6. Race, Authenticity, and the Gentrified Aesthetics of Belonging in Washington, D.C.

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Abstract

This chapter tracks the contemporary convergence of hipster aesthetics with a Black cultural space that results in the aesthetic re-coding of a popular gentrified Washington, D.C. commercial corridor as a diverse neighbourhood. I examine representations of blackness and diversity and analyze how they are deployed in the pursuit of authenticity in the gentrified city. Authenticity has become an instrument through which people attach meaning to things and experiences rather than people. I argue that the tension between the polar class/race lifestyles spur attraction from young, upper-income white residents and tourists to the area. Ultimately, blackness in the marketplace must be that which *sells*, and that which can be easily transacted by proprietors of capital.

Keywords: Washington, D.C., blackness, diversity, gentrification

In 2013, anticipating its forthcoming store on H Street, in northeast Washington, D.C., Whole Foods Market's Mid-Atlantic regional president, Scott Allshouse, spoke of the synergies between the Whole Foods brand and the rapidly gentrifying commercial corridor. He specifically highlighted H Street's demographics as representing what Whole Foods values: "That neighborhood reflects a lot of what Whole Foods is about—diversity, passion for food, history. Things like that. That's what we are too. We are so in tune with that. That sense of community and pride" (O'Connell 2013). A press release from the same year announcing the new store also references the corridor's diversity as an attribute and implies that diverse communities

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with diverse, cultural opportunities can benefit both old and new residents, thus establishing diversity as a desirable commodity and aesthetic. The press release states:

> The H Street Corridor is a thriving hub of diversity and cultural richness—a perfect match for Whole Foods Market's goal to support each and every community we're in…Whether you're a long-time resident or new to this neighborhood, we are proud to have the opportunity to join you and help write the next page of history. Being among the flourishing food scene, culture offerings of the arts district and the exciting mix of residents will make Whole Foods Market a great partner to those in the community.

Whole Foods uses "diversity" presumably to signal a multicultural, multi-racial neighbourhood, as a way to accrue value for both the Whole Foods brand and the H Street corridor's brand. The irony of the Whole Foods claim on diversity, culture, community, and history is its leadership by proclaimed libertarian CEO, John Mackey. While the Whole Foods brand is often associated with progressive politics and "socially minded commerce" due to its adoption of spiritual, sustainable, and countercultural practices, Mackey has spoken openly about his commitment to advance individual freedom without regard for social equality (Davis 2017). It is this kind of "diversity" in appearance that actually encourages neoliberal exploitation. As Shannon Winnubst explains, neoliberal social rationalities spawned language of multiculturalism, and "its even more aestheticized child, diversity, in the late 1990s as the new, preferred vocabulary for social difference" (Winnubst 2015: 3). "Diversity" and "development" are buzzwords that allay fears about displacement and inequality. Yet, while the diversity project was aligned with social justice, the two ideas are sometimes presented as synonymous, if not interchangeable.

Changes to the commercial landscape of H Street resemble other contemporary "revitalized" urban spaces that can be paradoxically described by the concurrent celebration of diversity and the increasing separation and isolation of different social groups. This shift can be explained, in part, by the infiltration of diversity discourses and by practices of aestheticization that work to naturalize lifestyle and landscape tastes as well as concretize neighbourhood forms and cultural difference. The H Street commercial corridor was known for many years as a Black-business downtown district that provided numerous retail options and public spaces for Black residents that were central to economic and social life. The area is now seen and aesthetically valued by local and national media, and local politicians, as a diverse space for corporate interests.

Recognized as one of three Black commercial districts devastated by the April 1968 uprisings that erupted largely in response to the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the H Street NE corridor was named *USA Today*'s top "up and coming" neighbourhood as well as one of *Forbes* magazine's "Hippest Hipster" destinations in 2011. In 2014, the *New York Times* describes the H Street, NE corridor as "increasingly mixed, racially and economically, as row houses within a block or two of the corridor undergo upscale renovations, property values rise and ethnic restaurants and fashionable pubs proliferate" (Meyer 2014). Yet in the not too recent past it was a predominantly low-income, Black neighbourhood. Linked to these designations has been a gradual demographic shift in the area's population. According to the US Census, the Black population in the H Street neighbourhood has been falling since 1990, when African Americans made up nearly 77 percent of the population. Black residents dropped from 73 percent in 2000 to 45.2 percent in 2010, while the white population has jumped from 22.4 percent in 2000 to 47.7 percent in 2010. Now, the location of the H Street corridor is recognized as a particularly attractive space for commercial and residential development because of its proximity to Union Station and because it is within commuting distance from Penn Quarter, Downtown, and other popular neighbourhoods.

