

Books

Reading Harlem

Gerald Horne

Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1995), 606 pp.

Cheryl Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode? Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 317 pp.

Nathan Irvin Huggins, ed., *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 438 pp.

James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Da Capo, 1991), 280 pp.

Harlem" is a Dutch name (initially spelled "Haarlem"), a reminder that what is now the city of New York—like its transatlantic counterpart, Cape Town—was founded by adventurers from Holland in the seventeenth century. There were Africans in this colony from its inception, though like most of the non-indigenous population, they were concentrated heavily in the southern cone of Manhattan.

Where Is Harlem? Definitions Differ

Cheryl Greenberg, one of the more precise cartographers, says that "by 1930, black Harlem included most of Manhattan between Park Avenue and Amsterdam Avenue, north

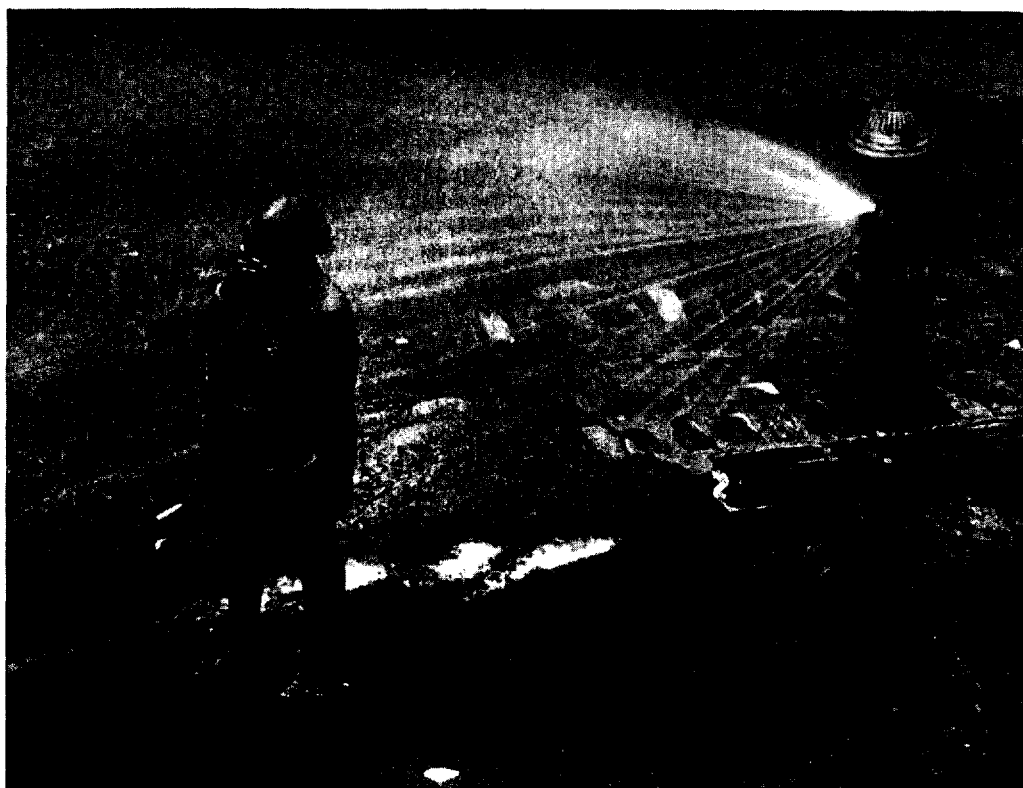
from Central Park to 155th Street. It held close to 190,000 blacks; two-thirds of New York City's black population and 80 percent of Manhattan's" (p. 15).

"Black Harlem" is, fundamentally, a twentieth-century development, spurred by the construction of the Lenox Avenue subway, "white flight," and a wily real estate mogul named Philip Payton. The evolution of this urban center cannot be separated from the transition of the people now called African Americans from the rural South—and the Caribbean Islands—to the urban North.

