“We’re a Part of This City, Too”: An Examination of the Politics of Representation of D.C. Native via #DCNativesDay

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Abstract
This cultural analysis explores how D.C. natives represented themselves on Twitter via #DCNativesDay. The analysis found that Twitter users engaged in hashtag activism to share stories about their connection to place(s) (e.g., movie theaters, neighborhoods, public schools) in the city that were integral in the construction of their individual and collective Black D.C. native identities. Constructed identities were not monolithic, and users engaged in some self-reflexivity. The users’ emphasis on place seemed to signify reclamation of changing city landscapes and legitimacy in the city. Ultimately, this research raises questions about how alternative representations that map marginalized communities onto city spaces in online spaces can create possibilities of transformation for Black communities during gentrification in offline spaces.

Keywords
Washington, D.C., cultural studies, critical geography, representation, hashtag activism

Social media provide opportunities for regular people, not just news producers or media elites, to offer ideas about the world around us. This online discourse can help lead to sociopolitical change (Clark, 2016). Murthy et al. (2016) found that marginalized groups, particularly Black people, are using Twitter to establish and use their voices in urban spaces where they have traditionally been excluded from political and economic life. This exclusion is often an outcome of gentrification. As mainstream media often support efforts of gentrification and focus on narratives of loss and displacement among Black people (Brown-Saracino & Rumpf, 2011), this research will focus on how Black people created alternative representations of themselves and their community via online dialogue in the form of storytelling. My research analyzes hashtag activism to highlight how Twitter can offer disruptive possibilities for Black people that have been displaced and deprioritized during gentrification in Washington, D.C.

This work highlights an important moment in the D.C. Native movement in Washington, D.C. The moment is defined by the celebration of the inaugural D.C. Natives Day on 20 May 2019. Tony Lewis, Jr and Angel Anderson, both Black native Washingtonians and local activists, worked with D.C. city councilmembers to draft a resolution for an official D.C. Natives Day. Democratic Councilmember Kenyan McDuffie, who is also a Black native Washingtonian, introduced the resolution to the City Council in February 2019. To help justify the need for a D.C. Natives Day, McDuffie stated in a Washington Post article,

Before D.C. was one of the hottest places to live in the country, as it is today, thousands of residents poured their blood, sweat and tears into improving our communities. While I certainly welcome new residents and neighbors, many of whom have produced a new generation of young natives, this ceremonial resolution highlights the people who helped build our beautiful city into what it is today. (Vargas, 2019, para. 23)

In April 2019, the resolution to create a D.C. Native Day was approved by the city council. The resolution named May 20 as D.C. Natives Day in Washington, D.C. How did native Washingtonians respond to this resolution? Who are those represented as D.C. natives? While research has documented that Black people have used social media to challenge...
stereotypical images or invisibility in mainstream media (Pinckney et al., 2018), this text is of particular interest because it is contextualized in a specific governmental (state-sanctioned) action (i.e., the city council’s approval of the resolution for D.C. Natives Day). Research has shown that the “local” is ripe for politics of resistance to emerge (Swyngedouw, 2000). Therefore, although this hashtag did not generate thousands of tweets, it is still an important case to examine representation as means for resistance and the nuances of gentrification in local spaces. This research is also consistent with Price’s (2010) work on race and geography that calls for a movement away from counting and a movement toward understanding how Black communities have struggled, endured, and resisted.

Using a cultural studies framework, with representation as an entry point, this research examines “#DCNativesDay” as a cultural text to investigate how D.C. natives represented themselves on Twitter through this hashtag. Cultural studies scholar, Paul Du Gay, wrote that representation is a meaning-making practice and language is the primary means of representation (Du Gay et al., 2013). Therefore, this analysis will investigate how D.C. natives participating in the online dialogue about D.C. Natives Day represented themselves on Twitter to help understand the ways in which representations of D.C. natives were constructed, negotiated, and regulated during this particular moment in the D.C. Native movement. More specifically, this analysis will explore the following questions: (1) How do D.C. natives represent themselves using #DCNativesDay? (2) How do those representation(s) of D.C. natives disrupt larger assumptions of who is a D.C. native? (3) How do those representation(s) of D.C. natives challenge displacement? and (4) How do D.C. natives use the D.C. Natives Day hashtag to regulate representations of themselves?

To foreground this research, the following section will provide some context on the uneven geographies of Washington, D.C., a review of literature on gentrification, and a brief discussion on the possibilities for disruption and resistance via hashtag activism.