The history of H Street tells the story of a Black space that underwent significant challenges to achieve the political and economic infrastructure that enabled it to thrive. The area did not suffer from lack of attention or a commitment of funds, but a lack of sustainable options, due to racialized systems of dispossession, to support the people who lived, worked, and shopped there. In the years following the 1968 uprisings, the H Street NE corridor went through a significant period of disinvestment and neglect by the state that was a continuation of the economic decline precipitated by urban renewal and white flight. As a result, the area was deemed a blighted, unwelcoming ghetto, teeming with transient people who did not care about their own condition or the conditions of their environment. Although the downfall of the H Street corridor was due to several factors, negative renderings of blackness in the media prevented the restoration of H Street as a renewed Black retail space.

In recent years, community organizations and government agencies have put significant effort into the rebuilding and rebranding of H Street as diverse. Now divided into three districts: Urban Living, Central Retail, and Arts and Entertainment Districts, H Street is sprinkled with restaurants selling the trappings of a global village: Belgian mussels, Taiwanese ramen noodles, Lebanese falafels, German ales, Ethiopian injera, plus countless

hipster bars, coffee shops, and bakeries. Patrons strolling along the street are also met by large, graphic signposts detailing a distinctly multicultural history of the corridor. On H Street you can partake in the pleasures of visible and edible ethnicity as a form of aestheticized difference – a politics that are provisional, variable, and a distinct move away from the homogeneous and monolithic. This popular Washington, D.C. neighbourhood is among several others that have undergone significant social, cultural, and economic changes that privilege newer, affluent, white residents and tourists coming to the region in droves, thus contributing to Washington's designation as the most intensely gentrified city in the United States, as more than 20,000 residents were displaced from the city between 2000-2013 as a result of a meteoric rise in home values, increased investment, and new amenities added to lower-income, traditionally Black communities (Richardson, Mitchell, and Franco 2019).

Revitalization efforts in Washington have led to the introduction of urban amenities and cultural alcoves that attract a different class of customers and tourists; those interested in improvements to lifestyle (bike lanes, farmer's markets) as opposed to equitable social and economic opportunities. This distinction between presumed Black and white interests also highlights struggles over entitlement between the new crop of residents, who have considerable education and access to resources and have invested their time and energy into the remodelling of the area, versus the old guard, who experienced the neighbourhood's most challenging periods when they lacked adequate financial support from the government and other entities.

In what follows, I examine representations of blackness and diversity and analyze how they are deployed in the pursuit of authenticity in the gentrified city. A vital component of understanding how blackness figures into the "revitalization" of the H Street corridor is how culture and authenticity work as instruments of urban development. Given the prominence of culture as a key resource for post-industrial cities to attract tourists and residents, several have implemented strategies to promote urban branding. Racialized expressions are more marketable in the emerging "creative city" that emphasizes cultural consumption and creative, aesthetic practices. Creating authenticity is an integral process to the socio-spatial organization of gentrifying cities. Several scholars have addressed the role authenticity plays in the making of spaces, especially the role of power in integrating exclusionary practices (Jackson, 2005; Pattillo, 2007; Zukin, 2008; Brown-Saracino, 2009). Authenticity inherently involves value and how people value a particular place. Furthermore, authenticity structures a sense of

belonging by producing, protecting, and celebrating spatial narratives. Mobility is a privilege that is attached to whiteness, so it is those that possess whiteness who are more likely to call a neighbourhood authentic or boast its "authentic" qualities as desirable.

Authenticity has become an instrument through which people attach meaning to things and experiences rather than people – hence the proliferation of boutiques, craft breweries, and cafés alongside the practice of branding neighbourhoods in terms of distinctive cultural identities. While displacement, through a loss of access to affordable goods and services, is certainly taking place on H Street, I argue that it is this exact encounter between the polar class/race lifestyles between long-time Black residents and new white newcomers that spur attraction from young, upper-income white residents and tourists to the area. At the same time, one can be stern or exhibit anger over the changes (as aesthetic, not critique), as long as the fundamental power relations of society, founded on broad appeal to white buyers remain intact. In other words, new residents can express their discontent over aesthetic shifts in the built environment as a matter of taste, rather than acknowledging the violence experienced by marginalized populations as a result of the changes. Therefore, blackness in the marketplace must be that which *sells*, and that which can be easily transacted by proprietors of capital. Ultimately, I track the contemporary convergence of hipster aesthetics with a Black cultural space that results in the aesthetic re-coding of the neighbourhood as a diverse commercial corridor.

