The Breath Seekers: Race, Riots, and Public Space in Harlem, 1900-1935

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The Breath Seekers:
Race, Riots, and Public Space in Harlem, 1900-1935

by

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Introduction

Following the financial crisis of 2008, several movements emerged that have brought the issue of shared urban space to the forefront of the American news cycle. One in particular, though not always explicitly described as a battle for public space, is the Black Lives Matter Movement. Perhaps exacerbated by the economic disparity in American society made glaringly apparent by the 2008 collapse, the movement was born of the grossly unequal treatment of some minority communities by their local governments, and continues to be fed by racially charged political rhetoric, such as likening American inner cities to hell-scapes. Other campaigns with similar complaints and objectives have surfaced following 2008, such as Occupy Wall Street and, more recently, the Women’s March on Washington. These movements have cut across broad swaths of American society, drawing together individuals of various ethnic and racial backgrounds for the shared purpose of giving voice to the injustice of American economic and social stratification. The Black Lives Matter Movement focuses its animus on those political, economic, and social entities that brutalize black communities and sideline black neighborhoods without repercussion. Inherent in many of the calls to protest is the connection between economic and social marginalization, lack of appropriate systems that could elevate those in need, and a dearth of shared space to gather and address these concerns.

Recent movements have in common the desire to assert agency on a national stage—to bring the plight of the disregarded to the fore and force a countrywide conversation. They assert this by seizing public space for the purpose of protest and are rooted in the need of the disenfranchised to gain agency in their communities. Access to
public space—parks, street corners, public transportation, plazas, libraries—not just to protest, but also to create a shared sense of community, is a hallmark of a democratic society. Denial of access to public space often leads to a sense of inequity and isolation, and can lead communities to fracture and eventually explode.

Impoverished urban communities, like those participating in the Black Lives Matter Movement, have little access to quality public space, thus forcing those attempting to generate a sense of community to do so on street corners and stoops, inciting hostility from law enforcement and local governments. Low income neighborhoods in major cities like New York, Baltimore, and Chicago are packed with public housing complexes essentially “left to rot” by local governments, creating additional friction between residents and local governments.¹

To that, add this argument, made by Mario Gooden, a principal at Huff + Gooden Architects, as quoted in a New York Times piece by Michael Kimmelman that was written following the death of Eric Garner in 2014: “[T]he presumption is that blacks are suspect just by being in public places.”² Continuing in that vein, Reinhold Martin, an architecture professor at Columbia, is quoted in the same piece, saying:

You can blame urban renewal, suburbs, the breakdown of inner cities, but in the end we’re really talking about real estate, which is about borders. It’s primal. Real estate involves thresholds, creating lines that should not be crossed, places that are off limits to certain people. African Americans are supposed to be invisible in public spaces. The challenge for African Americans is to gain access to these places, to infrastructure and amenities, so they can be seen and heard.


² Kimmelman, “Renewal Projects.”
This study seeks to explore the historical intersection of public space and equality by examining Harlem, New York, between the years 1900 and 1935. Harlem is ideal for such an examination for three reasons. First, Harlem was and is identified as a center of black cultural life. However, the idyllic perception of Harlem as a bastion of black intellectual and artistic achievement is countered by the reality that white New York consistently applied economic and social pressure on Harlem, in part because of its desirable location in Manhattan. Historian John Henrik Clarke wrote, “Harlem is not a self-contained community. It is owned and controlled by outsiders. It is a black community with a white economic heartbeat…a system of pure economic colonialism exists in the Harlem community.”

While many associate Harlem with its Renaissance, this movement was limited to a relatively small segment of the population. Many African Americans living in Harlem at the beginning of the twentieth century struggled economically; their thoughts turned more toward daily survival than to art and literature. Acknowledging this conflict between the popular conception of Harlem and reality, John L. Jackson writes in his work, Harlemworld: Doing Race and Class in Contemporary Black America, that in Harlem were places that “...are often fuzzy liminal spaces where tensions between wealth and poverty, the housed and homeless, the black and the white, are rehearsed again and again in rumors and news stories about the palpable danger of these natural border areas.” Jackson argues that Harlem is comprised of both “The simultaneity of proximity and distance, threat and safety, nearness and farness characterizes many people’s definition of contemporary Harlem and

its relation to the rest of New York City."  

The Harlem Renaissance sits squarely between 1900 and 1935, and yet so does overcrowding, poor sanitation, unemployment, and racial tension resulting in two riots.

Second, Harlem is ideal for such an examination because of its history prior to 1900. Harlem began as a small agricultural settlement far from the downtown center of New Amsterdam. While Henry Hudson first laid eyes on Manhattan in 1609, it was not until the 1630s that Harlem had anything close to a permanent settlement. From the moment the first European set foot on Manhattan, real estate and concepts of shared space were disputed. Jonathan Gill writes in his comprehensive work, *Harlem: the Four Hundred Year History from Dutch Village to Capital of Black America*, that “Manhattan hosted a variety of native communities, none of them permanent, there was no single owner, and, even if there were, Indians had no concept of property ownership as understood by Europeans.”  

Thus, from its very earliest settlement, land and property ownership in Harlem was in dispute. However, this is not an uncommon tale when looking at the European colonization of the New World. Europeans exploited indigenous notions of private property versus public space in order to secure dominance and permanent settlement throughout the continent. The practice was certainly not limited to Manhattan. What does make Harlem unique in this regard is the persistence of this conflict throughout its history. Harlem’s geography contributed to this continuity.

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This leads to the third reason Harlem is an ideal case study for the examination of how access to public space affects struggles for equality. Because of the fixed limitations of Harlem’s borders to the east and west and its relative proximity to the economic center of Manhattan, Harlem’s real estate has always been restricted by geography while remaining extremely desirable. As Alford A. Young puts it in his examination of Jackson’s *Harlemworld*: “arguments are made about the communal flavor of Harlem in comparison with the cut-throat culture of the business districts in downtown Manhattan, or the freedom that Harlemites believe that this space offers for people to dress, talk and interact as they desire without having to adhere to the restrictive standards of downtown.”6 In the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth, real estate in Harlem was a contested commodity—a haven for those tired of the frenetic landscape of downtown Manhattan. While this work will examine how Harlem became less and less an escape from downtown as the twentieth century progressed—as well as the implications of this transformation—space was no less contested. Rather, what shifted was who was fighting for it and why.

Chapter one will define public space in the context of this work, and will discuss the morphology of the language used to talk about race, specifically about race riots. The first chapter will also present the reasoning behind the choice of Harlem as the focal point of this study. Chapter two will discuss how conditions in Harlem in the late nineteenth century set the stage for the riot of 1900. This chapter will argue that the changing demographic and physical landscape of Manhattan—in particular the increasing scarcity of space, both public and private—fomented racial tension in the city and led to unrest along racial lines. The third chapter will outline the events, aftermath, and implications of 1900. It

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will also examine the period that defines Harlem more than any other—its Renaissance. However, looking at the Harlem Renaissance through the lens of accessibility to public space shows a gilded city, one where all the glitter and glow of this black cultural awakening were unable to filter through to the masses of Harlemites still living in the liminal space of New York society, largely in abject poverty. Chapter four examines the origin and fallout of the riot of 1935. While a cavalcade of factors led Harlem to ignite, chapter four will argue that these issues were compounded and exacerbated by the lack of accessibility to quality public space.

