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The Florida Project: Rage and Child Protection Among the Marginalized

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The Florida Project is about a young girl and her mother. It is about an intergenerational trauma set within the context of American poverty, with specific elements that, until our concerns about family separation at the US southern border, were associated primarily with women: child removal from a parent by the government. It also is about the man who, within the strictures of his limitations, is

something of a father and grandfather figure to them, a mediator between the family kingdom and the broader world.

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The film was written and directed by Sean Baker, with writing assistance from Chris Bergoch. Baker, born in 1971 in NYC, was the winner of the

Robert Altman Spirit Award for *Starlet* (2012), a film about a friendship between a 21-year-old girl and an elderly woman when the girl discovers a stash of money hidden in a thermos at the woman's yard sale. Baker is also known for *Tangerine* (2015), *Prince of Broadway* (2008), and *Take Out* (2004), respectively concerning a hooker searching on Xmas Eve for the pimp who broke her heart, a NY street hustler whose ex-girlfriend shows up with the son he didn't know he had, and an illegal Chinese immigrant who falls behind on an enormous smuggling debt. Sean Baker films about people on the margins, people that we might not otherwise tend to see.

His neo-realism has been compared to the Italian cinema of the 1940's – 60's, such as the film that Julio showed, *Fist in the pocket*. But Baker's characters are defiant to the end, not crushed like with the Italians. The main character in *Fist in the Pocket* ends up dead, on the floor. In Baker, we see an echo of Truffaut: "children's tremendous ability to stand up to life and survive". *The Florida Project* ends in what some critics see as a happy ending – I do not – the children running to the fantasy world of Disney's Magic Castle. In *The Florida Project*, we see Baker's purposeful evocation of the Little Rascals, from the Our Gang Hollywood short films of the 1920s, 30s and 40s – the adventures of a group of neighbourhood children. Those adventures were harmless. Baker's are not. In *The Florida Project*, we feel the the pressure building as hapless Halley moves along her "escalating crisis.....sliding into criminality". (Brian Tallerico [review](#))



Baker uses almost a documentary quality. His characters are three dimensional. He shows the drudgery of daily life in poverty without condescension. He makes extensive use of improvisation and of nonprofessional actors. Bria Vinaite, the actress who plays the mother, Halley, was born in Lithuania in 1993, age 24 at filming. She was scouted by Baker from Instagram. When he got in touch, she thought it was a joke, but replied because he “wrote so well”. Brooklynn Prince, Moonee, born 2010, started appearing in ads at the age of two. She received the Critics Choice Movie Award for the Best Young Performer for *The Florida Project*. Her acceptance speech is shockingly mature, obviously scripted by an adult and delivered by a pro through her tears. She has interviewed on how to cry on cue during which she also described how her mother taught her to give the finger for the film – Brooklynn used the wrong one at first – and to use swear words. They did not use the actual swear words in rehearsal.

The movie was filmed in an actual working motel which was inhabited by its normal tenants during the filming. Many of those tenants appeared in the movie as themselves. Many of the children were children who really lived there. Baker likes to use realistic settings and the real people who inhabit them. His film *Tangerine* was famously filmed on an iPhone. William Defoe, playing the motel manager Bobby, for which he was nominated for an Oscar for Best Actor in a

Supporting Role, has spoken about immersing himself in the motel life so that he could be true to that way of life. He learned from hanging around and talking to people that the motel manager in such places usually takes pride in making a run-down place a little better for the people who live there, while acting as policeman enforcing the rules, mediating tenant arguments, and interfacing between the kingdom in each separate unit, where a family of five might be living in one room, and the outside world via rent, policies, intruders, officials. He prides himself on taking the best care that he can of these marginalized people. Motels like this are used as “temporary” housing for folk who cannot find or afford better. Sometimes

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they live there for years. The actual rent that they pay may be no lower than rent would be in a much more desirable accommodation, but they do not have the first and last months' rent required. Many are one-step away from homelessness.

The Florida Project has been described as a “matter-of-fact view of poverty from a very young child, not yet disillusioneda happy film about an ugly world” (Tallerico). Baker himself has said of *The Florida Project*, “a horror flick about the easily discarded American poor”.

The Florida Project is about six-year-old Moonee and her mother Halley, set in the shadow of Walt Disney World in all the splendor of Florida pastels. We see the helicopters ferrying the well-to-do in and out of the Disney compound as a repetitive backdrop and chronic reminder of what the protagonists do not have: both Moonee and Halley give them the finger. Mother and child find their joy in defiance. While just a stone's throw away, just on the outskirts from the “actual” Magic Kingdom, Moonee's and Halley's world, with names like The Magic Castle Motel and Future World, is a world apart from Disney and the American Dream. The hapless couple who mistakenly end up there on their honeymoon are so upset that their new marriage itself seems jeopardized.

