical tension of history, memory, desire, and place trails in such a way to suggest that he intends to fix more than just her bike (fig. 4.12).