**Literature Review**

**A Brief History on Washington D.C.’s Uneven Geographies**

After Washington, D.C.’s population peaked at 800,000 in 1950, there had been a steady decline in the population until 2000. Washington D.C.’s population increased between 2000 and 2012 with the emergence of a high-wage working class, which was consistent with other major metropolitan area population shifts (Hyra, 2012). However, Washington, D.C.’s population shift was unique because of the number of White people moving into the city. With the influx of White residents and a decline in the Black population, Washington, D.C. had become more racially diverse, educated, and affluent (Hyra, 2012).

From 2000 to 2013, the National Community Reinvestment Coalition (2019) reported that Washington, D.C. experienced rapid rates of gentrification in majority low-income neighborhoods. Gentrification is a highly debated area of study (Hyra, 2015). For the purpose of this research, I use Zuk et al.’s (2018) conceptualization:

Gentrification has been seen as a tool, goal, outcome, or unintended consequence of revitalization processes in declining urban neighborhoods, which are defined by their physical deterioration, concentrations of poverty, and racial segregation of people of color. (p. 32)

Here, the authors draw a distinction between revitalization and gentrification, and established a correlation between gentrification and urban neighborhoods that are typically home to communities of color and low-income residents. The National Community Reinvestment Coalition (2019) found that Washington, D.C.’s low-income and moderate-income residents of color are at the highest risk for displacement in the city during gentrification. While some unintended consequences of revitalization can lead to increased amenities in neighborhoods, such as grocery stores and more entertainment options, older residents in the gentrified neighborhood often feel resentment or alienation (Hyra, 2015).

Washington, D.C. is unevenly developed, and recent gentrification efforts have actively produced and reproduced spatial and racial divisions that perpetuate hegemonic economic, political, social, and cultural structures in the city. One way in which these divisions are actively produced is through the representation of gentrification in mainstream media.

**Representation of Gentrification**

Lees (1996) argued that the representation of gentrification should be understood as a part of the productive and reproductive processes of gentrification. Gentrification is often represented as a site of difference and binary oppositions, which Lees (1996) postulated “reinscribes inequality” (p. 457). For example, in media coverage and academic studies of gentrification alike, there are typically “old” and “new” middle class, or “pre” and “post” gentrification. These binaries leave little room for understanding of the nuance and complexities of gentrification.

Harvey (1989) stated that local newspapers play a critical role in gentrification. Local newspapers create knowledge and regulate understanding about people, places, and political-economic processes in cities. This knowledge often works to legitimize gentrification. Traditional media, like newspapers, have been found to support efforts that support the city as a “growth machine,” or a place desirable or in need of revitalization (Brown-Saracino & Rumpf, 2011).
In Wilson and Mueller’s (2004) research on newspaper coverage of gentrification in St. Louis, two common metaphors were used to promote gentrification as key to growth coalitions in the city—the city as an organism and the middle-class technician as Salvationist. These metaphors worked together to create a need for restructuring and certify gentrification as constructive and beneficial. The metaphors also simplified and normalized the process of displacement.

Tom Slater (2006) noted that traditional media serve urban elite interests, prioritizing a narrative about a city that appeals to tourists and deprioritizes local residents and the spaces where they live. Mainstream media often represent an urban experience that Slater (2006) noted is used to appeal to newcomers as it signals that the city is a place suited for renewal, revitalization, and thus gentrification. While mainstream media typically support revitalization, and subsequently gentrification efforts, Twitter can offer a way to explore how gentrification builds local community and also offers spaces of production for additional, and sometimes alternative, viewpoints and sentiment toward gentrification efforts (Gibbons et al., 2018).

**Hashtag Activism and Everyday Activism on Twitter**

Digital and hashtag activism has emerged as a rich area of research in the field of communication. Hashtags function to organize information online and help situate messages in a wider social context (Brock, 2012). On Twitter, Brock (2012) stated that hashtags help mediate individual and community identities while indicating group-level discourse. This discourse can be a “mode of activism” that can enact material sociopolitical change (Clark, 2016).

Fang (2015) defined hashtag activism as a new form of digital activism that engages marginalized groups, specifically people of color, and encompasses two specific strategies—teaching of histories and self-expressive acts of political resistance. Fang’s (2015) research on hashtag activism among Black students on predominantly White colleges and universities found that the employment of viral hashtags combined with offline traditional acts of disruption, like protest and hunger strikes, contributed to national conversations on race.

In accordance with Fang’s (2015) emphasis on hashtag activism and offline engagement, Olson (2014) studied the agenda-setting function of cyber communities. Olson (2014) found that digital communities provided spaces for activists to educate and organize their following. Olson (2014) stated that hashtag activism is the most effective when a movement is able to garner support from traditional broadcast and print communication channels.

