

The Politics of the Urban Comeback: Gentrification and Culture in D.C.

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AUG 10, 2012 | POLITICS

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The rebirth of Washington, D.C., and especially its U Street neighborhood, didn't happen by chance.



President-elect Obama and D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty had lunch at Ben's Chili Bowl on U Street on Jan. 10, 2009. (Reuters)

Is bemoaning the gentrification of Washington, D.C., a genre past its prime? I mean, there's [considering the meaning](#) of the transformation of the city from a

majority-black metropolis to one that is no longer so, and there's [reflecting](#) on what it means to see all-black, working-class cultural communities replaced by middle-class, multi-ethnic, multi-racial ones that nonetheless have the kind of homogenized cultural aesthetic characteristic of the college-educated. And then there's just writing an ahistoric rant that ignores the successful decades-long effort by black political leaders and real estate developers and businesspeople of multiple races to rebuild a neighborhood decimated by the 1968 riots, drugs, and the flight of the black middle class, while also downplaying the significance of black American artists in the cultural life of not just white America but the entire world.

I speak, of course, of Stephen A. Crockett Jr.'s piece, "[The Brixton: It's new, happening and another example of African-American historical 'swagger-jacking'](#)", which set off lively Facebook and [blog comment](#) threads in my corner of D.C. and was among the *Washington Post's* most read local stories when published last week. Writes Crockett:

Look. I get it. The Chocolate City has changed. It isn't what it used to be, and I don't know what's worse: the fact that D.C. was once so marred by murder that it was nicknamed Dodge City or that there is now a hipster bar on U St. that holds the same name. Point is, there is a certain cultural vulturalism, an African American historical "swagger-jacking," going on on U Street. It's an inappropriate tradition of sorts that has rent increasing, black folks moving further out -- sometimes by choice, sometimes not -- while a faux black ethos remains.

In a six-block stretch, we have Brixton, Busboys and Poets, Eatonville, Patty Boom Boom, Blackbyrd and Marvin. All are based on some facet of black history, some memory of blackness that feels artificially done and palatable. Does it matter that the owners aren't black? Maybe. Does it matter that these places slid in around the time that black folks slid out?

Maybe. Indeed, some might argue that these hip spots are actually preserving black culture, not stealing it.

But as a native of a then Chocolate City, I can remember when a Horace & Dickie's fish sandwich always felt like a warm hug, because they were cheap, and we were broke. It felt like the owner knew we were struggling, so he lowered the prices for us. It felt like home. ...

Maybe I want to sit at the doors of D.C.'s black culture and check IDs, making sure you deserve to appreciate what Marvin Gaye and Donald Byrd meant to a city that really didn't have much to be proud of when these cats came up.

Maybe there should be a quiz at Brixton about the neighborhood's cultural significance. Maybe there should be a box set sold behind the bar at Marvin. Or maybe these places should just be called something else...

This article rehearses the by now tired tropes of the anti-gentrification genre, harkening back to a mythic, culturally perfect moment that was somehow destroyed by white middle-class professionals and successful new businesses that -- entirely on their own -- made the decision to move into historically black neighborhoods. But the reality of the transformation of D.C. is that that is not what actually happened. And it's definitely not the story of the transformation of the U Street neighborhood.

It's very clear from [the data on D.C.'s Census Tract 44](#) -- the heart of the U Street neighborhood, where I've lived since 2006 -- that the black population dropped dramatically long before any of the so-called "culture vulture" venues came in. More than 1,100 people left the neighborhood between 1980 and 2000 -- a third of the population. That is a profound population loss, and coincided with a time when just about the only new major development in the area was [Marion Barry's Frank D. Reeves Center project](#), a government building that's had something of a

[troubled history](#). Again: the bulk of the black U Street population loss happened by 2000, more than a decade before the Brixton came onto the scene. That's doubtless why the property that now houses the Brixton was standing empty (excuse, me, was an "[eyesore](#)") and why it was available to become something new.

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A close look at the Census data shows that black population loss in the neighborhood actually *slowed* as gentrification picked up, dropping almost in half from the previous decade's rate as whites and Asians flocked to the neighborhood in the first years of the new century, and as new amenities moved in. And the biggest reason so many people were able to move in was because there was a city-run effort to develop the parcels of land over the Metro, [condemn nuisance properties](#), increase taxes on [buildings left vacant for years](#), and push for new construction on the plethora of empty lots that peppered the neighborhood, the 1968 riots' ancient scabbed over scars. The result was that, starting with the opening the [Harrison Square Townhomes](#) in 2002 and continuing with [the Ellington apartments](#) in 2004, there began to be a lot of new housing for people to move into. The explosion of new places for people to live intensified as new projects planned early in the new century opened their doors.

