

# Upscaling Downtown

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STALLED GENTRIFICATION  
IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

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BRETT WILLIAMS

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IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

*Brett Williams*

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## Preface

This book tells the story of a Washington, D.C., neighborhood to which many people have fiercely attached themselves. By looking at a time of stalled gentrification, it details rich promise and some missed possibilities for integrated urban life.

I lived and worked in “Elm Valley” for ten years, moving from the rented row house I shared with a friend and her three sons into a large, deteriorating apartment building and then into another rented row house with my husband and children. I conducted many hours of formal interviews with women, men, and children I met in shops, restaurants, taverns, churches, day-care centers, hallways, and alleys and on street corners. I also attended innumerable neighborhood meetings, visited in many people’s homes, and was a full participant-observer in the life of the community. My family and I have now left Elm Valley. We outlasted many others of our means because we were even more fiercely attached than most.

I thus bring to this story many of the insights, as well as the liabilities, of what Renato Rosaldo (1984) has called “the positioned observer.” In writing this book, I have often wished that the neighborhood were less dense and complex. I have

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longed for a more straightforward story line and for conflicts that were more clear-cut. The entanglements I explore, however, seem true to the ambiguities of city life and to the nature of ethnography. No longer do I easily vilify the residents I disagree with, and it is harder to dismiss them with clichés. Nevertheless, I am saddened and angry that people must work so hard and with so little lasting success to build a meaningful community.

All the place-names I use in this book were borrowed from rural North Carolina. Like many of the residents of Washington, D.C., the names are real but transplanted. It will soon be apparent, I think, why I feel I must try to disguise the place. I have tried to camouflage the residents as well, and therefore I cannot thank many of the people I should. I feel uncomfortable about usurping the voices of Elm Valley residents, but I did so for two reasons. First, some wanted to remain anonymous. Revealing the names of those who did not mind would have caused other names to emerge as well. Connections among neighbors are complicated and precarious, and I do not want to disrupt them. The second reason reflects the nature of ethnographic fieldwork, which depends on daily interactions over time. I could not monitor and frame every encounter to offer people conscious authorship of what I would eventually write. This problem was especially complex in part because I lived in Elm Valley for so long, and in part because I married out of my logical group. Marrying out helped me see different perspectives more clearly, but it also allowed me to “pass” in some situations. I have decided that it is not fair to take too much advantage of those encounters by identifying those who may now feel that they revealed too much.

Of those outside Elm Valley, no one has been more helpful than John Henry Pitt. If race and class were not real, he would have written this book. Others who have helped me understand the community include Catherine Allen, Le-thi

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Bai, Maria Beamon, Olivia Cadaval, Cristina Espinel, Thérèse Jones, Ruth Landman, Freeman Mason, Joan Radner, Patricia Rabain, and Patricia Rickenbaker. Although they have never been to Elm Valley, Susan Draper, Robert Emerson, Christopher Geist, Harold Gould, Douglass Midgett, Robert L. Rubinstein, Barrie Thorne, and Tony Larry Whitehead at various times reviewed pieces of this work, pointed out complexities I had missed, and saved me from embarrassing mistakes. Laura Shields recorded many hours of television programs about city life which I simply could not bear to watch any more. My friends Warren Belasco, Geoffrey Burkhart, Micaela di Leonardo, William Leap, Kay Mussell, Leslie Prosterman, and Karen Sacks talked to me often about evolving versions of the book and offered valuable suggestions for how to make it better. The D.C. Community Humanities Council and its extraordinary staff at the time, Beatrice Hackett, Cleve Harrigan, and Lillie M. Stringfellow, encouraged, guided, and funded several cultural programs in the neighborhood which allowed me to try out my ideas and expand my research. Students, colleagues, and staff in the Department of Anthropology and the American Studies Program at American University tolerated the distractions and supported me immeasurably in writing the book. Without the encouragement and advice of Roger Sanjek, I might never have written it. Finally I thank Laura Helper and Peter Agree of Cornell University Press and my copyeditor, Alice Bennett, for their help in bringing the book to publication.