Online platforms have also created opportunities for self-representation for the “everyday activist” (Vivienne, 2016). Online users engage in “everyday activism” through sharing personal stories that challenge the status quo. Vivienne (2016) argued that everyday activism is important because it contributes to attitude changes over time that eventually help reshape social norms that are often perpetuated through mainstream media. Online platforms and the employment of hashtags have transformed the fight for social change (Fang, 2015).

On a discursive level, hashtags afford everyday activists opportunities to create meanings and make memories about the world around us (Harp et al., 2018). Sarah Florini (2014) stated that “remembering is never an end in its own right, but a means of asserting power and legitimizing social relations” (p. 314). Florini argued that the Internet is a space for marginalized communities to contest and assert power through storytelling and memory-making.

This research will critically investigate how everyday people asserted power and created meaning and examine what Lees (1996) identified as the politics of representation of D.C. natives using the D.C. Natives Day hashtag. Lees (1996) conceptualized representation as both a product and producing of culture. This research is informed by both cultural studies and critical geography frameworks, both of which will work to examine the representation of D.C. natives using the D.C. Natives Day hashtag on Twitter and how that representation is a cultural and social practice that produced means of resistance and disruption.

**Theory and Method**

In cultural studies, communication and culture are both constitutive and active processes, rejecting the viewpoint that culture is a static object, or separate from political and economic structures (Klaus, 1993). Raymond Williams (1961/2001) defined communication as continuous processes that re-create meaning among individuals in society. Similarly, critical geographers contend that space is an active and continuous cultural process. Space is never absolute and is rooted in human practice (Harvey, 1976). Space is both political and ideological, conditioned by historical and social processes. People create geographies within particular geographic, political, cultural, and social constraints that then shape human action (Soja, 1989).

Neely and Samura (2011) stated that space is organizing and plays a crucial role in the construction and organization of social life. McKitterick (2006) noted that people who are racialized are often erased from landscape. Furthermore, Neely and Samura (2011) postulated that racialized bodies have mostly been linked to land and control of space, or lack thereof. Racialized bodies, or people of color, are often represented as victims of geographies or even lacking geographies (Hawthorne, 2019). As such, the offline acts of displacement and the representation of that displacement online work together to deprioritize people of color in everyday life.

In Price’s (2010) work on race and geography, landscapes are conceptualized as texts. Price (2010) highlighted the epistemological importance of conceptualizing spaces as
texts because it prioritizes the process of storytelling. Stories help organize the world in which we live through the creation of limits, boundaries, and possibilities (Revill, 1993). While in the production and consumption of texts some forms of texts reproduce oppressive structures of inequality and inequality that silence people of color, others can produce alternative representations that can disrupt the status quo and work to transform them (Price, 2010).

In cultural studies, the study of texts is the study of culture. Texts are fluid, transformative, and political (i.e., sites of contestation) (Storey, 1996). Richard Johnson (1986–1987) stated that the study of texts does not seek universality, but instead prioritizes the study of language and storytelling as basic organizing functions of social life. Similarly, Stuart Hall (1997) stated that a study of representation is the study of language, as it is our primary meaning-making practice. This study of representation via #DCNativesDay examines how everyday people using this tag represented themselves as D.C. natives, how this representation disrupted narratives of displacement and loss, and how this representation was regulated.

While Twitter has become a popular site for quantitative data analyses using big data samples, qualitative and critical methods can still offer useful insight on patterns of social life that generalized data cannot capture (Marwick, 2013). In doing a close reading of tweets, Marwick (2013) stated that researchers pay attention to words, syntax, and diction. To conduct this form of analysis, a relatively small sample of tweets must be selected, such as tweets containing a certain hashtag or mention of specific words.

Using representation as a theoretical entry point, this cultural analysis employed textual analysis to study the text: #DCNativesDay. Using the advanced Twitter search, 249 tweets were captured that used the hashtag: #DCNativesDay. The timeline of analysis is 23 March 2019 to 20 May 2019. Two moments defined the timeline of analysis—Washington Post’s article published on 23 March 2019 that reported the formal commemoration of D.C. Natives Day and the celebration of the first official D.C. Natives Day on 20 May 2019.

Richard Johnson (1986–1987) stated that in cultural analyses of texts, forms and processes of production across different kinds of evidence are examined that point to common experiences of social and cultural life. Similarly, Stuart Hall (1997) stated that in language we use various signs and symbols, such as “sounds, written words, electronically produced images, or even musical notes” (p. 1), to represent concepts, ideas, and feelings. This analysis examines all 249 tweets, including retweets. To account for the different kinds of evidence or various signs and symbols and to help interrogate how users who participated in this online dialogue represented themselves as D.C. natives, I analyzed external links to news articles, photographs, images, and videos that were included in tweets using #DCNativesDay. Although online users did not always author the articles or create the images or videos, their selection and inclusion in the tweets were intentional, and thus should be considered a different kind of evidence that Johnson (1986–1987) and Stuart Hall (1997) highlighted as an integral component to cultural analysis.

