



**Magnolia Pictures and Field of Vision  
In association with  
Canal & the Gallery, Arch + Bow Films, Trailer 9,  
XRM Media and LinLay Productions  
present**

# RIOTSVILLE, USA

**Directed by Sierra Pettengill**

USA / 2022 / 91 minutes

**Official Selection**

2022 Sundance Film Festival – World Premiere  
2022 DOC10  
2022 New Directors/New Films  
2022 SFFILM Festival  
2022 DCDOX  
2022 Traverse City Film Festival

**Website:**

<http://www.magpictures.com/riotsvilleusa/>

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## **LOGLINE**

Welcome to Riotsville, a fictional town built by the U.S. military. Using footage shot by the media and the government, the film explores the militarization of the police and the reaction of a nation to the uprisings of the late '60s, creating a counter-narrative to a critical moment in the country's history.

## **SYNOPSIS**

Welcome to Riotsville, USA--a point in American history when the nation's rulers--politicians, bureaucrats, police--were faced with the mounting militancy of the late-1960s, and did everything possible to win the war in the streets. Using training footage of Army-built model towns called "Riotsvilles" where military and police were trained to respond to civil disorder, in addition to nationally broadcast news media, director Sierra Pettengill connects the stagecraft of "law and order" to the real violence of state practice. Recovering an obscured history whose effects have shaped the present in ways both insidious and explosive, RIOTSVILLE, USA is a poetic and furious reflection on the rebellions of the 1960s--and the machine that worked to destroy them.



## SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

### **Suggested for further reading:**

- **Tobi Haslett** (Writer, Riotsville, USA)  
*Magic Actions*, N+1 Magazine, 2021  
<https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-40/politics/magic-actions-2/>

*As the civil rights movement thickened into the militancy of Black Power, [James Boggs] knew that riots—the destruction of property and mass clashes with police—would be a routine feature of a society riven by racial hatred and that refused to feed its poor. The task was not to disavow the smashing clarity in the street but to build forms of collectivity that could outlast the days of rage. There was power in a riot, in its rippling, adaptable passions—power that might even express itself, at some point, by winning seats on city councils (as long as the movement knew not to deify this strategic foothold in the state). -Tobi Haslett*

- **Stuart Schrader** (Consultant, Riotsville, USA)  
*Badges Without Borders*, UNC Press, 2019  
<https://stuartshrader.com/bwb>

*After the destructive rebellions in U.S. cities in 1967, almost always spurred by incidents of police brutality, President Lyndon Johnson convened the Kerner Commission, which recommended spending billions to improve housing, education and employment prospects for African Americans. Johnson balked at those expensive solutions, but he adopted the commission's suggestions for riot preparedness with alacrity. Our contemporary situation — police and soldiers outfitted with seemingly endless supplies of tear gas grenades confronting a perpetually underemployed class of young people — is the legacy. - [Stuart Schrader, Washington Post](#)*

- Kerner Commission background and analysis: Boston Review three-part series, 2016
  - 1- [Fifty Years Ago, the Government Said Black Lives Matter](#) - Julian Zelizer
  - 2- [What the Kerner Report Got Wrong about Policing](#) - David Greary
  - 3- [From “War on Crime” to War on the Black Community](#) - Elizabeth Hinton

### **Brief Timeline of Federal Policy Response:**

- July 28, 1967 - LBJ appoints National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (referred to as the Kerner Commission). Tasked to answer three questions about the rebellions of 1967: "What happened? Why did it happen? What can be done to prevent it from happening again and again?"



- *The Harvest of American Racism* - written by a group of Kerner Commission staff researchers - turned in to Commission members. It provides a political context, identifying the riots as instead being rebellions, and links them to global anti-colonial struggles. *Harvest* is rejected and removed from the final report.
- February 29, 1968 - Final report - *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* - issued by the Kerner Commission. Intro states: "White society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it." Denies any "conspiracy" at work in the "riots;" instead identifies predatory policing practices, discriminatory housing, employment, education, and biased media coverage. Calls for "unprecedented levels of funding" into anti-poverty programs for disadvantaged and segregated communities.
- April 11, 1968 - Civil Rights Act of 1968 signed. Includes Fair Housing Act (which does not require any federal funding), and the Anti-Riot Act, which makes "travel in interstate commerce...with the intent to incite, promote, encourage, participate in and carry on a riot."
- June 19, 1968 - LBJ signs Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act, enabling the Federal government to deliver money to local police, prisons, and courts. Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) spends \$63 million in its first year.



## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

"What are we looking at?" Our narrator asks this question to our audience, and, perhaps, to the ghosts in the footage at the center of *RIOTSVILLE, USA*. During these last many difficult, upending, dark, and often revelatory years in the United States, that question has persisted in my mind.

I have worked extensively as an archival researcher for filmmakers and artists for the last fifteen years. And as a director of archival films, my work has focused on contending with the ways we can locate and trace structural power and white supremacy within the archives. In *The Rifleman*, I connect the NRA and the U.S. border control; in *Graven Image*, the construction, funding, and political backdrop to the building of Stone Mountain, the nation's largest Confederate Monument; and in *The Reagan Show*, the manipulative PR machine and self-documentation of the Reagan administration. My goal as a filmmaker is to re-present historical material that forces us to contend with our past and reflect upon our present, and interrogate the unique ways that moving images can transmit history in this country.

Making this film was about more than detailing the precise governmental and political machinations that lead to this specific training program. It was about making sense of the Riotsville footage; for me that is what the filmmaking process always is. How do you situate Riotsville within the legacy of 1968, reconciling living memory and mythology? How do you situate it within the life of the communities most affected by the state violence the performances at Riotsville are illustrating, and within the activism organizing to oppose it? And crucially, how do you situate it within a nation founded on white supremacy, determined to launch a war against its Black citizens, on a loop for hundreds of years?

These questions informed the form and shape of the film; a mapping of structural forces that could not seem more urgent in 2022, with all the violence and possibility it contains.

– Sierra Pettengill



## INTERVIEW WITH SIERRA PETTENGILL BY NELLIE KILLIAN

### **Maybe we can start with how you first learned about Riotsville.**

When I was working on my last film, I was reading *Nixonland* by Rick Perlstein. As part of his section about the law and order craze over the course of 1968, he listed all of these examples of local law enforcement reaction, including the fact that the Army built towns on military bases that they named Riotsville, USA, where they did large-scale theatrical reenactments of civil unrest. I googled it and I didn't find much of anything – and for me, as an archival researcher, that's just the bait I need to keep going. I found a listing in the National Archives catalog that sounded like it might be right, but it had no real information and hadn't been digitized. So I borrowed some funds from another project, and ordered a transfer of that footage, pretty blind.

The making of this film was really a long process of trying to figure out *what* the Riotsville footage is, on many levels. I was so shaken by what I saw in it, and also so drawn to it. I spent the next six years trying to figure it out: what it said about the 1960s, and also how it speaks to right now.

And then I just kept on looking for more and more footage to help me try to understand how it fit into what was happening at the time, but also trying to address how we collectively remember that time period, and what to make of it now.

### **There is a lot of context for the historical moment when this took place, but not a lot of context for Riotsville as a specific project.**

When we started in 2015, there wasn't much readily available information about what these recreations literally were and what role they played, when they started, or who designed them. There were no secondary sources other than a handful of contemporaneous articles, so we spent the first few years trying to find as many primary sources as we could – ranging from really byzantine military documents, to tracking down people who had been there in various roles – shooting, performing, and overseeing them and talking to them. Late in the process, the brilliant Stuart Schrader - who came on as a consultant - published a book, *Badges Without Borders*, which provides an excellent history of the US military's involvement in policing both here and abroad, including his research into Riotsville.

### **Something like Riotsville takes all these complicated social questions and turns it into a matter of crowd control.**

Yeah but, unsurprisingly, which crowds are being controlled, and how, are different. There's a military training film that we feature late in *RIOTSVILLE, USA* that shows the different ways the Army is instructing their soldiers to handle white protestors versus what they term "hardcore professional agitators," who are of course Black.



But yes, what's ironic is that much of this training is evolving in conjunction with the Kerner Commission, which was a panel convened by LBJ in the summer of 1967 to explore all these complicated social questions. Led by a group of mostly white political moderates, it reaches a fairly radical and unexpected conclusion: the cause of the rioting is inequality caused by white racism. It is an official acknowledgement, in stark terms, of a deeply unequal society and a clarion call for transformative and costly social policy initiatives to begin to reverse course.