BRETT WILLIAMS

*Washington, D.C.*

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## Introduction

This book explores the complexities of life in a varied urban neighborhood I call Elm Valley. Here a core of long-term black American residents has welcomed many newcomers in the past ten years, including refugees from East Africa, Central America, Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean and, most problematically, prosperous white middle-class property owners. For several of these years, rising interest rates and a faltering housing market delayed what otherwise would have been rapid and dramatic displacement. These years of stalled gentrification framed an anomalous time when the most unlikely groups of people tried to live together as neighbors. The story of their attempts opens rare windows on the difficulties as well as the possibilities of achieving racially, ethnically, and economically integrated cities. The residents of Elm Valley share a physical setting and participate generally in a national culture of overwhelming presence in the District of Columbia. Yet their visions of the neighborhood and the city and their strategies for living there have varied a great deal. It appears today that these differences will be resolved at the expense of the poor.

Although this book tells the small story of one neighborhood's transformation, in a larger sense it is about how peo-



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ple attach different meanings to objects such as gardens, houses, sidewalks, stores, and streets—objects that anchor their everyday lives. These meanings are many layered. They are often distorted by national cultural processes, which offer us houses as homes; quaint, safe tourist tracts as communities; commoditized versions of ourselves as inauthentic or traditional, yuppie or ethnic. We may engage these confusing, shifting, weightless meanings with others of our own. We may share those meanings with our neighbors or, as in Elm Valley, disagree desperately about them. The book is about our battle with clichés. Through the ways people try to build meaningful lives, we can see both the profoundly alienating social forces we all must confront in modern America and also the ways we try to anchor ourselves in worlds of our own making. I argue that those who insist on vivid, detailed, interwoven, textured worlds build the most satisfying urban communities.

This book has six chapters. In the first I describe the regional and metropolitan setting. Washington, D.C., is a symbolic city with a paradoxical colonial history. More than any other city in the United States, Washington juxtaposes national culture and a vibrant underlife. Although American myths hold that Washington is somehow nowhere, in reality it is firmly anchored in a regional economy that has drawn those displaced from the often-depressed Carolinas to staff the city's service sector. Elm Valley is only one of several neighborhoods that have experienced a strong tradition of civic activism, vital, continuing links to the upper South, and the disruption of rapid residential flux in recent years. Chapter 1 locates Elm Valley's long-lasting core of black American residents in terms of the social, economic, historical, and regional forces that brought them there and that have ultimately dislocated the generation moving into adulthood today.

In the chapters that follow, I introduce each group of resi-

dents chronologically as they have appeared on the local scene and place them in their niches of shared space in Elm Valley. In each chapter I move in and out of Elm Valley to trace the larger cultural processes that influence life there. In most chapters I highlight neighborhood conflicts, because those conflicts illuminate residents' passions and concerns in particularly sharp ways. Chapter 2 explores the Carolina traditions lived out by Elm Valley's core residents. For thirty years these residents have rebuilt Carolina culture through the shared lore of alley gardens, through the exchange of medicines and delicacies, through fishing and feasting among metropolitan kin, and in visits, exchanges, and the construction of an alternative economy with relatives who bring the Carolina harvest to the city. Carolina foods have been almost alone in resisting the relentless merchandising of nostalgic, neoregional, neoethnic dishes often marketed to the younger white professionals who are among Elm Valley's newest residents. I argue that Carolina culture helps black residents resist mass media messages about Washingtonians by allowing them to construct alternative identities and relationships based on ties of friendship and family, history and place. This symbolic anchor is not without contradictions, given the true grimness of some of the areas former Carolinians have left behind. Nonetheless, in many ways it is a powerfully renegotiated oppositional identity, which knits together neighbors and draws families together across the city.

Carolina families span a wide range of incomes and occupational categories, and younger members often reside in Washington apartments or in the suburbs. In the next chapter I move to the apartment buildings and to renovation, deterioration, and movement in and out of Elm Valley. Although the neighborhood is unique and complex, its location in Washington and its social history as one of the first places in the world to experience gentrification allow us to use it as a model for the interaction between national culture

and varied urban living. Chapter 3 introduces new white homeowners and new Latino renters, unraveling their, and old tenants', conflicting perceptions about inhabiting an urban place. The chapter explores how apartment dwellers and the owners of houses see each other's lives and build ideas about one another. In Elm Valley, row-house renovation mirrors the relentless decline of the large apartment buildings, most of whose residents have been evicted so that the owners can rehabilitate them for wealthier people. To understand owners' feelings about renters, as well as renters' complex emotions about owners and about one another, I had to look outside Elm Valley at the powerful commercial connotations that, since at least the 1950s, have clustered around the word home. Circumstances in Elm Valley have challenged many of these connotations, yet the metaphor—that a house is a home and that a person who owns a house has special cultural qualities—provides a divisive frame for urban encounters and tenant activism. It also bares the contradictions and pain of displacement.