All 249 tweets were read during the “long preliminary soak,” as prescribed in Stuart Hall’s (1976) introduction to Paper Voices where he outlined the procedure for critical textual analysis. In this stage of the analysis, Hall (1976) recommended that the researcher engage with the text to select representative examples to be further analyzed. Examples are selected by identifying recurring patterns of emphasis in position, placement, style, tone, treatment, and imagery. As such, during my long preliminary soak, 249 tweets were analyzed and then organized into three themes based on recurring patterns of emphasis in primarily position, tone, style, and imagery. Those three themes are as follows: (Re)Placing in Representation, Representation as Resistance, and Regulation in Representation. Each theme is explained in more detail in the analysis section below, and in accordance with Hall’s (1976) guidance on critical textual analyses, the analysis includes contextual evidence to help interpret latent meaning of the text or tweets.

It is also important to note that racial identities of Twitter users cannot be verified. However, because this research centers on Black cultural production, the race of Twitter users is an important element in the analysis. Similar to the precedent set in Williams and Gonlin’s (2017) research, my analysis recognizes how Twitter users represent themselves racially online, and therefore, I am able to make inferences about the racial identities of Twitter users by examining their public avatars.

Analysis
All three thematic categories of this cultural analysis examined the politics of representation of D.C. natives. More specifically, it explored how D.C. natives represented themselves via hashtagging #DCNativesDay, how those representations of D.C. natives worked to disrupt dominant narratives of displacement, and how D.C. native representations were self-regulated. Tweets were organized into three themes: Replacing in Representation, Resistance in Representation, and Regulation in Representation. The themes are not mutually exclusive, but rather work together to form a complex whole cultural text.

Re(Placing) in Representation
Twitter users employed the #DCNativesDay to share excitement about the formal commemoration of D.C. Natives Day. Users also shared individual and collective stories about experiences in particular spaces in Washington, D.C.’s physical landscape. In these tweets, D.C. natives were represented via place, an exemplar of “mixing the social and the physical” (Revill, 1993, p. 131). When the social and physical are
mixed, Revill stated that the physical descriptions of places are tightly bound to people and events. Users (re)placed narratives of displacement and loss through representations of themselves embedded in historically and culturally significant Black spaces.

The first tweet using #DCNativesDay was posted on 23 March 23. The tweet thanked local activists Tony Lewis Jr and Angel Anderson for working with Councilmember Kenyan McDuffie to draft the resolution for D.C. Natives Day. The second tweet also conveyed excitement about the commemoration. The user tweeted,

Yay, we get a day to be honored #DCNativesDay

Maybe soon we will get voting representation!

Both users, which displayed Black avatars, conveyed excitement about the city formally recognizing D.C. natives, and both tweets signified a specific Black racial identity of D.C. natives. Tweets explicitly mentioned that local activists, Anderson and Lewis, and city councilmember McDuffie, were all Black D.C. natives. Both tweets also featured a link to a *Washington Post* article. This link populates the story’s photo, which featured Black native Washingtonians dressed in all black and gathered around a D.C. flag at the May 2018 grassroots organized D.C. Native Photoshoot.

A later tweet from city council at-large candidate Markus Batchelor, who self-represented as a Black native Washingtonian, thanked the organizers for creating a “celebration of people, culture, and unity.” So far, users seem to be defining their D.C. native identities as a united Black community that is culturally significant. Additional tweets also pointed to a distinctive D.C. native identity.

On 20 May, one user tweeted,

Happy #DCNativesDay to all my peeps from D dot C!!! I love my people

And our culture. We are from here. We have been here. We’re here to stay.

#weaintgoingnowhere #wegointoberighthere #GetUpDC

In this tweet, the user called specific attention to a distinct culture of D.C., one that has historical roots and will survive. Several tweets represented D.C. natives in the description of specific places in the city. For example, one Twitter user stated,

To N. Capital & Tuckerman In Lamond

To 11th & Irving in Parkview/Columbia Heights

To Brookland Manor on Saratoga

To “Deuce Decue” 22nd & Savannah

Thank you to all the neighborhoods I lived in that molded and shaped me into who I am. #DCNativesDay #oneeverythingloveJoe

Similarly, another user tweeted,

Happy DCNativesDay!