While there were many riots that shook Harlem in the twentieth century, most of them along racial lines or because of the effects of racial discrimination, those in 1900 and 1935 are significant because they bracket two defining and connected events: the emergence of Harlem as a majority black neighborhood and the Harlem Renaissance. Unpacking the genesis of the riots can provide a deeper understanding of the turbulent and sometimes violent history of Harlem, as well as the obstacles facing Harlem today.
Chapter 1: Public Space and the Genesis of Black Harlem

Defining Public Space

In order to successfully execute this study, a working definition of public space must be established. There are many interpretations of public space found in scholarly works. Benjamin W. Stanley, Barbara L. Stark, Katrina L. Jonston, and Michael E. Smith, in their comprehensive essay, “Urban Open Spaces in Historical Perspective: A Transdisciplinary Typology and Analysis,” examine the cultural, political, and economic impact of urban open spaces throughout history, and define such spaces as “any urban ground space, regardless of public accessibility, that is not roofed by an architectural structure.” However, while study of such spaces is helpful in understanding urban geography and the distribution of space, public or private, which certainly contributes to the sense of equality in a community, this definition is too broad for the purpose of this essay. Some studies of public space argue that public space does not necessarily mean public access. For the purpose of this examination, public space does mean spaces that are accessible to the public. Additionally, roofed structures can be important public spaces, especially in an urban environment. Subway stations, libraries, and community centers are open to the public, and can serve as valuable spaces for exchange to occur, and will therefore be considered public spaces.

In Public Space, a thorough guide to the topic by Stephen Carr, Mark Francis, Leanne Rivlin, and Andrew Stone, public space is defined by the purpose served for the community. They define public space through a set of values—responsive, democratic, and meaningful. According to Carr, “[R]esponsive spaces are those that are designed and managed to serve
the needs of their users...[D]emocratic spaces protect the rights of the user
groups...[M]eaningful spaces are those that allow people to make strong connections
between the place, their personal lives, and the larger world.”

This framework is useful in that it allows for flexibility in the types of structures or areas that could be classified as
public space, and places a morality on the creation and use of such spaces. However, while
the parameters established by Carr are valuable, a narrower definition of public space is
necessary in order to establish clear margins for the types of structures and areas
considered public space specific to Harlem between 1900 and 1935.

In their edited work *Public Space: The Management Dimension*, Matthew Carmona,
Claudio de Magalhaes, and Leo Hammond define public space in a way that is perhaps the
most expedient for this examination. They argue “public space (narrowly defined) relates
to all those parts of the built and natural environment where the public has free access. It
encompasses: all the streets, squares and other rights of way...the open spaces and parks;
and the ‘public/private’ spaces where public access is unrestricted.”

Parks and street corners will be at the heart of this work; however libraries, transportation facilities,
recreational spaces, and plazas fall within the parameters established by Carmona. Some
may argue that public space does not necessarily equal public access. In some instances put
forth in the following pages, access may be denied de facto, and those circumstances will be
examined. There were and are conflicting ideas of what public space is and what governs it.
These very contentions define this issue. The act of denying access to public space, or of
restricting the use of public space to either commercial or community use, can create

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8 Matthew Carmona, Claudio De. Magalhães, and Leo Hammond, *Public Space: The Management
Dimension* (London: Routledge, 2008), 5.
fracture lines in communities. The contention of this thesis is that such denial contributed to the race riots that took place in New York City in 1900 and 1935.

**Defining Race Riot**

While the term “race riot” is widely accepted and often used to discuss any uprising with a basis rooted in race relations, the connotation of the term does not always meet with the intended meaning. A May 2016 article from NPR’s “Code Switch” series documents the commemoration of an 1866 race riot in Memphis. The term “race riot” was challenged by members of the Memphis community, ultimately found to be inadequate, and replaced with “massacre.” Beverly Bond, a historian at the University of Memphis, commented on this decision, stating, "[N]aming is very important. If your name is John and I insist on calling you Johnny, it’s really a power relationship." Bond argues, "[M]ost people tend to think in a 20th century frame of reference that [race riot] must be African-Americans who are rioting and destroying their community." In the case of the 1866 event, this was far from the truth. In fact, it was just the opposite. Dozens of black men, women, and children were killed by a white mob in what began as an altercation between a black Union soldier and a white police officer. In Memphis, it was determined that the term “race riot” did not accurately represent this fact, and so “massacre” was deemed more appropriate.

The 1905 and 1935 uprisings that occurred in New York City and had a direct effect on the Harlem community will act as the bookends to this study. Both were disturbances...

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that resulted, in part, from racial tension. However, the 1905 incident more closely resembles the 1866 Memphis Massacre, while the 1935 incident differs in that the African American community in Harlem fomented the unrest as a result of the inequality felt by its members. Therefore, while “race riot” may be used to describe the 1935 incident, it is not appropriate to employ this term to describe what occurred in 1905.

Why Harlem?

This study could be accomplished using any number of racially charged urban areas. However, because of its history and geography, using Harlem as the subject of this study provides a singular lens with which to understand the intersection of public space and social equity. Harlem is a part of Manhattan geographically, and yet it is culturally separate from any other neighborhood on the island. The relatively limited physical area that Harlem occupies on the island has forced residents to negotiate space, both public and private, throughout the neighborhood’s history. From its first settlement by Europeans, notions of public versus private space have been central to Harlem’s inhabitants.

Henry Hudson laid eyes on Manhattan on September 3, 1609. It was not until around thirty years later, however, that what is now considered uptown Manhattan, including Harlem, began to take any shape as a European settlement. Native Americans had long resided in the area, although according to Gill, it is difficult to determine which specific subgroup occupied Harlem. Gill writes, “Manhattan hosted a variety of native communities,

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none of them permanent, there was no single owner, and, even if there were, Indians had no concept of property ownership as understood by Europeans”. Europeans capitalized on differing notions of land ownership and played the various groups of Native Americans against one another in order to lay claim to the island, turning Harlem and the rest of Manhattan into a permanent Dutch settlement by the late 1630s.

Harlem was always marked by diversity and, to some extent, racial tension. This is not necessarily unique from other European settlements in the New World, except that the Dutch character of Harlem placed adherence to Christianity as more significant than race when determining a person’s worth to the community. Similar to other colonial holdings in the seventeenth century, white indentured servants and African slaves were considered to be roughly in the same category. Free blacks living in Harlem during this time “lived in their own homes and continued to work with relative freedom from the discrimination and violence encountered in the southern colonies, which was also becoming more common downtown.” However, this relative freedom shifted in the eighteenth century as a result of a growing downtown population, from 8,600 to 25,000 between 1732 and 1773, and the change from Dutch to British control. Wealthy downtown residents, repelled by the overcrowding and disease of downtown, began building country escapes in Harlem. However, the area remained mostly rural into the nineteenth century. Gilbert Osofsky writes in *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* of this transition:

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12 Ibid., 49.
13 Ibid., 53.
In the last three decades of the nineteenth century Harlem was a community of great expectations. During the previous half-century it had been an isolated, poor, rural village inhabited largely by squatters who lived in cottages pieced together with any material that could be found—bits of wood, twigs, barrel staves, old pipes, tin cans hammered flat. That community was now, however, being transformed into an upper- and upper-middle class suburb—New York’s first suburb.\textsuperscript{14}

One of Harlem’s most famous residents, Alexander Hamilton, was a pioneer of this uptown transition. Hamilton owned a sprawling 32-acre estate in Harlem and commissioned a grand house to be built there, which he intended to be comparable to Monticello or Mount Vernon. He called his home “The Grange,” but was only alive for two years after its completion. Hamilton was invested in Harlem’s development, and identified potential racial tension as an obstacle the region could face. Hamilton recognized what Gill describes as “America’s already disastrous racial situation.”\textsuperscript{15} According to Gill “[A]fter the war he founded the Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves, started a chain of African Free Schools, and gave free legal representation to runaway or kidnapped slaves.” Although Hamilton had a famously contradictory view of slavery—he objected to its economics rather than its morality—his efforts to support the African American community are evidence of his concern that racial inequity in Harlem could lead to friction among its residents, black or white.

