Harlem Gentrification

Something is changing in New York’s Harlem and other black neighbourhoods, and it is all to do with the gentrification of the once predominantly black areas. Leslie Gordon Goffe writes on how the hubs of black soul – from barbershops to restaurants – are increasing being “whitewashed”. This is a sign of the times.

Not long ago, these black areas were where white people feared to tread, generally unjustifiably. But today, swathes of young, white gentrifiers are on the march, changing the colour and complexion of black New York. Today in Harlem, fancy French restaurants, German beer gardens, upscale supermarkets which sell nothing longtime locals eat or can afford, are replacing black bookshops and barbershops and soul food joints.

Walk down Harlem’s Malcolm X Boulevard, and you are as likely to see as many whites as blacks on it, and you will see as many whites relaxing in Marcus Garvey Park. Today the black population in Harlem has fallen to its lowest level in almost 100 years. On the other hand the proportion of white people now living in Harlem has more than doubled, according to statistics from the City University of New York.

Only 672 whites lived in central Harlem in 1990, according to census figures. By 2000, that number had leapt to 2,200. By 2008, this had doubled and tripled and quadrupled to 13,800. Since then, many more white people have come to Harlem and many more are on their. With property prices generally lower in Harlem than other areas in New York City, they also come in the hope of snapping up bargains. Harlem became a haven in the early 1900s for African-Americans escaping racial terrorism in the South.

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It became a haven, too, for West Indians, who arrived in the 1920s, and Puerto Ricans, who arrived in the 1950s. And it became a haven in the 1980s for West African immigrants who, because so many of them settled there, called a section of Harlem “Little Senegal”.

“This gentrification is affecting us mentally,” complains Kaaw Sow, general manager of the Senegalese Association of America, which is located in Harlem’s “Little Senegal” area. The area had been home to a host of African shops selling palm oil and fonio, and restaurants which cooked djebu jen. These are disappearing fast.

Kaaw Sow says the arrival of wealthy whites has pushed rents in the area up and led the landlord who owns the Association’s storefront offices to raise the rent from $1300 per month to close to $6000 dollars.

Unable to afford this, the Senegalese Association will soon move out of the offices it has occupied for almost 30 years.

“They are making us go away and it won’t be ‘Little Senegal’ any more when we have to go away,” says Kaaw Sow.

It’s clear Harlem is no longer a local black people’s haven. It is, instead, a hotspot for high income hipsters attracted by the neighbourhood’s high quality architecture and by the easy commute to New York City’s commercial and business districts downtown. Harlem is a hotspot, too, for interlopers eager to experience the urban, uptown African-American experience close up and in person.
“Whites moved away and now they have come back,” says Clarke, amused that white flight to the suburbs 50 years ago has now reversed itself. “It’s heartening that they have discovered we are not going to eat them.”

No one has done more to convince whites interested in moving to Harlem that blacks aren’t going to “eat them” than Willie Kathryn Suggs, a well-known African-American real estate broker in Harlem. Many housing activists and others blame Suggs for encouraging the rapid pace of change taking place in the neighbourhood.

“Oh yes, I’ve sold to people from Israel, Argentina, Egyptians. I sold six properties to a Norwegian,” she boasts happily. It’s clear it is not personal, and just business. “What am I supposed to do? Tell African-Americans whose house I am selling to sell only to other African-Americans?” That, Suggs shrieks, “is called racism. Look, the people whose house I sell, and get top dollar, love me to death.”

Gentrification, Suggs says, has pushed prices up and brought the murder rate down. She points to her neighbourhood in Hamilton Heights where she lives in one of Harlem’s most impressive brownstone mansions as an example. In 1990, Suggs says, there were 55 murders. Last year, there was only one. “It’s gentrification on top of the world, but gentrification is not an ugly term,” says Suggs.

Tell that to the many Harlemites living below the poverty line. While a select few are enjoying the high life there, statistics gathered by New York University show central Harlem has the highest unemployment rate in the city. As a consequence, the area has, too, the highest poverty rate in New York City. Bizarrely, in central Harlem, that is where the neighbourhood’s most expensive home, a 4-bedroom, 4-bathroom duplex penthouse on the market for $4.3m, is located.

Harlem has indeed become a case of the have and the have-nots. While some fill their faces at fancy new French restaurants on Malcolm X Boulevard, others do not have enough food to feed themselves and their families.

More than 10,000 Harlem households get their food from subsidised food banks and community kitchens, according to a report. For example, the Community Kitchen and Food Pantry, a free food facility for the poor in Harlem, says it provides 50,000 hot meals to locals each month. And the soul of the old Harlem is fast disappearing. Most of the structures and hubs that were black in New York have become white.

As one of the victims of this gentrification, Kaaw Sow of Senegalese Association of America, mournfully concludes: “There won’t be people speaking Wolof here any more. If we go, they will speak about us as history, saying ‘here used to be an African restaurant’ and here used to be this but it is not here any more. It won’t be ‘Little Senegal’ any more. It’s not Harlem, any more.”