Thesis Summary

Over the past decade, several studies looked at Harlem residents’ perceptions of gentrification to understand how the process affected their lives and that of their families. However such studies mainly focused on the traditional African American and Latino communities, and did not account for the changing social fabric of the area, especially the growing presence of African immigrants who have been living in Harlem since the early 1980s, when they started to arrive en masse in the United States.

The study’s main purpose was to correct such an anomaly, and asked African immigrants in Central Harlem their views of gentrification in the neighborhood.

The researcher delineated a study area between 125th street and 110th street, in a North-South direction; and between 8th and Lenox Avenue in a West-East direction, where he conducted 21 interviews over a period of a month. The participants, 10 women and 11 men, were at least 18 years old; had lived in the area for 5 years or more; and participated in the research in a voluntary non-remunerative basis.

The insights that transpired through the interviews suggest that, in the aggregate, Africans in Central Harlem positively regard gentrification in their neighborhood, namely the “convenience of life” and the security and safety that the process brings.

However, despite the overall appreciation of gentrification, African immigrants who participated in the study raised some serious concerns about the negative effects it might have on longtime Harlem residents. These apprehensions revolved around the increasing price of rent, the relative higher prices of groceries and other key services in the neighborhood, especially while Harlem booming economy, namely its flourishing business and service industries, seemed incapable of delivering the promises of a mixed economy tantamount to better jobs and more economic opportunities for the residents.

Nonetheless, the majority of Africans interviewed showed strong faith in the future of Harlem which they consider as their “home away from home,” a quasi “sanctified” and sacred cultural place, in which they believe they deserved a special place where they can live peacefully, pursue their dreams of prosperity in America, and where they can weave their cultural and ethnic specificities within the larger “sanctity of black culture.”

To conclude, the study suggests that City officials, and urban planners in particular, use both existing and other innovative policies and planning tools to consolidate the benefits of gentrification to local poor and low-income residents, including Africans, and mitigate the negative effects they suffer from the process, especially the high price of rent.

Moreover, the researcher argues that community participation—both within the existing local deliberative structures such as Community Boards, and across the various Harlem ethnic /cultural communities— can considerably help Harlem residents advance their vision of the neighborhood, and also provide African immigrants with more visibility and leverage in the larger Harlem socio-political landscape.