

What Happens When Your Hood Is the Last Stop on the White Flight Express?

Taigi Smith

When I think of home, I envision a place where memories and wounds run deep like murky rivers, a place where dreams sing like unfinished songs, the soil where we lay our roots and our heads. San Francisco's Mission District was the place I called home, a close-knit community where poor and working-class folks lived side by side while struggling to obtain a piece of Americana. After two years of living in New York City, I am ready to return home. It is almost Thanksgiving and between trips on the D train and fifteen-hour work days, I barely feel the autumn leaves beneath my feet in Brooklyn. My body shivers from the November chill, while my nose, red from wind-burn, runs uncontrollably. I find myself wishing for the comforts of home and smile: In a few days I will be in San Francisco, sitting at my mother's table, full of sweet potatoes, pasta and, if I'm lucky, turkey. At forty-five years old, my mother is still unconventional and has yet to cook a traditional Thanksgiving dinner. She faithfully replaces the turkey with a simpler bird: Cornish hen.

Will my mother, who like me, spent several years in New York,

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recognize that at twenty-four years old, I have found myself on the brink of insanity, unsure of where the next year, let alone my entire life, will lead me? Will she be able to see that working at a TV station has made me aggressive, competitive and edgy, or will she be deceived by my nice clothes, make-believe smile and pleasant demeanor? I am heading home, to the streets of the Mission, in search of my comfort zone, Shotwell Street, where the memories are good and the streets familiar.

In the summer of 1980, I was a tall, skinny, eight-year-old, with big feet and wild braids. My friends and I gathered at our usual spot on Twentieth and Shotwell to amuse ourselves. There wasn't much to do during the long days of summer. We were the children of bus drivers, housekeepers, migrant workers, the unemployed and the mentally ill. Most of our mothers were raising us alone and struggled, like single moms do, to provide us with the basics. The mothers of the Mission worked long days to afford simple things for us, like Top Ramen, notebooks for school and shoes that fit. They weren't afraid to scream our names from their windows or yell at us in public.

We lived together on this block surrounded by automotive shops and single-family homes in the heart of the Mission, America's Latino pit stop for high hopes and big dreams. Some families had come seeking refuge from the bloody wars that had ravaged El Salvador and Nicaragua during the 1980s, while others had immigrated toward *el Norte* to escape the desperation of Mexico's barrios. My mother, then a twenty-four-year-old single-parent, found the Mission through a friend, and although she'd never admit it, Moms was a hippie seeking

solace from the craziness of the Haight-Ashbury, the legendary stomping ground of the Grateful Dead and reefer-toking flower children. She acted like a womanist even then and didn't know it. I consider her a womanist because of her strength. She has run more than twenty-five marathons in her lifetime, and she still logs about fifty miles a week. She raised me with a loud voice and a burning passion, as if her life depended on my failure or success. She raised me on her own, without welfare and with an intensity that I've never been able to replicate. She was gutsy enough to hitch a ride across country to forge a better life for herself and me, and for this, she remains my hero.

Moms convinced the owner of our building to rent her a one-bedroom apartment for less than \$200 dollars a month. We were one of a handful of black families in the Mission then, so it was almost impossible not to notice us. I learned how to make quesadillas on an open flame at my friend Marcy's house while her mother spoke to me in Spanish. Most mornings, I would wake up to the sounds of Mexican ballads blasting soothingly from the building next door. Even today, I can still hear the sounds of wailing mariachis playing guitar and singing songs *de amor*. I always knew I was different than many of my Mexican friends and neighbors; we spoke different languages and ate different foods. But I never felt out of place in the Mission. As children of the Mission, we were raised to love and accept each other. Even today, as adults, we remain friends.

The Mission of the 1980s was a place filled with music and dance. On the far corner of Twentieth and Shotwell was an old garage that had been transformed into a dance studio. For months you could hear the

sounds of Brazilian drums resonating from the walls of a once vacant garage. At night women and men would emerge from the building salty with sweat, glistening and seemingly exhausted. You could hear them chattering incessantly, in Spanish and English about Carnaval, the Mission's answer to the legendary Rio de Janeiro annual event. For months dancers packed the studios that laced the Mission to practice for the twenty-four-hour festival of samba, salsa and steel drumming.

