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When Jim Crow Came to Town, With Eviction Notices

By MANOHLA DARGIS

There are ghosts haunting Marco Williams's quietly sorrowful documentary "Banished," about the forced expulsion of black Southerners from their homes in the troubled and violent decades after the Civil War. Dressed in what looks like their Sunday best, in dark suits and high-collar dresses, they stare solemnly into an unwelcoming world. A couple ride in a cart along a pretty country road, and others stand awkwardly before houses with peeling paint. There are few smiles. Photography was then a serious business, though being a black landowner, part of a fragile, nascent Southern middle class, was more serious still.

It's stunning how loudly the dead can speak, and with such eloquence. I couldn't help comparing these images with those in one of my own photo albums of a large family of stern-looking Midwesterners dressed in what looks like their Sunday best. The rough, ill-fitting suits and somber dresses look similar to those in the documentary, and the simple clapboard house looming behind this family recalls comparable homes in "Banished." There are, once again, few smiles, though in one photo my grandfather, then around 12, looks as if he's trying to keep one in check.

Unlike the young men in Mr. Williams's documentary, my grandfather raised a family and ran a business not far from where his photographs were taken — an upstanding white citizen in a nearly all-white land. The young black men in "Banished" never had the chance to take root. Some were falsely accused of molesting white women and were lynched. We see a few of these dead in other photographs, hanging from trees and lampposts, their bodies sometimes surrounded by a visibly excited white crowd. (A crude sign under one corpse warns not to

wake him.) As Mr. Williams explains, his measured voice-over calm as ever, lynching was an instrument of terror, used against blacks as a means of control and “racial cleansing.”

Mr. Williams isn't one for hysterics or histrionics, even when seated across from a Ku Klux Klan leader who says he wouldn't be happy if this African-American director moved in next door. The Klan leader lives in a nice-looking house adorned with white supremacist banners in Forsyth County, Ga., which in 1912 brutally expelled an estimated 1,000 of its black residents. Mr. Williams guides us through this terrible history, often while strolling on camera through the scene of the crime, talking to white residents and dredging up memories. He also uncovers some repellent images of a white mob trying to stop a peaceful, interracial civil rights march in the county in 1987. The marchers sing “We Shall Overcome.” The mob throws rocks.

There is so much more to the story than can be told by this 87-minute movie, which only casts glances at Reconstruction, the question of reparations and the bitter, enduring, living legacy of slavery. Although Mr. Williams somewhat overstates his case when he says that racial cleansing has “remained hidden,” there's no denying that this ugly chapter deserves more than an occasional well-meaning documentary. (A national day of mourning might be a good start.) The 1997 fiction film “Rosewood” recounted one such expulsion that took place in central Florida in the 1920s, and journalists, activists and descendants, including those who appear in “Banished,” have dug into the archives and sifted through the evidence. Mr. Williams has done his own part to shed needed light, though I wish he had dug longer, harder.

In late 2006 The News & Observer in Raleigh, N.C., published a series about an 1898 white riot to destroy a political alliance between blacks and poor whites in Wilmington, N.C., where the literacy rates for black men were higher than those for whites. One agitator, a former Confederate soldier and the future mayor of Wilmington, vowed that he and other like-minded whites would never surrender “even if we have to choke the Cape Fear River with carcasses.” What followed was a coup d'état, possibly the only time that a municipal government was toppled in American history. Black residents were murdered; the local black newspaper was torched, and survivors exiled. Reconstruction died, and Jim Crow moved right in.

BANISHED

Opens today in Manhattan.

Directed by Marco Williams; written by Maia Harris and Mr. Williams; director of photography, Stephen McCarthy; edited by Kathryn Barnier and Sandra Christie; music by

David Murray; produced by Mr. Williams and Ms. Harris. At the Film Forum, 209 West Houston Street, west of Avenue of the Americas, South Village. Running time: 87 minutes. This film is not rated.

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