Representing the Real: Black Aesthetic Emplacement

Over time, "diversity" has developed incredible linguistic power. This is especially relevant within the context of Whole Foods Market expanding and opening a store on H Street, and as mentioned above, evoking the language of diversity. The term "diversity," Gabriella Modan points out, "has maintained its veneer of concern for social justice, but picked up new meanings associated with hipness, as it's used in new contexts that have nothing to do with inclusion, power sharing, or social justice" (Modan 2012: 190). This façade of interest in social justice, and the depoliticization of diversity, has become a popular rallying cry and organizing principle for emerging businesses that cater to customers who are interested in lifestyle amenities like yoga studios, organic foods, fair-trade coffee, etc., buttressed by a commodified ethical mode of consumption. These businesses, which appear in some of the most contested spaces where the poor and marginalized lived for years

without access to basic services, purport to support global initiatives that improve the lives of the most vulnerable populations.

Whole Foods Market was founded in 1980 and grew from being a small, natural foods store based in Austin, Texas to become the country's largest organic food store and seventh-largest grocery store chain (Davis 2017). Colloquially known as "whole paycheck" for their high prices and reputation for catering to a young, upper-middle class population, Whole Foods thrives on being more than just a grocery store, but a mission-driven, lifestyle chain that emphasizes its "responsibility to co-create a world where each of us, our communities and our planet can flourish" (Whole Foods n.d.). Furthermore, the chain states its purpose is to improve access to healthy food for underserved neighbourhoods, despite little evidence demonstrating success of this claim.

The H Street Whole Foods Market finally opened on May 15, 2017 – a brand-new 40,000 square-foot store on the ground floor of a luxury residential building named "Apollo." The building was named after the Apollo Theatre, which originally opened in 1913 and was located in the same area as the new Apollo building. The theatre closed in 1955 and the land was later sold to Ourisman Chevrolet. It later became the site of Murry's grocery store and H Street Storage. The H Street location was the third Whole Foods Market within Washington D.C.'s city limits, and sixth in the D.C.-metro area. Although Whole Foods is a global brand, each store features aesthetic elements that reflect the neighbourhood they occupy, thus making their customers *feel* like they are in a local market.

A few months after the store's grand opening, I walked in to look around. It appeared to be like any other Whole Foods Market in terms of its layout, selection, and ambiance. A couple of aisles down from the organic produce section, next to the non-dairy milk products, was an immaculately organized, colour-coded display of gourmet chocolates. Above the multi-tiered tower was the phrase "Chocolate City" featured prominently in white block letters foregrounding a dark brown backdrop. Above the sign was a generic city skyline, resembling paper cut-outs, dipped in various hues of chocolate brown. The "Chocolate City" name was adopted by Black Washingtonians' as a sense of pride in the face of the horrifying political and economic conditions they faced in the mid-20th century. While the "Chocolate City" label originally referred to Washington, D.C., the music group Parliament's 1975 song of the same name opened up the designation to include cities like Newark, Gary, and Los Angeles where Blacks became a large population once white residents fled to the suburbs. In light of this popular and recognizable history, it became immediately clear that the "Chocolate City" sign at Whole

Foods doubly authenticated remnants of the waning Black culture that had been prominent in the neighbourhood and aestheticized the meaning of blackness in this first majority-Black metropolis. This display deploys what I call *black aesthetic emplacement*, a mode of representing blackness in urban capitalist simulacra, which exposes how blackness accrues a value that is not necessarily extended to Black people and how social and political histories are casually decontextualized in the service of capital.

Instances of black aesthetic emplacement oftentimes share the same space with aesthetics of diversity, evoked by markers of "history." The "Chocolate City" tower was physically positioned alongside common aesthetic markers of a gentrifying landscape. At the new store, three colourful posters hang on the interior windows depicting abstract images of H Street, with phrases like "History & Legacy," "Culture & Arts," and "Heritage & Tradition" emblazoned on them. The organization of images on the posters resembles a quilt. Small thumbnail pictures displaying scissors, presumably representing the many Black-owned barber and beauty shops that historically lined the corridor, a coffee cup, music notes, an admission ticket to the local Apollo Theatre, and other symbols that evoke history, community, continuity, and a rich culture. The posters also have pictures of H Street's historic Victorian-style buildings, and in one of the images is the representation of the newly refurbished streetcar. These posters show a combination of the historic and contemporary; subtle and overt references to racialized objects, people, and locations; a seamless blend of the two evoke notions of authenticity as welcoming, accessible, diverse, and cool for white purveyors. The images are positioned so that shoppers will see them as they enter and leave, no matter which route they take (to the parking garage below ground or at street level).