During Carnaval the neighborhood women transformed themselves with fifty-foot feathered headpieces and barely-there thong bikinis to parade down Mission Street twisting, gyrating, shimmying and singing. A woman could take off her bikini top and flaunt her breasts without embarrassment or inhibition during this raw celebration of femininity and womanhood. It was not until I, at twelve, put on my own bikini and feathers and danced with the Brazilian troupe *Batucaje'* that I truly felt the electricity generated when women of color come together to celebrate themselves as beautiful, cultural and creative beings. Here we could dance, sing, sweat and flaunt ourselves and our bodies like no other time. This was Carnaval.

I also remember the rallies on Twenty-Fourth and Mission during the eighties and the sounds of political activists demanding freedom, shouting, "No More, No More, U.S. out of El Salvador!" They were white, Latino, young and old—most of all, they were loud and unrelenting. Many were women, unafraid of showing civil disobedience and unfazed by the threat of arrest. Who would have thought that almost twenty years later, these same women would be fighting against land developers to keep the neighborhood they called home?

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I finally made it home for Thanksgiving, but something strange had happened to the Mission. I had only been away for two years, but it had been transformed into a place I found hard to navigate or recognize. Many of my childhood friends had already disappeared, and some Latino families I grew up with were nowhere to be found. The brown faces had diminished, and I was trapped in an unfamiliar scene filled with Caucasoids and trendy bars. It was gentrification.

Gentrification: The displacement of poor women and people of color. The raising of rents and the eradication of single, poor and working-class women from neighborhoods once considered unsavory by people who didn't live there. The demolition of housing projects. A money-driven process in which landowners and developers push people (in this case, many of them single mothers) out of their homes without thinking about where they will go. Gentrification is a premeditated process in which an imaginary bleach is poured on a community and the only remaining color left in that community is white . . . only the strongest coloreds survived.

The word on the street was that the neighborhood was being taken over by white people—yuppies and new media professionals who would pay exorbitant rents to reside in what the *Utne Reader* had called “One of the Trendiest Places to Live in America”—and there was nothing people of color could do. Some were going to housing court in hopes of saving lost leases, but most attempts to fight greedy landlords were unsuccessful. The neighborhood folks, many of whom had protested in the 1980s against the contras in Nicaragua, were

now feeling helpless. They were tired of fighting or simply unsure of how to protect themselves. They had seen their neighbors wage unsuccessful battles against landlords, and they were just hoping they wouldn't be next. The streets were now lined with Land Rovers and BMW's, and once seedy neighborhood bars now employed bouncers and served \$10 raspberry martinis. Abandoned warehouses had not been converted into affordable housing but instead into fancy lofts going for \$300,000 to \$1 million. The Army Street projects had been demolished, leaving hundreds of people, many of them women with children, displaced and homeless. The message was clear: It was time for the blacks and the browns to get out—the whites were moving in and that was it.

For poor single mothers, gentrification is a tactic “the system” uses to keep them down; it falls into the same category as “workfare” and “minimum wage.” Gentrification is a woman's issue, an economic issue and, most of all, a race issue. At my roots I am a womanist, as I believe in economic and social equality for all women. When I watch what has happened to my old neighborhood, I get angry because Gentrification like this is a personal attack on any woman of color who is poor, working class and trying to find an apartment in a real estate market that doesn't give a damn about single mothers, grand-mommas raising crack babies or women who speak English as a second language.

The shameful thing is that the yuppies have changed the fabric of a neighborhood that was by all accounts an affordable, great place to live. The Mission wasn't one of those neighborhoods destroyed by the

1980s crack epidemic. It wasn't a destitute community with burned-out buildings and shuttered-up storefronts, where gunshots rang out in the night. It was a cultural mecca where working-class people of color took pride in the community. The colorful murals that decorated the walls of local buildings were a testament to the rich culture of local Latino artistry, the numerous thriving *marquetas* and restaurants were living proof of a small yet growing business district. We had nightclubs, supermarkets, auto body shops, meat markets, florists, delis and clothing stores owned and operated by first- and second-generation Mexican Americans. For many of the immigrants, the Mission was a break from the poverty that had surrounded them in Mexico and El Salvador. Although the work days were long and hard, most of my neighbors were grateful for the job opportunities that came their way. At least in the United States, there was a way to support one's family.

Many of us existed in a microcosm where working for white people as cooks, housekeepers and migrant workers was a way of life. Many years later I realized this type of work was actually part of a larger system in which poor people (many of them women) did the low-level, low-paid work that no one else wanted to do. As a result of this system, most of us remained poor. Today I see that we were probably making the best out of a difficult situation. Even now, we (me and the women I grew up with) insist that we would purchase homes and raise our children in the Mission if we had the financial means—our memories of the community are that good.