But in the end, few of the Commission's prescriptions were enacted. And, ultimately, they called for an upgrade in policing, and massive amounts of federal funding for military riot-training programs were made available. It's linked to the beginning of the professionalization – and thus funding – of the police.

Figuring out how to balance, on one hand, the promise of what the Kerner Commission concluded – which felt large, and surprising – and on the other, the real, huge limitations of that kind of liberal, mostly white, top-down program with many serious flaws, helped form some of the structure and direction of the film.

**Can you talk a little bit about how you decided what kind of material to include and not include? I think a lot of revolutionary images are central to our collective memory of 1968, but you stick to broadcast news and military footage. It's a very official story of revolution and how it gets subsumed back into order.**

I wanted this film to explore, obliquely, how a national consciousness is formed. That led me to broadcast news and to the footage the military had shot itself. These institutions were dictating policy and trying to shape opinion on a massive scale, and wielding incredible financial and cultural influence on the formation of the carceral state.

I have long been drawn to, and pretty committed to showing, state sanctioned media. I think this partially comes out of my background in archival research. When you see archival material in its raw forms, and see a lot of it, you can't help but be aware of the context in which it was produced, and all sorts of questions about the various hands of ownership and categorizing it's passed through before it reaches the hands of a researcher. All the questions that are currently (rightly) front and center in documentary filmmaking about how participants and subjects are treated and how they are involved in the filmmaking process, are echoed in archival material, in terms of levels of consent, what the agenda of a news broadcast is, what it means when people are captured in their communities by an outsider and then that footage is followed by an ad for Gulf Oil on the nightly news... but these thorny ethical questions are less discussed when footage is decades old.

For this film, almost more than for any I've made before, having the context for this type of archival material felt like a crucial and necessary element. My collaborators Tobi Haslett, who wrote the voiceover, and composer Jace Clayton were key in this regard. Tobi is a writer that I'd long admired, both for his writing on radical movements and his writing on essay films. He has a really sharp and specific voice, and he brought a deep historical knowledge, provided a tether to the present moment, and brought real poetry to the narration. The sections where his writing



appears are all digitally altered, calling attention to their own materials. Jace Clayton's musical score also underlines the artifice of the archival material. He composed the score on analog synthesizers, which are of the era and feel very grounded in the material, but also sometimes sound really alien. For the footage of Riotsville in particular, we wanted to make Riotsville itself to feel as strange as possible. We wanted it to feel like an uncanny world that resembles our own but isn't.

**Other than the images of the riot in Miami at the end of the film, you don't really show many images of unrest, even though those were covered fairly extensively in the news.**

This goes back to a long history of image-making, where images of riots have been traditionally instrumentalized to justify the way that Black communities are policed. We talked a lot about how photography tends to emphasize these moments of explosion and rupture, but it really fails at capturing the long, structural questions that lead up to moments of crisis.

That was a guiding thought for us in making this film. We decided very early on that we were going to avoid that footage, that it was going to be a structuring absence.

Elizabeth Hinton, author of *America on Fire*, makes the great point that the 60s created this image of riots as being a fundamentally Black phenomenon, when factually, most riots in this country have been white vigilantes, many times playing out violence against Black citizens (which is something that we have very much seen in last few years as well, of course). We wanted to underline the fact that this massive militarization of the police as a reaction to Black riots is not incidental. To be able to show the military recreating and rehearsing something and then see it play out in real time shifts the narrative: instead of the police and military responding to an outbreak of violence, it's presented as an attack on civilians by the police backed by a massive explosion of money and interest towards repressing Black rebellion.

**The public television media you employ provides a broader perspective on the narrative of civil unrest vs law and order.**

We were trying to deal with this dissonance, where 1968 seems both pretty modern and also very far away. Finding the Public Broadcast Laboratory (PBL) program really drove that home. The PBL clips engage with the issues underlying the unrest so much more deeply.

We wanted to present it in a way that mimicked our own reactions to watching and listening to the discourse that was happening publicly on PBL, shown nationally via PBS. The Kerner Commission post-mortem, in particular, with Bayard Rustin and Kenneth Clark, is so far ahead of the rest of the conversation that's happening anywhere else on broadcast television.