After a few weeks, the management team at the H Street Whole Foods received significant backlash after images of their very own "Chocolate City" went viral on social media. As a result, "Chocolate City" became "Confectioner's Corner," with a brand-new tan and white colour scheme. Even though "Chocolate City" only lasted a couple of weeks, displays like these shed additional light on why the movement of white residents into Black neighbourhoods generates tension and feelings of exclusion (Boyd 2008; Hyra 2017; Lees 2008; Lees, et. al. 2008). The presence of these racial aesthetics disrupts narratives commonly associated with gentrification; namely displacement. With black aesthetic emplacement and aesthetic markers of diversity prominently on display, ready for immediate consumption, "*re*vitalization," "*re*newal," and "*re*development" enact violence upon those who lived and toiled around the neighbourhood in previous years, despite the euphemistic characterizations (Smith 1996; Kern 2016).

The Whole Foods Market press release and the "Chocolate City" display exemplify how authenticity and diversity are mapped upon the space. They work together to invite attention, shape how the space should be seen, and attract commerce, while at the same time, evoking language of community and belonging. At Whole Foods Market, authenticity is a hyperreality, one that does not reflect a prior social reality, but a new one constructed from models or ideas about "the real" and "authentic" (Baudrillard 1994, 1998). Blackness is still a large part of this formulation, but it is in examples like these that we see blackness similarly aestheticized and depoliticized.

To think about why there is a push for diversity, it is also important to consider what diversity is actively working against. Historically, various turns to diversity have been brought about in reaction to conservative, nationalist, nativist movements in support of the "white majority." Diversity was touted as a liberal remedy to explicit forms of discrimination. It inherently avoids engagement with structural racism, sexism and economic inequalities (Berrey 2015). What makes the push for diversity an integral part of the neoliberal shift is its commodification and emphasis on individualism. Evoking diversity brings about social and economic rewards, primarily for white people. The Whole Foods Market ethos is a perfect reflection of that as they emphasize diversity, but also entrepreneurialism that is especially espoused by CEO Mackey, whose libertarian views speak to his advocacy of neoliberal principles in the running of the business.

Authentic Abstractions of Race

Questions of authenticity and cultural appropriation have become popular and contentious topics in the academy and in popular media, especially with the rapid growth of new media technologies in the digital age. Debates about the performance of Black style, dance, speech, and fashion call into question the value of blackness when produced for commercial consumption. Similarly, multiple studies provide ethnographic and statistical evidence of predominantly white gentrifiers having the political clout and racial privilege to reallocate resources and repair the infrastructure of ailing cities (Davis 1992; Smith 1996; Florida 2002; Brown-Saracino 2004; Lees, et al. 2008; Zukin 2010). Gentrifiers attempt to tidy up urban space by removing its residents and completing the task that urban renewal of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s started. Similarly, with the displacement of long-time Black residents, gentrifiers occupy urban spaces to reap the benefits of a constructed urban

life that involves selective reflections of nostalgia, cosmetic grit, and lifestyle amenities, all the while overlooking those who were displaced.

We saw from the example above that the aesthetics of stylistic diversity and black aesthetic emplacement work together within transitioning spaces to make them more approachable, appealing, and consumable. On H Street, the form of authenticity that is enacted through consumption does not necessarily follow the pattern of ethnic enclaves or districts, like your typical urban, American Chinatowns, Greektowns, or Koreatowns. Instead, it is a place that is distinctly multicultural; not privileging one race, culture, or ethnicity over another. Authenticity here is abstract, it is a representation of a desired social reality. The cosmetic grittiness and danger that Derek Hyra (2017) argues is vital to neighbourhoods that have adopted Black branding strategies, only operates at a surface level; residents and visitors do want to feel safe. The desire for authenticity is about the look, but not the feel of a particular neighbourhood. Urban should not *look* suburban but can feel suburban in its visual representation of safety (i.e., walkable, adequate lighting, welcoming consumer spaces, and other examples of new urbanism).

Authenticity shows up in various ways on H Street, specifically through a diversity aesthetic that has been mapped upon the neighbourhood and the city's blackness. Drawing on the history and revival of the Apollo building on H Street speaks to a desire for authenticity and purposeful iconographic drift. For example, the Apollo Theatre on H Street was simply a movie house from the early twentieth century that was pulled out of history and drifted to the contemporary imaginations of developers represented by words and images. This purposeful adoption, or drift, of mundane historical structures becomes a significant part of the work developers use to attract attention and investment. It also reflects the interest of "social homesteaders," gentrifiers who want to maintain a piece of the past as representing the social or cultural heyday of the neighbourhood, which usually involves negotiation over what spaces, structures, and people have value (Brown-Saracino 2004). Taking control of the narrative of this place privileges a certain history and erases others. Producing these kinds of nostalgic memories and histories gets represented in different ways. From the naming of the building after the Apollo Theatre, to the iconic and recognizable images on posters in Whole Foods Market; these are ways to "honour" history and tradition but also make people feel like they are connected to the space and its history. But the adoption of certain histories is selective. No one wanted to name the building after the car dealership it became after the Apollo was demolished, nor the storage facility that inhabited the space before the residential building was

erected. Instead, authenticity ends up being a performance, and a chosen lifestyle, as well as an instrument of displacement (Zukin 2010).