The infiltration of our neighborhood by the wealthy and the

privileged is heartbreaking. To act as if our neighborhood is something that they needed to "clean up" or "take back" is insulting. It is as if our new neighbors deny that our businesses, familial relationships and community ever really existed in the first place. Many of the white people who have moved into the Mission see us in stereotypical terms—as immigrants, as people with thick accents and brown skin, as people who play loud music and collect welfare. In essence, they ignore who we really are. Our new neighbors can't see that our homes are impeccably clean and that many of the Latino families here are headed by both a mother *and* a father. And although we barely scrape by at times, we go to work and pay our bills. They want to believe we are all on welfare, destined to become single mothers and crack addicts. The truth is, however, that most of us have proven them wrong. We learned well on Shotwell Street from our single mothers and other women: Teena is now a sheriff, Maricela a police officer, Sonia a journalist at the *San Francisco Chronicle* and I am a writer and a producer. None of us grew up to be statistics.

I started calling myself a womanist while attending Mills College in Oakland, California. Mills, a liberal arts women's college, catered to families who could pay \$22,000 a year. I was able to afford it thanks to a tremendous financial aid package. Many of the white women at Mills who called themselves feminists didn't understand my experiences as a black woman. In women's studies classes, for example, the individual histories and struggles of black women were often ignored.

It was in an African-American women's studies class that I learned the word "womanist." Dr. Dorothy Tsuruta was at the time the most progressive (and only!) full-time African-American professor at the Mills. She was regularly criticized because many of the white women who attended her classes felt alienated. They became upset and felt excluded when Dorothy told them that the term womanism, as defined by Alice Walker, was meant specifically for women of color. Dorothy was eventually fired from Mills for shaking up a system that really wasn't in the business of liberating young, black minds.

For the black girls at Mills, Dorothy was like manna for our culturally starved souls. She spoke to us in ways we understood, and most important, she recognized it was tortuous for us to attend a college where we were so widely misunderstood. I remember when a white female English professor who called herself a feminist declared that slaves had a special bond with their masters that many of us couldn't understand. I was the only African American in the class, and I was stunned by this statement. I declared myself a womanist when I realized that white women's feminism really didn't speak to my needs as the daughter of a black, single, domestic worker. I felt that, historically, white women were working hard to liberate themselves from housework and childcare, while women of color got stuck cleaning their kitchens and raising their babies. When I realized that feminism largely liberated white women at the economic and social expense of women of color, I knew I was fundamentally unable to call myself a feminist.

I really don't need another white feminist to tell me that poverty,

teen pregnancy, infant mortality, AIDS, unemployment and gentrification are class issues. I was once on the board of a progressive, young women's reproductive rights organization, and the other board members were very wealthy white women who viewed many of the problems of women of color as "class issues." We would spend hours talking about how white and black women had a hard time getting along because of our class differences. As a black woman, however, my problems have always been directly connected to race; for me, class is secondary. Most white feminists I've encountered seem to think class is the source of all problems. While the roots of gentrification have as much to do with class as with race, it is hard to ignore that most of the people being driven out of neighborhoods are not poor whites in Appalachia; rather, they are the poor blacks and browns in the inner city melting pots. Some would argue that gentrification only occurs in major cities, but as a news producer, I've traveled around the country. I can say firsthand that gentrification is kicking people of color out of communities everywhere. From Saint Paul, Minnesota, to the outskirts of Louisiana, to the South Side of Chicago, to the flatlands of East Oakland, we're being evicted from our communities.

When I returned home to the Mission, I attended the open house of a new loft building opening up on Shotwell Street. I was the only black person there. Because I've had access to higher education, I am now able to support myself and live a middle-class lifestyle, but even if I had the money to live in the Mission, I wonder how many landlords wouldn't rent to me as a young, single, black woman. The other

people who had come to the opening were white, and they looked at me as if I didn't belong there. I felt as if they wouldn't want me as a neighbor even if I had the money to live among them. While I represented everything they wanted to get away from, it was ironic that they were trying to move into a neighborhood that was historically black and brown.

I've tried hard to intellectualize gentrification, but the harder I try, the more complicated it becomes. When I was looking for an apartment in Park Slope, Brooklyn, I was making enough to rent a studio off Seventh Avenue, yet all of the real estate agents I spoke with blatantly refused to show me apartments in the pristine, lily-white neighborhood. They kept taking me to Prospect Heights and Fort Greene, which at the time were mostly black neighborhoods. Gentrification is more about the color of my skin than the money in my pocket.