In chapter 4 I turn to the ways the circumstances of renting and owning shape public life. Elm Valley makes tangible the abstract intersection of class and culture, as the passion for interactional depth that is firmly rooted in black American culture is bolstered by the constraints of dense living. Through the work of the street, male renters build a vivid, detailed repertoire of biographical, historical, and everyday knowledge about community life. Main Street, Elm Valley's central forum, has grown to be the focus of harsh feelings and escalating conflicts. In part this reflects the interaction between class and culture as new owners' resources, preferences for metropolitan breadth, and conflicting search for variety and community distance them from the main street and alienate them from its men, who seem to have become emblematic of the problems of living with renters.

I have found it impossible to discuss modern urban life

without noting the influence of network television, a powerful medium for framing unfamiliar encounters. Chapter 5 focuses on the new late prime-time divide, with programs aimed at class-based audiences, often portraying members of one social class to those in another. Whereas poorer people prefer shows that feature wealthy families and may exaggerate the advantages of house living, middle-class people are drawn to programs that treat city life and the poor. This parallel gentrification of both television and Elm Valley has significant consequences in everyday life.

Elm Valley's children are the most happily and unselfconsciously integrated of its residents, linked across almost every boundary that divides adults. Among the institutions and traditions that bring them together, none has more force than the imaginary characters they borrow from television. Through shared language, costumes, props, and games, the children translate a popular culture form (which is relentlessly and pervasively merchandised) into folk culture. Superhero/action figure/team culture has become an important pathway into child culture for refugee children, separated otherwise by language, culture, style of family living, foodways, and dress. Children build a strong and unifying set of folk traditions rooted in a meaningless television paradigm. This poses very important questions about the future of communal traditions in their lives.

Finally, chapter 6 introduces the refugees who have immeasurably enriched and complicated Elm Valley life in recent years, importing foods and languages beyond what most older residents have known. This chapter also offers a sort of epitaph for Elm Valley, echoing a widespread sense among residents that the years of integrated living are over as gentrification and displacement speed up. Through two last-ditch and somewhat polarized efforts to invent community, Elm Valley provides important lessons for preserving urban variety. In the first, a group of mostly newer homeowners

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has sought to create a community of memory, preserving what they see as the sense of living in a particular time and place by taking control of the built environment in Elm Valley. The second effort has involved a deliberate attempt to engage in the politics of culture by drawing on folk traditions as a model for cultures of resistance and on the symbolic strategies of metaphor and bricolage to produce community festivals with indigenous meanings. Both speak to the importance of grounding international and national forces in everyday life, but they also address the difficulties of grass-roots organizing that must look outward and inward at once.

## Revisiting the Symbolic City

Washington is a city of northern charm and southern efficiency.

—John F. Kennedy

### The City as Cliché

Symbols and stereotypes surround Washington, D.C., and offer its residents a bounty of clichés. Catch phrases meant to capture the city's identity have included President Kennedy's "northern charm and southern efficiency" and President Nixon's "crime capital of the world." Blues musician Huddie Ledbetter thought it a "bourgeois town" and commemorated it in his song of that name. Jean Toomer and Langston Hughes were among many in the black cultural elite who were torn between the glimmerings of southern folk tradition they sensed here and a cityscape they found lonesome, pretentious, and alienating. Most recently, American Studies scholar Joel Garreau excludes Washington from his "nine nations of North America" because it "is so consumed by itself" and lumps it with Hawaii, Alaska, and New York in a separate chapter entitled "Aberrations." Garreau glibly expresses a widely held view that Washington is an unanchored place where no one really lives except those

who get rich from the growth of an isolated, Byzantine bureaucracy that has nothing to do with the rest of us. "Except for the black poor," he writes, "Washington has the highest per capita income in the nation" (Garreau 1981, pp. 67, 100–104).<sup>1</sup>

