As Little Senegal's Borders Become Littler, Locals Seek to Hold Onto Their Culture

When gentrification threatens neighborhoods and the very culture they hold, Little Senegalese officials and citizens band together to protect their once flourishing community.

Little Senegal between Frederick Douglass Blvd and 116th St. Image credit Boukary Sawadogo.

By Stephen Roark

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HARLEM, New York —The sun's gleaming rays shimmer off the highrise windows, just recently washed. Restaurants and shops are filling with hungry customers, ready to empty their wallets for pleasure and plenty. Streets are lined with new apartment buildings ready for service, waiting for avid city-goers to take residence in their modern rooms. If you thought this was the glorious Midtown or Upper West Side of Manhattan, you would be wrong; for this is Harlem's Little Senegal.

Modernization and development perhaps sounds like a prosperous idea, for mountains of wealth and new faces would be brought into an already dying community. But the reality: Little Senegal is suffering. As local family-owned shops close one after another due to highrise apartments and chain restaurants opening up, the Senegalese people of Harlem must fight harder than ever to preserve their cultural identity.

Gentrification is a term coined by British sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964, and is used to describe the influx of middle-class people displacing lower-class worker residents in urban

neighborhoods. For Harlem, especially neighborhoods like Little Senegal, this became a reality around 2000, when individuals from Midtown and Long Island, predominantly White suburban Americans, migrated and pushed the old Harlem pioneers away. As a result, residents are plagued with high poverty and rent rates, driving the many generations of immigrants further away to areas like the Bronx or Brooklyn. To counter this, families are having to band together to buy properties and organize cultural gatherings to fight this homogenization that is now their reality.

Columbia University graduate and professor Dr. Mujib Mannan spoke on this issue, saying ideas of gentrification are rooted within the “broken window theory of crime,” arguing that visible signs of crime, anti-social behavior and civil disorder create an urban environment that encourages further serious crime and disorders. In short, when people from affluent backgrounds observe these struggling, poor neighborhoods and visibly abandoned buildings, they feel as though safety is of utmost concern, and by replacing or fixing these buildings the issue would be solved. Modernization often leads to comfort.

“Harlem’s a melting pot…” Dr. Mujib said, describing the cultural diversity, but noting the fact that it is now fading within the city, “people are having to band together and buy properties… coalitions are being formed to save the old Harlem.”

Despite obvious signs of removal and chain restaurants and designers moving in, local store owners and workers are reluctantly accepting of this reality. A worker from Kilimanjaro Fashion, a popular traditional African clothing store on 116th, said that “life is about updates… the area is very expensive and people are having to move out, people from Midtown are then moving here with their businesses, it can be hard but it happens and we deal with it.”

Michelle Richarson, Program Assistant for Faces NY, a non-profit aiming to assist community members suffering from HIV/AIDS, on 116th St, claimed that in her two years of working in Little Senegal, she hasn’t noticed many effects of gentrification and that “the delis on the block are still here, family owned, [and] African shops are mixed in between and still here.”

A new highrise apartment building on Malcolm X Blvd, replacing the old apartment buildings once there.

Just walking along the streets between 115th and 118th, contrary to a place like Jackson Heights in Queens where cultural clothing and artifacts line street corners, there are very few shops and signs seen written in French or traditional African languages. Even the Malcolm Shabazz Market, a once flourishing bazaar selling African crafts and textiles, has visibly fewer shoppers and tourists during peak hours due to new competitors.

When asked about the gentrification that Little Senegal is now facing, General Director of the American Senegalese Association (ASA), Mamadou Drame, 39, said “it's a sad reality… we are being pushed back… people moving, they just want to kick us out.” Drame has lived in Little Senegal almost all his life, experiencing the area's very first problems and has a concrete grasp of what needs to be done to resolve them. Even for the ASA, a 501 C tax exempt organization, rent has risen to nearly $5,000 a month for which they are struggling to consistently pay and must quickly relocate to a new building.

Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic did not help stop prices from rising or the gentrifying rates of housing and offices. “Everything was shut down, even here for 7 months… it hit this community really a lot,” said Drame. Over the course of the pandemic, the ASA managed to raise $32,000 to distribute among struggling families, each in checks of $200 every few months. The ASA, which is completely volunteer based, along with residents of the area are fighting desperately to keep their homes and stop the homogenization of their community.

“We are applying to have Lenox Avenue sectioned off for a parade, a cultural parade in July… it will be good for the community and help people learn [more] about us,” Drame said.

Little Senegal is a community like no other. It's a tightly-knit, family oriented and peaceful place that is being threatened by gentrification similar to that of many other neighborhoods around the city. Organizations like the ASA are desperately trying to hold onto the Senegalese culture, and rather than focusing on violence and disruption, are attempting to educate those imposing these restrictions upon them about their culture.

Drame finishes with, “we struggled a lot and will struggle, but we are still here, and will continue to be here.”