As the nineteenth century concluded, downtown Manhattan became an increasingly difficult place to live for many due to overcrowding and poor sanitation. New York was becoming one of the largest cities in the nation, surpassing Boston and Philadelphia. However, without the space to sprawl, Manhattan grew vertically, packing as many residents and businesses into the island as possible. Not only was population density


\textsuperscript{15} Gill, \textit{Harlem}, 66.
increasing, but the diversity of those occupying space downtown also increased.

Immigrants from the Caribbean and Europe began pouring into the city as war, famine, and economic hardship struck Europe, the West Indies, and South America. In *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, nineteenth century short story writer Stephen Crane describes downtown New York in graphic detail:

Eventually they entered into a dark region where, from a careening building, a dozen gruesome doorways gave up loads of babies to the street and the gutter. A wind of early autumn raised yellow dust from cobble and swirled it against an hundred windows. Long streamers of garments fluttered from fire escapes. In all unhandy places there were buckets, brooms, rags, and bottles. In the street infants played or fought with other infants or sat stupidly in the way of vehicles. Formidable women, with uncombed hair and disordered dress, gossiped while leaning on railings, or screamed in frantic quarrels. Withered persons, in curious postures of submission to something, sat smoking pipes in obscure corners. A thousand odors of cooking food came forth to the street. The building quivered and creaked from the weight of humanity stamping about in its bowels.16

Although Crane painted this horrific mental image in the later years of the nineteenth century, a comparable scene could apply to earlier years. Gill describes downtown in similar terms, writing that “[G]arbage, raw sewage, and waste from slaughterhouses, factories, and stables was simply dumped in the street, where herds of scavenging pigs, goats, and wild dogs roamed free.”17 Yellow fever, scarlet fever, cholera, and tuberculosis were widespread, while corpses buried within the city limits contaminated the already polluted water supply. In short, downtown Manhattan had become dangerous, unsanitary, and overcrowded.

Those that could afford to began their migration uptown. In his 1963 work, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto*, Gilbert Osofsky describes a Harlem that served as an escape for some well-to-do New Yorkers: “Relatively untouched for centuries, it had the physical

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17 Gill, *Harlem*, 77.
possibilities of becoming the country retreat of a burgeoning metropolis. Ofsfsky continues, quoting historian James Grant Wilson: “everything that is lovely and much that is grand are assembled in a moderate space. Hill and dale, stream and wood, rock and meadow...river views...of surpassing magnificence...the walks through the woodland shade...are always charming...the clear brooks, the yellow leaves of autumn, the birds...leave one of forget the city and all its toils.”

Thus, Harlem served as the country escape for a relatively few well-off New Yorkers during the early 1800s. It offered bucolic vistas and clean air, though still within close enough proximity to the economic center of downtown Manhattan. While much of the rugged topography that initially attracted many to Harlem as a country getaway was eliminated in favor of the streets and avenues that were commissioned to continue from downtown Manhattan in 1811, Harlem still appeared expansive compared to the lower half of the island. Indeed, many New Yorkers predicted that Harlem, which was annexed by New York City in 1873, would become a fashionable, upscale, and semi-suburban neighborhood.

While the wealthy appropriated land for grand country homes and the city flattened hills and filled in valleys in favor of thoroughfares, those who had settled Harlem decades before were pushed aside. Here, the desire to claim and manipulate space by one group rendered another marginalized, the disparity of ownership and access widening the chasm between the two. Osofsky considers this event, vividly describing the following scene:

Negro neighborhoods were traditionally located in the less attractive residential areas on the outskirts of Manhattan island...here Negroes lived apart in generally rundown quarters because of their poverty and were further separated from other working-class families in

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18 Osofsky, *Harlem*, 73.

these neighborhoods on the basis of color. Within this pattern, however, was a built-in source of instability. New York was a rapidly expanding city...and as its population grew, new neighborhoods came into existence. What was the periphery of town of a slum for one generation was not necessarily the same for the next. As the city moved northward, so did the principal places of Negro residence. 

A steady stream of New Yorkers began migrating uptown, and Harlem became an extension of the concrete grid that governed downtown Manhattan. Transportation to Harlem increased, with ferry service from New Jersey and a railway that allowed one to commute to and from downtown. Wealthy white New Yorkers were still building mansions in Harlem, but by the mid 1800s growing interest in the area led developers to buy plots of land for more lucrative housing options. This growing white presence in Harlem was at odds with the strong black farming community that occupied much of the neighborhood.

By the 1860s, there were still only about twenty thousand people who called Harlem home, and most of them were African Americans making their living from the last of Manhattan’s arable land. Tension between these groups boiled over in 1863 as a result of the Civil War draft. A riot enveloped the city, with mobs of white New Yorkers attacking African Americans. Gill details the reasoning behind the rioters’ actions in *Harlem*, writing, “Harlem’s significant black presence, its white population strongly in favor of abolition, lots of disgruntled immigrants fired up by Democratic propaganda, and many wealthy families who had been able to buy their way out of the draft made the neighborhood the object of special rage.”

However, much of the riot’s fury was focused in the more densely populated downtown areas. Harlem became a haven for some black New Yorkers fleeing the violence.

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visited upon them by the mob. The Colored Orphan Asylum was an early target of the rioters. Located on Fifth Avenue between 43rd and 44th Streets, the Asylum was home to over 200 children when it was attacked by a white mob on July 13, 1863. The children were safely removed, but their clothing, food, and other provisions were stolen or destroyed. The Asylum chose to move its location to Harlem in the wake of the riots, as it was home to many black families and was still relatively isolated from the rest of New York City.22

Conditions for African Americans living in Harlem did not improve during the post-war period—just the opposite. A flood of European immigrants in the late nineteenth century brought new workers who took jobs that had traditionally been done by African Americans, such as food service and catering. Anti-black sentiment increased in the wake of the war, especially as growing numbers of African Americans began moving north in search of more and better opportunity. The black population in New York had been relatively small and consistent, according to Osofsky, hovering around one percent. But between 1865 and 1900, the number of African American New Yorkers grew as a result of immigration from the West Indies and migration from the South. Unfortunately, these new residents, seeking a less restrictive and more prosperous life, did not find what they were seeking in New York.

Figure 1: Art and Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. "Harlem : From The Old Fort In The Central Park."
Figure 2: Art and Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. "Harlem Plains, 1814."