Authenticity might be tied to history, but whose history? The quest for authenticity reflects a nostalgic longing for a constructed history that serves the present by presenting a particular version of the past. Ultimately, while some scholars argue that it is the desire for an authentic postindustrial aesthetic that draws in residents and tourists, and helps shape the development of gentrifying neighbourhoods, I am also saying that contestations over the meaning of authenticity in urban spaces both complement and supplement black aesthetic emplacement and cultural diversity by emphasizing origins as style.

Claims on the authentic also expose and empower whiteness to determine what and who fits. Cities are able to evoke authentic narratives of place if they effectively "create the *experience* of origins. This is done by preserving historic buildings and districts, encouraging the development of small-scale boutiques and cafés, and branding neighborhoods in terms of distinctive cultural identities" (Zukin 2010: 3). This occurs with the preservation of historic structures and districts that lead to the proliferation of new or revised places and spaces and the adoption of certain narratives of layered history. One of the ultimate ways to claim space and organize narratives is through (re)naming. For example, a December 2017 story from the local NPR station discussed the naming of new greenspace, organized by the area's growing number of dog owners, in the NoMA neighborhood (North of Massachusetts Avenue), adjacent to the H Street corridor. In order to name the park, the NoMa Parks Foundation encouraged public comment and then a vote. According to the president of the foundation, the name Swampoodle "won by a landslide" (Schweitzer 2017). Swampoodle was the name of the neighbourhood surrounding H Street mostly inhabited by immigrant Irish families who settled in Washington, D.C. following the famine of the 1840s and 1850s, and who also helped erect the Capitol. The neighbourhood was later destroyed with the construction of Union Station in 1907.

Local interest in recognizing a neighbourhood's *true* Irish origins effectively reconfigures the space to be devoid of the blackness that characterized the area in recent memory. Focusing on the neighbourhood being previously inhabited by Irish immigrants who sought refuge after the potato famine of the mid-19th century, and who built the Capitol, makes invisible the slaves and freedmen that also toiled alongside them. Saying that the Irish workers built the Capitol ties them to the land. It justifies their lingering presence. This form of past-making re-centres whiteness by marking territory. By

Figure 6.1: Swampoodle Dog Park and Kids Playground on 3rd and L Street, three blocks from the H Street Corridor. Photograph by the author.

engaging in an active erasure of the space's more recent history, going back to a time before Black people "destroyed" the neighbourhood during the "riots," the park can take on a nostalgic meaning and drive decisions about how the space can be developed moving forward. Introducing blackness to the area brings up far too many memories of violence, oppression, and practices of inequality.

The whiteness of Swampoodle's Irish immigrants tells a different and more pleasing story. Whiteness not only represents the norm, but is also unthreatening, despite characterizations of the neighbourhood being "rough." Therefore, it is important to not only recognize the production and presence of blackness in these urban spaces, as the landscape shifts, it is instructive to notice the ways that whiteness (as ethnicity) appears aesthetically, in this case through naming, to encourage (or substantiate) the presence of more white people. For authenticity is an instrument of power (Zukin 2010: 3). The naming of Swampoodle Park should be considered within the context of the changes occurring in and around the area. There's nothing alarming about the naming of public space after an ethnic group that inhabited the area in the 19th century, but again, the context under which NoMa and H Street are changing adds a different meaning. The naming dictates how the space *should* be remembered in case its history is overshadowed by contested events and populations.

Hipster Economics and the Aesthetic Politics of Belonging

In a May 2014 piece on the *Al Jazeera* website, Sarah Kendzior lamented the encroachment of "hipster economics" on America's urban landscapes. She defines hipster economics by the practice of urban decay becoming "a set piece to be remodeled or romanticized" (Kendzior 2014). Kendzior argues that gentrifying hipsters view poverty through the lens of aesthetics and therefore concentrate on aesthetics rather than people since "people, to them, are aesthetics." If people are aestheticized, so are class relations, which are systematically "depoliticized and reduced to questions of lifestyle choices, consumption patterns, visual pleasures and 'good taste'" (Pow 2009: 373). The process of gentrification exposes how public spaces become privatized by white, middle-class interests, and the transformation of urban space demarcates the boundaries of who belongs and who does not.