Garreau's blithe dismissal of 70 percent of the city's population is typical of those portraits of the city which do not see its people as real. Complementing such stereotypes is Washington's international role as a metaphor for the nation and its less known but increasingly spotlighted position as a stage for national and international black politics. As a center for the antilynching, antisegregation, voting-rights, and anti-apartheid campaigns, Washington has often seen its destiny linked to black political issues elsewhere. Such connections reflect both black activism within the District and also the occasional sensitivity of federal politicians to their own black constituents. Washington received limited home rule only after the civil rights movement had enfranchised black voters in other places; its current quest for statehood may rely on those same voters, since the District's residents have no votes in Congress.

This strange constellation of stereotypes and symbols that make up Washington's anomalous identity has contradictory implications for its residents: living in a place denied meaning by outsiders, they find their political acts sometimes take on meanings that stretch far beyond their own city. Living in a political colony, they have nonetheless been able to construct a vibrant, sometimes oppositional place. As unrecognized residents, they have often turned their attention and

1. Other scholars, most notably Hannerz (1969) and Liebow (1967), have offered vivid ethnographies of Washington life. Their reports, however, do not really explore Washington as a place within a region or as a city where national cultural processes are peculiarly problematic. For an interesting discussion of family migration from South Carolina to Philadelphia, see Ballard (1984).

energies toward building neighborhood life. Even more than most of us, Washington's people must battle inappropriate clichés in an effort to build meaning.<sup>2</sup>

### **Inside Downtown**

The clichés that treat Washington as a symbolic, political, isolated, floating metropolis obscure its place in a regional, national, and world economy where people migrate to find refuge and work. At first glance the downtown neighborhood of Elm Valley seems to offer stereotypical urban characters. Its main street is lively with black and Latino men who could provide background for the television show "Hill Street Blues" or for media warnings to tourists who might venture too far from the mall. Young whites might delight reporters seeking former antiwar activists turned upscale consumers as they start Volvos, board buses, and mount bicycles to ride to work. Many Americans "know" one-dimensional caricatures of those who live in Elm Valley. But the people and the place are much more complex.

From a nineteenth-century tract comprising several large estates, in the early years of this century Elm Valley grew up around a trolley-car turnaround, becoming an inexpensive settlement for commuting government clerks. Its modest row housing combined the integrity of private houses with the economy of shared walls and lots. Its present commercial

2. Washington's anomalous identity may best be understood by contrast to the way residents of New York City sometimes express a wry, reflexive sense of being part of a place to which they link their own identity. One man, for example, recently explained to me very simply why his family had never considered moving: "We're New Yorkers." A second popular and folk portrait consistently contrasts Washington to Baltimore, which many observers feel is a more authentic city where, as one taxi driver put it, "people are here to stay, not like in Washington where they change with every administration."



strip of mostly mom-and-pop stores, along with the prominent residential porches, recalls an era when people took the streetcar home from work and shopped in the community. Like other parts of Washington, the neighborhood welcomed many new residents during the depression and the war years, and its several large apartment buildings reflect that second period of development. However, the community's definite physical boundaries, including busy main avenues and large parks, have kept away through traffic and large-scale commercial development.

Proud of a long tradition of inward-looking civic activism, in the past thirty years Elm Valley has seen dramatic residential changes. For the first half of the century, Elm Valley remained an all-white community of varied ethnic groups, whose shopkeepers lived in the neighborhood and whose churches served the local residents. The 1954 *Bolling v. Sharpe* decision legalizing integration in the District of Columbia brought massive white flight, and by 1970 the neighborhood was 80 percent black. In the past fifteen years refugees from Central America, Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean have filled the basements of row houses and crowded into small apartments. Joining them, at first slowly, then more quickly since 1975, have been middle-class whites, coming for a variety of reasons. While unique in its intricate variety, Elm Valley displays representative patterns of urban succession: streetcar suburbanization as city dwellers agreed to commute in exchange for a more bucolic life away from the blighted city center; black in-migration and white flight as the cities were abandoned to those considered poor and dangerous; gentrification, as whites returned to the city, finding that they would rather not commute and in some cases discovering that they valued the excitement of city life.

This rather comfortable, largely working-class community in the heart of Washington's service sector stands in contrast