What was it like to begin the redevelopment of the U Street area? It went in fits and starts, and there were a lot of failures along the way, like the late-'90s effort to attract a Fresh Fields (what Whole Foods used to be called), which **floundered** after "a group of African-American women" told the company "they wouldn't feel safe shopping at 13th and V." And if you listen to **Harrison Square land development manager Billy Smith**, they weren't so wrong in their assessment: "While most of the block was filled with abandoned buildings, there were three row houses across the street that were the epicenter of a very active drug market [in 2000].... The violence was pretty bad back then. At least once a week there would be gunfire, and our construction crew would dive into the trenches that were being built as a water inlet for the project. The gunfire was so frequent that diving into the trenches became a weekly routine. To shield ourselves from the bullets, we built a large mountain of dirt between the project and the street and an armed security guard was hired to patrol the site 24 hours a day."

Eventually the drug dealing across the street became such a problem that the properties were condemned. "After the third bust in the winter of 2001, bulldozers were called in by the city the very next day and the houses were demolished. The day after that the street filled with residents and neighbors, some of whom had lived in the area for 50 years but had been afraid to come outside," recalled Smith.

Encouraging new construction and trying to entice middle-class people to move into the District of Columbia has been the official policy of the city under at least its last four mayors -- Marion Barry (on his second go-round), Anthony Williams, Adrian Fenty, and Vincent Gray -- because of the city's desperate need to broaden its tax base and stop population outflow. These black political leaders -- each with distinctive views, constituencies and alliances -- have supported **the federal First Time Home Buyer Tax Credit** Bill Clinton first signed into law as part of the Taxpayer Relief Act of 1997, an idea that came straight out of the District of Columbia Economic Recovery Act proposed by D.C. Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton. The tax credit had a dramatic impact in encouraging moderate and middle-income people to put down roots in D.C., especially younger, college-educated white

people, and invest their sweat equity in fixing up rundown housing stock. Indeed, a 2005 study by the Fannie Mae Foundation found that a third of the run-up in housing prices in D.C. between 1997 and 2001 [could be attributed directly to the new tax policy](#).

Why did Congress undertake this measure after a two-year city planning process? Because 30 years after the riots that tore 14th Street NW apart, burned down H Street NE and devastated Washington's downtown, people were still not sure if the city would ever bounce back, or if it was destined to linger on as a kind of Detroit in miniature. Like the Motor City, Washington experienced a major decline in population, shrinking by nearly a quarter between 1950 and 1990 thanks to the end of the war economy; the growth of the suburbs; white flight following desegregation; the impact of the riots; crack and other drug epidemics; and the city's ongoing mismanagement and financial problems (which led to the [federal control board era](#)). But the most dramatic population loss came in the decade after the riots; the city lost more than 118,000 residents during the 1970s, according to U.S. Census data. [CNN's boilerplate description](#) of my current neighborhood in 1998, the year after I moved to D.C., was a portrait in doubt: "It's been three decades since Martin Luther King's assassination sparked riots in Washington, D.C., and parts of the nation's capital are still trying to recover from the impact of the violence. While some speak of a city renaissance, others are unsure whether the district will ever fully recover."

As Neely Tucker described it in [a 2004 Washington Post look-back](#), the block where I now live was the epicenter of the destruction:

Moments after the [Martin Luther King Jr.] assassination, Washington began to erupt. Stokely Carmichael, a former Howard University student who was leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, led an unruly group from the intersection of 14th and U streets NW, demanding that stores close out of respect. The crowd spun out of

control; windows were shattered and looters piled into men's fashion shops, appliance stores, five and dime discount marts, women's clothiers and liquor stores.

The city spun into full-blown riots the next day along the black business corridors of 14th Street NW and H Street NE. In the ensuing three days, there were 12 deaths, 1,097 injuries and more than 6,100 arrests. More than 900 stores lay in ruins. ...

More than 2,500 jobs had been lost. Washington's black business districts were devastated. Piles of rubble marked buildings destroyed in the April riot. Insurance rates in the areas soared, if policies would be written at all. The two corridors of the riot remained crime-ridden shells for decades.

Patricia Kearney, then a teenager who was working one block from the epicenter of the 14th Street riot, lived out those years in her home town.

