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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Troubling Representations of Black Masculinity in the Documentary Film *Raising Bertie*

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Abstract

In this paper we undertake a critical reading of the documentary *Raising Bertie* (2016). Directed by Margaret Byrne, the film tells the story of three poor, young Black American males living in Bertie County. In the paratextual material associated with the film, Byrne demonstrates reflexivity about stereotyping, revealing she engaged authentically with participants over a period of six years. Further, she begins the film by signalling the critical importance of situating the boys' lives in a long history of discrimination and disadvantage. However, this focus on context soon disappears, and an observational mode of filmmaking is engaged. As a result, the type of negative images of Black masculinity that have had considerable currency in popular culture are reproduced and overstated in the film. *Raising Bertie's* images of Black males as violent and criminal, and as absent and passive, are not effectively embedded in any broader narratives of disadvantage. Despite the director's intentions, the film risks positioning rural Black males as responsible for their own plight. Poverty is racialised and individualised. The problem the film presents becomes one of troublesome Black masculinity, rather than one of a racialised, economically and geographically unjust world.

Introduction

This paper draws on literature from documentary film, media studies, rural geography and sociology to examine the racialised scripting of rural poverty in the film *Raising Bertie*. Directed by Margaret Byrne, the film tells the story of three poor Black youths, Reginald Askew (Junior), David Perry (Bud) and Davonte Harrell (Dada) living in Bertie County,

North Carolina. In six years of filming Byrne developed close relationships with the young men and their families, and remained in contact with them as part of her commitment to participatory and engaged filmmaking.¹ *Raising Bertie* was praised for creating ‘empathy for the teenagers’ plight’ also for using their stories to point to ‘a larger issue’,² likewise for its understanding of ‘the intrinsic link between the political and the personal.’³

Our reading differs from these affirmative reviews. *Raising Bertie* is problematic in terms of form and in its representations of race, gender, and poverty. It begins in an expository style, with some provision of context. However, it abruptly shifts to a subjective, observational, cinémathématique mode, with some brief poetic moments thrown into the mix. At the start it appears that the film is to be about The Hive, an alternative school in Bertie established by Vivian Saunders. We learn of The Hive’s success and that it is threatened with closure. However, this storyline is not given a coherent focus. Instead, other narrative trajectories are followed, then quickly abandoned. The film also lacks defined time markers so a clear chronological sense is lost, its representations decontextualised, as Byrne intersperses the text with images from across the six years of filming.

In highlighting the problematic nature of the observational/poetic mode of *Raising Bertie* we build on earlier work in which we detail the challenges of representing the rural poor through an analysis of the documentary film *Rich Hill* (2014) by Tracy Droz Tragos and Andrew Droz Palermo.⁴ Like *Raising Bertie*, *Rich Hill* garnered praise and prizes, winning the Grand Jury Prize at the 2014 US Sundance Documentary Competition. Another observational documentary that tells the story of being poor in the non-metropolitan United States, *Rich Hill* focuses on three white teenage boys living in the small, mined-out western Missouri town after which the film is named. Our critique centres on its aestheticisation of poverty which facilitates its ‘othering’ of the poor.⁵ We contend that despite the director’s intent, the film does not challenge poverty, but instead aestheticises it, and fails to elaborate upon the complex factors creating the intractable problem of rural poverty.

While *Rich Hill* and *Raising Bertie* are similar in their poetic/observational form, they are also distinctly different. A particularly important aspect of this difference, and one which we trouble in this paper, is race. In this analysis we examine how the film’s racialisation of the rural poor reproduces populist stereotypes about Black men, Black masculinity and fatherhood: as violent and criminal, and as absent and passive. While there are some counters to these negative representations, where masculine care, concern and engagement are demonstrated, these are momentary. We argue that the overall depiction of Black masculinity is a discourse of individual failure. Before elaborating upon this argument we first provide an overview of the literature framing our analysis, and outline our methodological approach.

