

BOOK REVIEW

There Goes the 'Hood: Views of Gentrification from the Ground Up

by Lance Freeman

Temple University Press, 2006, 248 pages Reviewed by Alex Schafran

One of the challenges in reviewing the work of a prominent author in any field is the tendency to review the author and not the book. This is especially true in the case of Lance Freeman's new book, *There Goes the 'Hood: Views of Gentrification from the Ground Up*, for Freeman holds a very important place in the recent debates about gentrification within the academy. On his own and together with Frank Braconi, Freeman was the author of two important studies in 2004 and 2005 which used quantitative statistical research to demonstrate the authors' claim that there is a tenuous relationship between gentrification and displacement (Freeman and Braconi 2004; Freeman 2005). This research, which garnered national attention (including front page coverage in USA Today), was celebrated by the right and excoriated by the left, and helped thrust Freeman into the spotlight.

So the question for a reviewer is how to approach *There Goes the 'Hood* - does one attempt to read it on its own, or is it either impossible or unwise (or both) to separate it from the author's prior contributions to the literature? For better or for worse, I am attempting to do both. In some ways, *There Goes the 'Hood* makes that choice easy, for it represents somewhat of a departure both for Freeman and for the literature in general.

What is fundamentally refreshing about the book is its teleology and methodology, or more accurately, methodological focus, and its honesty about race. The author makes his goal clear early on, to "paint a richer and more nuanced picture of gentrification..." It is a truly laudable goal, and in many ways the author succeeds. His findings are confusing, at times contradictory, and do a great deal to break apart the often black and white picture of gentrification that tends to dominate the popular discourse. He also does not fall into the trap of trying to develop a finegrained definition of gentrification; rather, he lets his subjects speak for themselves.

The subjects, human beings who live in the neighborhoods in question and who suffer/benefit/profit/lose from this complex force we call

gentrification, are another key contribution of this book. Freeman argues in his introduction that in many ways residents of gentrifying neighborhoods have been "displaced" from the literature on the subject. We are so busy trying to define it, quantify it, stop it, etc. that we have a tendency to lose sight of the human side of the discussion. Freeman literally gives voice to residents - letting them speak for themselves in lengthy sections, sections which in my opinion are some of the strengths of the book. He also openly struggles with some of their comments, comments which he knows to be either racially insensitive, contradictory, confusing or just plain wrong. But he never fails to treat their ideas with respect, and makes clear that their opinions and ideas matter. In fact, much of his policy discussion at the end deals not with displacement but with the fear of displacement, recognizing perception and disenchantment are critically important.

Finally, Freeman should be commended for placing race front and center, for crafting an honest and personal account of one of the most difficult parts of the gentrification discussion. Although many would like to think that gentrification is mostly about class, Freeman shows unequivocally that race must be discussed, especially in the context of older, historically black neighborhoods like Harlem and Clinton Hill. He does not shy away from exposing his own race and racial experience, at least as it relates to the research at hand. He makes it clear that some of the candid response he garnered were likely due to his being black - 85 percent of his respondents were black, and Freeman felt that they clearly trusted him and opened up in a way he doubted they would have had the researcher been white. This honesty is crucial to our understanding of the situation. Contrary to what Banfield (1974) might wish, not talking about race will certainly not make it go away.

Yet it is in this vein of honesty that I wished Freeman had pushed a little harder on issues of class, especially within the African American community. He notes regularly that one of the distinctive features of the two communities in question is the role of the black gentry but he avoids any real consideration of the issue. He states in Chapter 3 that class does not really come up in his interviews, but it is unclear whether he pushed his interviewees to discuss it, as he did other subjects. He also decouples this discussion with his later and much briefer discussion of the role of local community-based organizations in the redevelopment of Harlem. He acknowledges that many of those groups played a leading role in bringing middle-income people back to the neighborhood, but he hesitates to get into what has been a significant conflict within the community. Freeman has all the pieces to put together a truly nuanced and deep picture of race and class, of the attempt to create a strong urban

mixed income African-American community, but at the end he sadly shies away from the task.

His treatment of his own work on gentrification and displacement is also somewhat problematic. He does acknowledge the controversy very briefly in the introduction, and had it served solely as the motivation behind the book, I would feel comfortable letting it go. Yet in Chapter 6, he repeatedly refers to it as "the most rigorous research on displacement," without acknowledging the significant opposition to his work, including one author whom he thanked in his acknowledgements (Newman & Wyly 2006). He does not even give any information about this research, which is essentially two pieces he wrote or co-wrote and one other work - hardly a body of literature. Freeman well knows the controversy that his earlier work inspired, and he must be aware that many researchers (and reviewers) will likely be reading this work with knives already drawn. By putting his old work front and center in the core policy section of the paper, he distracts us from the core findings and nuances of the first five chapters, doing both the reader and himself a disservice. One does not have to either agree with or even know Freeman's prior work to benefit from this book, but sadly, he seems determined not to let us forget it.

On a final note, one could focus on some of his policy points, both good (his idea on the use of Tax Increment Financing was new to me and well thought out) and bad (his view of rent regulation clearly was at odds with his findings), yet that is not the heart of the book. Those who are looking for a detailed discussion of policy should look elsewhere; *There Goes the 'Hood* focuses on the experience of gentrification, and in that regard it is an important work in the ongoing struggles over neighborhood change. By being honest about race, by focusing strongly on human beings and their stories, and by setting a strong goal of nuanced storytelling, Freeman has consciously opened more doors for future research than he has closed. For anyone interested in the subject, and especially those interested in contributing their voice to the growing literature, it is a worthwhile and important read.

References:

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