The PBL clips show the very reasoned debates and policy demands that underlie the riots that erupted in the late '60s, the root issues that were even recognized by the Kerner commission. It's like Reverend Gibson in the scene in Miami towards the end of the film. He sums it up perfectly: "We ask, we ask, and we ask and you promise, you promise, you promise." That's what the film is driving at. You see these incredibly on-point, reasoned conversations happening, over and over and over, and they are ignored and ignored and ignored. Ultimately, how can what happen in Liberty City possibly be seen as some unreasonable act of violence, you know? Even at the very





end, we show a black reporter, Bob Reid, who works for WTVJ in Miami, and he's asked the question by his white colleague: "Why are these riots happening?" And Reid gives a very thoughtful answer about how they can't take it any longer. And the white reporter's response is, "well, I guess we'll never know the reason." He just ignores him and carries on in willful ignorance. That's how you should feel – the answers have been provided all along.

**You use Frederick Douglass Kirkpatrick's performance of "Burn Baby Burn" to mark the end of this experiment in public television and also the death of MLK, can you talk about including that song in full?**

The editor Nels Bangerter found that performance, and the decision to play it in full is something that has been in the film since his very first draft of the cut. We wanted to give unbroken time to that expression, which feels like a rare thing to be on television in the first place. It's just an incredibly moving performance. It's a hard one to intellectualize, but it felt like an emotional necessity to have a structural break to mark the scale of the loss of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. To look and listen and feel, for an extended period of time. Some moments are larger than others, and the weight of that moment should be reflected in the time-space of the film.

**At what point did you know you wanted to end with the Republican National Convention in Miami and the riot in Liberty City?**

We were trying to kind of reverse a certain set of assumptions about the '60s. The Miami RNC is just not part of our historical memory in the USA. The Chicago DNC looms large in the mythology of the era – it's even gotten the Aaron Sorkin treatment – but it's important to remember that the RNC is largely unexplored, and it also represents the side that won. It has all these characters that will shape the 50 years to come. Reagan rides in. We wondered if what happened in Liberty City might be more relevant to look at than what happened during Chicago.

The goal of waiting until the final moments of the film for there to be images of Black people rebelling against their circumstances was to fully equip the audience to be able to look at that footage in a different way. Right after we move out into the streets of Miami, Tobi Haslett's beautiful narration quotes Frantz Fanon about how the colonized dream of strength, of running, jumping, and flying. There is still agency. And the footage of the rebellion in Liberty City Miami should be viewed in that way, in Fanon's way. Tobi has written (in his essential article on the 2020 Uprising "Magic Actions") on rioting and the power in that action and that is how the film wants this footage to be viewed, as something powerful, and alive with possibility. And then, of course, the police and the military come in and smash it all down.

**It's difficult to watch these overwhelming forces of oppression take shape.**

I agree, but that's actually, perhaps paradoxically, where I also find the hope. In watching the formation of these forces, you realize how they're all constructed. We take the world we live in as an inevitability. What I find really empowering, it's all constructed and, thus, can be deconstructed. There is this idea that these movements failed, that protests failed, that activists weren't practical enough. I wanted to show all the forces that aligned against them. We end the film with the visionary architecture of June Jordan. If an oppressive system like the one we see



today can be constructed, something like Jordan's dream of a humane Harlem can too. Hopefully this film helps us see what we need to overcome to get there.



## BIOGRAPHIES

### **Sierra Pettengill, Director**

Sierra Pettengill's work focuses on the warped narratives of the American past. Most recently, she directed the archival short *The Rifleman*, which premiered at the 2021 Sundance Film Festival. Her 2017 feature-length film, the all-archival documentary *The Reagan Show*, premiered at the Locarno Film Festival before airing on CNN. She directed the 'Big Dan's Tavern' episode of the Netflix series *Trial By Media* about the first televised rape trial in the U.S. Her 2018 all-archival short film, *Graven Image*, aired on POV and is held at the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama. In 2013 she produced the Academy Award-nominated film *Cutie & the Boxer*, which also won an Emmy Award for Best Documentary, and co-directed (with Jamila Wignot) *Town Hall* about the emergent Tea Party movement, for PBS. She has also worked as an archival researcher for many artists including Jim Jarmusch and Adam Pendleton. She was a Sundance Institute Art of Nonfiction Fellow, a fellow at the Yaddo and MacDowell colonies, and is a board member of Screen Slate.

