

When They GEN Us

“He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

Micah 6:8

“When They See Us” is a four-part miniseries featuring a raw, horrific, and heartbreaking account of the now Exonerated Central Park Five. In 1989, the Exonerated Five, as they are now called, were falsely accused and convicted of the rape and battery of a white woman jogging in Central Park. Renowned film director, Ava DuVernay masterfully tells the gut-wrenching story of each man. The cinematic narrative follows the men collectively and individually from adolescence into their heartless interrogation through their trial and ultimately into their lives during and after prison. The travesty and trauma from their incarceration and eventual exoneration could still be felt in Oprah’s post-film interview with the men. When They See Us, DuVernay explains, “embraces the **humanity** of the men and not their politicized moniker.”

When They GEN Us

Current events reveal that *When They GEN Us* is no less traumatic and terrifying. GEN is my abbreviation for Gentrification. And the phrase “*When They GEN Us*” is my homage to DuVernay’s docuseries. The phrase, along with this article, seeks to express the truth about the systematic and intentional social displacement politicians, urban planners, and other community developers enact on black and brown communities and their residents. Ruth Glass, a British sociologist coined the term ‘gentrification’ in 1964 as more affluent people moved into less affluent neighborhoods that were assessed as prime locations. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) defines gentrification as, “the transformation of neighborhoods from ‘low value’ to ‘high value.’ It may be presumed by the myriads of displaced residents that they are not considered high value.”

To be sure, Gentrification is an extremely expensive encroachment of exclusion primarily in inner city communities of color. What happened by default and oftentimes deceit became a developer’s pipe dream. Ravished by shuttered mills and factories, many purposefully relocated overseas for greater profits and meager wages with no health benefits. The collateral damage of such an exodus was lower tax bases that negatively impacted public schools and the upkeep of infrastructure – streets, buildings, bridges, parks, and vital city services.

Due to unemployment and underemployment, crime increased in inner cities. This is why it is important that people understand gentrification and the other systematic ways institutions control populations and space. Poverty, crime, and homelessness are not causatives but the consequences of a lack of access, opportunities, retraining, and compassionate strategic planning, as well as increasing racial disparities affecting those living in once stable and thriving inner cities.

GENS and The Inner City Hostile Take Over

Enter GEN. In a concerted effort to monopolize prime locations via revitalization, opportunistic politicians, cunning urban planners, and hustling developers coalesced to hatch and implement master plans for land grabs by any means necessary. Eminent Domain, higher rents and leases, increasing property taxes, and shady evictions, served the political and profiteering purpose of driving out working class residents and attracting affluent residents. To accomplish this, marginalization became central to gentrification.

Weaponized with money and assumed privilege, gentrifiers (GENS), primarily young adult white professionals, signed for astronomical rents, leases, and home purchases and became the new faces of many inner cities. This made struggling Blacks, Browns, poor, and disenfranchised peoples expendable. An array of businesses followed these GENS. Along with renovating homes, building luxury townhomes, apartments, and skyrocketing property values, Gentrification ushered in a new form of segregation. And poorer people were subsequently displaced and discarded.

The Selfishness of Gentrifiers

Gentrification initially appeared as an innocent (but calculated) form of bait-and-switch. With the intention of substituting inferior-for-superior housing accommodations, long-standing inner city residents were promised affordable housing and equitable living incentives. But once community renovations were completed, many in these communities were priced out of the housing market and forced into surrounding counties with little-to-no resources. Many misled residents sought housing restitution, but unfortunately, justice was devastatingly denied.

The issue is NOT the Middle-Class or working professionals moving into these redeveloped inner cities. The most glaring issue is that many who come have NO commitment to the betterment of the less fortunate who are still there. Public schools remain grossly underfunded as there is barely any support, mentoring, or advocacy for the Black, Brown and poor students who still attend these languishing schools. It's disheartening to see GENS go to work and hurry back to their watering holes and dog parks jogging behind their aerodynamic baby carriages never lifting a finger to offer these students, their neighbors, any hope or help.

The Impact of Gentrification

Just a few weeks ago in Washington, DC, where I'm based, the streets saw boisterous pushback as activists and community members protested the closing of a much needed halfway house for ex-offenders. It is this kind of "community revitalization" that ultimately perpetuates the destruction and distress of Black and Brown communities. Dr. Sabiyha Prince in her 2019 study on Gentrification in Washington D.C. for the National Community Reinvestment Coalition (NCRC) says, "Across the city, as the threat of displacement looms for these diverse populations, public housing residents also face unaddressed and unsafe conditions associated with pest infestations and leaking pipes, as well as humiliating forms of over policing that criminalize young people's use of shared, outdoor spaces." The fact of the matter remains, all of this

is evidence of egregious irresponsibility on the part of politicians, urban planners, and developers.

When They GEN Us is why so few feel compassion or concern for the plight of hungry people now that former food deserts have been turned into popular eateries with high-end grocery stores. Of course there is no admission of complicity with the ideology of Gentrification. But many are taking full advantage regardless of the overwhelming number of casualties.

Silence is Violence

Let me be clear. People have the right (and privilege) to live where they can afford to live. However, for new residents to not be aware of what is going on around them remaining willfully blinded to the real and legitimate needs of the devalued residents among them is the irrefutable problem of gentrifiers. Vulnerable groups need voices, advocacy, and policies for affordable housing. Political pressure can and should be placed on mayors, city councilpersons, and community stakeholders. Who is a better voice and advocate for the displaced and disregarded than the gentrifiers participating in the creation of their need?

Gentrifiers can be solutions, instead of simply silent squatters. Increased police surveillance in gentrified communities may stem from crime and violence. But gentrifiers need to know that SILENCE IS VIOLENCE! Whenever and wherever gentrifiers have the availability or capability of doing good or right or justice, it is their moral and social responsibility to do so.

Until gentrifiers acquire a profound appreciation for the Humanity of ALL people, *When They GEN Us* will continue to be another act of systematic violence inflicting the trauma of displacement and dehumanization on Black and Brown people. May we all heed the words of the prophet Micah and learn to do justice, especially when we are the perpetrators of injustice.