Figure 3: Art and Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. "Residence Of Judge Ingraham, Harlem, N.Y., 1858."
Figure 4: Art and Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. "Harlem-Lane From Central Park To Manhattanville."
Chapter 2: Setting the Stage for 1900: Discrimination, Language, and Public Space

Following the tumult caused by the Civil War, Harlem was destined to change rapidly, like the rest of Manhattan. However, the neighborhood still offered the gentry a place to escape the “poverty, crime, social unrest, and epidemics” that plagued lower Manhattan. Gill describes post-war Harlem as “the choicest spot on the island for horse racing, yachting, cricket, sleighing, swimming, and skating or simply glorying in the beautiful vistas and virgin forests that remained.”

Although seemingly idyllic compared to lower Manhattan, Harlem was in the process of making a similar shift towards greater urbanization. As waves of immigrants from Europe flooded downtown, Harlem underwent a developing and real estate boom to accommodate those that desired wider avenues, larger homes, and more public space. Indeed, the Third and Eighth Avenue subways were built to allow for ease of transit between Harlem and downtown. Tellingly, when finished, these trains “ran above empty fields, only occasionally passing over a private house in the distance.”

Thus, as Harlem approached the twentieth century, it was not yet the urban landscape that it would become, but was certainly on its way there.

From Country Escape to Overcrowded Tenements

Transit lines between downtown Manhattan and Harlem were envisioned as a way to alleviate the overcrowding downtown by providing a convenient commute to those who

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23 Gill, Harlem, 100.

24 Ibid., 110.
could afford the move towards Harlem. Public meetings held in 1871 at Harmony Hall in Harlem advocated the construction of rail lines that would connect uptown to downtown. A speaker at one such meeting described the “happiness, comfort, and prosperity” that would result from the “quick transit” to Harlem.25 The slogan of these public meetings, “From New-York to Harlem in Fifteen Minutes,” demonstrates the common perception of Harlem as an almost suburban escape from the congested metropolis. However, this perception of Harlem was relatively short-lived. Fairly quickly, Harlem made the jump from country getaway to an extension of Manhattan, leaving those investing in real estate to grapple with a rapidly changing climate.26

Several factors, including the introduction of mass transit, the exodus from downtown, and increased immigration into New York from across Europe, contributed to the growing urbanization of Harlem. By 1900, the countryside of Harlem was almost a thing of the past. Tenements appeared alongside the mansions built by earlier Harlemites. Those who had valued Harlem for its pastoral landscapes were dismayed by this development. Frederick Law Olmsted, famed landscape architect perhaps most famous for his design of Central Park, argued that elevated roads and the “uptown movement” would degrade the quality of living in New York.

Olmsted described uptown Manhattan as having “new houses of the ridiculous jammed-up pattern, as dark and noisome in their middle parts and as inconvenient


26 Adams, Harlem, Lost and Found.
throughout as if they were parts of a besieged fortress.” Olmsted contended that housing in the city was growing unaffordable for the masses, writing in 1879:

The first-class brown-stone, high-stoop, fashionable modern dwelling house is really a confession that it is impossible to build a convenient and tasteful residence in New-York...except at a cost which even rich men find generally prohibitive. [...] What are advertised as apartment houses for people in New-York of more moderate means, such as must be looked to by teachers, artists, artisans, writers...are as yet only a more decent sort of tenement-house, nearly half their rooms being without direct light and ventilation. The same classes that are compelled to live in them in New-York would regard them as intolerable in Philadelphia, or in London, Paris or Vienna.

Thus, while it had once been in abundance, by 1900 public space in Harlem was at a premium. Because of the converging factors of the war and misery downtown, anyone who could afford to do so was migrating north. Jews, Italians, and the Irish were moving uptown in droves. African Americans followed suit, attracted by the promise of luxury living with fewer of the discriminatory practices found downtown. An area of Harlem dubbed as “Strivers Row” boasted stately brownstones owned and occupied by upper-middle-class black families, and attracted aspirational African American families. They moved to Harlem in hopes that they could make it out of the downtrodden lifestyle of the downtown tenements. The convergence of these ethnic, racial, and socio-economic groups inevitably led to tension, and eventually, violence. Several instances of street violence in the first few years of the twentieth century, coupled with the fact that parts of Harlem were still relatively inaccessible because public transportation had yet to catch up with demographic changes, led many affluent white families to move out of the neighborhood.

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Apartments built explicitly for well-heeled white occupants sat empty. Builders and real estate agents had made a miscalculation in their predictions for Harlem. A document produced during this period entitled “Housing for Negroes in NYC” details this occasion, stating that “[T]he houses in the section of Harlem inhabited by the Negro were built not only for another race, but what is more important, for a group on a different economic level, and consisting of families and households of an entirely different composition from those which now occupy these dwellings.”

Real estate developers took advantage of empty buildings and desperate black people, convincing white building owners to pack their units with African American families, while charging those families more than they would white occupants. High rents led many African American Harlemites to take in lodgers in order to afford their homes. These apartments, referred to as “railroad flats,” were already over-occupied and allowed for little personal space. The addition of lodgers “destroyed the privacy of home life” for many black families.

Dark, unsanitary, and crowded tenements, a hallmark of downtown, were now becoming commonplace in Harlem as well. Scores of Jews and Italians filled uptown apartments, occupying spaces in much greater numbers than allowed by city law. Overcrowding uptown caused many of the same problems as it had downtown. Tenements became breeding grounds for disease and discontent. And as people hailing from diverse backgrounds began crowding into Harlem, friction along racial and ethnic lines became increasingly common.

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31 Ibid.
Diminishing Public Space

Just as laws are only necessary once a person steps outside of what is considered socially correct behavior, public space only becomes an issue of civic interest once there is too little of it. In the decades prior to 1900, Harlem was awash in publically accessible space. In general, Harlemites did not feel the need to delineate such space, as it was readily available. However, once the streets of Harlem began to resemble those of downtown, public space became a commodity designated for affluent individuals who could afford the luxury.

Historically, certain kinds of public space, such as parks, have been the result of careful and deliberate planning. Parks, playgrounds, plazas, malls, and other spaces intentionally left for the public to gather and use for recreation are, as is the case in New York, usually found in more well-to-do neighborhoods. While real estate developers in Harlem were chopping up lots and buildings to see how many people could be squeezed into smaller and smaller spaces, areas of the city occupied by wealthier residents could afford to carve out pocket gardens and areas for leisure.

A movement emerged around the turn of the century to establish more playgrounds in the most densely populated areas of the city. This desire for additional public space in immigrant neighborhoods was a part of the greater reform era that sought to level the scales between the old elites and the rising masses of new Americans. Carr et al write that the “growth of slum districts in the largest cities led to the emergence of settlement houses and vigorous efforts to ameliorate conditions in their districts.”32 This demonstrates a growing recognition of public space as a measure of social equity, and led reformers to

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32 Carr et al, Public Space, 64.
advocate for more recreational space allocated to less affluent neighborhoods. Jacob Riis, in a meeting of the New York City Small Parks Advisory Committee in 1897, argued that a dearth of such space “has been the most efficient cause of the growth of crime and pauperism in out midst.” 33 The Committee considered playgrounds to be a “healthful influence upon morals and conduct . . . for the physical energies of youth, which, if not directed to good ends, will surely manifest themselves in evil tendencies.” 34

Though perhaps their intentions were right-minded, the parks’ creators clearly thought themselves and their ilk to be morally superior to the people for whom they were creating these spaces. As Carr puts it, “by providing services defined by another class, and by ignoring the value and vitality of ethnic recreational habits, the sanitized set of resources shaped rather than reflected the needs of the users.” 35 Thus, the little public space that was available in increasingly overcrowded Harlem neighborhoods was paternalistic in its creation and did not necessarily meet the needs of those who required it.