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"The saddest part was that [the rioters] destroyed everything we owned and used," she said. They "burned down the corner stores, the areas we shopped. . . . It's taken three decades for things to even begin to come back."

[Ben's Chili Bowl](#) stayed open through the whole thing because Carmichael demanded it of owner Virginia Ali, despite the curfew imposed on the city, so that he and other militant leaders could have a place to use as their base of operations, she told *Washingtonian* in a 2008 reflection on those frightening days.

The downtown area of D.C. suffered a similar wave of looting and burning and was, if anything, even harder to turn around after the riots than were the residential areas. But, starting around 1997, [it finally began to happen](#). Of course there were people and businesses pushed out of D.C. during the city's turnaround years --

pushed out by policies implemented in concert with or by its black leadership, I might add, as well as the meddlesome hands of members of Congress and rising rents and property taxes -- but the U Street area was not a target of one of the centrally-run plans to bust up old urban neighborhoods. That was reserved for SE, where the crime-ridden, rat-infested Capitol Gateway and Arthur Capper and Carrollsburg Dwellings housing projects were razed in 2005 an effort to break up concentrated poverty in the District and reduce crime. (It worked.)

A city plan put into place in 2003 foresaw a future in which, by "strategically developing and preserving housing, Washington's citizens and government can create a city of mixed-income and mixed-race neighborhoods across the city -- not just in select areas -- and increase today's population by 100,000 residents during the next fifteen years."

That has for at least the past 16 years been the culture that was developing on U Street -- "a Benetton boardwalk scene -- black, white, Latin, gay and straight," as the *Post* described it in 1996.

* * *

I've lived upstairs from [Busboys and Poets](#) since it was a lonely beacon in the night on a corner that was dark on the three other sides, and all the way down 14th toward U Street, too. I was so grateful it stayed open late or else my block would have been nothing but vacant lots, shuttered stores and abandoned properties at night that first year. Most of my building was built on a vacant lot. There was probably a building there before the riots, but by the time I got to D.C. in 1997, whatever had been there was long since razed and the spot was paved and being used for weekday parking and a weekend flea market cum junk sale. The yuppies who live across the street from me in a new P.N. Hoffman building live on what was another underused lot. The Hilton Brothers' [Blackbyrd Warehouse](#) healed my block by filling in its broken tooth, a mid-block rowhouse-sized vacant lot between their [Belgian/soul food restaurant Marvin](#) -- "Inspired by the story of Marvin Gaye's infamous two years in self-imposed exile in the small Belgian town of Ostend" --

and the long-vacant corner building that ultimately became the steakhouse/club [Lost Society](#). These businesses and condo buildings gave [loud new life](#) to a block that had been dead too long.

Ideas about naming buildings and restaurants in the area after regionally -- and internationally! -- significant black literary and musical figures ping-ponged between developers and restaurant and bar owners, but since at least 1998 those who would help dream the new neighborhood into being were turning to the area's rich pre-riot, and even pre-World War II, cultural history as the thing that [might be able to give it new life](#):

It's a commonplace, especially, perhaps, among white Washingtonians, that the city has no distinct identity of its own, nothing of the grit and fire of Chicago, say, or New York, or New Orleans. But that is wrong. This city does have an identity, and it is black, and the heart of it is on U Street. It's just that because of the way we live, if you're white, or even black, you may not know much about it, or think that it has much to do with you.

U Street's boosters and visionaries -- historians and architects and artists -- see a lot of commercial potential in this history....

The Ellington apartments, named after [Duke Ellington](#), were developed by [Donatelli Development in conjunction with Gragg and Associates](#), a black-owned firm, back before other new construction led the giant [mural of Duke Ellington a block from their project on U Street to be moved](#) further east. I asked developer Nigel Gragg how the Ellington got its name. "There was a distinct discussion about honoring the history and the heritage" of U Street, he recalled. In particular, club impresario Marc Barnes had revived [the Republic Garden brand](#) elsewhere on the 1300 block of U, opening a nightclub just steps from and with the same name as an

old U Street performance space where Ellington, Charlie Parker and Pearl Bailey had all performed during its time as a mainstay of the old "Black Broadway." And that got people thinking about Ellington.