Background: framing our analysis

A decade ago the study of ethics in documentary film was described as an ‘emerging field’.⁶ Since then film scholars have begun to build a sophisticated and rich literature examining documentary’s multiple and complex ethical questions. At the forefront is Kate Nash who has argued for more nuanced and theoretically-engaged understandings of power in the study of ethics and documentary film.⁷ Drawing attention to the specific and potentially more amplified ethical questions that arise in observational documentary films,⁸ she advocates for an empirical turn in research on documentary film ethics that attends to participants’ experiences.⁹

In recent years such ethical questions have been specifically asked in relation to images of poverty. This is not to suggest that contestations about documenting the lives of the poor are

new. As Szorenyi states, 'the debate about photographing the poor has been ongoing since the beginnings of the socially concerned genre of documentary'.¹⁰ The iconic images of rural poverty taken by photographers of the United States Farm Security Administration in the 1930s have been afforded considerable scrutiny with critics raising issues of authenticity, and questioning the relationship between the images, New Deal ideologies and notions of the pastoral.¹¹ Elsewhere Ballerini similarly interrogated Wendy Ewald's book *Portraits and Dreams: Photographs and Stories by Children of the Appalachians* (1985) for its uncritical adoption of idyllic notions of rural familial and community norms and values, and its emphasis on individualism as a means to effect social change.¹²

However, what is different in representations of poverty today, as Carabine reminds us, is the ubiquity, mobility and immediacy of the image.¹³ Illustrative of the particular ethical challenges attendant upon contemporary documentary representations of poverty is a study by Keenaghan and Reilly examining a series of British Comic Relief films which feature celebrities visiting a range of African locations with graphic portrayals of hardship and suffering.¹⁴ Keenaghan and Reilly critique the films' creation of a Global South wherein countries of Africa appear as homogenous spaces facing the same generic problems, their inhabitants powerless and passive. Poverty is simplified and decontextualized as it is tied to the geographical region and its people, rather than situated as 'a series of unjust and unequal relationships between the Northern public and Southern communities'.¹⁵ As the authors explain, there is no challenging of spectatorial privilege and no questioning of the relationship between this privilege and the on-screen suffering.

As the Keenaghan and Reilly study demonstrates, the politics of documenting poverty intersect with the politics of documenting race. In a rural context this has typically involved examining media representations of 'white trash'. Embedded in whiteness studies, this work names and critiques whiteness as a racialised category, opening up to scrutiny not only the potential privileges of white identity, but also hierarchies of white subjectivities.¹⁶ Representative is Young's recent analysis of three documentaries set in rural Appalachia which reveals the ways in which the filmmakers connect white poverty to violence and criminality.¹⁷ This work resonates with numerous other studies of documentary films featuring the rural white working class which have demonstrated that this is a group that continues to be represented as an object of disgust and failure.¹⁸

While the impoverished white male subject recurs in documentary representations of rural poverty, the poor Black male subject is less visible, typically imagined in popular culture as living in urban ghettos.¹⁹ While depictions of Black masculinity are fluid and shifting, as Kocic argues in charting the emergence of the 'Black hero',²⁰ there is a long history of depicting Black men on-screen as either hypermasculine and hypersexual beings or socially feminized, passive and helpless.²¹ Such negative stereotyping often includes an association with criminal behaviour, and the promotion of a violent Black masculinity 'defined mainly by an urban aesthetic, a nihilist attitude and an aggressive posturing'.²² *Raising Bertie* is thus situated in a socio-cultural field which has not only typically pathologised poverty, but also Black masculinities.

The methodological approach we adopt situates *Raising Bertie* within its socio-cultural contexts and within the frame of ethical inquiry.²³ We undertook repeated readings of the film while engaging in paratextual material associated with the film such as reviews and interviews with the film's director and producer. We also read scholarly material which engaged with themes of the film such as rural poverty, rural education and rural racism in the United States. Across multiple viewings of the documentary we made notes about the ways in which

‘meanings accumulate, slip and shift’ in the film.²⁴ We then shared and debated our reflections as part of a larger analytical discussion in which we identified key issues requiring additional scrutiny and/or assessed differing interpretations and raised alternative perspectives. An important dimension of this process was a reflexive engagement with our own subjectivities, as white, middle-class, middle-aged Australian women.²⁵ Cognisant that our lives are far removed from those of the young men whose stories Byrne tells, and that any reading of a text is partial, we questioned our assumptions, knowledge and viewpoints.

