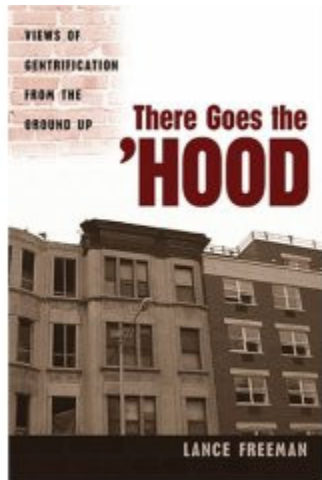


## THE GENTRIFICATION SHUFFLE

Gentrification: The displacement of poor women and people of color. The raising of rents and eradication of a single, poor and working-class women from neighborhoods once considered unsavory by people who didn't live there. The demolition of housing projects. A money-driven process in which landowners and developers push people (in this case, many of them single mothers) out of their homes without thinking about where they will go. Gentrification is a premeditated process in which an imaginary bleach is poured onto a community and the only remaining color left in that community is white... Only the strongest coloreds survived.—Taigi Smith, “What Happens When Your Hood is the Last Stop on the White Flight Express?” from the anthology **Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism**.

by *Racialicious* special correspondent [Latoya Peterson](#)



Last year, the Washington Post published a series of articles about the H street corridor in downtown DC. The article detailed the thoughts and opinions of the historical residents, who had seen H street through riots and a depressed economy, and spoke with the new residents who had moved to H street after the city slated the area for economic revival.

What interested me more than the article was the surrounding chat about gentrification, proctored through one of the Washington Post's “live online” sessions. The discussion quickly dissolved into an argument about the

events at a local bar, where some new residents picked up some of the sidewalk chalk sitting in a decorative basket and began drawing on the tables.

The black proprietor objected to them using the chalk. The white party at the table asked why they couldn't draw with the chalk, since you generally use chalk to draw. The proprietor responded, saying you shouldn't draw on a place where people eat – no one wants a bite of chalk dust.

This is where the story gets a bit blurry. The white kids assert that the proprietor became shrill, telling them that they didn't belong in her neighborhood. The proprietor states that the white kids became hostile, saying she should be lucky that they were spending money in her “ghetto” neighborhood.

The article and chat discussion epitomize the delicate dance we do around gentrification. Class divisions and race divisions tend to pop up, turning neighbor against neighbor. Revitalization of an area isn't always bad – many people enjoy living in luxury condos, having shops within walking

distance, and having a nicer, cleaner, and safer neighborhood. Gentrification, however, is revitalization in a different stripe. While revitalization seeks to improve a blighted or run-down area, gentrification aims to attract people with higher incomes to live in the community.

And unfortunately, the people with higher incomes tend to be white. While affluent professionals of all races participate in the gentrification of historically ethnic enclaves, the introduction of whites to a predominantly POC area seems to herald the coming of a gentrification effort.

The business premise behind this is very logical. If a business invests funds to enter into a community (with an unknown rate of return on their investment), they want to be reassured that there will be a nice profit in the not-so-distant future. However, the current residents of the communities hold limited buying power and many cannot afford to patronize the new businesses and shops. That is when business owners and property owners team up to try to attract big spenders with a lot of disposable income, normally by selling the type of lifestyle one sees on TV - city living with lots of clubs, bars, local coffee shops and brunch spots.

A few weeks ago, I happened across [an article from USA Today](#) which described the trends in development and gentrification in DC. The article made a startling assertion: my fair chocolate city (with the marshmallow center, as Stephen Colbert notes) will be majority white by 2015.

The article opens:

Much has changed since Ben's Chili Bowl opened nearly 50 years ago on a bustling strip known as America's Black Broadway for its thriving black-owned shops and theaters.

Back then, the red-and-white diner was a popular hangout for black bankers, doctors and blue-collar workers who lived and worked along U Street. Even jazz greats Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald could be found devouring chili half-smokes and milkshakes after performing at nearby clubs.

Now, on some days, the crowd at the Washington landmark is mostly white, reflecting a neighborhood metamorphosis that has brought in high-end condominiums and businesses like Starbucks.

"Sometimes you look around and wonder, 'Where are all the black people?'" said Virginia Ali, who opened the diner with her husband, Ben, in 1958.

A similar transformation is happening across Washington as the black population declines and more white residents and other ethnic groups move in. Demographers say if the trend continues the District of Columbia could lose its longtime majority-black status within 10 years. The changes are shaking up city politics, reshaping neighborhoods and displacing longtime residents.

[...]

Analysts attribute the shift to lower-income and middle-class black residents leaving for the suburbs while young white professionals and others able to afford expensive housing prices are moving in. The newcomers to D.C. are being lured by a robust economy, new condos and a chance to escape worsening highway congestion.

Saddened, I finished the article and reflected for a few moments. It isn't as if gentrification is a new phenomenon. Urban centers like New York (and most notably, [Harlem](#)), Philadelphia, and the Bay Area have all experienced tensions surrounding gentrification. However, the reality of the situation becomes a bit harder to swallow as gentrification creeps into your own backyard.

I currently live in the suburb where I grew up - [Montgomery County, MD](#). It is one of the most affluent counties in the nation. It also has a very interesting racial breakdown according to the 2000 census (thanks Wiki!):

The racial makeup of the county was:

64.78% White

15.14% African American

0.29% Native American

11.3% Asian

0.05% Pacific Islander

5.0% from other races

3.45% from two or more races.

