

Book Review: African Americans and Gentrification in Washington, D.C.: Race, Class and Social Justice in the Nation's Capital by Sabiyah Prince

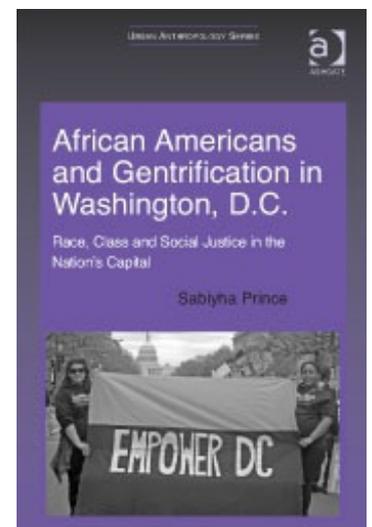
*Using qualitative data, including extensive interview material and ethnographic research, to explore the experiences and ideas of African Americans as they confront and construct gentrification, this book aims to contextualize Black Washingtonians' perspectives on belonging and attachment during a marked period of urban restructuring and demographic change in the US capital. This book is particularly valuable for those studying middle-class urban renaissances in other places and eras, finds **Susan Marie Martin**.*



African Americans and Gentrification in Washington, D.C.: Race, Class and Social Justice in the Nation's Capital. Sabiyah Prince. Ashgate. January 2014.

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Two social ironies are attached to the topic of gentrification in the capital of the U.S. The first is embedded in gentrification itself: anywhere, under any guise, regeneration is fuelled by narratives that marry progress, prosperity, and propriety. However, once in motion, gentrification destroys the culture of historic neighbourhoods and disrupts lives. The second social irony is, regrettably, D.C. itself: the city is home to an African American majority that has, historically, been subjected to institutionalised racism and classism. A study of the impact of the former on the latter brings into focus how race and class intersect with gentrification, important considering 'progress' is popularly conceptualised as the politically-neutral rising tide that floats all boats. Sabiyah Prince's work is subtitled *Race, Class and Social Justice in the Nation's Capital*, an addition that makes it clear that gentrification does not deliver and, in this centre of power, it threatens to deepen the marginalisation of this community.



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Prince, an independent scholar and cultural anthropologist, grew up in the city, from 1959 through 1977, at the height of the civil rights movement, and she returned to the area in 1996. The previous decade was lived in New York. More precisely, she lived in the Bronx, a community stymied by decades of gentrification schemes. She declares this "scholarly positionality" early, before explaining that gentrification is the focus of this study, but "at its core" she examines how "people make sense of themselves, this place and others against the backdrop of a rapidly changing city" (p.20).

Several critical points are made, convincingly, in the Introduction. The first: the belief that race as an 'issue' in America is declining in significance is patently false. Prince takes pains to set the record straight for those who would believe that having elected an African American to the office of President means that America has turned a corner. She cites the anti-Obama backlash witnessed through attacks on his healthcare programme from the far right as a blatant example of how race and poverty continue to marginalise. Furthermore, the argument that neoliberalism is 'colourblind' is dispensed with: people of colour in America have been hit disproportionately by both deindustrialisation, and the supply-side proviso that 'trickle-down' is a social leveller in key areas such as housing. Here her findings demonstrate that race as a hegemonic force is still very significant. Later, in Chapter 2, she examines the historical junctures relative to "racial formation and socioeconomic inequalities" (p.17), from enslavement through post-emancipation desegregation, bridging time to delineate the historical roots of contemporary struggles.



I Heart Gentrification Street Art in D.C. Credit: [Veronica Olivotto](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Chapter 1 details the conceptual framework that underpins the findings of Prince's extensive and intimate ethnography. Here she tackles early the seemingly universal phenomenon that normalises gentrification while discrediting its critics as Luddites of a different stripe. Far from being 'anti-progress', community-based organisations and "working class communities of color" (p.26) criticise what they know is uneven development. Prince draws on a variety of theoretical frameworks about gentrification, race, class, and neoliberalism to demonstrate that urban regeneration positions the needs or desires "of the upwardly mobile" over those of the poor and working poor (p.19), of which African Americans figure disproportionately.

Including neoliberalism in this analysis extends the concept to highlight how the reach of privilege stretches beyond large wealth-generating strategies to street level, and the material wants of the White soon-to-be-urban-again middle class. Gentrification is a reflection in the local of "broad political and economic projects" (p.31), fuelled by the marked influence of corporate American on policymakers. Furthermore, neoliberal inclinations to blame the vulnerable, combined with a neoliberal concept of diversity that emphasises "invisibility" and "conformity" (pp.33-34), makes the insidious toxicity of this intersection unavoidable. The notion of 'blame' is extended elsewhere, vicariously, when Prince and interviewees highlight that earlier promises to rebuild and revitalise neighbourhoods destroyed in the 1968 riots were left to flounder.

Four chapters examine data culled from oral histories, interviews, statistics, and observations of the social, political, and economic landscapes. Prince's methods foreground the impact on the lives of individuals. African American voices are centred to tell the stories behind statistics across these chapters to subsume the meta-narratives of commercial and real estate interests that paint D.C. as a "tourist mecca and stomping grounds of the rich, powerful and connected" (p.81). In contrast, an interviewee likens urban renewal to "urban removal" (p.104).

Elsewhere it was observed that 'regeneration' had killed "traditional black neighbourhoods and festivities" and home-grown businesses, displacements likened to "a takeover" (pp.90-91). The potential for an even uglier aftermath is made vivid in the evidence detailed in the chapters that address the individual dynamics of, and collective responses to, gentrification. Numerous examples are cited of 'newcomers' expressing their disdain for the pre-existing life of the neighbourhood. These nouveau 'settlers' unashamedly promise to 'fix' neighbourhoods and raise property values, while others are at ease delivering the racially demeaning insults of colonisers. The story isn't exclusively grim, but such phenomena are still common in our time in the wake of change.

Prince's goal was to explore gentrification from the standpoint of the racially and economically marginalised in targeted communities, and she does so while addressing the socio-economic diversity within the African American community. She includes a range of perspectives on the positive and negative impacts of particular initiatives. Her

work is sweeping, sound, and sharply focused. One reviewer calls her study of urban culture “rigorous and ambitious”—a model for those who criss-cross disciplinary boundaries. Agreed. The book is particularly valuable for those studying middle-class urban renaissances in other places and eras.

Susan Marie Martin is a Ph. D. candidate in Social Science (Interdisciplinary) at University College Cork (Ireland). Her research focuses on the impact of modernity and gentrification on women who eke out subsistence earnings as street traders. She is an international educator, currently dividing her time between Ireland and the Middle East. Her thoughts on tangible and abstract markets may be followed on Twitter [@smariem13](#). [Read more reviews by Susan](#).

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