John Jackson invokes Lefebvre's concept of qualified spaces that are unclaimed by market forces in his discussion of the privatization of public space. He says that privatization "is not solely about how spaces symbolize (as Black or white, rich or poor); it is also a rehearsal of social belonging tethered to people's everyday practices and senses of self. To look out onto one's public sphere and see what was another abandoned storefront (open space for all, especially the least successful) alchemized into a gourmet bakery for a growing middle class, is a different order of displacement entirely, a kind of psychological and semiotic displacement from the sites of one's own, formerly less-fettered, everyday pedestrianism" (Jackson 2005: 55). With the introduction of yoga studios, bicycle shops, hookah bars, tiny art galleries and vintage/antique furniture stores, on H Street, fewer and fewer shops speak to, serve, and reflect the everyday needs of the poor and working-class. Although Zukin et al. suggest that boutique businesses arrive in gentrifying urban space as part of an emerging market that institutionalizes the consumption practices of more affluent and educated individuals, Jackson makes a much more nuanced argument about the privatization of public space and how public spaces obtain private, personal, and political meaning for residents, especially long-term residents who are gradually leaving the neighbourhood (Zukin et al. 2009). Not only is physical displacement taking place as small businesses that were patronized by poor and working-class residents leave the corridor, but the affective dimensions of gentrification and displacement structure who belongs in the space and who does not. Nevertheless, it is in these spaces that market-driven consumption is depoliticized in favour of the aesthetics of "cool" – and where the streets become "little more than

public playground for the authenticities monopolized by middle-class consumerism" (Jackson 2005: 55).

Around the same time Kendzior published her piece, Destination DC, the official tourism and destination marketing organization for D.C., unveiled their newest marketing campaign: "DC Cool." In a 2017 interview with me, Elliott Ferguson, Destination DC's President and Chief Executive Officer explained that the "cool" brand that Destination D.C. adopted purposefully reflected how recognizably "cool" D.C. has become, and it gave the organization an opportunity to "promote and expose [tourists] to things out of the three M's: monuments, memorials, and museums, because that does not always resonate as a sexy reason why people want to travel." Destination DC is an economic development organization that focuses solely on the $7 billion hospitality industry. It is their primary role to attract visitors to the District and promote the city as a primary convention destination. The "DC Cool" campaign reflects the organization and the city's desire to not only advertise D.C.'s "cool people" and cultural diversity, but also its "sports, theatre, nightlife, retail, arts, restaurant scene, and outdoor activities."

What the campaign does not highlight are those changes to the cultural makeup and commercial landscape of "declining" districts that have undergone significant transformation in order to make way for the gentrifying hipsters Kendzior bemoans. What commercial districts like H Street are experiencing are a disappearing mode of social and cultural life in favour of an emerging retail ecology, or commercial gentrification, that features "new establishments with particular goods and services – such as clothing boutiques, art galleries, cafes, restaurants, and bars – that open to satisfy the needs of middle-class gentrifers," and displace long-time, established business, and people (Ocejo 2011: 285). One example is the April 2017 off-market sale of Smokey's Barbershop to the 11th Property Group. The barbershop had been on 13th and H Street since 1999. The building was sold to the 11th Property group to make way for a mixed-use development, thereby reflecting an ongoing trend on H Street where small, Black-owned businesses are being replaced by developer-driven, mixed-use projects. On the same block, at the former site of the R.L. Christian Library, the Insight Property Group (who also developed the Apollo project discussed above) plans to construct a mixed-use that is a "100% affordable project" with all 33 units being "a combination of 50% [area median income] and 30% units" (Bannister 2018). Although the units will be "affordable," Insight plans to bring similar retail options to the location as they did to the Apollo building.

The changing landscape of the corridor is reflected when projects like these become the norm. That the new buildings are being constructed on

the site of a Black-owned barbershop and a public library speaks volumes: the end of local public services and a transition to a new economy that privileges exclusive commerce, gentrified culture, and consumption. These changes not only impact the commercial makeup of the space, but also its aesthetic geography.

Consuming Diversity

Culture and race in the age of neoliberalism affectively shape how we see, feel, and taste diversity, blackness, and authenticity. The aesthetic elements of neoliberalism make diversity a perfect rejoinder, especially in terms of the goods we can consume directly. Sociologists, geographers, and other social scientists have written at length about the role of consumerism, consumption, capital, and changing political economies of cities (Baudrillard 1998; Brown-Saracino 2009; Florida 2002; Hannigan 1998; Hyra 2017; Lees, et. al. 2008; Ley 1996, 2017; Zukin 1995, 2010). What undergirds much of these changes is the way that gentrification represents a phase in urban development in which consumption, aesthetics, and taste has led to an "imagineering of an alternative urbanism to suburbanization" in global cities (Ley 1996: 15).