And what is the Magic Kingdom Motel but a place where relationships are jeopardized by external circumstances? We are given tours variously by Bobby, the manager, who points out to the owner a unit where the occupant is dealing and will be evicted, and Moonee, showing another child around: “the man who lives in here gets arrested a lot”.. We see a little friend of Moonee's move out with his father. Their car is so fully packed that not everything can fit. The one thing left behind is the box with all of the little boy's toys. The father tells the boy that he will buy him everything new when they get where they are going, but the little boy knows better. He watches, constrained by his love for his father from voicing his skepticism, while his father gives away all his toys. The boy sees his hero father knocked down from his pedestal and grieves.

For six-year-old Moonee, this IS her Magic Kingdom. Every day is an adventure, filled with joy and exploration. During this, their summer vacation, Moonee and her

friends, Dickie, Scooty and Jancey, have the run of the place. The story is told mostly from Moonee's perspective. It is presented as lighthearted, but we see the children romp and wander along the highway dangerously unsupervised, catch the eye of a probable pedophile, start a significant fire. We know that trouble is coming. We watch as mom Halley cannot cope. Having lost her job as a stripper because she would not perform sexual favours, Halley feeds herself and Moonee from the back of a Food Bank truck and through an arrangement with her neighbour Ashley. Halley looks after Ashley's son Scooty in exchange for she and Moonee being fed from the diner where Ashley works and where Halley sought but did not get a job. But Halley does not really look after Scooty. She lets him run with Moonee without any supervision or interest on her part. When others complain to her about their behavior, such as when they spit on a new tenant's car and on her grandchild, Halley brushes it off, "kids will be kids". Halley tries to make money selling cheap perfume knock-offs in parking lots, risking getting arrested which she "cannot afford to happen again". When Ashley cuts her off, Halley prostitutes herself to pay the rent. She steals from a John: entry bracelets to the Magic Kingdom.

Seeing herself as a rebel and a hero in her own story, Halley cannot tolerate the cold hard frame of her life given her by Ashley

One by one, Halley loses her relationships and so does Moonee. Dickey's father will not let him play with Moonee anymore after they spit on the car. Most importantly, Halley loses her one good buddy, Ashley, mother of Scooty. Ashley is perceptive enough to realize that the kids were connected to the fire. That crosses a line for her. She ends the arrangement with Halley, leaving Halley without ready access to food for herself and Moonee, and keeping Scooty away from Moonee. She disassociates herself from Halley.

Halley wants her friend. She goes to Ashley to make amends, but also to ask for a loan of rent money. Ashley has had enough and tells Halley that everyone knows she is "whoring". Seeing herself as a rebel and a hero in her own story, Halley cannot tolerate the cold hard frame of her life given her by Ashley. She erupts in fury, pummeling Ashley repeatedly, viciously, then goes home, vomits and cries. She has just attacked someone she sincerely cared about. Those were the only tools in her tool box.

Only near the end of the film do we see Halley look grim: no more joking. She takes Moonee for a stolen breakfast at a Disney Hotel, knowing that child protection is on their case, that this may be something she cannot give her way out of: sort of a convict's last meal. Moonee knows her mother. She has a pretty good idea what is up when her mother tells the waitress a fake room number to credit for their meal. Halley and Moonee wink at each other.

Exasperating as it is, there is a wonderfully warm and intimate relationship between mother and child, Halley and Moonee. They are highly attuned to each other, with instant and strong connection. Moonee has only to see the look on her mother's face, hear the tone of her voice, to know her mother and follow her lead, e.g. taunting Bobby when he comes to the door of their unit to complain about Moonee turning off the power to the building, Halley smiling and taunting that she is "such a bad mother", Moonee grinning ear to ear while confirming that "yeah, mom, you're such a bad mother". Moonee takes her cue instantly when Halley tells her and her friends to pay Bobby for his time for his evening wasted by their antics: "I don't have any money", as if they would if they could. They are a tag team, functioning as a unit. When Halley tries to sell her perfume, Moonee adds her own pitch. When Halley yells at the office manager who won't rent her a unit for the night, Moonee yells at her, too.

Moonee can read her mother, other adults, and adult situations. She can tell when an adult is about to cry. She knows that she has just gotten a glimpse of something new and important when her mother's John opens the bathroom door on her. Moonee can explore this new knowledge with her friend Jancey, not with her mother. Jancey commiserates, she has seen something going on with her grandmother when she, Jancey, pretends that she is asleep. They know that they both are talking about the same thing, are on to it, but don't yet know what it is.