In addition, 11.52% of the population was Hispanic or Latino, of any race

I currently live a newly revitalized area. Seemingly overnight, condos sprouted, new stores and shops dotted the formerly barren landscape and it became damn near impossible to get a meal for under five dollars. The average cost of rent in my area soared - most of the studio apartments in my area (under 600 square feet) are easily over \$1,000 with many coming in at \$1200 and \$1300 a month. Luckily for me, MoCo was fairly progressive back in the day and they passed this ordinance:

Since the 1970s, the county has had in place a Moderately Priced Dwelling Unit (MPDU) zoning plan that requires developers to include affordable housing in any new residential developments that they construct in the county. The goal is to create socioeconomically mixed neighborhoods and schools so the rich and poor are not isolated in separate parts of the county. Developers who provide for more than the minimum amount of MPDUs are rewarded with permission to increase the density of their developments, which allows them to build more housing and generate more revenue. Montgomery County was one of the first counties in the U.S. to adopt such a plan, but many other areas have since followed suit.

As a result of this, the building's residents are all over the map. There are programs for broke young professionals, single parents, low-income workers, veterans, the disabled, etc. The apartment building

I live in is ridiculous - yuppies and buppies share elevator space with mentally disturbed Vietnam vets and rambunctious latchkey kids. Checking my mail, I might run into the Navy personnel who rent much of the upper floors as well as local filmmakers. My building is reflective of the diversity of the area - due in no small part to government intervention. Without the plethora of government programs designed to keep us integrated, I wonder how many of us would be living in completely segregated neighborhoods.

The property across the street from my complex is a different story. The townhouses and condos that have arrived on the scene in the last few years sell for astronomical sums. One town home, boasting four bedrooms and one bathroom (WTF at that!) was renting for \$2599 per month - no utilities included. When I asked the proprietor why the price was so high, he responded that the mortgage was actually close to \$3,000 - the rental price was cheaper! The condos and town homes are also fairly diverse - except for one key difference. There are very few children or older people to be seen. Actually owning a home seems to be the exclusive domain of singletons or young couples with no children - again, catered to those who have significant amounts of disposable income.

With an eye toward purchasing property in the next few years, I checked out a condo community that is less than a mile from my current residence. I chose something similar to my current situation and tried to figure out how much it would cost me to purchase a property. The real estate results came back as follows:

Mortgage Calculator \* | Recalculate...

Home Price \$307,500  
Down Payment \$ 61,500  
Fixed Rate Term 30 year  
Interest Rate 6.28  
Estimated Payment 1519.47

\*Note: These are estimates only.

Source: Bankrate.com

So - a one bed, one bathroom condo is \$307,500. That's pretty reasonable for this area, but where the hell am I going to get a \$60,000 down payment? My credit score made me scream when I saw it, so I can take it that interest rate is shot to hell. Based on my own estimates, even if I can come up with the down payment, a higher interest rate puts me closer to \$2,000 a month in payments - not to mention condo fees and MoCo's killer property taxes.

The situation in DC is even more grim. For example, the tony Ellington Apartments on U Street have a one bedroom, one bathroom unit renting for \$1715-\$2320 per month. [Also, please [check the website](#). U Street is a historically black area...how much diversity do you see in this ad? And why do the shots of

U street only include the tops of the buildings?] The 2020 lofts on U street started at \$400,000 for a one-bedroom basic unit. All of the 2020 units have been sold.

While I am not moved to rock-attack people who can afford to live in the beautiful new condos off U Street nor jump some semi-urban cyclist on their way somewhere, I can understand some of the poorly channeled frustration.

The neighborhood is changing, presumably for the better.

And, due to financial constraints, I am not invited to be a part of it.

Now, for me, it will be a temporary situation. With ever increasing earning power, it stands to reason that eventually I will be able to afford one of these overpriced homes. I also do not have any children, meaning the bulk of my income can be used to pay things like exorbitant rent. Hopefully, I will be able to afford to live in the areas where I want to live by the time I am 30.

The gentrification debate continues to war on but I wonder what side I will eventually be on. It is easy to relate to the anger that displaced people feel when they are priced out of their own neighborhood. But will I still feel this way when I can afford that type of housing?

Right now -thanks to my continuing broke status - I still struggle a bit to get my subsidized rent in on time. While I was raging at the real estate website over the unfairness of it all, my DC-born boyfriend injected a note of reason.

“You know,” he started, swinging the laptop around to his side of the bed. “You could afford exactly what you want. A loft, nice view, reasonably priced...”

He pulled up another real estate site. The loft-style condos featured were gorgeous, complete with two levels, stainless steel appliances, granite countertops, and a french door style balcony. All for around \$210,000. I was in heaven...until I looked at the address.

The lofts were located on a barren stretch of Rhode Island Avenue, in Washington DC.

“I can’t live there!”

“Why not? That’s what you can afford, right? It’s got everything you want.” He waited for my answer.

“That’s not the kind of neighborhood I’m looking for,” I replied.

And it’s true. My current neighborhood has three major grocery stores in walking distance, a few cute bars and restaurants, a wine store, and a few day spas in the immediate area. The neighborhood does an impeccable job of keeping the streets and sidewalks clean, we have outdoor benches and parks, and

there is a very large police presence - which is fairly comforting to a woman who lives alone and frequently gets home well after dark.

The new neighborhood is reasonable and affordable - but the nearest grocery store is 20 minutes away by car (and I don't have a car!), the nearest businesses are carryouts, check cashing spots, and corner stores. Passing through the area, all I see are men loitering at all times of the day and night, and I would not be caught dead heading home from the closest metro station after sundown.

I tried to explain this to him in the kindest terms possible. However, somewhere around the time I was explaining how I viewed the situation as a young woman living alone, the realization dawned on me: as much as I may disagree with gentrification on principle, I complicity agree with it by my neighborhood selection practices.

So now, I'm left wondering - exactly which side of this debate am I on?