As early as the 1920s, this process had reached a point of fruition so that artful analysts could—justifiably—speak of a "Harlem Renaissance" that encompassed not only literary and creative accomplishment but also a "New Negro" who was loath to accept passively racist subjugation. Yet as one surveys the victories and defeats that comprise the checkered history of black New York, one is left simultaneously with the conclusion that—fortunately—many things have changed but, sadly, too many others have not.

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James Weldon Johnson, the dapper diplomat, songwriter, and NAACP leader, both epitomizes and reflects the achievements of the Harlem Renaissance. His *Black Manhattan* is one of the first chronicles of the urban experience of African Americans; in this sweeping overview spanning centuries, Johnson—inter alia—strives to explain how a city that those languishing under lynch rule in the Deep South



Woman seeking relief on a hot summer day. Photo copyright Chester Higgins Jr. All rights reserved.

came to see as a veritable oasis could disappoint so bitterly. Johnson is careful to note that despite its location north of the Mason-Dixon Line, New York "was the last of the Northern states, except New Jersey, to emancipate the slaves" (p. 14). The "peculiar institution" in Manhattan was so horrific, so agonizing that it produced two of the major slave revolts of the eighteenth century in North America (pp. 7-8). Proslavery sentiment remained strong in Manhattan, not least because it remained a major center of financing for Southern planters. This grating "Negro-phobia" exploded in July 1863 in a "riot"—more precisely, a "pogrom"—when a mob of racists "proceeded to wreak vengeance upon Negroes wherever found. They were chased and beaten and killed—

hanged to trees and lamp posts. Thousands fled the city" (p. 51).

Despite such catastrophes, Negroes continued flocking to Manhattan. They were an essential part of the process that led to the creation of a black working class with distant memories of agriculture, forestry, fishing, and other rural pursuits. Often scorned by unions and despised by their melanin-deficient counterparts, this sector of the working class was too frequently subjected to a vile persecution.

Early in the evening of August 15, 1900, black New Yorkers' late summer idyll was interrupted crudely by yet another raging mob: "Negroes were seized wherever they were found and brutally beaten. Men and women were dragged from street-cars and assaulted"

(pp. 126–127). This eruption flowed from a confrontation at Eighth Avenue and 41st Street between the already notorious New York Police Department (NYPD) and an African-American couple perceived as being overly bumptious—considering their “race.” Although only this couple was seen as overstepping societal bounds, prevailing racial etiquette dictated that all Negroes must pay the penalty for the alleged sins of these two; this kind of collective punishment had helped to forge a binding group consciousness that found its locale when the opportunity arose to move north to Harlem.

Strikingly, when the furious mob surged throughout midtown Manhattan seeking black victims, “the cry went out to ‘get Ernest Hogan and Williams and Walker and Cole and Johnson’” (p. 127).

Why would there be a desire to lynch otherwise popular performers and entertainers? Johnson concludes that “these seemed to be the only individual names the crowd was familiar with,” but there may have been more to it than that. These performers were also “successful,” and their very existence challenged the white supremacist creed that Negroes could only aspire to be hewers of wood and drawers of water; though the untutored have suggested that the downtrodden nature of the great mass of Negroes helped to bolster the idea of Negro inferiority and subsequent oppression, actually those who were able to rise above the lowly position to which they had been assigned were oppressed precisely because they did not appear to be downtrodden.

And the peculiar nature of racism in North America has meant that black performers—musicians, comedians, actors, singers, dancers—at times have been able to capitalize on their talent in a manner not allowed for others.

Johnson observes that “as far back as 1821 the African Company gave performances of

Othello, *Richard III*, and other classic plays, interspersed with comic acts at the African Grove, corner of Bleecker and Mercer streets” (p. 78).