What kind of attachment is this between Moonee and Halley? Moonee seems utterly secure in the knowledge that her mother loves her and is there for her when she comes back to the secure base of home. But she spends most of her time away from her mother. Moonee is allowed to go off on her own, into danger, unprotected. Moonee is better able to read her mother than her mother can read

Moonee: Halley did not realize that there was more to it when Moonee did not want to go and watch the fire. While Moonee may be more attuned to her mother than Halley is to her, Moonee does not become entangled in caring for her mother: she expects her mother to take care of the two of them when they are together. Moonee is not tied to her mother, unable to go out and explore out of concern for her mother or lack of confidence in herself. Moonee has had plenty of opportunity to develop self-confidence and competence – not because her mother turns her away or rejects her, but simply because her mother is otherwise occupied with activities that bore Moonee, such as watching T.V. during this phase of their life together. Indeed, Moonee explores with the gusto of a Marco Polo, thrilled by the unknown of a new world. She tells her friend Jancey, “See, I told you I would take you on a safari”. Moonee has the security for that, knowing that her mother is there to run back to. What would it do to Moonee to sever that relationship, to take and keep her from her mother? What would it do to Halley? Is the relationship Enmeshed? Parentified? Disorganized? Dismissive? Secure? The connection between them is strong and real. Moonee has the self-confidence and initiative that is associated with a secure relationship, even though Halley is woefully neglectful. Halley is blind to the danger that Moonee gets into. In Halley’s care, Moonee could end up in any number of catastrophes, possibly fatal. Moonee loves her mother with passion. It is hard to imagine Halley without Moonee: any softness likely would be lost, perhaps the ability to play, that transitional space that provides Halley with temporary relief from her circumstances. Should Child Protection take Moonee? Forever? Will Halley change? Can she? Does Halley have the potential to work cooperatively with Child Protection and become a better parent? Do her economic and social circumstances allow for that possibility? Does her personality?

The movie ends with Halley screaming “fuck” into the camera. Moonee is overwhelmed, knowing that she must get away, precociously understanding that she may never again see her best friend Jancey. Is Moonee attached more to her peer Jancey than to her mother Halley? Jancey takes Moonee by the hand and off they go to the “real” Magic Kingdom, the biggest fantasy of them all. At least one critic calls this a happy ending. Do you?

As a little dose of realism, from:

Sarah Stillman, Separated: A fight to keep mothers from being incarcerated. The New Yorker. Nov. 5, 2018, pg. 42 – 46.

- the number of women in US state prisons has increased more than 800% in the last 40 years.
- Women in local prisons is 14 times higher than in the 1970's, mostly consisting of poor women unable to afford bail while awaiting trial
- a quarter of a million US children have a mother in jail
- one in nine black children have a parent who is or was once incarcerated
- these kids are at risk for mental health, asthma, migraines, HIV, illicit drugs: adolescent boys are 20 % more likely to drop out of school and are at higher risk of themselves being incarcerated
- 85% of incarcerated women are mothers
- Oklahoma has the highest rate of incarcerated women
- Oklahoma has few safety nets such as childcare subsidies or health care. It has a high infant mortality, twice as high for African-Americans within the first year of life
- kids with incarcerated mothers are five times as likely to end up in foster care than those with incarcerated fathers
- once a child is in the foster care system, the State can terminate parental rights in less than two years: this is accelerated for kids under 4. This provides an incentive for moms to plead guilty and get released, to get the child out from foster care and try to avoid permanent loss of the child.
- 86% of jailed women have experienced prior sexual violence, most have problems with addiction
- formerly incarcerated people are 10 times more likely to be homeless: more for women of colour
- more than two-thirds of incarcerated women have a mental health diagnosis
- the justice system criminalizes survivors of domestic violence for failure to protect the child when they, too, are victims
- When the boyfriend of 21-year-old Heidi Marie Benjamin killed her infant son, Heidi got 14 years for not preventing it
- Tondalao Hall's abusive boyfriend, who fractured the ribs and legs of their infant daughter, reached a plea deal and got 8 years' probation with no jail time. Tondalao got 30 years for failing to protect her children.

- nation-wide in the US, there are far fewer prison-diversion programs for women than men
- In Wyoming, first-time male offenders have the option of attending a six-month “boot camp” instead of prison: that option is not available to women
- The Prison Police Initiative report states that women “face years of incarceration for first-time offenses while their male peers return quickly to the community”.

What should happen to Halley and Moonee? What would be ideal? What is realistic?

Thank you.

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