
David-William Gibson. 2015. The Edge Becomes the Center: An Oral History of Gentrification in the Twenty-First Century. New York: Overlook Press.

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Both illuminating and frustrating, DW Gibson's *The Edge Becomes the Center: An Oral History of Gentrification* indicates its strengths and limitations in its subtitle: this is ultimately just one subjective account of gentrification, drawn from an increasingly singular setting, contemporary New York city. The book disappoints readers hoping for broader context, conceptual precision, clarifying historiography, or other standards of social science research on this topic. Yet it seems churlish to expect those from a work targeting a popular audience written by a journalist with a different objective. Indeed, the book's value lies in its immersion into the language of gentrification, articulated through the perspectives of those who steer, oppose, benefit from, are displaced by, and accommodate — often simultaneously — this dynamic process for urban inequality.

In a format that recalls Studs Terkel's oral histories, *The Edge Becomes the Center* assigns one or occasionally two informants per chapter and allows them extended, sprawling responses. Gibson interjects sparingly in italicized passages written at a distance from the interview moment, which serves more to tease the reader along (e.g. by failing to disclose informants' roles in gentrification from their first introduction) than to disclose his analytical agenda. Informants run a gamut of participants in and witnesses to gentrification: real estate agents and middlemen, landlords, neighborhood activists and tenant organizers, architects and contractors, street artists, art collectors, institutional investors, elected officials and residents' association leaders, public defenders and legal aid lawyers, squatters, homeless shelter staff, shop owners, weed dealers, even a sociology professor. Each is asked what gentrification means to them, and the multiplicity of meanings they share — if at first infuriating to readers versed in well-trod conceptual and theoretical approaches — sketch out an experiential framework whereby urban bodies navigate flows of capital and attachments of place.

A few scattered references to political economist Neil Smith's work on gentrification suggest the emphasis and extent of Gibson's theoretical program; the author is content to let his informants guide readers through practical debates regarding gentrification as a class vs. race-based process, the future of municipal institutions like public housing, the creation and support of urban amenities like gardens and coffeeshops, urban universities as major landowners and redevelopers, the politics of white-led gentrification resistance, the eclipse of manufacturing by service and creative sectors, and the evolution of art practice when studios become unaffordable. The book helpfully explains in clear, everyday language a spectrum of on-the-ground mechanisms: from street-level processes of landlord disinvestment and harassment, tenant buy-outs, and the acquisition and flipping of foreclosed apartments; to city-level processes that involve scanning public archives, enforcing occupational health and consumer safety regulations, incentivizing green infrastructure, and offering immigration visas to foreign

investors. Persuasive assessments are offered for the historical significance of the Giuliani and Bloomberg mayoral regimes, and of the understandably high expectations placed upon the de Blasio administration (newly elected at the time of the book's publication).

This has to be said: as formal ethnography, *The Edge Becomes the Center* is significantly lacking. Gibson never explains his sampling strategy and methods, leaving readers no means with which to assess the typicality of informants' roles and viewpoints. The analysis here could benefit from an extended place method that identifies informants in gentrification's key sites of abstraction: real estate investment firms, urban policy institutes, the moment of neighborhood choice by footloose migrants, etc. There's also the question of why base this study in 21st-c. New York, a place where gentrification has evolved over three decades into highly advanced dynamics of global city formation may yield limited insights about the generalized diffusion of gentrification elsewhere. No doubt there remains a diehard readership for New York urban studies, but the scholarship on gentrification increasingly pulls in new and global directions, from stagnating second-tier and shrinking industrial cities, to the amenity frontier of rural towns and natural-recreation destinations, to the state-led initiatives of city-region building and primitive accumulation that drive what Loretta Lees calls 'planetary gentrification.' In this context, why return to NYC at such a late date?

Answers are found in the responses that Gibson collects and assembles from his informants. Particularly because gentrification at this stage has become so single-mindedly pecuniary in motives and mechanisms in contemporary New York, *The Edge Becomes the Center* offers a deep dive into the language of money at all levels of urban livelihood. There are almost no homilies about neighborhood 'authenticity' or civic participation in this book, in contrast to the reports of gentrifiers that Japonica Brown-Saracino and other scholars have produced. Everyone in this city has their price, informants repeatedly attest; as Georg Simmel would recognize, within this reductive quantification lies a prism to observe the totality of urban life. Race and ethnicity are revealingly implicated in this language of money, when, for instance, a Hasidic landlord describes how he understands the varied neighborhood obstacles and conflicts he encounters: 'I can't explain it to you without sounding like a racist' (p. 172). Crucially, New York remains a key testing ground for the execution of neoliberal ideas about poverty relief and public investment. Especially jaw-dropping is one banker's breathless transition from praising the Bloomberg administration's embrace of high-end development ('Bloomberg raised so much money... Among the unsung heroes in the city, I think, are the capital budget people' [pp. 116-7]) to a near flawless recital of HOPE VI-style strategies for deconcentrating poverty in public housing:

to build out the fringes of these entities into a more open, retail-oriented, low-rise, mixed-use, mixed-income environment so you're dealing with this in a different way. To have lower-middle-income and lower-income people in their own world is just horrible. (pg. 122)

The Edge Becomes the Center includes its share of old-timers' recollection of gentrification's first wave in 1980s East Village and Lower East Side — stories well documented in urban research, articulated now with an occasional even-handedness that the

passage of time affords. Even more recurrent are the deeply felt remembrances of New York's legacy of civil liberties and tolerance. 'We flee to New York because we know it's the place where there's freedom,' a downtown shop-owner says. 'But it's not going to be free for too much longer.' (p. 209) Gibson and his informants reframe this local expression of a critical junction in NYC life into a broader contradiction in urban governance and planning between democracy and capitalism. Therein lies perhaps the most profound lesson of this New York story.