The abject terror that drove African Americans north to Harlem in the early twentieth century did not eliminate their creative muse, which continued to expand and flourish. This migration, as Ann Douglas notes, was accompanied by another of similar significance: “the shift in cultural power in the modern era from New England to New York” (p. 21). “Mongrel Manhattan” was the result: a cultural capital that embraced—minimally—strands with roots in both Europe and Africa.

A classic example of this trend was Irving Berlin, viewed by many as the godfather of popular music. Douglas argues that Berlin had “learned” from the “black ragtime pianist Lukie Johnson,” then “retooled” this music for “mainstream consumption”—making a fortune and a reputation in the process, while Johnson has long since been forgotten (pp. 357–358). Of course, Berlin was not unique in this regard; James Weldon Johnson has written that “it is from the blues that all that may be called American music derives its most distinctive characteristic” (pp. 124–125). This was “mongrelization” of a sort, but it was also “appropriation,” a situation not unfamiliar to a people whose stolen labor helped to fuel a modern economy.

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Yet this "appropriation" was occurring in a venue far distant from the cotton fields of the South and the sugar plantations of the Caribbean that had produced so many who had fled to Harlem. The relatively open and cosmopolitan atmosphere that was Harlem saw the

emergence of an articulate gay and lesbian community, which sought to make its mark while resisting the kind of marginalization that had befallen Lukie Johnson and so many others. Douglas avers that "most of the best-known black male writers on the New York scene were homosexual; [Langston] Hughes, [Countee] Cullen, [Alain] Locke, and [Claude] McKay, not to speak of minor talents like Richard Bruce Nugent and Harold Jackman, were homoerotic, men whose most important intellectual, social, and sexual ties were to other men." This factor, she suggests, was not so for their Euro-American counterparts: "Try to imagine what the white 1920s generation would have been like if, like the Harlem Renaissance, its most important male ringleaders and spokesmen—say Sinclair Lewis, [H. L.] Mencken, [F. Scott] Fitzgerald, and [Ernest] Hemingway—had been homosexual. One almost can't do it; the differences involved are too immense, too complex" (p. 97).

What About the Women?

Were there Audre Lordeses to complement these premature James Baldwins? Appar-

This Harlem Renaissance was a direct outgrowth of the development of Harlem itself as an urbane and self-assertive community that just happened to be located within New York City, a cultural capital with a burgeoning publishing industry, an expanding theater district, and a wild array of cafés and watering holes conducive to stimulating the habitués of bohemia.

ently not to the same extent, though Douglas adds that "white and black women artists of the time were all reluctant breeders . . . Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Dorothy Parker, Sara Teasdale, Katherine Anne Porter, and Anita Loos

were heterosexual women who married at some point in their lives, but none of them had children" (p. 98).

To be sure, there was homophobia and complicated gender relations generally in Harlem. Ann Douglas recalls the admonition by the sociologist Robert Park that the Negro was the "lady of the races" (p. 8). This was not necessarily interpreted as a compliment, this notion of a deficit in "masculine" strategies of "self-empowerment" and emancipation; the reaction to this concept involved—at times—a surfeit of masculinity and homophobia.

Gender relations were similarly complex. Although a supporter of women's suffrage and a prime booster of black women generally, W.E.B. Du Bois, says Douglas, "believed that 'the [N]egro race has suffered more from the antipathy and narrowness of [white] women both North and South than from any other single source'" (p. 80). This statement may sound extravagant today, but actually it reflects the extent to which the burdens of white supremacy had infected gender relations.

Nevertheless, it is likely that a besieged Harlem that understood well the dangers of

intolerance was more open to a difference and diversity that included a positive pan-sexuality, and this environment, likewise, provided fertile soil for the flourishing of creativity of all sorts—not least in the artistic realm.