**Real Estate and Public Space**

At the turn of the century, the African American community in Harlem was small compared to other areas of the city. However, it was sizable enough that, by the 1890s, there were several apartment buildings and tenements composed entirely of African American tenants, a number of black churches, and a few social organizations, such as the

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33 Carr et al, *Public Space*, 64.


35 Carr et al, *Public Space*, 64.
Colored Knights of Pythias, that worked to serve the community. There was no centralized section of Harlem for its African American residents. Rather, black families were scattered throughout the neighborhood, and appear to have frequently settled near Italians. Prior to 1900, the black community in Harlem readily took advantage of the available public space to socialize, celebrate, and organize. According to Gilbert Osofsky, African American families routinely gathered in Sulzer’s Harlem Park, on the banks of the East and Harlem rivers, and in assembly halls.36

However, around 1900, available public space decreased as a result of several converging factors. Subway lines were constructed that connected Harlem to the rest of the city. Overcrowding downtown made the move to Harlem, for those who could afford it, appealing. Real estate speculators, wishing to capitalize on new public transit and the desire to flee lower Manhattan, set their sights on Harlem. Osofsky argues this point, quoting from a *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide* from 1904 that “practically all the vacant land in Harlem’ was ‘built over,’...[T]he growth of...Harlem...has been truly astonishing during the last half dozen years.”37 The expectation shared by speculators and builders was that Harlem was a sure financial bet. However, in 1904-1905, following a building frenzy in which much of the uninhabited space in Harlem had been developed into luxury housing in anticipation of a great uptown migration, there was a crash in the market.

By 1904, a glut of new apartments sat vacant in Harlem, in want of affluent occupants who would never materialize. While certainly the ambitions of those betting on Harlem’s real estate boom had miscalculated the housing market, events beyond their

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36 Osofsky, *Harlem*, 84.

37 Ibid., 87.
control conspired against the success of their ventures. They could not have anticipated that violence would erupt in New York City in the summer of 1900—violence that would inevitably disrupt even the best real estate schemes, which these were not. Violence enveloped the city that summer, and while the fighting did not occur in Harlem, the aftermath would shape both the physical and demographic makeup of the neighborhood for years to come.

Crammed and unsanitary tenements, dwindling public space, and a lackluster effort by city officials to ameliorate the poor living conditions ratcheted up levels of dissatisfaction throughout New York’s immigrant and minority neighborhoods. Add to that toxic mix a growing animus between immigrant groups, African Americans, and white New Yorkers. At the turn of the century, New York was a tinderbox primed for a flame.

**Language and the Riot of 1900**

While the violence that erupted in New York City in August of 1900 did not begin in Harlem, it affected the availability and accessibility to public space in that neighborhood. Before exploring the events of that day and what its fallout meant for accessibility to public space in Harlem, it is necessary to revisit how this event is often described and to what extent that description shapes our perception of such incidents.

As previously discussed, use of the term “race riot” to describe an incident like that which occurred in 1900 in New York City is misleading. Some may argue that the entire use of such a term is deceptive. Scholar Ben Railton argues that the genesis of the term is rooted in racism and white supremacy. According to Railton, the phrase “race riot” emerged as a tool of the supremacist movement, and was meant to pivot the narrative of
violence enacted against the African American community to be more sympathetic to white people.

Railton traces “race riot” to an 1898 event in Wilmington, North Carolina, in which “rampaging mobs, featuring both white Wilmingtonians and members of militias from around the state, attacked and brutalized the city’s African American community, murdering many residents, forcing most of the others to abandon their homes and communities, and burning much of it to the ground.” While the black community of Wilmington sought to bring attention to this horrific event, the story that materialized following the massacre was overwhelmingly favorable to the white mob rather than the black victims. According to Railton, evidence of this bias appeared in Collier’s Magazine in the form of an essay entitled “The Story of Wilmington, N.C., Race Riots.” Collier’s cover illustration featured images of “marauding armed African Americans.” Railton maintains that this piece “led to the designation of the [...] massacre as a ‘race riot’, a description that has continued today.”

Certainly events have occurred where the action matches the connotation of “race riot.” Railton recognizes that racially charged violence in the late 1960s and early 1990s fits this description. However, placing all race-based unrest in the same terminological bucket not only fails to accurately represent historical events, but also contributes to a narrative that has consistently stripped African Americans of equity and justice.

Recent scholarship supports changing any language that creates a false impression of historical events. Historians Michael Todd Landis, Edward Baptist, and Paul Finkelman

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argue in separate publications that terms used to describe Civil War era events are misleading and contribute to an inaccurate perception of the period. In a synthesis of Baptist’s and Finkelman’s works, Landis asks “[W]hy should we continue to employ wording that is biased, false, or laden with myth?”.

For example, Baptist “rejects ‘plantations’ (a term pregnant with false memory and romantic myths) in favor of ‘labor camps’; instead of ‘slave owners’ (which seems to legitimate and rationalize the ownership of human beings), he uses ‘enslavers.’” Such changes can have significant influence on the way events of the past are understood by the reader and interpreted in the present.

Accordingly, “race riot” is problematic in describing events like that which occurred in 1900 in New York City. Landis contends that “[T]he old labels and terms handed down to us from the conservative scholars of the early to mid-twentieth century no longer reflect the best evidence and arguments.” He argues that such terms are often used to “uphold a white supremacist...interpretation of the past.” Therefore, rather than employ “race riot” to describe the violence in New York in 1900, different phrasing must be considered. However, trading in terms from “race riot” to “massacre” can be equally inappropriate, as there was only one fatality. Similarly, the word “unrest” is too passive a term to describe the cruel violence enacted against New York’s African American community, while the term “uprising” connotes revolutionary activities. The words “insurrection” or “insurgence” do not capture the tenor of the event either. If the problematic part of the phrase is “race,” perhaps riot can be preserved as the most suitable term. Though “riot” alone still does not serve to explicate the event. As endeavoring to describe the events of 1900 accurately is a

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40 Landis, “These are Words.”
goal of this study, perhaps the desire to create a label that can be applied to this and other such events works against this goal. In this way, the act of labeling itself perpetuates a prejudiced interpretation of the past.

In the end, while imperfect, “riot” remains the most accurate way to describe the events that took place in August of 1900. And while the addition of “race” does indicate the racial motivations of the rioters, the implication is that those initiating the violence were African American, which was certainly not the case in 1900. Rather, black people were victims of violence motivated by racial hatred. Therefore, “riot” will be employed moving forward.
Chapter 3: The Problem of Being: Race, Space, and the Creation of Harlem

Two events occurred in the nineteenth century that made the Tenderloin neighborhood of Manhattan, also referred to as Hell’s Kitchen, a powder keg of racial tension. First, famine in Ireland forced tens of thousands of Irish to New York in search of a better life. Many took up residence in the Tenderloin. Second, the end of the Civil War and the oppression of Jim Crow prompted masses of African Americans to move north, an event known as the Great Migration. Between 1890 and 1910, New York’s African American population more than doubled. By 1930, African Americans made up 12 percent of New York’s population, while in 1890 they were just 1.5 percent. Many of these African American families settled in the Tenderloin neighborhood, living alongside the Irish, both competing for the same kind of low-wage unskilled work. As housing grew more crowded and race relations became increasingly fraught, tension between Irish and African Americans spilled over into public space.