Born: DC General Hospital

Neighborhoods: Paradise/Mayfair, Deanwood

Schools: Thomas, Browne, Hine, Carroll, HD Woodson

#DCorNothing

One other tweet stated,

From Dawn to Dusk to Ketcham to Garfield to KIPP DC

From Choppa city to Wellington Park to Stanton Oaks

From W8/W6, 90s, X2, B2 to Naylor Road, Gallery, NOMA

From NIKE boots to New Balances

From Rare Essence to XIB

From 93.9 WKYS to Praise 104.1

I’m so DC, moe

#DCNativesDay

All of the aforementioned users displayed Black avatars and seemed to represent their D.C. native identities through narratives of place, specifically neighborhoods, schools, and hospitals located in predominantly Black communities in Washington, D.C. Many of these spaces, such as Brookland Manor, an affordable housing community, and D.C. General Hospital, the only hospital operating East of Anacostia River, are in areas ripe for gentrification. It seemed that naming these places both amplified their cultural significance and helped circulate a narrative of racialized places to be celebrated, not condemned, and deemed necessary for revitalization. Another user tweeted,

I’m a proud DC Native, Howard University Hospital baby,

Uptown representer, Coolidge Colt, survivor of the Black Hole,

Yearly Georgia Ave and Caribbean Day Festivals attendee, etc . . .

#happydcnativesday #dcnativesday

Here, this user, with a Black avatar, identified as a D.C. native and then named schools, neighborhoods, and historic cultural celebrations as markers of a D.C. native identity. The user’s reminiscence of The Black Hole, formerly an infamous live go-go music hall, and Georgia Avenue Day and Caribbean
Day Festivals, outdoor neighborhood parades and festivals that the city government no longer sponsors, asserted power through memories of Black cultural experiences.

Twitter users participating in the #DCNativesDay conversation also mapped boundaries onto the city’s landscape to specify their collective identity as D.C. natives. For example, one user with a Black avatar tweeted an image with the text, “Let’s make something clear, being from the ‘DMV’ area don’t mean you are from #DC Being from ‘DC’ means you’re from ‘DC’.”

On 20 May, WAMU, Washington’s affiliate NPR radio station, tweeted a link to an article “Who Says ‘No One’s From D.C.? Not Black Washingtonians,” (Schweitzer, 2017). This article, published in 2017, included several accounts from people who identify as D.C. natives. In the article, one D.C. native described the city’s changing landscape by emphasizing that at one time it was not popular to be from D.C. After the economy boomed, the population shift occurred and it seemed that everyone wanted to be from the DMV (which stands for D.C., Maryland, and Virginia). The tone of the WAMU article conveyed a sentiment of skepticism and suspicion of DMV culture, as one D.C. native described how DMV culture works to deprioritize the cultural significance of D.C. and its native communities. The WAMU article also highlighted that there has always been a clear demarcation between official “Washington,” which includes the Capitol and the White House, and “hometown D.C.,” which comprises the neighborhoods where people have lived and worked mostly outside political bubble.

Tweets in Re(placing) in Representation used online dialogue via storytelling to represent themselves in places, such as schools, hospitals, and community centers in majority Black neighborhoods. Users’ tweets signified how their self-representations were embedded in the city’s landscape. In the next theme, tweets conveyed how this representation was also means of disruption and resistance.

Resistance in Representation

Tweets in this theme signified a representation of D.C. natives that was racialized, spatialized, and, most significantly, politicized. This representation conveyed elements of political resistance that challenged assumptions about D.C. natives. Narratives, images, and videos in tweets worked to disrupt the status quo about D.C. natives and worked together to signify that Black D.C. natives were organized and organizing to reduce the number of Black people being displaced throughout the city. Finally, tweets conveyed hope, which Castells (2012) noted was essential to social network movements. The approval of the resolution seemed to provide legitimacy in the city. Eventually, voting rights and Black D.C. natives could unite to assert more social and political legitimacy in the city.

On 20 May, the Mayor of D.C. Muriel Bowser, who is a Black native Washingtonian, tweeted,

On this first #DCNativesDay, we’re putting an end to “no one’s from DC.”

We are.

We go back generations.

We’re DC Proud.

This tweet also included an image of the proclamation. The proclamation stated,

Washington, DC is a unique city with many rich and diverse communities And a city beyond monuments . . . our city benefits from the rich history and Cultural knowledge of multiple generations of native Washingtonians, And we thank them for being the heart of our hometown . . .

This proclamation conveys a representation of D.C. natives that is rich, diverse, and multigenerational. More importantly, this proclamation formally centers the contributions of D.C. natives. The image of the proclamation tweeted from the mayor’s handle also seemed to signify that the city government is active in prioritizing D.C. natives and protecting them from erasure from both the physical landscapes and stories about the city.