### **Sara Archambault, Producer**

Sara Archambault is a Creative Producer dedicated to artful nonfiction storytelling. She has an extensive professional history in production, programming and foundation work, including 10 years as Program Director at the LEF Foundation, and 9 years as Founder/Programmer of the award-winning documentary film series *The DocYard*. Past producing credits include the Emmy-nominated documentary *Traces of the Trade*, *Street Fighting Men*, *Truth or Consequences*, and award-winning shorts *Community Patrol* and *Contents Inventory*. Sara's work has received support from Sundance Film Institute, Tribeca Film Institute, SFFILM, Catapult Film Fund, IDA, Hot Docs Pitch Forum, Film Independent, and IFP Spotlight on Documentaries, among others. Sara was a 2020 Impact Partners Producing Fellow, a 2013 Sundance Creative Producers Lab Fellow and was named the 2020 SF DocFest Vanguard Awardee. She is a board member of The Flaherty.

### **Jamila Wignot, Producer**

Jamila Wignot is an award-winning Brooklyn-based filmmaker. Her body of work includes *Ailey* (Sundance '21); the Peabody, Emmy, and NAACP award-winning *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross*; *Town Hall*: a feature-length co-production with ITVS about the Tea Party movement; and for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE the Peabody Award-winning *Triangle Fire* and Emmy-nominated *Walt Whitman*. Wignot's producing credits "Hands On," for The New York Times FX/Hulu series *The Weekly*; W. Kamau Bell's directorial debut *Bring the Pain: The Documentary*; and the narrative *A Stray* (SXSW '16) by Sundance Award-winning director Musa Syeed.



**Tobi Haslett, Writer**

Tobi Haslett is a writer who has written about art, film, literature and politics for the *New Yorker*, *Artforum*, *Harper's*, and elsewhere. He penned the introduction to *Horse Crazy* (1989), a novel by Gary Indiana reissued in 2018, and *Nothing But the Music*, a collection of poems by Thulani Davis forthcoming from Blank Forms in 2020. Tobi's essays have appeared in the exhibition catalogues for *Radical Visions: Reza Abdoh* (MoMA PS1, 2018) and Martin Puryear's U.S. Pavilion exhibition at the 59th Venice Biennale. He lives in New York.

**Nels Bangerter, Editor**

Nels Bangerter is an Emmy-nominated documentary film editor and two-time winner of both the International Documentary Association and Cinema Eye Honors Best Editing awards. His work includes *Cameraperson*, which premiered at Sundance and won the Freedom of Expression award from the National Board of Review *Dick Johnson is Dead*, *The Hottest August*, the Academy Award-nominated short film *Buzkashi Boys*, and *Let the Fire Burn*. Nels has contributed as a consultant to numerous award-winning projects, and has been an advisor for several incubators including the Sundance Institute Lab Program. Before becoming an editor, he worked in a gold mine, lived in a redwood tree, and earned an MFA in film production from USC.

**Jace Clayton, Composer**

Jace Clayton is an artist and writer based in New York, also known for his work as DJ /rupture. He is the author of *Uproot: Travels in 21st Century Music and Digital Culture* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) and was awarded a 2020 Andy Warhol Foundation Art Writers Grant to support *Behold the Monkey*, his upcoming book on contemporary art, faith, and social media. Jace is currently Assistant Professor of Visual Arts at Columbia University and Interim Director of the Sound Arts Program. He has performed in over three dozen countries, both solo and as director of large ensemble performances. Since 2018 his work has been exhibited internationally.

**Charlene Modeste, Narrator**

Charlene Modeste is an actress and singer-songwriter based in Los Angeles with a background in live theatre. She and fellow cast members were recipients of an LA Weekly Theater Award (Best Ensemble) and an Ovation Award (Best Musical in an Intimate Theatre) for *The Women Of Brewster Place: The Musical*. She is honored to lend her voice to the story of *Riotsville, USA* and is currently working on her one woman show, *She's About To Pop!*



**CREDITS**

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Tobi Haslett

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Sara Archambault  
Jamila Wignot

**Editor**  
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