The 1900 riot began after a plain-clothes police officer attempted to arrest an African American woman for prostitution. The woman, May Enoch, had been standing on the corner of Eighth Avenue and Forty-first Street waiting for a man named Arthur Harris. Harris, who, according to an article detailing the event from the New York Tribune, “passed” as Enoch’s husband, was inside a saloon when Robert J. Thorpe, the police officer, approached Enoch. Newspaper accounts of the night posit that when Thorpe attempted to arrest Enoch, Harris intervened and a fight between the two men ensued, resulting in the
death of Thorpe. Accounts of the events preceding and following the incident differ. Historian Martha Hodes synthesizes these disparate interpretations and in doing so paints a vivid picture of a system rigged against the African American community in New York. From the very first moments of the encounter between Thorpe and Harris, the narrative began to take a discriminatory shape.\(^4\) White men and women in Hell’s Kitchen were primed for a fight, and the murder of Robert Thorpe provided the spark they needed to envelop New York in the flames of racial hatred.

The details of the encounter speak to ideas about the acceptable use of public space by African Americans living in New York City at the turn of the century. To restate an earlier point, not only was access to public space by African Americans restricted by city planning and over development, but access was also limited by what was considered the socially acceptable presence of African Americans in the public sphere. This work seeks to provide a new perspective on a familiar story by analyzing the racial tension that erupted in Harlem through the politics of public space. Inaccessibility to quality public space shaped black Harlem by creating a pattern of denial and discrimination—eliminating the physical space for democratic discourse, subjecting black Harlemites to substandard living conditions with no escape, and imposing the expectation that, even while in public space, black people were invisible.

Melissa Harris-Perry explores the historical genesis of this last concept in an article written in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin, which galvanized the black community and ignited the Black Lives Matter movement. Harris-Perry argues:

...[T]he democratic social contract is not violated when citizens have problems; it is violated when some citizens are a problem. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois described the experience of being black in America as a constant awareness that others viewed him as a problem. “Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question.... How does it feel to be a problem?” This is not a statement about black people having more problems than their white counterparts. Du Bois captures the defining element of African-American life as the very self, but most especially the visible, black self in public space as being a problem.

In the early morning hours of August 12, 1900, Enoch faced the dilemma that Harris-Perry presents above. She was guilty of being a black woman standing on a street corner. According to Hodes, “[T]hat night, on the street corner, the white man didn’t say a word to her, just took hold of her.” Without any outward indication that he was a member of law enforcement, and without a word of explanation, Thorpe put his hands on Enoch because she was occupying a public space in a way that was unacceptable to a white man. Harris-Perry unpacks the tension of this kind of encounter, writing, “[A] black body in public space must presume its own guilt and be prepared to present a rigidly controlled public performance of docility and respectability.” This was the ultimate crime committed by Arthur Harris. When he rushed to Enoch’s defense, his actions could not be characterized as “docile” or even protective. He confronted Thorpe, challenged his authority, and bested him in a physical struggle.

Thorpe’s subsequent death sparked violence and rioting throughout the west side of Manhattan. A white police officer dead at the hands of a black man was more than enough reason to ignite the already eager white residents of the Tenderloin. “Any black person”

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43 Hodes, “Knowledge and Indifference, 64.
would do for the rioters: “waiters, messengers, cigar-makers, longshoremen, dockworkers, carpet-cleaners, stablemen, horse-and-dog clippers, chimney-sweeps”—all were targeted in the violence.\textsuperscript{44} Both men and women, people of all ages, were subject to acts of aggression enacted by white New Yorkers. Police officers did little to prevent, and often engaged directly in, the violent acts.\textsuperscript{45} Hundreds of African Americans were attacked for simply existing in public space. Men and women were afraid to leave their homes or jobs, and many chose not to do so for the duration of the riot.\textsuperscript{46} Accounts of the violence show that members of the police force were especially brutal in their attacks on black men and women, “hitting them with clubs and fists, on the head and in the face.” Police officers “spat at [African Americans], kicked them and shoved them, tripped them so they fell forward, threw them down whole flights of stairs.”\textsuperscript{47} An account from \textit{The Evening World} details the experience of Howard Lytle, described as “an intelligent and refined” black man, who applied to a police officer for help in escaping the angry mob, begging, “take me and protect me”. The officer responded “[L]ike hell I will,” and was joined by several other officers in beating Lytle to the point of unconsciousness.\textsuperscript{48} Though some in law enforcement kept the violence from escalating, others incited the mobs, intensifying the already vitriolic situation.

\textsuperscript{44}Hodes, "Knowledge and Indifference," 71.


\textsuperscript{47}Hodes, "Knowledge and Indifference," 70.

The riot ended with a soaking rainstorm that dispelled the August heat and dampened the frenzy of the rioters. In the wake of the violence, African Americans and their white allies engaged in "protests, community organizing, meetings, speeches, the gathering of testimony, and demands for investigation...to make the violence visible and scandalous for the explicit purpose of claiming legal rights and equality for African Americans." However, attempts to increase public knowledge of the riot and empathy for the victims were blocked by a systematic effort by the city's administration and police force to reshape the public's perception of the events of August 1900. Just as black people were expected to be as physically invisible as possible while in the public sphere, the story of the white-on-black violence that occurred was also made to be invisible in the public record.

To make an event or a person invisible, to remove someone or something from the public eye and memory, was a way to reinforce the societal inequality that existed for African Americans in New York and to realign power so that it rested firmly with the white populace. There existed a pervasive indifference to the discriminatory treatment of African Americans among many white New Yorkers, and this indifference allowed the acceptance and forgetting of the brutal acts committed during the 1900 riot.

Visibility, or rather invisibility, is central to the recognition that units of accessible public space are a measure of equity. To occupy public space is to be visible, and the political and social engines in New York at the turn of the century sought to make African Americans invisible. This is why the city's administration and police force worked hard to keep the violence of August 1900 out of public consciousness.

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50 Hodes, "The Power of Indifference", 82.
Americans invisible. The cruel story of the 1900 riot was “submerged and subjugated” in the public record. Ultimately, evidence of the white-on-black violence of 1900 was destroyed, with only fragments of the many testimonies recorded following the riot remaining. The visibility of the violence that was enacted against innocent African Americans in public space—on street corners, sidewalks, and stoops—did not inspire meaningful change for black people living in New York City.\textsuperscript{51}

Perhaps the use of “race riot” in the stories reporting on the event affected public empathy for the victims of the riot, shifting the narrative to imply black-on-white rather than white-on-black violence. Indeed, there were some accounts that falsely claimed that mobs of African American rioters had taken up arms. Perhaps the methodical efforts to erase the actions of the police and their confederates from the public’s mind dampened any possible outrage among the public. More likely though, many white people felt indifference about how the riot affected the lives of African Americans in New York, and this indifference affected the fallout, or lack thereof. However, indifference alone does not serve to explain why there was no substantial response to the riot, and certainly does not resonate with the deep-seeded belief among many white New Yorkers that being visible in public space was a privilege not afforded to black people.

