Directed by Shirikiana Aina

Producer: S. Aina

Screenwriter: S. Aina

Cinematographers: Ellen Sumter, Norma Blalock

Editor: S. Aina

With: Lester Wakefield (narrator)

16mm, color, 33 min.

The Children of the Revolution: Images of Youth in *Killer of Sheep* and *Brick by Brick*

by Dorothy Hendricks

Much has already been written about the aesthetics of the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers, and certainly there's much to say about the artistry of the films and the affect that viewing them affords. I'd like to focus on the recurring images of children in two of the L.A. Rebellion films, Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (US, 1977) and Shirikiana Aina's *Brick by Brick* (US, 1982). While I resist positing that they create some kind of through line demarking similarity between artists and films, I'd like to think through the idea that these captured moments of childhood destabilize identity and consistently underline the fluidity of spaces, bodies, and time itself.

Charles Burnett's well known film, *Killer of Sheep*, offers riveting imagery of children playing on train tracks, abandoned yards, and against fences. These moments of free play are eerily out of place with the tone of the film and certainly out of step with the adult realities of looming despair. While these particular scenes read as symbolic in relation to the plot, it is imperative to note that these sequences serve no purpose in furthering the actual storyline; rather, they are marked by their offness and, at times, surreal qualities. Take for example a scene in which a young boy, standing against a metal fence, looks to his left, down a sidewalk, and watches a girl with a dog mask walk toward him. She gives no explanation as to why she's wearing the mask as she leans against the fence, her hand in the dog's mouth hole, and he barely looks up at her as she moves toward him. We might also look at the children running through the confines of their neighborhood and playing in the empty dirt yard as moments that are severed from the rest of the film by their surreal qualities.

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Free play has no real form and, in the diegesis of the film, it happens outside of any real time—outside of the diegetic time that governs the economy of survival that the adults are restricted to. Just as the train tracks are cruel reminders of the economic realities, the children playing on them call attention to the fact that this is a place outside of both the real time laid out by the film or the time of production as understood by viewers. Politically urgent Watts falls away suddenly, and the children mark out a time that resists any kind of linear coherence. Unlike their adult counterparts, the children move easily between inside and outside spaces as seen in sequences in which they descend staircases, ascend out of holes, underscoring their ability to bridge the two. Shirikiana Aina's *Brick by Brick* is a stark contrast in genre. Her film depicts the late 1970's effects and local reaction to the gentrification of Washington, D.C. through interviews and footage from the actual time period. While her piece is a documentary, it is infused with artistry and a compelling use of sound. Voices overlap sporadically through the piece and the overlapping creates a texture of displacement and uncertainty. Aina makes her point of view on urban gentrification obvious, interviewing elderly women being pushed out through ever-increasing rents, families living six to a room, and residents losing their homes of twenty years because of the finely orchestrated corporate push to raise rents and make neighborhoods attractive to businesses. The film gives the residents a platform to voice their experiences and triumph in founding the Seaton Street Project, a movement that unified long-time tenants in efforts to buy their homes.

The ending of the film, while moving and hopeful, is hardly a bookend to the arguments over gentrification. In terms of our focus on *liquid blackness* and the problematic practice of separating blackness from actual black bodies, recent developments in urban gentrification seem eerily connected. Referring back to Henry Elam's description of the separation of "black cool"[1] from actual black bodies, we can't deny that this negotiation is in constant play across mediums, but recent reactions to gentrification uncover the same discrepancy being practiced in physical spaces. Poor black neighborhoods from New Orleans to Washington, D.C. are being remade safer, more attractive to the up-and-coming wage earners; however the aura of authenticity (Elam's "black cool") is now an essential part of the attraction. Reflecting on this problematic piece of modern-day gentrification, Stephen A. Crockett writes on the recent rebuilding of D.C.,

> In a six-block stretch, we have Brixton, Busboys and Poets, Eatonville, Patty Boom Boom, Blackbyrd and Marvin. All are based on some facet of black history, some memory of blackness that feels artificially done and palatable. Does it matter that the owners aren't black? Maybe. Does it matter that these places slid in around the time that black folks slid out? Maybe. Indeed, some might argue that these hip spots are actually preserving black culture, not stealing it.[2]

