

**Chris Myers Asch, George Derek Musgrove.** *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 624 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-3586-6.

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Finally it is here: a one-volume history of Washington, DC that puts race and the black experience at the center of the story. *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital* deserves wide praise. The joint authors, who both once taught history at the University of District of Columbia, tell a detailed, chronological story from the city's origins before European contact to its current state. They draw substantially on primary research including city newspapers, oral history collections, the Moorland-Spingarn collection at Howard, the National Archives, the Library of Congress, the Washingtoniana collection of the Historical Society of DC, and the papers of the NAACP. They also refer to the work of previous generations of black scholars, as well as the latest in DC scholarship, to analyze the intersection of race and politics in an ever-changing city. *Chocolate City* is a terrific achievement and a major work of scholarship that deserves to be recognized as the new starting point, and the new standard, for understanding DC political history.

The title of the volume reflects its main theme, which is that people of African descent had always comprised a significant presence in the District, but had been excluded from political power and treated as inferiors. That tension, between the overruled and their rulers, is present in

every chapter. A city of less than ten square miles, DC served as a refuge for runaway slaves and free families during the Civil War, but its growing black population caused worry among elites. Politics in this context then, is about the politics of economic and human survival. The authors chart the often overlooked achievements of institutional and cultural community-building of black residents despite political and economic discrimination, violence, and exclusion. Ironies abound. DC, the home of the Republic, was the city of slavery, slave-trading, disfranchisement, and segregation. DC, the heart of the nation's democracy, excluded its own citizens from voting in federal elections and from self-governance. Fear of a voting black majority in DC whipped up fears that democracy would lead to "negro domination" (p. 176). After an initial burst of change during Reconstruction, white elites were satisfied to leave representation to appointed bodies.

Musgrove and Asch expertly guide the reader through a myriad of circumstances that made the district unique. They explain why, despite its drawbacks and frustrations, the city was lauded as a site of black hope. It attracted the educated, the skilled, and the talented. Before the "Harlem Renaissance," DC's U Street was known for its distinctive music, nightlife, and writers; it was a

place that Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, and Duke Ellington came through and could call home. Yet the District was also a place of overt racial repression where black income was less than half that of white income, and well into the 1960s low wages, bad schools, unemployment and poor housing prevailed. “The city’s black residents had more leeway than their peers in the region,” the authors concede, “but that was not to be confused with power” (p. 207). Segregation dictated the terms of black life in the South, and DC was not an exception.

The politics of struggle during the postwar era takes up the a solid third of the book, and readers are introduced to overlooked figures in the civil rights struggle, such as Julius Hobson, the local head of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE). Leaders in DC were early advocates of voting and civil disobedience, as well as armed self-defense and black power to gain respect and rights. DC also had its interracial coalition to save the city from urban planners and freeways. Some of those efforts were successful but no one organized to stop the massive relocation of over twenty thousand poor black DC residents from the Southwest quadrant to public housing in Anacostia in the 1960s. A focus on “civil rights” and the 1968 DC riots has sometimes erased important milestones in the city’s own history, which the authors could have done more to highlight here.

The last chapters tackle how the black electorate finally took charge of the city and the struggles of its residents to join the world of modern politics. Civil rights activist and mayor Marion Barry is given his due, and the authors place the controversial figure within the broader context of downtown revitalization, congressional politics, and the cocaine/crack crisis. They explain Barry’s wide appeal to the black majority. His energy and civil rights credentials as well as his dedication to improving the lives of ordinary black people in DC all made him a hero. But when crack hit DC, everything “unraveled” (p. 401). Open-air drug

markets thrived, with lines that stretched for blocks. “DC POLICE WHERE ARE YOU?” read a neighborhood sign (p. 403). *Chocolate City* names names, not only of the great and the good, but of the city’s major drug dealers. The authors also address the growing, and dissatisfied, number of Latino voters as well as Chinese residents and white philanthropists who played key roles in the city’s growth and change in recent times.

DC never stood still and the city is now known for its rapid gentrification and racial displacement. The once solidly black majority of U Street/Shaw neighborhood has now diminished to 30 percent. Older, poor, working black residents are being displaced once again. “White wealth” in DC is now eighty-one times greater than black wealth (p. 459) and low-income residents are being pushed out. A black-majority city since 1957, in 1970, black residents were 71.1 percent of the population; today, however, African Americans no longer comprise a majority (pp. 460-61). Nevertheless, this massive, careful, and thoughtful study demonstrates the centrality of race, racism, and the black experience to understanding the politics of DC today.

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