On 20 May, one Twitter user, who displayed a Black avatar, tweeted a link to a Washington City Paper article, “Home Ruler’s: D.C. Natives speak on their city.” The article features four award-winning essays that described the experiences of four different D.C. natives (Sani, 2019). One Twitter user, who tweeted the article’s link, wrote one of the award-winning essays. In the essay “UnSeen in My Own Home,” the Twitter user described how she is immensely proud to be from D.C. She also described her ability to move from “D.C” to “National D.C.” seamlessly (Sani, para. 67). The essay highlighted that while she can move in and out of these spaces, the city is full of contradictions. Her essay highlighted education and income disparities in Washington, D.C. She stated that in a place that she proudly calls home, she worked to not just defend and preserve its distinct culture, but also to close the wealth and education gaps between people living in “D.C.” and “National D.C.”

Another essay, “Voiceless in DC,” featured in the Washington City Paper (Sani, 2019) article talked about how to be a D.C. native is to be a defender of the city. The author of this essay wrote that she is compelled to circulate stories that define D.C. as more than just Congress. She wrote,

As much as DC belongs to us in our hearts, we have no real ownership of our home. It belongs to everyone in America except us, the people who actually live here. (Sani, para. 55)

The exertion of power and control is linked to land ownership, and here, the essay highlighted that without ownership, D.C. natives really do not belong. The author wrote that she
continues to defend the city and the people who live and work in it. Other Twitter users also made a point to defend the whole city and asserted that native Washingtonians have the right to enjoy every part of the city, not just “hometown D.C.”

A tweet from the D.C. Lottery included a video clip that featured D.C. Natives Day co-organizer, Tony Lewis, Jr. In the video, Lewis is shown standing on U Street, formerly one of D.C.’s “Black meccas” (Hyra, 2015). In the video, Lewis stated,

I frequent all parts of the city. I think more Washingtonians gotta understand that. There’s no part of the city that’s not for you or off limits to you. This is our city. DC is the greatest city in America.

After naming various locations across the city, Lewis highlighted how D.C. natives should assert ownership in their own city. He identified himself as a “son of the city,” not just a son of “hometown D.C.” Here, Lewis represented D.C. natives in a posture of spatial reclamation and social and cultural relevance in places across the city, not just in predominantly Black or residential spaces. This posture was also political and strategic, as noted in another tweet that pointed to D.C.’s fight for statehood.

Another Twitter user tweeted support for Eleanor Holmes Norton, a Black native Washingtonian, who is D.C.’s non-voting delegate to the US House of Representatives. The tweet’s content praised Norton and her fight for D.C.’s democratic rights, which would grant the city more control over its own political, economic, and social structures. Here, this user represented D.C. natives as an integral part of the city’s struggle for state rights.

Other tweets conveyed how D.C. natives who still live in the city have rightful ownership to the city. In a tweet on 20 May, one user tweeted:

We are here. We live here. We are real. We belong here.

Do not forget us. Do not try to erase us. This is our hometown.

#DCNativesDay

Another user tweeted,

It’s a war call! The natives have gotten restless and the drums are bringing our issues to the forefront. Now is the time to step it up and prioritize our children, change the culture, create our own plans, form our own lobbyists, set our agenda #displacementfreezone #DCNativesDay

Both users, displaying Black avatars, conveyed how D.C. natives should be using their collective identity to create opportunities for resistance, whether through the assertion of spatial struggle as in the first tweet or in a specific call for D.C. native political agenda as read in the second tweet.

Similarly, WUSA tweeted a link to a Washington Post article, “Monday Is Officially a Holiday for People Born and Raised in the District.” In the story, a Washington Post columnist described how strange it is that a city needs an official day to celebrate people who grew up in the city. The columnist stated,

. . . but this is not just any city. We have to listen to what DC natives pushing for a day of recognition are really trying to tell us. And it is this: Don’t forget we’re part of this city, too. (Vargas, 2019, paras 4–5)

The Washington Post columnist highlighted that D.C. natives did not just want a day of celebration, but instead wanted recognition of their active roles in the production and maintenance of the city’s political, economic, social, and cultural infrastructures. However, some users questioned the celebration of D.C. natives absent of any tangible policy changes that would disrupt displacement across the city. In the next theme, Regulation in Representation, Twitter users called into question the possibilities for disruption in their representations of D.C. natives. While the first two themes conveyed a representation of D.C. natives that was tied to place and engaged in spatial and political struggle, this third theme conveyed a self-reflexive and regulated representation of D.C. natives.