Although my building in San Francisco had been spared from the claws of wealthy land bandits, it was a cultural war zone, spurred on by economic and racial disparities. In fact, the entire community had become a war zone, where guerrilla tactics were the weapons of choice. Someone had posted signs all over the neighborhood urging people to deface the live/work lofts, scrape up the fancy, high-priced vehicles that now lined their streets and flatten yuppie tires. This vigilante had become a sort of folk hero, and the signs were part of an underground movement called the Urban Yuppie Eradication Project. The posters urged fellow Missionites to burn down the million-dollar lofts and make life hell for the new pioneers. In their own

defense the yuppies held a rally, ironically, on the corner of Twenty-Fourth and Mission—the home of the infamous political protests of the 1980s. Although the local media came out for the event, only a few yuppies were brave enough to show up.

My mother had formed a sort of guerrilla coalition in her building. Along with other people of color, she had vowed to fill vacant apartments with friends and family when they heard that their new neighbors wanted to rent to filmmakers, writers and other artist types. The new renters were communicating via e-mail with the building manager to secure any vacancies, and although the plan almost worked, they failed to fully homogenize the building. It was these people who viewed me with suspicion when I returned to Shotwell Street. Their icy glares easily translated into “What are you doing here?” They were suspicious of the black girl “loitering” around the building. It really didn't matter that I had spent almost twenty years of my life there. They didn't care that I was a published writer, a successful TV producer or a graduate of Mills College. To them I was another black woman they were trying to get out of the neighborhood. I needed so badly to say, “This is my neighborhood. I grew up here,” but my anger silenced me.

More than the air of wealth that now permeates the neighborhood, it is the attitude of superiority that angers me. It is the look of hate that aggravates me, the icy glare that says, “We are willing to take over this neighborhood at all costs.” It leaves me wondering about the future of my friends and neighbors. I realize that women of color may never have a place to truly call our own. At times I think about returning home to

the old neighborhood to organize my former neighbors, but doing that would mean giving up the life I've worked so hard to create in New York.

As my mother's only child, it is my responsibility to make sure she will always have a place to live, whether that be in San Francisco or elsewhere. It angers me that someone's greed could take away the apartment she has called home for almost thirty years. Countless women are grappling with having their rented apartments put on the auction block without regard for where they will go next. And the chances are that the person who buys that building/apartment/duplex will probably be a white person with more power and a lot more money. What is to become of all the other mothers and grandmothers in the Mission whose children have neither the income nor the knowledge to help?

I pay more than a thousand dollars a month to live in a Brooklyn neighborhood where the amenities include a round-the-clock liquor store, a marijuana delivery service, illegal all-night gambling and numerous buildings for Section 8 families and people on welfare. My building is earmarked for upwardly mobile professionals and white people. Throughout the neighborhood, signs of "revitalization" are cropping up. White kids walk smugly down the street, sometimes riding rickety bikes or skateboards. Internet businesses are opening up alongside yoga studios, and I have a fully renovated apartment with superfast T-1 Internet access. I am on the cusp of the revitalization, and although I have an amazing apartment in the midst of the hood,

I am more than conscious of the fact that the low-income women around me may not be here for long.

I am sure they look at me and the other professionals moving in and wonder "What are they doing here?" Do my low-income neighbors realize that the new buildings being put up like wildfire are not for people like them but for people like me, who can afford to pay inflated rents for renovated apartments in the hood? I am keenly aware of exactly what is happening, and I realize that neighborhoods don't have to be financially rich to be culturally vibrant, and that white people moving into poor neighborhoods do little good for the people that already live there. When white people move into black neighborhoods, the police presence increases, cafés pop up and neighborhood bodegas start ordering the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*. You rarely see low-income housing built alongside million-dollar lofts or social service centers built next to yoga studios. When I think about this, I am caught somewhere in the middle, because although I have the money to live in a neighborhood that is being gentrified, I still hear the words my black real estate agent whispered to me: "Just think of this as your own little castle in the hood."

I don't want them to take over my San Francisco neighborhood, but five thousand miles away, in another state and another community, I "am on the front lines of gentrification," as a neighbor so politely put it. When I come home at night and see the crackheads loitering in front of the building next door, I realize I may have switched sides in this fight. When I dodge cracked glass and litter when walking my dog, I realize that this neighborhood really could use a facelift

and that the yoga center that just opened up on the corner is a welcome change from the abandoned building it used to be.