Next came the Langston Lofts, which opened in 2005, named after Langston Hughes, who was discovered as a poet while working as a busboy at the Wardman Park Hotel nearby. The Metropolis Development Company that built the lofts was led by Harvard MBA Scott Pannick and Merrick Malone, who had been Sharon Pratt-Kelly's deputy mayor for economic development and director of housing and community development from 1992-1996, where he was involved in efforts to restore the Lincoln Theater on U Street, among many other notable projects. Busboys and Poets, in turn, took inspiration for its name from the condo development on whose first floor it was housed, Iraqi-American owner Anas "Andy" Shallal recalled in 2011:

The invasion of Iraq energized the left, but "there wasn't a place where people actually got together socially and culturally to be able to connect. ... I wanted to create a place that was unapologetically progressive."

He intended it to be steeped in Washington's identity as none of his other restaurants had been. But he didn't get the idea to go back to the poet and the poem until he saw the name of the condo project where he proposed his project. The Langston Lofts. Eureka.

Eatonville, which opened in 2009, was an extension of Shallal's proven concept of marrying literature and food -- there are now four Busboys restaurants, and they all contain progressive, slightly radical or Afrocentric booksellers. If it were just about naming a restaurant after Hughes' early job or Hurston's former hometown of Eatonville in Florida, maybe the charge of empty marketing would fit. But Shallal is selling ideas, too -- providing bricks-and-mortar outlets for contemporary black

authors and poets (and also white and other race ones) to find an audience through a series of small independent bookstores and performance spaces that have, amazingly, taken root across the area during the great era of bookstore decline, and through [wildly popular](#) spoken word and [poetry nights](#). While I, too, never expected to see a giant painting of Zora Neale Hurston in the entryway of a restaurant, she's hardly the only author referenced in the area. Down 14th Street sits Bar Pilar, named after Hemingway's boat, the Pilar, and Café Saint Ex, named after Antoine de Saint-Exupery, the French aviator and author of *The Little Prince*. U Street is a neighborhood of restaurateurs with strong literary passions, it turns out. Or at least it is now. The big question is whether we as a society are ready to accept that black writers like Hughes and Hurston belong to the world the same way writers like Hemingway do -- or whether the difficult facts of American history and continued racial inequalities will always make such claims somehow discomfiting, no matter how canonical the writers have become. (To be clear: I don't know the answer.)

As big as the shift in the racial and ethnic composition of the neighborhood has been, an even bigger shift has occurred in its educational background. Nearly half of Census Tract 44 residents in 1980 had not finished high school, while by 2005-2009 that number was down to less than 10 percent. But far from having trouble surviving, a number of the more down-home establishments with long histories in the area -- such as Ben's, or [the Florida Avenue Grill](#) -- are thriving. Ben's, founded by Howard University-educated Trinidadian immigrant [Ben Ali](#), has grown so much it opened a second spot, [Ben's Next Door](#), and is planning [a new outpost on H Street NE](#). (I date the mainstreaming of Ben's to [Obama's nationally-covered visit there](#) in the days before his 2009 inauguration. After that, it became a tourist destination.) On weekends, it can be hard to find a seat at the once sparsely populated Florida Avenue Grill, which has been in business since 1944. Even relative newcomer [Oohs & Aahs](#) (serving soul food since 2003) got so hot it massively jacked up its prices. But the influx of a huge number of establishments targeted to the new college-educated, middle-class residents diluted the cultural significance of the older ones, and some less successful establishments, such as the AM-PM Carry Out, were not

able to find a new clientele that would allow them to survive the neighborhood's transition and concomitant rise in commercial rents.

As for Hilton Brothers Ian and Eric -- who are, in just the U Street area, behind [Marvin](#), [The Gibson](#), [Brixton](#), [Patty Boom Boom](#), [American Ice Company](#) and the soon-to-open [Satellite Room](#) -- are they "jacking" black musical and literary history? Or are they helping to write some new sentences in its D.C. chapter while teaching a multi-ethnic, multi-racial generation of Washingtonians raised elsewhere about some of the history of the local scene? Certainly I'd never heard of former Howard University Prof. Donald Byrd and [the Blackbyrds](#) before [Blackbyrd Warehouse](#) opened. And why would I have? It is not the 1970s and "[Rock Creek Park](#)" doesn't come up no matter what I start a Pandora channel with. As for Marvin, it may not sell box sets (people still buy CDs?), but in April it hosted "[Life & Legacy: A Celebration of Marvin Gaye](#)," a benefit concert whose [invitation](#) promised members of Gaye's old band, as well as his children, grandchildren and brother, to mark what would have been the D.C. original's 73rd birthday. It was the only restaurant in D.C. to honor him so.