Regulation in Representation

Tweets in the third theme, Regulation in Representation, challenged the disruptive power of the alternative narrative of D.C. natives by pointing out glaring income, education, and wealth disparities that continued to cripple the city. Twitter users in this theme noted that these inequities disproportionately affected Black residents in the city and noted that city policies were contributing to the displacement of Black native Washingtonians. Users suggested that D.C. Natives Day should simultaneously function as a celebration and call-to-action for city residents and officials to advocate for its most at-risk populations for displacement during gentrification.

One user, with a Black avatar, tweeted,

Didn’t get to celebrate #DCNativesDay because the government in DC refuses to provide equitable transportation, economic access and food stability . . . so didn’t seem proper to celebrate while so many people going hungry in the streets.

Another with a Black avatar tweeted,

With an 85:1 racial wealth gap and 10 times racial arrest rate there’s much to celebrate #DCNativesDay #ourdc #celebratedapartheid
For both of these Twitter users, it seemed inappropriate to celebrate D.C. Natives Day when Black people in the city were still suffering with persistent issues of poverty, food insecurity, and wealth gaps. The second tweet specifically pointed to how these issues are conditioned by racial structures. The tag “#celebratedcapartheid” seemed to suggest that a celebration of D.C. natives was a celebration of racial inequity across the city. The tag “#ourdc” also seemed to suggest that D.C. natives should take ownership of the racial inequity and struggles in the city, too.

Similarly, another Twitter user conveyed some skepticism about the city’s first official D.C. Natives Day. The tweet stated,

#unpopular opinion

Them ppls could care less that u are a DC native.
They laughing at you from inside ur Gramuvvas old house.
#dcnativesday

This user, also with a Black avatar, pointed out that while D.C. natives were celebrating their identity, people are still being displaced and deprioritized in the city. More specifically, the tweet’s content seemed to signify that a D.C. native is void of any real political and economic power. Here, this user provides evidence of Swyngedouw’s (2000) assertion that although speaking from the margins, or creating an alternative perspective or representation, may be a liberating experience, it rarely translates into any power.

Other Twitter users suggested that in honor of D.C. Natives Day, the city should invest in its most vulnerable populations. One user tweeted,

Between 2000 & 2013, 20K Black residents were Displaced. We can’t celebrate #DCNativesDay and at
The same time cut effective programs that are working
To reverse this trend.

To truly celebrate D.C. natives, this user called on city government officials to help protect and preserve D.C. natives through housing policy reform.

Another user with a Black avatar tweeted,

Born and raised UPT in DC. This city is not of the natives
anymore, and don’t look like it will be in the very near
future. They have Pathway to Middle classed us out of this city.

Where is the Pathway from Homelessness to the middle class.

Just asking . . . #DCNativesday

Another user with a Black avatar tweeted,

Mr. Black Man tell me where you’re heading,
The last few years I watched while you were shedding,
Pounds and pounds of growth off the population, soon we won’t
Be able to have a strong black nation.
#DCNativesday.

Here, this Twitter user posted what appears to be an image of himself as a toddler on a park bench. The tweet’s language was a quote from a hip-hop song by Black female rapper NonChalant, titled “5 O’Clock,” that was released in 1992. This tweet signified a cultural critique of the deliberate disaggregation of the Black community in Washington, D.C. Both tweets signified a warning to D.C. natives that if the city continues to head in the same direction, there will not be a Black community left in the city.

Overall, Twitter users in this third theme represented themselves as D.C. natives who were embedded in the city’s landscape and simultaneously questioned the political and economic relevance of the D.C. Native movement. More importantly, tweets in this theme seemed to call on D.C. natives, which included themselves, to challenge city councilmembers to end the enforcement of city policies that have pushed its own Black native residents out the city and create policies that reverse trends of displacement.

Discussion

This textual analysis, rooted in cultural studies and critical geography, examined how Twitter users represented themselves as D.C. natives, how those representation(s) of D.C. natives disrupted larger assumptions of who is a D.C. native, how those representation(s) of D.C. natives challenged displacement, and how D.C. natives using the D.C. Natives Day hashtag regulated representations of themselves. The analysis showed that D.C. natives represented themselves as racialized and spatialized beings. As indicated in the analysis, all of the representative examples analyzed were tweeted by users with public Black avatars. While Black avatars cannot be verified as the racial identity of users, the avatars do represent a specific online Black racial identity. In addition to the public Black avatars, users represented themselves in stories about historically and predominantly Black spaces in Washington, D.C. McKittrick (2006) stated that the process of naming place(s), such as schools, street names, and movie theaters, is the process of naming one’s self. D.C. natives who participated in #DCNativesDay named and represented themselves as Black people who were not just victims of
gentrification and D.C.’s uneven geography. Instead, they engaged in what Neely and Samura (2011) termed “oppositional place-making imaginaries,” as they signified their representations as a part of, not separate from, the socio-spatial formations of city spaces and places.