Race and *Raising Bertie*

In promoting the film Byrne emphasised the importance of race, both to the film and to her personally. She references her own positionality as a (white) woman married to an ‘African man who faced many of the same challenges that the boys did’.²⁶ The centrality of race is also signalled in the film’s opening moments. Following the beginning credits a quotation from James Baldwin’s first book of essays, *Notes on a Native Son, 1955*, appears in white against a Black screen. The text reads: ‘I am what time, circumstance, history, have made me, certainly, but I am also, much more than that. So are we all’.²⁷ As Rusk observes, in his writing Baldwin recounted his experiences of ‘otherness’ as a Black African-American man, alongside acting as an ‘observer’ and ‘a critic’ of white America. He emphasises the deep historical roots of Black disadvantage, but then argues that he is far more than the past. He tells readers that Black experiences are unique, complex and diverse before adding a message of inclusivity, reminding his audience that the same could be said for all of humankind.²⁸

The important themes in the short quotation that Byrne uses to introduce her film seem to fade with the opening credits. For example, while footage of farming land is interspersed throughout the film, the links between contemporary experiences of Black poverty in the rural South, and the long history of marginalisation, dispossession, exploitation and discrimination against Black farmers and farm workers are ignored.²⁹

All three boys have ties to the land. When we first meet Junior he is an optimistic seventeen-year-old living with his mother Cheryl in a small house next to fields of corn. We are not told who owns the fields, but it seems unlikely that they belong to Cheryl, given that she works three jobs and is later bankrupted, her house repossessed when she cannot repay a loan. Elsewhere we see Bud driving a picker harvesting corn, and, later in the film, chipping weeds amongst rows of crops. Bud’s dream is to be a landscape architect. He is shown working in yards alongside his father and driving between jobs past large plantation-style homes. Byrne does not make explicit the relationship between the boys’ impoverished circumstances and the historical dynamics of race relations which have so extensively restricted economic opportunities for Black Americans in the South. The quotation from Baldwin invites us to understand that the past informs the present. Yet the boys’ biographies are given neither an historical nor a contemporary socio-economic context, such as how global, national and state economic policies entrench rural poverty for Black Americans, their effects aggravated since the 2009 recession.³⁰

Alongside the opening quotation, race is directly referenced only four more times—twice by Vivian Saunders, founder and Executive Director of The Hive, an alternate schooling program in the town. She recalls ‘There were so many African American boys walking the street and I was saying to myself, “We got to find a way to get you babies back in school”’. In expounding on her philosophy for The Hive she references her own past as daughter of a local tenant farmer, also current challenges facing young Black men:

African American males have had the perception that they have to prove themselves... Black boy starting proving themselves by violence... by joining gangs so we had to be brainwashing them by telling them you don't have to prove yourself to anybody we remove their entire past and we're going to put Mr in front of your name instead of a DOC number in front of your name. We're a quarter of a mile from the jail and I often tell the boys, 'You got a choice. You can be educated at 117 Country Farm Road or 219 Country Farm Road. Take your choice'.

Despite Vivian's sympathetic reading of the plight of young Black men, and her focus on building their confidence and pride, her final statement speaks to a neoliberal discourse of individualism and choice, foregrounded in the film. Soon after this scene we are shown a classroom at The Hive filled with young Black men watching an address by President Obama to the nation's school children on 7 September 2009. Controversial amongst conservatives who accused Obama of politicising education and indoctrinating students into socialism,³¹ the speech does not mention race. However, as the title 'You Make Your Own Future' suggests, it promulgates a neoliberal rhetoric of self-responsibility, choice and individualism.³² Obama acknowledges factors which may limit equity in education before dismissing them, championing instead the idea that success in schooling is a matter of personal commitment. As the Bertie students watch, President Obama says:

I know many of you have challenges in your life that make it hard to focus on your schoolwork. Maybe you don't have adults in your life to give you the support you need. Maybe you live in a neighbourhood where you don't feel safe but at the end of the day the circumstances of your life, what you look like, where you come from, how much money you have, there is no excuse for not trying.

It is possible that Byrne intends the viewer to see the emptiness of Obama's claims for young Black men born in poverty in Bertie, as she cuts from the classroom scene to a sign hanging in a Bertie street. The sign features an American flag pictured against flower blossoms and the words 'God Bless America'. In the next shot we are shown an image of a street of houses in Bertie, where curb-side detritus fronts the house most prominently framed. In these moments Byrne is perhaps signalling the inextricable connection between neoliberal discourse and the mythology of the American dream, likewise the impossibility and hollowness of this dream in terms of everyday life in Bertie.