For flourish it did: the very premise of the “Harlem Renaissance”—a movement, by the way, that was paralleled in Paris, London, and on the continent of Africa as well—was the recrudescence of artistic creativity. The poetry of Hughes, the fiction of Fauset, the singing and acting of Paul Robeson are the leading indicators of this proficiency. This Harlem Renaissance was a direct outgrowth of the development of Harlem itself as an urbane and self-assertive community that just happened to be located within New York City, a cultural capital with a burgeoning publishing industry, an expanding theater district, and a wild array of cafés and watering holes conducive to stimulating the habitués of bohemia.

Although the Harlem Renaissance is one of the most important developments in the artistic life of this nation, it is curious that it has not received more attention. Douglas states that “to date there are no full-length reliable biographies of the important writers, organizers, and performers of the Harlem Renaissance,” including “Cullen, [Rudolph] Fisher, Fauset, Walter White, [Wallace] Thurman, Locke, [Charles] Gilpin, Charles Johnson, James P. Johnson, and [Ethel] Waters.” By contrast, “major figures like Hemingway, Fitzgerald and [Eugene] O’Neill are each the subject of dozens of biographies and reminiscences” (p. 87). This is a gauntlet tossed at the desks of scholars in African-American studies; and of course, the neglect endured by contemporary Harlem is reflected in the neglect of its luminaries.

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This neglect of the basic needs of Harlem is not new and throughout this century has led to an angry response. Those who feel the most pain often scream the loudest—and Harlem, as a result, has reverberated with a cacophony of political sounds ranging from the nationalist to the Communist, with various decibels in between. At times, advocates directed these piercing screams at each other: W.E.B. Du Bois and A. Philip Randolph were not alone in their distaste for Marcus Garvey. James Weldon Johnson speaks dismissively of his “transcending egotism”; this, says Johnson, was his downfall, in that during the trial that led to his imprisonment and subsequent deportation, “he brushed his lawyers aside and handled his own case. He himself examined and cross-examined the witnesses; he himself harangued the judge and jury; and he was convicted” (p. 259).

Yet, whatever his flaws, Garvey did build a major mass movement that caused apprehension in colonial offices in London, Paris, and Brussels particularly. Tony Martin, in his unjustly neglected gem, *Literary Garveyism*, points out that Garvey should not be seen just as a political figure; his journal, *Negro World*, which was circulated throughout the diaspora, published poetry and artistic works of various sorts. The study of Garvey has been the gaping hole in most studies of the Harlem Renaissance.

Still, Garvey’s contemporaries were critical of him not least because of his flirtations with “Negro-phobes” who sought to deport African Americans en masse, and others felt that his appointment of himself and others to posts with presumed jurisdiction in Africa was a basic denial of self-determination for those who resided on the continent. Nevertheless, the kernel of Pan-Africanism and opposition to white supremacy that he represented was shared widely—even by his



Harlem designer. Photo copyright Chester Higgins Jr. All rights reserved.

sternest critics. Du Bois's convening of Pan-African congresses is well known.

The racial theorist Lothrop Stoddard, as Douglas reminds us, was worried about "whether the white race was to be eclipsed" by the "darker peoples of the world," and the buzzing activity of Du Bois and Garvey was one reason he was so concerned (p. 49). According to Douglas, one of the first black pilots, Hubert Julian, echoed this concern when he gravely warned the United States that "Pan-Africanism and Third World development might one day end America's world supremacy if its racism continued unchecked" (p. 458). As Garvey was fading from the scene, the nationalist mantle was being seized by the organization that came to be known as the Nation of Islam, which originated in the Midwest but quickly obtained a following in Harlem. Their notion of an "Asiatic black man" was at once a reflection of their ties to what was to become the U.S. enemy in war—Japan—and a reflection of why Stoddard was so concerned about the coming together of the "darker peoples."