Tweets also represented D.C. natives as politicized beings who were organized and strategic. Users who employed this hashtag included everyday people, city council members, representatives from local media organizations, and co-organizers of the D.C. Native movement. The hashtag helped create an online space for people with various levels of political power and social capital to engage one another. Twitter users represented themselves as D.C. natives who were political actors in constant struggle. Twitter users signified that their native identities were both contradictory and disruptive to stereotypical assumptions about D.C. natives and the communities in which they live. With emphasis on the city’s fight for statehood and calls for the creation of a D.C. native political agenda, Twitter users conveyed how D.C. native identities are in what Hall (2006) noted as the process of becoming. This process highlights how representation is not static, but rather in constant flux and, most importantly, a possibility for transformation. D.C. natives who employed this hashtag disrupted dominant narratives of displacement and loss during gentrification by emphasizing their strategic and ongoing struggle for more political power and legitimacy in the city.

The struggle conveyed about the D.C. native identity also signified practices of self-reflexivity and self-regulation. While many tweets detailed how D.C. natives were represented as racialized, spatialized, and politicized beings, others engaged in an important practice necessary for social movements on online spaces. Manuel Castells (2012) studied several social network movements and identified several emergent patterns, including how movements were self-reflexive. He stated,

They constantly interrogate themselves as movements, and as individuals, about who they are, what they want, what they want to achieve . . . and how to avoid the traps and pitfalls of so many movements that have failed by reproducing in themselves the mechanisms of the system they want to change . . . (Castells, 2012, p. 254)

Twitter users regulated the celebration and commemoration of D.C. natives in their critique of city policies that work to displace Black people. Twitter users who represented themselves as self-reflexive conveyed a sense of pride in their D.C. native identities and signified a sense of skepticism and ambivalence to the celebration of a D.C. Natives Day when so many Black people have lost homes, jobs, and access to quality education in the city. Ultimately, these tweets seemed to signify the question: what is the point of having a D.C. Natives Day when there may not be any D.C. natives left to celebrate?

Conclusion

Using representation as a theoretical entry point, the study of #DCNativesDay as a cultural text prioritized the making-making practices of Black people in Washington, D.C. The representation of D.C. natives analyzed in this case was not monolithic. Hall (2006) stated that identities emerge in power struggles and are never truly unified. Du Gay et al. (2013) argued that through representation people learn about themselves and others. More importantly, through representation we deliberate and make decisions about how to act upon one another. While this research cannot draw conclusions about the impact of the hashtag activism on offline behavior toward or among D.C. natives, it does offer some important theoretical and practical implications of the study of hashtag activism and how Black people are using Twitter to assert social, cultural, and political legitimacy. It also raises questions about how hashtag activism can translate into offline action in Black communities experiencing displacement during gentrification.

My analysis provided evidence that the #DCNativesDay hashtag activism met several elements of successful movements outlined in hashtag activism and social network movement literature. The analysis provided evidence of online dialogue via narrative agency, or storytelling, which according to Yang (2016) is central to hashtag activism. Olson (2014) defined hashtagging as means for activists to inform and organize following. Twitter users who represented themselves as D.C. natives told stories about themselves through an emphasis on place, and others called for more strategic organizing and coalition-building. The signification of self-reflexive and regulatory sentiment in some tweets was also consistent with one of Castells’ (2012) emerging patterns in social network movements.

This research also contributes to scholarship that explores how Black people use online spaces that counter dominant cultural narratives that position Black people as inferior (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Brock, 2012; Florini, 2014; Pinckney et al., 2018). More specifically, it extends scholarship that suggests that the sharing of ideas is itself a form of radical resistance, as users who represented themselves as D.C. natives told counternarratives to combat stories of displacement and loss in mainstream media.

Future research should expand the cultural analysis of hashtag activist efforts on the local level. A study of representation is the study of just one “moment” of cultural production on the circuit of culture (Du Gay et al., 2013; Hall, 1997; Johnson, 1986–1987). Future research should study the regulation and consumption of hashtag activism to help explore questions of access and participation in hashtag activist movements in Black communities experiencing gentrification. Questions of access and participation are important because they challenge us to think critically about who and what perspectives are missing from online dialogue about Black communities experiencing gentrification. The
exploration of those barriers may yield useful findings necessary to not only help break down those barriers online but also lead to more inclusive and participatory offline efforts of community transformation.

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