In the next scene, race is explicitly mentioned in the film for the third time. Here the linking of race and individual responsibility is taken up again by the Superintendent of Bertie County Schools, Dr William Crawford, who reflects on the 'unique' character of Bertie whose 'population is 80% Black', before asserting that 'our people...are in the driver's seat' and a determination 'that we change the story here'. But his statement is decontextualised from the inequities that shape life in Bertie, which is situated within a two hour drive of the Research Triangle Park—bounded by universities, equated with the knowledge economy—yet whose opportunities are limited by the fact that spending on public education in North Carolina is at the lowest end compared with other American states.³³

The final time race is mentioned directly in the film is in the Perdue chicken processing plant where Bud's mother Veronica works. This plant is Bertie's largest employer killing and dismembering thousands of birds daily. We watch Veronica as she arrives to start the day. She is capped and gowned in protective clothing, and wears headphones to reduce the overwhelming machine noise. The sound track captures the excessive noise level assaulting the viewer aurally as Veronica's voice-over, assisted with subtitles explains, 'When David was born it was a blessin' cause he was big, and light-skinned and they called him Butterball cause he

was born on Thanksgiving'.³⁴ As her voice-over ends we watch Veronica join a crowded room of women standing shoulder to shoulder in rows, sorting freshly slaughtered chickens. The sheer volume of dead chickens moving on hooks above the conveyor belts between the women is visually arresting, inviting disgust, the lingering shots of chickens fetishizing the visual.

Byrne's direct referencing of race, and explicit connection of race with historically embedded disadvantage, in *Raising Bertie* is thus confused. The use of Baldwin's quotation to bookmark the film signals that long term racial systemic discrimination continues to shape the daily lives of Black youth in rural America in the twenty-first century. However, from here the audience is given little further assistance in contextualising Black poverty in Bertie. As the negative images of Black masculinity that dominate the film are not embedded in any broader narrative of disadvantage, the film risks positioning rural Black males as responsible for their own plight. The issue becomes one of problematic Black masculinity rather than a problematic racialized, economically and geographically unjust world. This is a problematic Black masculinity of criminality and violence as well as absence and passivity.

Criminality and violence

Beyond the individual storylines of Junior, Dada and Bud the spectre of criminality hovers over the film in that we are told there are 27 prisons within a 100-mile radius of Bertie County.³⁵ The economic and social implication of having multiple prisons is significant and this significance resonates in the film's imagery.

A key visual motif in *Raising Bertie* publicity images (Figure 1) is the image of three young Black men grouped in stark profile or singularly framed as shadows or silhouettes.



Figure 1 Raising Bertie, Source: Official Trailer Vimeo 2017³⁶.

These images offer unsettling connotations of criminality, mirroring photos circulated in the media of suspects in crime or referencing the style of identity photographs required by law when being taken into police custody. Most particularly, they reference 'mug shots' taken of a person's face typically for police records. The seeds of potential criminality are not only planted early in the film via these images. They can be found subtly built into each of the young men's character construction, and in particular, into each of the young men's relationship with their respective fathers and male relatives. This contrasts sharply with the representation of their mothers. For example as we watch Bud cut grass with his father he explains: 'I don't want to

get married. I don't wanna get hurt no more. My mother, she by herself now. My Daddy was living with us 'til I was 15 or 16. I don't know why they split up'. As he continues to speak, the film juxtaposes images of his mother Veronica in church with those of Bud and his father packing up tools and driving off. Bud then declares: 'I'm getting a big house for me and my Mom. Everything she ever done, I want to reward her back'.

From the scene of Bud declaring respect for Veronica, Byrne then shifts her emphasis to Junior's mother Cheryl driving to work and stopping at the gas station for petrol and a scratch-it card. We watch her cleaning and caring for an elderly couple in their home; ministering to a young woman who we learn is undergoing chemotherapy and carrying cleaning implements into a Hall that carries the sign: 'No children Under 12. No loud cursing or noise. No drugs. No credit. If you break the rules you have to leave'. Cheryl is clearly exhausted after a long day. These scenes explicitly honour maternal suffering and have been positioned in the narrative to precede, and therefore contrast dramatically with a climatic fight scene (discussed later in the paper), involving Junior, Dada and half a dozen young Black men.