The reason Marvin is called Marvin is simple, says Ian Hilton. "Eric [Hilton] is a huge Marvin Gaye fan and Marvin is from around here," having grown up in Northeast Washington and gone to high school at Cardozo High School in Columbia Heights. Adds Sheldon Scott, the chief marketing officer for the Hilton's ESL Management Group and a former staffer at both Busboys and Marvin, "The fact of the matter is that Eric, the mastermind behind this, is a musician at heart." [Along with Rob Garza](#), Eric Hilton co-founded the eclectic lounge music group the [Thievery Corporation](#) in 1995, which since has collaborated with musicians of a wide variety of different genres (as well as sampled and mixed music from them), including "[Godfather of Go-Go](#)" [Chuck Brown](#) on what turned out to be [his last major release](#).

The key theme that unites the Hilton brothers venues is music. Several outposts are not just named after musicians, but are venues for musicians and DJs to perform, because the Hilton brothers are not just restaurateurs but, through Eric Hilton, part

of a world of recording and producing musical acts. Whatever you think of their music, this is not a pose but a real thing, and a part of the cultural fabric of D.C. since they opened the [Eighteenth Street Lounge](#) in 1994. Today the Thievery Corporation and its affiliated bands still tour; Hilton also has a record label, [ESL Music](#), whose bands you can [check out here](#). The Brixton was named after a London "neighborhood rich in musical history," says Scott, from [David Bowie](#) to reggae and ska. [Patty Boom Boom](#) was named after a reggae song, he adds, since "there's a huge amount of reggae and ska in the music that [Eric Hilton] is creating" (see for example: [The Archives](#)). And the Gibson is named after a musician "who used to play in a trio in the Eighteenth Street Lounge," says Ian Hilton.

On the other side of the new D.C., Crockett's beloved Horace and Dickies Seafood Carryout, founded in 1990 on H Street NE, has been written up [in Zagat's](#). These days it's got a [Twitter feed](#) and a [press page](#) and [cameos on cable TV food shows](#), as well as fried whiting on bread. Supreme Court Justice Sonya Sotomayor [just bought a condo](#) in the U Street area. "[My president is black](#)" went from a song to reality -- though Obama is, as he says, "[not the president of black America](#)" but "of the United States of America." He makes [more than \\$400,000 a year](#), sends his kids to one of the poshest private schools in D.C. and is worth millions. The president of France [has gone to Ben's for a half-smoke](#), and the Washington Nationals baseball team uses Chuck Brown's 1979 hit "Bustin' Loose" as its [home-run anthem](#). Times have changed in all kinds of interesting ways, even if they have not changed everywhere as much as some think. Drive-by shootings on U Street in [2010](#) and [2011](#), as well as two shooting so far in [2012](#), suggest the area is still not totally past its "dodge city" days.

Meanwhile, two wars and the administration of the national stimulus package [kicked a lot of money into the D.C. area](#), keeping it afloat even as the rest of the country has struggled since 2008. D.C. is still smaller by about 200,000 people than it was at the end of World War II, but its [more than half-century long population slide](#) was finally arrested during the first decade of this one, thanks in

part to a population spike since the recession began and the D.C. economy emerged as a [port in the national storm](#).

One day a couple of years ago I came home after work and noticed there was a [movie screening](#) in the park behind my building. I wandered over to see what it was, and sitting in the dark on the grass between the Langston and the Ellington, with the sounds of U Street drifting over in the evening air, watched the documentary *Duke Ellington's Washington* on a big screen just around the corner from where he used to perform. I could have caught the same documentary on PBS in 2000, but it felt different somehow when viewed with neighbors, in that particular neighborhood. Not *cooler* (people come to D.C. to be cool?), but nonetheless kind of cool, in that way that it always is to learn more about the history of where you live.

D.C. has enough statues of white men and venues and buildings named in their honor. Lord knows it has a boatload of statues of [white men on horses](#). It does not, [in the grand scheme of things](#), have many [statues of major figures in African-American history](#). The U Street area is not Chinatown, where banks and random non-Chinese stores are fronted by a script that outsiders cannot read, while since the late 1990s the heart of the local Chinese-immigrant community [has been in suburban Maryland](#). And it is not Clarendon, Va., or even Cleveland Park. It is a real living, breathing, multi-ethnic, multi-racial neighborhood and cultural melting pot whose establishments have realized the mid-90s dream of reconnecting D.C.'s future to memories of its past. Sometimes these days it is a bit too lively for my taste. But it never fails to teach those of us who live there a thing or two.

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