

Gentrification: "It's Not About Race..."

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"Gentrification: "It's not about race..." by Lindsay Foster Thomas, posted on the York and Fig blog on January 6, 2015.

There's no doubt about it. I am a gentrifier. So, why don't I feel like one? Maybe no one really does, but if I may be honest, I think it's because I'm African-American. Does that mean I get some kind of free pass to gentrify without it weighing on my conscience? Not even a little bit. I think about it a lot. I experience guilt over paying exorbitant rent prices that I complain about, but can afford with an awareness that my presence and ability to live in the country's "hottest" neighborhoods means someone else can't.

But here's what race has to do with it. First of all, when middle and upper middle class people seek out more affordable housing options, the most budget-friendly places to turn to are communities that have been historically ignored by developers, retailers, elected officials, etc. The populations of these neighborhoods are often black and brown people who aren't necessarily poor or even struggling. In fact, if houses and buildings have been well-maintained, that's an attractive foundation to envision a community that feels like home to many more kinds of people. This is why many folks who decry gentrification define it as a process in which "rich white people" come in and take over everything. Property is cheaper in predominately African-American and Latino neighborhoods and so these areas are frequently ripe for development, investment and economic change — all courtesy of wealthier people taking an interest. When I move into such communities, I am perhaps in many ways not like the "old timers" there, but I look a lot more like them than white people and there's a good chance I share some cultural connections with the neighbors that don't feel forced.

The second point I'd like to make is inspired by a conversation I had with Georgetown journalism lecturer and author Natalie Hopkinson. Hopkinson, a longtime D.C. resident, is African-American, a wife, a mother and a scholar who has witnessed many changes to communities within the urban landscape of our nation's capitol. She has a career and the financial means to live in almost any neighborhood she'd like. But, "I don't have that white privilege," she says, recognizing the main difference between herself and some of the newcomers to the community where she lives. "They can come onto the same block and just through the sheer fact of their whiteness, they can raise the value."

Hopkinson continues, "Right off the bat, your calls are going to get answered. People are going to respond to you more. People will value the place more. People will invest more." She's quick to point out that she's not "anti-gentrification" — Hopkinson and her family enjoy the restaurants, green spaces, school improvement and other benefits that have materialized along with neighborhood change. But, she confesses that it's hard to feel good about it all the time.

"It's hurtful when you realize that if millions of people who looked like me moved in, there wouldn't be the same sort of response. There wouldn't be the same outcome," says Hopkinson. "I don't have as much power or agency as people who are white. That's not white people's fault. That's just sort of the way that it works and that drives some of the tensions that are around gentrification." She adds that often, wealthy, white gentrifiers "have a personal stake in having black people gone because race is so closely tied to socioeconomic status so it's impossible to separate those two."

So, whose investment matters more? The people and families who have created strong communities in spite of disinvestment or the new members of the neighborhood who are able to drop a million dollars for a renovated row house? There's no easy answer. But, I agree with Hopkinson about the role race plays in gentrifying neighborhoods.

When we began this project in Highland Park, the Wealth & Poverty team encountered many people eager to discuss their ideas about gentrification — even if shy about using "the G-word," or admittedly confused about its meaning. Several local residents (all white, I have to point out) have declared confidently to me that what is happening here is "not about race." A high school teacher in the area pointed out that not just white people are coming to majority-Latino Highland Park. Young Latinos are also part of the change something known as "gente-fication." One woman said "White, black or brown doesn't matter —gentrification only sees one color and that's green."

They're not entirely wrong. The many drivers of gentrification are complex and they are what our team came to Highland Park to uncover. While we work to better understand these drivers, I think it's important to acknowledge that race is a major factor in how gentrification plays out in America's cities. I wouldn't shy away from saying so while working on this project. At the same time, I continue to consider how my own money influences change in the neighborhoods I move to. So, before quickly dismissing race as a part of the larger conversation, listen to, learn from and think about who occupied the spaces you call home before you and who new businesses appear to be catering to in rapidly changing neighborhoods. That's how I've been operating as a gentrifier all these years.

Guiding Questions:

- Lindsay Foster Thomas makes the case that "race is a major factor in how gentrification plays out in America's cities." Which aspects of her perspective resonate with you? Which don't?
- Some neighborhoods undergoing gentrification have significant white populations, with parts of Kensington and Port Richmond in Philadelphia being one example. How does this affect what Thomas presents?
- How did her perspective change or nuance your thoughts on gentrification?
- In what ways have you experienced race as a factor of gentrification? Or does this perspective contradict your experiences?