In a response to Crockett, Garance Franke-Ruta discusses corporate appropriation (and commodification) of black history and culture in her article, "The Politics of the Urban Comeback: Gentrification and Culture in D.C.," but she resists the delineation and implication of good/bad that Crockett lays out, instead articulating the positivity of safer streets and a more multi-cultural demographic.[3] While the discourse surrounding this particular location is certainly rich and provocative, I think Crockett's commentary on a neighborhood essentially remade with "loving black cool without loving black people" as part of its motto might play an important role in the further theorizing and discussion of Elam's thesis.

Returning to Aina's film, which reads like a triumph against the recent machinations of gentrification, and also to the texture of displacement, the intent is not to outline the debate surrounding urban gentrification but rather to present the experience as a series of multiple separations between people and places and, perhaps just as problematic, the filtering of auras and bodies.

In addition to the political argument that her piece makes, I think there is also the possibility of reading youth as a resistant presence in her film. An interview with a woman living in a basement surrounded by her children who move uncoached in and out of the frame is particularly interesting. While the woman explains the hardships of displacement, her children's voices act as backdrop and soundtrack, unadhering to the main focus of the interview. Juxtaposing this first sequence with one in which children play in the Christopher Columbus Memorial Fountain set to sounds of soldiers, or another that shows them walking while "Ol' Man River" plays, it seems that even while they are a part of overarching meanings, their actions resist definition. The instrumental plays while a patriarch of the neighborhood talks and laughs while surrounded by children, but then we leave him and follow the kids as they play and chase each other around the pedestal of the Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial in Lincoln Park. While the struggles against the landlords reflect the song's despair, and we might read the circular motion of the play group as another reminder of systematic oppression, the joyful ownership the children exert over the monument directly opposes the first reading in a provocative way that resists the tone of the scene. Time is unquantifiable in these scenes. Inside the small basement apartment there is no way to know if it is day or night, if the street is silent or busy. Similarly, in seeing the fountain, we cannot know how this scene fits in with the rest—it is a stolen moment, outside of the time of the film. The free play is in direct opposition to the stifling actions of the landlords and the housing regulatory policies in general. These images of the D.C. youth resist the shearing of aura from body, insisting that the two are one and the same.

All of these are lovely moments, certainly visually striking, but what I keep coming back to is the possibility that these sequences might speak to questions of fluidity and, ultimately, resistance. There is something inherently unknowable about these images, something that remains just outside, just beyond. The surreal quality of place and time is just one aspect of this ambiguity, but there is also the ubiquity of the children. *Brick by Brick* resonates with the soundtrack of children's voices; they are everywhere even though they aren't the film's focus. *Killer of Sheep* is grounded in the world of children and of play, always coming back to a perspective that is never seemingly driven by definitive motivations. Not only do these particular images disrupt the more central narratives of the films, but they also begin to suggest the permeability and fluidity available to imaging black bodies and experiences. Part of the importance of the L.A. Rebellion as a body of works resonates from these sequences focused on children, not only as visual reminders of the future, but also as visual possibilities for filmic blackness.

[1]Harry J. Elam, Jr., "Change Clothes and Go: A Postscript to Postblackness," in *Black Cultural Traffic. Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*, eds. Harry J. Elam, Jr. and Jackson Kennell (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 386.

[2]Stephen A. Crockett Jr, "The Brixton: It's New, Happening and Another Example of African-American Historical 'swagger-Jacking,'" *The Washington Post* - Blogs, August 3, 2012, accessed 2 January 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/therootdc/post/the-brixton-its-new-happening-and-another-example-of-african-american-historical-swagger-jacking/2012/08/03/b189b254-dcee-11e1-a894-af35ab98c616_blog.html.

[3]Garance Franke-Ruta, "The Politics of the Urban Comeback: Gentrification and Culture in D.C.," *The Atlantic*, 10 August 2012, accessed 2 January 2014.