The lives of all three young male protagonists intersect with criminality or the potential for criminal behaviour. Junior's father resides in prison having been incarcerated for murder when Junior was three years old. His relationship with his father is one of a number of narrative threads in the film. It culminates in a traumatic scene in which Junior visits his father in prison. The prison visit is highly emotive. As an audience we are primed for tension and a subjective alignment with Junior's predicament by the preceding scene that begins with an establishing shot of a modest home behind four tall trees at twilight. We see Junior sitting on a Black couch in a lounge room filled with an unidentified middle-aged male, three young children, his mother and stepfather and watch Junior paint his niece's nails with bright red nail polish. These scenes of gentle domesticity are intercut with shots of an interview with Junior discussing the impact of being frequently whipped, in particular by his stepfather Ren:

He (Ren) can be the nicest person in the world, but he can catch a quick temper. You know you got a friendliness for your mother or your father and you sad cause they whip me, it feel like you done something wrong, you hurt them, you let them down, so they have to whip you. But I do get so many whippings you feel like they start liking it and you lose that feeling that you are hurtin them or letting them down cause you got so many whippins you like, this shit don't even hurt no fuckin more, because he don't want me so fuckin much, you know what I'm sayin? My biological Dad, I wanna go and see my dad, I want to give him a chance that he didn't give me when I was small.

The film then cuts to an establishing shot of the 'Lanesboro Correctional Institution, North Carolina Department of Corrections.' We follow Junior as he is ushered into the prison by a female prison guard and is seated at a table awaiting his father. We hear Junior's voice-over: 'It's been six years since I've seen my dad.' The camera stays focused on Junior's face and body alert with anticipation as we hear keys jangle, a door slam, and footsteps as his father approaches. Junior leans forward excitedly as his father greets him saying 'Hey, you man!'

The scene cuts to a two shot of father and son sitting across a table deep in conversation:

Junior's Dad: I don't know if you are aware of it, but I turned my life around. I'm servin' the Lord whole- heartedly now. And you know as I preach the word of the Lord to other guys, it's like you know, you got kids in the world, but you also got a bunch of kids in here, there's a lot of young kids that I'm ministering to here too.

The distance between Junior and his father is emphasised visually in the rhythmic cross cutting between them as this speech is delivered across the table. His father continues:

When I first fell into this system I believe you was seven years old. I missed a lot of years with you man. A lot, Junior: I know. [Father's voice breaks and he tearfully explains] This journey has been hard without loved ones. I prayed, 'Lord if you ever let my son come see me, I will worship you to the end of my days. That's all I ask. All I ever ask for.' And here you are.

As he finishes this speech he stands weeping and walks to Junior for a hug. In the next scene the camera follows a car travelling down a country road, and as the non-diegetic music begins, cuts to a solitary, close up profile shot of Junior, somber and contemplative as he drives.

Equivalently unsettling scenes capture Dada's brother Mickey-Mouse's arrival home from prison at the beginning of the film, and the news that he is back in prison in the film's conclusion. We know little about the dreadlocked Mickey-Mouse as he is not interviewed in the film and is only seen in brief family moments with Dada.

Bud's relationship with the criminal justice system is even more direct than that of Junior and Dada. Via scenes of his interaction with a probation officer we learn that he has been in trouble with the law. He is large in personality and size, robust and anti-authoritarian. Early in the film he explains that there is sometimes a necessity for violence: 'Like, for instance, somebody pickin' on you and you wanna stand up for yourself.' Like Junior, Bud has also experienced violence from his father. In a wretched scene he recalls being 'kicked out' of elementary school 'because people say something to me, I just flip on em'. Bud continues, 'It got so bad, so my Daddy come out there and beat me. I think when he used to beat the mess out of me all the time until I pee on myself. I be thinkin', like, I see why he done it, cause I just be so wild'.

Recurring narratives and images of Black fathers as abusive, criminal and violent are frequently intertwined in *Raising Bertie*. For example, Junior's mother, Cheryl, explains that she was 'afraid' of her former husband. Referring to his crime that resulted in his prison sentence she states: 'He beat the girl in the head with a shot gun. I often thought that could have been me'.