Parts of my Brooklyn neighborhood are symbolic of what the media and sociologists say is wrong with "the inner city." I live on a block where the police don't arrest drug dealers who peddle crack in broad daylight, where young black men drive around in huge SUVs but barely speak grammatically correct English, where I see the same brothas every day standing on the street corners, doing absolutely nothing. They don't hustle or harass me but instead politely say "hello," as if they've accepted me. I feel strained by my situation. While I am intimately aware of what is happening to my new neighborhood, I feel powerless. I've been in Brooklyn long enough to know that although it is not the most savory neighborhood, it is a community where people feel connected, where the old folks know each other, where neighbors still chat. But sometimes I feel like telling the young men on the corner, "Get the hell off the street! Don't you see that life is passing you by? Don't you see this is what *they* expect *you* to do? Don't you see they're moving in and in a few years, you're gonna have to get *out*?"

In my neighborhood men shoot each other, the sidewalks are cracked and many of the buildings are abandoned, and I've witnessed two drug raids from my bedroom window. When I come home at night, I put on my sweatpants and walk my tiny dog on littered sidewalks, past tomboys in goosedown coats doing each other's hair on stoops of aging brownstones. When I see these girls, I remember my own childhood and think that they deserve more than this. They

deserve a neighborhood that is clean and safe and provides some hope, a place where they can learn that some dreams do come true and that Prince Charming doesn't drive an Expedition and sell weed to his friends.

Walking the streets, I realize my neighbors and I are alike in many ways. We like the same foods, the same music, and most important, we are a group of African-American people living together in a neighborhood that is on the verge of change. But in the end we are also very different. If the rents go up, I will have options and they may not. They may have to move and I will get to stay. Although we look the same, we are different. We are connected by race but remain separated by a slip of paper called a college degree. Our block, our hood, our neighborhood has become the next stop on the White Flight Express.

Fast forward. It is 1998. I sip chocolate martinis in what was once an immigrant's watering hole. Ironically, the bar is now called Sacrifice. A jukebox replaces the mariachis and top-shelf liquor takes the place of Night Train. An old flame, Ron is trying to convince me to marry him. I'm thinking I haven't seen this guy in years, but I thank him for his compliment. And then I see a short man, a few inches over five feet and wearing dirty gray pants and a button-down shirt. His eyes are glazed over and he is barely able to stand. He is singing a song and I recognize the accent, from Juarez or Tijuana. He mumbles something profane in Spanish and appears to be confused by the sea of white faces (and me!).

He searches the room for his *compadres*, and it becomes evident

that this place he had once known so well is now as foreign as it is to me. He blinks his eyes a few times and tries to shake himself from this drunken haze but soon realizes that what he is seeing is no illusion. He stares at the blond woman with the multiple tattoos and pierced lip and wonders where his friends might be. He has never seen white people in this bar and as he looks at her, I stare at him and relate to his longing for days gone by. And then he turns from her and looks at me as if to say "What are you, *una negrita*, doing here?"

We lock eyes and I allow him to see my shame while I share his sadness. I too am lost in a place I knew so well. Like the old man looking for a drink, I am saddened, disillusioned and disgusted by the changes. Like him, I also feel powerless. He glances around a bit more, struggles to his feet, curses a few words in *Español*, throws down his tequila, closes his eyes and stumbles out of the door.

HIV and Me

The Chicana Version

Stella Luna

When I was a little girl, I dreamed of being an actress. I enjoyed making up silly dances and putting on shows for my friends and family. Being the youngest of five children and arriving six years after my sister, I had the privilege of being the center of attention throughout my childhood. Our family lived in a suburb of Los Angeles that was generally classified as Mexican middle class. My father was a second-generation Mexican American who believed in strong family values and a religious foundation. As in many Mexican-American households, our family always came first. My mother wasn't allowed to work because my father believed her place was in the home taking care of our family. I never saw my mom question this arrangement, but I noticed actions that discreetly displayed her desire. For example, my sister and I weren't allowed to do any of the household chores or cooking. She would say, "One day you are going to be forced to do this stuff to keep your husband happy, so I'm not going to force you to do it now." I happily obliged, but in the back of my mind, I began to visualize marriage as the beginning of a lifelong service to others.