Garvey's influence can also be seen in Alain Locke, who reflected the veteran nationalist's tendency to view Africans in the Americas as the vanguard for Africans worldwide. In his sparkling collection of essays, stories, and poetry, Nathan Irvin Huggins cites a passage written by the Howard University-based philosopher that assigns to "Harlem" the "same role to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for the New Ireland or Prague for the New Czechoslovakia." More generally, he continues approvingly,

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African Americans were "acting as the advance-guard of the African peoples in their contact with Twentieth Century civilization" and "rehabilitating the race in world esteem from that loss of prestige for which the fate and conditions of slavery have so largely been responsible." Harlem, he concludes proudly, "is the center of both these movements" (pp. 54–55).

It is easy to argue today that the messianic role of Harlem has been supplanted by Johannesburg and that the "advance-guard of the African peoples" is now located in Cape

Town (and Pretoria), where the government of Nelson Mandela controls a state sector that includes a well-endowed airline fleet, globally competitive arms manufacturing, sophisticated telecommunications—and much more. Better

still, there is a militant trade union movement, along with a parliament that is at least 20 percent Communist, to insure that the siren song of "privatization" does not reverse this tendency altogether.

It is easier still to see why Locke would have penned these words, for at that historical conjuncture, it did seem that the NAACP of Du Bois, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) of Garvey, and even the Communist Party that rescued the Scottsboro Nine would be the saviors of Africans across the planet. As the fruitful decade of the 1920s was replaced by the blinding devastation of the Great Depression, Harlem emerged not only as the artistic capital but also as the political capital of the African diaspora.

Cheryl Greenberg's engaging volume suggests that the topography of Harlem played a

role in the ability to mobilize masses there. Unlike rural areas, where one could travel for miles without seeing another person, "the block of 140th to 141st Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues was 'reputed to be the most crowded dwelling area in the world'" (p. 31). A single posted leaflet could attract thousands of eyes. One functioning megaphone could amplify a voice that could reach thousands more. And the dire conditions of homelessness and hunger guaranteed that the messages transmitted by political organizers would be greedily consumed.

This was a time when the writer and pundit George Schuyler commented with stunningly savage imagery that one could "turn a machine gun on a crowd of red caps . . . and you would slaughter a score of Bachelors of Arts, Doctors of Law, Doctors of Medicine, Doctors of Dental Surgery" (p. 21). Massive unemployment—and underemployment—combined with old-fashioned bigotry meant that even African Americans with advanced degrees could barely find work as railroad porters.

Inevitably, this sparked the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" crusade, as Harlemites sought to boycott stores on 125th Street that refused to employ African Americans. However, this campaign quickly got bogged down in tensions that are painfully familiar in Manhattan. One group "relied to a large extent on Nazi propaganda and some of Garvey's teachings to protest 'Jewish control' of black economic life." At certain moments, "the strongest invective . . . was reserved" for merchants who happened to be "Jews" (p. 126).

This narrow nationalism was ultimately outweighed by a powerful united front of left and center, symbolized by the National Ne-

gro Congress and the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell Jr., pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church. This coalition was able to push successfully for jobs in mass transit and other sectors. Eventually, Powell was elected to the city council; then when he moved on to the U.S. Congress, he was replaced in 1943 by Benjamin Davis Jr., a Communist.

Davis was reelected in 1945, then ousted unceremoniously—if not illegally—in 1949 as the Red Scare and the Cold War dawned. The routing of the left removed from the scene the natural predators of the right wing; this latter force was to dominate the United States politically during the second half of the twentieth century. Its ascendance and its lavishing of trillions of tax dollars on military spending proved to be a disaster for Harlem, as mass transit declined, housing stock became more dilapidated, and health care deteriorated.

Harlem—and black New York—has witnessed many changes during this century. The brutal attacks that seemed so common in 1863 and 1900 have been replaced by an almost casual police brutality. African Americans can now work as clerks on 125th Street, but unemployment and underemployment continue to reign. The more things change, the more they remain the same.

Whither Harlem?

This sprawling community remains a weathervane, providing storm signals of approaching cataclysms that could devastate Africans in this hemisphere and, perhaps, the world. That is why examining Harlem—"reading Harlem"—remains a critically important task.