However, these young men are not just victims of violence, they are also perpetrators of violence. Dada and Junior, who, for the most part, are sympathetically constructed in the film, are involved in the dramatic fight scene an hour into the documentary. The sequence commences with shots of Junior participating in a drinking game with a group of young men at an undisclosed outdoor location. The sun is going down and the camera cuts to Dada watching from behind a car. Dada moves in to join the group as Junior's voice-over introduces 'Block': 'Block is our leader cause he's the oldest. I think he's about 26 or 27'. We then listen to Block say, 'Most niggers think it's a gang when I say "Block squad", but it ain't a gang. I consider everybody my family'.

Following this, the camera cuts to the young men at a new location playing basketball. Dada sits with Block watching the game while Junior continues describing Block: 'He got a high school certificate and business qualification. I don't know why he ain't got no job. I guess he in the wrong neighbourhood'. It is not clear when this interview took place – either before or after the fight. In quick succession the camera cuts to Block who is pictured sitting on a front porch. He warns, 'I ain't gonna let anyone disrespect me and I ain't gonna let nobody come at me like they Tarzan and I'm a fuckin bitch'. The camera moves to a close-up of a knuckle-buster sitting on the chair beside Block as he states: 'It ain't gonna happen'.

In the next scene a hand-held camera captures the slamming of a car door. We see Junior joining Block and others in a car as it speeds off. The young men are shouting, but it is difficult to understand what they are saying. The camera then cuts to the inside of the car and close up shots are taken of the boys' sharing alcohol while driving. The editing pace picks up building tension. The next quick cut moves the viewer to a point of view shot from inside the car, which is now stationary and parked across a road. We see, via the driver's side rear-view mirror, another group of young men standing around cars. They are not aware they are being filmed, and we are not sure who is operating the camera. Another cut in the action occurs and we are shown three figures Junior, Block and an unidentified male walking towards the property and hear a voice yell, 'Take that camera right back where you got it from'. An unknown young man lunges aggressively at the camera shouting, 'You heard me' and abruptly we see the ground as the camera is dropped down beside a leg. Images and sound continue to be recorded. As the sound of distant shouting becomes louder the camera swings back up and we hear furniture breaking. The hand-held camera then travels towards the action to record flesh on flesh fighting on a front porch. As viewers we are not told who these people are or why they are fighting. The voyeurism, sensationalism and decontextualized nature of this scene is reminiscent of crime-focused reality programming where markers of the real (such as the sound of the dropped camera) are engaged alongside ideologically-infused and generically-repetitive actions, whose stereotyped representations produce and reproduce racial assumptions for entertainment purposes.³⁷ Block is seen hitting someone and a window breaks as we hear a women's voice from the house yelling 'What the hell's going on?' Three more women emerge from the house yelling 'Cut it out'. The scene becomes more chaotic and layered as women and men congregate in the yard screaming and gesturing. The blurred vision demonstrates that the camera is clearly being jostled around and the camera person's hasty retreat is shown as our own view moves backwards down the driveway.

In the following scene it is unclear how much time has passed. Junior, Block and others are walking away from the fight, back down the street. The film cuts to a new location with Junior and the Block squad recalling the event: 'I was like going boom, bonk, pop, pop'. Junior high-fives a squad member as we are provided with some context: 'Lil P owed Block money, so we went down there and he didn't have it. So it was done. He didn't have the money. Had to be done. Had to be done'. At this moment Junior's mother Cheryl pulls up in her car. She jumps out shouting and swearing at the boys telling them that she has received a telephone call about the fight and a broken window. It appears she is unaware she is being filmed as the vision is unframed and moving erratically. In the final shots of this sequence the camera shows the Block squad playing cards and ignoring Cheryl as she leaves to sort it out. None of the boys' fathers appear to have knowledge of, or involvement in, dealing with this event. Rather, it is the women who actively intervene.

Like much of *Raising Bertie*, the fight sequence is confusing, disconnected and lacking context. Interestingly, in an interview with Ellis, Byrne raises the issue of contributing to negative stereotypes of Black masculinity through the fight scene. She comments, 'There was a big question when we were editing the film [over] whether or not to include that fight scene, because obviously I don't want to further a negative stereotype, but ultimately I felt like it was part of Junior's story arc.'³⁸

It is difficult to countenance Byrne's rationale given other dimensions of Junior's story. Early in the film we witness Junior attending an interview for a computer shop sales position and attempting to complete a job application form. It becomes clear in these scenes that he has great difficulty reading and writing. Like many of the people represented in the film,

he speaks using colloquialisms and with a distinctive accent, incomprehensible without the subtitles provided. Towards the end of the film we are told that he has finally gained a job, but it is a two-hour drive away from Bertie. His consistent self-reflective comments throughout the film make it clear he is worried about being judged, and is cognisant of the film's potential impact upon on his life. Interspersed within scenes of domesticity and daily life are voice-overs and face to face interview edits with Junior and Cheryl contextualising their very grim living situation. While the fight sequence provides a sense of action, it seems (relatively) trivial compared to the other extraordinary challenges of Junior's life, one isolated event in six years.

