

REVIEW | THE EDGE BECOMES THE CENTER

An Oral History of Gentrification in the Twenty-First Century

AUTHOR | D.W. GIBSON
Review by Blake Montieth

Gentrification is often portrayed as a two-sided war: the gentrifiers versus the gentrified. But through a compelling collection of first-hand oral histories from on-the-ground New Yorkers, D.W. Gibson teases out a more nuanced struggle for power between mostly well-intentioned players in a rapidly-evolving global American city. The author’s resulting thesis is clear: the “sin of property” has muddled New York City’s once-cherished sense of community and citizenry.

“His displacement [...] escap[es] the statistician’s graph. Toussaint still clings to his apartment but he is disconnected from the neighbors across the hall...Little by little he has become more disconnected from the community that exists in the building where he grew up.” p. 160

Unearthing the subtleties of complex social issues through intimate oral histories is an art that Gibson continues to perfect. His 2012 book *Not Working: People Talk About Losing a Job and Finding Their Way in Today’s Changing Economy* similarly relies on a collection of oral histories to depict the vast impact of the late 2000s recession beyond statistical trends. *The Edge Becomes the Center* is an impactful continuation of a career devoted to considering and elevating the voices of those ignored by an increasingly unequal world.

“It always feels like we’re bad people. But we’ve lived here for twenty-three years. We work. We don’t mess with nobody. We’ve paid rent on time. And who’s helping us?” - Noelia Calero, p. 238

The Edge Becomes the Center begins with an unassuming and archival chapter name “1.” a short quote regarding gentrification from Bill de Blasio’s victorious election-night speech, and a few paragraphs positioning the reader in the

context of twenty-first century New York City before delving into the first of twenty-nine oral histories. These first-hand stories by an eclectic cast of Manhattanites, Brooklynites, and Bronxites take center stage, only briefly interrupted by italicized narrations, information, and morsels of reflection. No table of contents is provided to guide the reader through what, at first glance, seems to be a haphazardly-organized stack of interviews. Yet a consistent pattern of juxtaposition is revealed: from a small Brooklyn developer to a Brooklyn neighborhood activist; from a stupendously-wealthy former CEO to the unassuming president of a Harlem residents’ association; and from a struggling Crown Heights tenant to a tactless, and frankly racist property investor, among many others. And just when this reviewer thought this story of gentrification covered every possible perspective, Gibson continues with intimate interviews of a street artist turned upper-class drug dealer and with a lifestyle squatter. With such a diverse cast of characters, Gibson challenges readers to understand that gentrification is more than just a struggle between rich and poor; it is a process that affects every New Yorker in a distinct and unique way. For some it hurts, for some it helps, and for others it is a natural extension of urban life.

“Neighborhoods evolve and I think if you’re willing to be part of that process you’re really able to enjoy that process and enjoy your city.” - Matt, p. 195

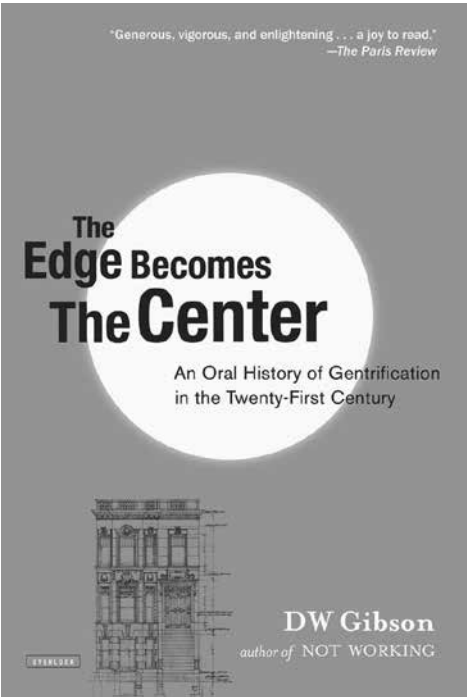
It is the organizational structure of Gibson’s interviews, along with a masterful craft for storytelling, that makes this work great. The author has seemingly eschewed any personal pretenses or prescriptions, allowing the powerfully raw stories of twenty-eight New Yorkers to speak for the complexities of the city’s increasing waves

of gentrification. Readers are left to form their own conclusions.

It is quite incongruous when this collection concludes, in its final chapter, with a heavy-handed stance by the author decrying the “invasion” of gentrification that, he states, threatens to dismantle the city’s future. The author’s own methodological structure and reverence for his subjects’ voices throughout already leads readers to this conclusion, if not a more impactful one, so the author’s final chapter diminishes more than it enhances. Therefore, it is with a similarly heavy hand that this reviewer encourages readers to rip out chapter 29 immediately upon purchase.

“But I didn’t know it was at the expense of the people who were already here. Before it was a lot of Hispanics and a lot of blacks. Now you don’t see a lot of them. It’s not for us to live in. It’s for other people. But I’m like, ‘Ooh, I want to try that restaurant. It looks nice.’ I like organic stuff, too!” - Noelia Calero, p. 236

The Edge Becomes the Center by D.W. Gibson offers readers first-hand insight into how gentrification affects urbanites from every walk of life in New York and, by extension, around the world. This book is recommended for those who seek a deeper, qualitative understanding of this complex social issue. A careful examination of every story in this collection ingrained in this reviewer an unshakable understanding of gentrification and a commitment to addressing its negative ramifications.



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