According to Gilbert, efforts to shed light on the violence, to make the inequity and suffering of African Americans more visible, were “hardly enough to crack an almost solid wall of indifference.”\textsuperscript{52} Additionally, Hodes argues that invisibility and indifference shaped

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\item[51] Hodes, “The Power of Indifference”, 82.
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the perception and response to the riot. However, invisibility extends beyond the intentional destruction of archival evidence of the riot or how the violence was represented in the media. Invisibility was an expectation in the physical sphere. Similarly, while there was an endemic apathy toward the plight of African Americans after the riot, many white New Yorkers were not at all indifferent in their feelings about how African Americans should behave while in public space. Indifference connotes a lack of caring or concern, but many white people cared a great deal about the appearance of black communities in New York. The expectation that African Americans were to be physically invisible in public space contributed to the riot and shaped the response to it.

Figure 5: Riot in 1900. From The New York World.
The Origins of Black Harlem

Today, African American residents, past and present, define Harlem's identity. Harlem is inextricably associated with black art, music, and literature, as well as activism and movements for civil rights. The 1900 riot was instrumental in creating this Harlem. The violence in August of 1900 pressed many African American New Yorkers to prioritize safety in their search for new housing. Traditional African American neighborhoods, like the Tenderloin, were increasingly troubled by racial tension and hostility, not to mention crowded and unsanitary housing options. Because of the excess of available housing in Harlem, landlords eager to fill vacant units in new buildings advertised directly to African Americans looking for a new place to settle. As historian Barbara Lewis observes, “desire connected with availability and blacks started relocating en masse to Harlem.”53 In response, tenements were built to accommodate need, and by 1904, vacant land in Harlem was a thing of the past.54

While black New Yorkers were fleeing racial violence downtown, scores of African Americans from the South were continually pouring into New York to escape the oppression of Jim Crow. Between 1890 and 1910, the black population in New York almost tripled.55 Realtors, both black and white, rushed to exploit the situation. Notably, an African American man named Phillip Payton appears frequently in the historical record of this period as having attempted to leverage this situation to his advantage. He established the

55 Osofsky, Harlem, 18.
Afro-American Realty Company in 1904 and assertively campaigned to attract African Americans to Harlem.56 Payton bought up tenements in West Harlem and advertised on billboards and subways with the message: “Rent Colored!” Payton was not being altruistic—he charged black people “as much as $30 per month for a four-room apartment in a tenement, plus a 10 percent management fee, about five dollars more per month than whites had been paying.”57 In Payton’s desire to rent to black families, he aggressively moved against realtors and landlords who sought to keep Harlem white. For instance, when Hudson Realty, a competing company, bought three of Payton’s buildings and promptly evicted the black tenants, Payton retaliated by buying neighboring properties and evicting all of the white occupants.58

While Payton’s success did not last, other realtors followed his example and were instrumental in populating Harlem with African Americans. In 1902, the New York City Tenement Housing Department counted only 1,127 black families living in Harlem, mostly working as servants in wealthy white households.59 By 1904, the black community began concentrating its numbers, many relocating to the blocks between Seventh and Eighth Avenues.60 An article from the New York Herald described this area as a “stronghold” for African Americans, and it would only become more so in the years to come. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, several factors converged, which increased African

56 Osofsky, Harlem, 100.
57 Gill, Harlem, 177.
58 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
American migration into New York City from the South. Fewer jobs and intensified
discrimination in Southern states, reduced European immigration, and demand for
industrial labor drove black people to northern cities.\textsuperscript{61}

Between 1910 and 1920, New York’s black population grew by 66.2 percent, and in
1915, over eighty percent of black New Yorkers lived in Harlem. This is not to say there
was no opposition to the shifting racial landscape of uptown Manhattan. Several
organizations emerged with the explicit agenda of keeping Harlem white, using bellicose
language to describe this endeavor, often describing the movement of black people into
Harlem as an “invasion.”\textsuperscript{62} The Save Harlem Committee, Anglo-Saxon Realty, and the
Protective Association for 130\textsuperscript{th} to 132\textsuperscript{nd} Streets organized landlords and property owners
to evict black tenants or refuse black people or immigrants trying to secure housing in the
neighborhood.\textsuperscript{63} These efforts had limited success and were short-lived. The black
community countered by encouraging African Americans with means to purchase property
in Harlem, evict white tenants, and rent to black families. Black ministers and newspapers
branded such measures as fulfilling a “race duty,” and these efforts, coupled with white
flight, produced the Harlem we now associate with the Renaissance—the epicenter of black
life in America.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{61} Tritter, “The Growth and Decline,” 67.
\textsuperscript{63} Gill, Harlem. 182.
\textsuperscript{64} Tritter, “The Growth and Decline,” 67.
Public Space During the Harlem Renaissance

According to Carr, “[W]hen public spaces are successful...they will increase opportunities to participate in communal activity.” “Parks, plazas, waterfronts, and natural areas of our cities” serve to “[nurture] the growth of public life” and allow “people from different cultural groups [to] come together in a supportive context of mutual enjoyment.” Thoughtfully constructed public spaces “become vessels to carry positive communal meetings.” Indeed, Carr contends that “in a well-designed and well-managed public space, the armor of daily life can be partially removed, allowing us to see others as whole people” which “creates a temporary bond.” Accordingly, Geographer Ash Amin writes,

Urbanists have long held the view that the physical and social dynamics of public space play a central role in the formation of publics and public culture. A city’s streets, parks, squares and other shared spaces have been seen as symbols of collective well-being and possibility, expressions of achievement and aspiration by urban leaders and visionaries, sites of public encounter and formation of civic culture, and significant spaces of political deliberation and agonistic struggle.

By the turn of the twentieth century, many acknowledged that access to quality public space was essential to the overall health of a community. As Olmstead remarked in 1870, “no one who has closely observed the conduct of the people who visit the Park can doubt that it exercises a distinctly harmonizing and refining influence upon the most unfortunate and most lawless classes of the city.” Thus, the allocation, design, and maintenance of areas devoted explicitly to public space—parks, libraries, community


66 Carr et al. cited in Amin.

centers, playgrounds—can help measure how a neighborhood is regarded by the wider society. If city planners and politicians were aware that such areas were necessary, even essential, to the well-being of those living in a neighborhood, then it follows that the presence, or absence, of such spaces can serve as a measure of the esteem afforded to that community. In such cases, accessibility to quality public space becomes a civil rights concern.

Communities of color, like Harlem in the early twentieth century, were saturated with residents and covered in concrete. Just a few decades earlier, a pamphlet released by the City of New York boasted “nearly 4,000 acres of free playgrounds for the people.” The document includes illustrations and maps to help guide the harried New Yorker to a restorative jaunt just beyond Harlem.68 There was clearly awareness that parks and other public spaces were desirable, especially in dense areas populated by low-income families. In 1887, the Tenement House Commission was instrumental in pushing through legislation authorizing the creation of public parks in areas dominated by tenement housing south of 155th Street.69 However, it does not appear such efforts were successful in locating parks in poor areas, especially uptown where the racial landscape was quickly shifting. The image below, featured in the New York Times in 1929, features a telling caption: “There are few playgrounds in Harlem. Negro children must play on the streets.”70

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70 Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, The New York Public Library. "There are few playgrounds in Harlem. Negro children must play on the
For the average African American living in Harlem in the early twentieth century, life did not feel like a Renaissance. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, living conditions had deteriorated as white landlords left the city and neglected maintenance on their buildings. Overcrowding exacerbated the decline to the extent that many buildings were near collapse. One resident described Harlem apartments as “vibrant with waterbugs, roaches, mice and rats.”

Most residents lacked the means to relocate. If they could afford new housing, most were prohibited from moving out of the Harlem and into better streets.