Absence and passivity

A second dominant representation of adult Black masculinity in Bertie is that of absence and passivity. Again, the lack of context means we are not sensitised to the historical, economic, social and political imperatives which may have given shape to these discourses of masculinity.

As explained above, Junior's father resides in prison and during the film other adult males in Junior's life come and go. After Junior's prison visit, and towards the end of the film, there is a short scene in which Junior writes to his father telling him that 'mamma got a new boyfriend' and reminding his dad to write back, suggesting that they may have ongoing contact, but this is not made clear. As Junior's letter reveals, his step-father Ren, is no longer around. Later in the documentary, Junior explains that because he does not get along with his mother's new boyfriend (Steve) he has moved in with his grandfather. We glimpse his grandfather, but he is not given a speaking role so a potentially positive representation of Black masculinity is not elaborated upon

In contrast to the absent/passive men in his life is Junior's mother Cheryl. It is Cheryl who helps Junior with (unsuccessful) job applications, questions and berates him about fighting, and works multiple low-paid jobs to provide for them. She is the disciplinarian and authority figure in his life. When Junior mentions that he wants to be rich, and discloses that he has thought about selling drugs to achieve this goal, he dismisses the thought saying he would never do it, and, 'Plus Mama says she'll break my neck'. We witness Cheryl as the enforcer of rules in a scene which begins with Junior asleep on a pile of clothes strewn across the blue-carpeted floor. He is still dressed in clothes from his late night out. We cut to the doorway where his mother stands yelling: 'Junior get up! Come on, let's go!' He reluctantly follows her out of the room sighing deeply. The camera cuts to a close up shot of a television and we see two older men sitting watching an Adam Sandler movie. Both men ignore the angry exchange taking place between Junior and his mother. They are unknown to the viewer; they sit quietly, eyes lowered as Junior and Cheryl shout at each other:

Cheryl: I don't know why you ain't just goin' to fuckin school.

Junior: I sleeping during the day, I didn't go to school cause my shirt was wet

Cheryl: Well you should take your ass to sleep at night, that's what nights are for - you go to sleep so you can go to school in the morning.

Junior: What's that got to do with me not going to school?

Cheryl: Well Why?

Junior: Cause my shirt was wet.

Cheryl: Put it on like I used to do and let that muthafucka dry on my body. And I still went, passed school.

The scene then cuts to Junior asleep in a chair with on screen text announcing: 'Junior is now 20 and is repeating 11th grade'. Cheryl's voice-over is used to transition to the next scene, an interview where she confides:

Sometimes he won't go to school, he'll be sleeping, or if he goes to school he'll go to sleep in class. I'm trying 100%. I've taught him manners, taught him how to be responsible, taught him that this is what life is all about, but it seem like to me I have failed as a mother.

Dada's father is similarly absent. Early in the documentary Dada tells the camera that his parents have been separated for about six months. His father Ernest appears intermittently in the film. He is portrayed as a drinker, unreliable, and selfish. About a third of the way through the film Dada's paternal grandmother dies from a heart attack. We see Dada sitting with his mother and Vivian Saunders in the small lounge room of his home. We learn that his father has not contacted him and that Dada's mother has not been invited to the funeral, so Vivian accompanies him. He sits in the church with Vivian a number of pews back from his father, and divulges that he would have liked to have talked to his father but he had his new girlfriend with him.

Dada's hopes for a closer relationship with his father are again announced when he is shown trying on a football helmet with what we presume to be the school football coach. He says 'I want to play football. If I play football I can stay out of trouble. And I'm hoping my Daddy will come to my game if I tell him about it.' In a later scene Dada sits on the bench during the game unhappy at not being selected. His father is not in sight.