Richard Florida describes approaches for remaking urban spaces as U.S. and Canadian cities introduced urban planning practices that targeted the addition of a "creative workforce" (Florida 2002). His theory about the "rise of the creative class" posits that a "new" upwardly mobile class will work and reside in places that have strong creative and arts industries, as well as racial/ethnic diversity, café culture, art districts, unique architecture, and a strong and vibrant nightlife. While Florida has been hired to consult with American and Canadian city planners in their rebranding efforts, his neoliberal approach to urban design and planning focuses on the creativity of individual "entrepreneurs" and absolves the government of responsibilities to support wage-earners in an economic environment "that increasingly privileges self-employed freelance labor" (Banet-Weiser 2012: 109).

In D.C., former Mayor Adrian Fenty's vision to buttress the city's growing creative economy resulted in the development of the "Creative DC Action Agenda," which his administration introduced in order to "support creative employment and business opportunities, to promote revitalization and enlivening of underserved areas through arts and creative uses" (D.C. Office of Planning). The discourse of "creativity" works in alignment with "diversity" and provides a charming backdrop for cultural consumption.

Some narratives reinforce local discourses on shopping and dining that frame the consumer as an independent and active agent. These discourses, Arlene Dávila (2012) argues, "further a romanticized view of consumption and consumption sites as democratic spaces that are open to everyone, whether one comes to shop, browse, or hang out" (24). Adopting this view only hampers an investigation of the "existing social inequalities that are actively reproduced in these spaces" (Dávila 2012: 24).

H Street, like many post-industrial, urban commercial corridors, operates as a "space of consumption" (Zukin 2010). The role of commercial entrepreneurs is tied to the development of H Street privileging consumption in three meaningful ways. First, store owners represent the interests of a *cultural community* that operates in direct contrast with long-time residents. We see this with the explosion and expansion of boutique businesses that cater to an upper-class clientele, actively displacing stores that offer retail and services to long-term, lower class residents. Second, retailers (as well as developers and investors) enter the consumption space in search of *economic opportunity*. In the public imagination, everyday people are thought to be the agents of change. However, within revitalizing spaces that are considered ripe for economic opportunity, developers and investors work alongside business owners to enact change. Larger-scale development projects whose ground floors are occupied by custom coffee houses, craft-based retail, and high-priced restaurants, dictate the changing landscape, leading to the final way H Street privileges consumption: retailers act as *social entrepreneurs* as they establish social spaces that invite new residents and tourists, while alienating long-time residents and visitors (Zukin 2010: 19-20). In this way, spaces of consumption also draw on representations of authenticity in order to fulfil the needs of new residents, thereby enabling them "not so innocently – to stake their own claim to the neighborhood" (Zukin 2008: 734). On H Street, this was a gradual process. Disinvestment, urban renewal, and construction of the streetcar tracks, all contributed to the downfall of the corridor's commercial infrastructure that had supported the needs of its working-class, predominantly Black population.

Within this commercial space, consumption, authenticity, and aesthetics work together. Contemporary discourses of "healthy, clean, and sustainable living" help drive consumption of food products and patronage of certain stores, like Whole Foods, and places, like farmer's markets. These discourses are reinforced by an ethical mode of consumption that is commodified and marketed as responsible. How do these tastes become indoctrinated? Following the tradition of Pierre Bourdieu, the tastes become part of the culture; a structural phenomenon that has temporal and geographical

consequences. The aesthetic itself may change across time and space, but the benefactors do not change much, especially along racial lines. That said, blackness is rarely something that reflects high culture or taste. In a modernized space, blackness can accompany or be used as a side dish, but is not usually the main course. Consumption is important, but what exactly is being consumed in these spaces? Quite obviously we can look at food as one element that is being consumed, but it is not just the food, it is also the experience. Even restaurants that feature cuisine from various parts of the world have adopted a diverse and eclectic way to incorporate various cultures onto one menu.

Within these neoliberal spaces of consumption, no longer are we interested in contained cultural spaces that have businesses that either cater to or represent a particular ethnic group, instead we seek diversity within one location, alongside the increasingly common, seemingly universal establishments that sell raw juice blends, cupcakes, coffee, and pet grooming services. As a space of diversity, the neighbourhood brings to life ideal diverse and creative public spaces to produce individuality, creativity, difference, and social interaction. But Black people fear improvements to Black spaces because the shift will invite others to take over. The conundrum of making the space more desirable is that others will discover it and want to take over, like in other neighbourhoods and cities.