Dada's difficult relationship with Ernest is further conveyed in a scene in a Bertie park. A handheld camera and Dada's voice-over sets the scene. He states, 'My Dad's supposed to be buying me shoes for the prom but I'm having trouble trying to get in touch with him'. The film cuts to a shot of Dada speaking to Ernest using his girlfriend's cell phone as they sit on a park picnic table, his voice tinged with frustration and resignation. He says to his girlfriend, 'He's on his way here to bring some money'. Byrne then cuts to a long shot of Dada's father arriving in a white car accompanied by a male friend. Dada leans across to his girlfriend and asserts sadly, 'Now listen to the lies he's about to say'. His girlfriend chastises him responding, 'Sssh it's your father, still got a respect him'. Wearing a Black baseball cap tilted sideways on his head, dark sunglasses and a moustache, Dada's father glances at the camera as he sits on the picnic table.

Ernest: Margaret told me y'all was coming to get the money. I gave her the money for you.

Dada: So she got it?

Ernest: Yeah, she got it, otherwise I wouldn't leave.

...

Dada: So you just come out here to see your kid?

Ernest: Well I'm gonna leave you cause I gotta go get my little drink on. I ain't gonna sit here and tell you no lie. I'll see y'allt'morrow.

Once Ernest leaves, Dada and his girlfriend sit in silence looking at each other and the ground before Dada says 'So sad'. Following this Byrne cuts to a shot of Dada putting new shoes on as he dresses for the prom. We are not told who paid for the shoes.

Of the three young male protagonists in the film it is Bud who has the closest relationship with this father. Indeed, when we first meet Bud he is working with his father. He says proudly 'I work with my Dad. We landscape. He's got his own business.' Despite this positive positioning, his father's fecklessness is on display in a scene where Bud recounts sharing the

news that he is going to have a baby with his girlfriend. Bud recalls, ‘My dad found out and he says, “That’ll be eighteen years you gotta pay for child support.” He said, “Get a blood test”’. Aside from these scenes Bud’s father is given little voice in the film, so his potentially positive representation is muted. Bud lives with his mother Veronica, who, like the other mothers depicted in the film, is shown to be industrious, no-nonsense and engaged in her child’s life—the antithesis of the relationship depicted between father and son.

Conclusion

A significant contribution of this paper is that its critique is offered alongside an acknowledgement of Byrne’s commitment to her participants and to eschewing stereotyping and to portraying their lives in a respectful way. In this respect it highlights that the issues we have raised demonstrate the great challenges facing filmmakers documenting contemporary poverty.

In respect of the ethical questions raised here about the troubling politics of visual representation, we concur with Valier and Lippens that there is not a ‘self-evidently just response’.³⁹ However, Nash offers a way forward, troubling the ways in which ethics have been conceptualised in documentary filmmaking and suggesting that the relationships between filmmaker, participants and spectators may ‘usefully serve as foundation for ethical reflection’.⁴⁰ Specifically, she argues for the usefulness of the moral philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and his elaboration of the relationship between Self and Other.⁴¹

Nash does not seek to replace traditional normative approaches to documentary ethics through an engagement with Levinas’ framework. Rather, she aims to use his moral philosophy to reconfigure documentary ethics as a way of reflecting on and challenging our assumptions about how we come to know and see the ‘other’. She explains that ‘Levinas calls into question our desire to know the Other, reconfiguring ethics as a kind of deep reflexivity in which assumptions about the Other and the possibility of knowing are constantly challenged’.⁴² She identifies the dimensions necessary to enable a Levinasian encounter between documentary filmmaker, participant and spectator. Filmmakers, she writes, must acknowledge the contribution of participants along with their circumscribed capacity to know the Other. They need to render themselves vulnerable to the Other, listen to the Other, and be willing to abrogate their power and position to the Other. Further, and critical to our analysis, is that, according to Nash, a Levinasian perspective requires that the documentary filmmaker presents the spectator with contradictions and plurality. In *Raising Bertie* we are not witnesses to this complexity in the lives of the Other, but rather to the oversimplification produced by recurring and pernicious tropes about Black masculinity, as complex geographic, economic, cultural, and political issues are not adequately addressed. As a result rural poverty in this film becomes a troubling individualised and racialised problem of violence, criminality, absence or passivity rather than a structural problem embedded in a long history of discrimination and marginalization.

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