Conclusion: Festival, Foundations, and Revelry

Each year in mid-September, H Street hosts its annual, one-day street festival. The street is closed to automobile traffic from the beginning of the corridor at 4th Street through the 14th Street. Held for nearly fifteen years, it is one of the largest events in the city and is a huge tourist draw. Over 250 booths line the corridor, filled with regional food vendors, local and regional artisans, non-profit organizations, and business merchants. The street is always crowded. Lines wind around the food trucks and food stands as local restaurants display their most popular fares. Bodies spill outside of the designated borders of pop-up cocktail and beer gardens. Tents are erected to advertise the campaigns of local politicians. Vintage cars act as artistic canvases – intricately designed and painted. Dozens of photographers wander the streets. Impromptu dance parties break out as local bands perform covers of both classic and new hip-hop and pop songs. Culture and cuisine are on display as thousands of people pack the streets (Figure 6.2). The festival is an apt representation of a "cosmopolitan canopy"

that Elijah Anderson describes as a self-contained, social, exceptional space where people interact easily and "appreciate" diversity. The festival reflects a moment in time when a diverse collection of people of different races, cultures, and classes exist in the same social space (Anderson 2012). Festivals like these are supposed to represent the best of the neighbourhood or city. That is why they are *exceptional*; not a true reflection of the everyday or quotidian. People are often enthralled by these displays of diversity and camaraderie. The scene makes people feel good and safe. There is something desirable and inviting about diversity in this way.

Festivals have become an increasingly relevant component of the tourism industry. They encourage growth in economic activity, even during economic downturns. They are helpful in not only increasing economic growth, but also helpful in establishing neighbourhood identity and growing local tourism. They are part of the cultural economy, which is based on the production and consumption of cultural symbols like food, tourism, and art, and the spaces in which they are consumed (restaurants, galleries, offices, and the street). The annual festival on H Street firmly establishes the street as the ideal consumption space mentioned above – one that focuses on producing gentrified spaces for residents and visitors to socialize and hang out, but one that also caters to a particular lifestyle that actively reinvents the space.

H Street Festival was originally conceived as a form of social preservation. Over time, the meaning and intentions shifted to accommodate interests in economic growth opportunities. In the 1980s, when the H Street Festival first appeared, residents and local business owners hoped to focus on the neighbourhood's cultural heritage and economic independence in the face of state efforts to disinvest (various forms of political mobilization, racial/cultural awareness, and demands for social justice and fair/equitable conditions in the face of urban decline). Organizing a celebratory event became increasingly important in the aftermath of the uprisings that precipitated a downward spiral of H Street's physical and economic conditions. At the time, the corridor was overwhelmingly Black and full of Black and some Asian small business owners, most of whom were able to take advantage of the crumbling economic infrastructure in the 1980s and 1990s.

Today, the H Street Festival is a visual smorgasbord of colour, culture, art, cuisine. It displays whimsy, joy, celebration, diversity. According to the festival website, the event has successfully helped commercial building vacancy precipitously drop from 75 percent to 5 percent by using "arts as an engine for the growth for the historic neighborhood." The festival is an opportunity to show off what is new along the corridor, but also a way to attract more residents and customers. The event generates a marked

Figure 6.2: Festival and revelry on H Street. Onlookers watch street performers at the H Street Festival. Photograph by the author.

increase in applications for leases and interest in residences, hence the popularity of buildings like the Apollo. In this way, the festival puts culture on display in order to generate capital along the corridor. Nevertheless, while the festival helps draw in large, culturally and economically diverse crowds, the group of people who get to stay and live is much less diverse. For example, thirty-five of Apollo's residential units are designated as affordable. This means that tenants may only earn up to 50 percent of the Area's Median Income (AMI). For this building, the figure the D.C. Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) used is $108,600 for a family of four. As of 2017, studio apartments started at $1800, while the affordable units can be rented for $808, only if the tenant makes less than $38,010 per year. Affordable housing offered at market rate is still expensive to some poor and working-class families as the AMI continues to shift upward.

The festival allows various actors and stakeholders to organize ways for the space to be seen, thereby establishing a clear relationship between economics and culture as being constitutive in developing urban spaces. Their desired view of the space combines history, celebration, growth, and diversity. What is significant about how we think and talk about diversity today is that while most people experience diversity in terms of race, they talk about it in terms of difference in exhaustive ways. As a discursive

project, it is unable to address inequality, privilege, and power, especially when framed in terms of cultural consumption (Bell and Hartmann 2007).

With each passing year, the H Street Festival becomes more and more popular, with crowds packing onto the streets awaiting musical performances, tasting gourmet and carnival foods, and buying trinkets and clothing from the eclectic collection of street vendors. The festival represents a culmination of the diversity elements that draw traffic into the neighbourhood. It is this constructed multicultural urbanity that relies on a depoliticized ethnic cool that decontextualizes the history of the space.

As I have shown in this chapter, the role of diversity on H Street, and, in other areas, the push for diversity is ironically supposed to be a postracial (race neutral) project, but it is saturated with and structured by race. To produce H Street as a space of diversity requires an elaborate collection of bodies, social forces, and processes that rationalize the presentation of issues within particular contexts. Within this space, blackness, as distinct and a central component of diversity, becomes an aesthetic tool that can be reflected in and extracted from architecture, public space, and text.

Note

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