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neighborhoods because of white racism. Consequently, while popular history remembers
the Harlem Renaissance as an idyllic period, the apogee of African American cultural
achievement, for most black people living in Harlem in the first two decades of the
twentieth century, both private and public space was shaped by poor living conditions,
discrimination, and indifference toward improvement.

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Chapter 4: “Pitiable Breath Seekers”: Public Space and the Riot of 1935

During the period known as its “Renaissance,” Harlem was a socially and economically diverse neighborhood, defined by its artists and writers, its politicians and reformers. During the 1910s and 1920s, Harlemites fought for equity, recognition, and inclusion. They clashed with corrupt officials and created organizations to combat discrimination and fight for civil rights. While the vast majority of African Americans living in Harlem were too busy surviving to revel in the burgeoning cultural movement that this period is known for, many participated in smaller actions that, when amassed, pushed the needle more firmly toward a collected assertion for civil rights.

During the Renaissance years, Harlem not only saw a literary and artistic explosion, but an increase in community-based social, political, and economic services. Such organizations grew from necessity, as external forces were actively seeking to deny equitable services to African American living in Harlem. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, Harlem became recognized as Manhattan’s “black belt” and efforts to isolate the neighborhood within the larger Manhattan community intensified.73 Historian Brian McCammack, in a study of how public transportation shaped urban culture during the pre-war years, writes of Harlem during this period: “[G]iven the choice, whites more often than not sought to reinforce barriers between white and black communities, not make them

73 Brain McCammack, “‘My God, They Must Have Riots on Those Things All the Time’: African American Geographies and Bodies on Northern Urban Public Transportation, 1915-1940” Journal of Social History 43.4 (Summer 2010): 973-988.
more porous.” Isolated from the rest of the city, denied adequate services, and refused equitable work, African Americans in Harlem turned inward for support and relief.\textsuperscript{74}

Efforts to segregate Harlem from the rest of New York were explicit and often expressed on the legislative level, as illustrated by a 1922 meeting to discuss a proposed subway extension into Harlem. The Central Park West and Columbus Avenue Association objected to the subway extension, the president of the group arguing that “[T]here is little use in trying to beautify Central Park West if the line serving it terminates in the black belt of Harlem.”\textsuperscript{75} Subsequently, sentiments and actions regarding the creation, use, and maintenance of publically accessible space, such as parks and subways, were heavily influenced by racial discrimination.

When the Great Depression struck in 1929, the inhabitants of Harlem fared far worse than other neighborhoods in New York because most Harlemites were African American and were already living well below the poverty line. Already, Harlemites were not afforded anywhere near equal treatment. Instead, they were forced to live in substandard housing and accept low-paying jobs. Even the most qualified black Harlemites were often forced to toil as unskilled laborers because barriers to obtaining more desirable work were almost insurmountable for African Americans during this period.

This chapter will explore the tension between the widely acknowledged recognition that there were social benefits to having accessible quality public space in urban areas and the denial of access to quality public space based on racial grounds. Between 1900 and

\textsuperscript{74}McCammack, “My God,” 974.

1935, there was a general acknowledgement that limited access to public space led to social unrest and contributed to crime, delinquency, and rioting.\textsuperscript{76} However, while advocates for equity in public space agitated for the creation and expansion of parks, transportation, public baths, and libraries, these efforts were met with virulent resistance from white people fighting to maintain the racial status quo. This chapter will examine how Harlemites countered this resistance by claiming corners, stoops, and the streets to assemble, worship, and protest. Spontaneous gatherings in public space allowed for conversation around the ideas generated by Harlem Renaissance thinkers. Alaine Locke’s “New Negro” and W.E.B. Du Bois’ “color line” were among the ideas that circulated through conversations in Harlem during the early twentieth century, challenging Jim Crow-era race relations that, though not codified as in the South, were very much present in New York City.\textsuperscript{77}

Lastly, this chapter will look at how social and economic stressors generated a need for community-based organizations that could address the effects of poverty and discrimination that plagued Harlem during the Renaissance and Depression years. When some of these organizations buckled under the weight of hardship and opposition, many Harlemites felt intense frustration and anger and channeled those feelings into violent acts during the riot of 1935.\textsuperscript{78} Rather than focusing their violence on people, the rioters


attacked property. This chapter will argue that the assault on property rather than people is, at least in part, directly related to the dearth of public space allotted to Harlem. Living in overcrowded, dilapidated, unsanitary housing drove Harlemites outside in search of recreation or escape. However, discriminatory practices meant that they were systematically denied access to areas where they could restore a sense of personal space, contributing to the pervasive discontent that ignited the riot of 1935.

Figure 7: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Art and Artifacts Division, The New York Public Library. "Harlem Street Scene."
Urban Nature and the Commodification of Public Space in Harlem

The distribution, creation, and use of public space in Harlem in the beginning of the twentieth century were defined by racial bias. Public space was only deemed worthy of legislative monies if it was to be used primarily, or exclusively, by white people. When occasion arose where public space was intended to be shared by people of different races, opposition, like the example above, was prevalent. Accordingly, proposed extensions to public transportation systems or creation of new parks were contentious matters.

Subways posed a particular challenge to those wishing to maintain the racial status quo and keep the barriers between Harlem and the rest of Manhattan impermeable. Public
transit offered the opportunity for African Americans living in Harlem to travel downtown in search of better jobs, and in doing so, enter predominantly white areas. Expansion of “transportation infrastructure both contained and expanded the black sphere.”79 Subways allowed African Americans a measure of agency, as well as a path to upward social mobility, that some in the white community found threatening. Additionally, crowded subway cars forced black and white straphangers into each other’s physical space, creating occasion for “an incipient interracial...threat.”80

Black newspapers provided guidance on how to navigate the interactions that would inevitably occur while sharing public space with other races. An article from an issue of the 1923 Chicago Defender pointed out to African American riders that “[O]n street cars, busses, and in public places you can come in contact with others who pay the same price and have the same rights as you.” However, the Defender warned its readers to be cautious of standing out while on public transportation, writing, “[Y]ou have a right there the same as they, but you also owe a duty as a citizen to the public and the individual to be neat and clean and not make yourself a nuisance and objectionable.”81 After riding on a subway, Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man mused, “my God, they must have riots on those things all the time.” African Americans in New York City, and indeed, nationwide, were subject to the politics of respectability. Black people were forced to adhere to a set of behaviors that governed every interaction that took place with a white person. This relationship was pushed to the limit on subways, where black and white people were forced into close

79 McCammack, “My God,” 976.
80 Ibid., 975.
81 Ibid., 976.
quarters, and black behavior was constantly tested against white expectations. Ellison’s *Invisible Man* expected that the tension created by such interactions would surely ignite into violence.

While subways and other forms of public transit offered frequent occasions for direct contact between black and white New Yorkers, the expectation of parks and recreational areas was quite different. Integration on the subway was accepted, albeit grudgingly, by many white New Yorkers, but sharing recreational space was not met with the same level of consent. In any case, those using recreational facilities and parks were often children and they would not travel a great distance from home to play, necessitating the existence of public space in the same geographic area of residence. Such spaces were scarce in Harlem, both as a result of racial bias and economics.

Geographer Matthew Gandy in *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City*, contends that “urban nature is...a medley of different elements that binds the concrete fabric of the city to the abstract commodification of space.”82 Although just a few decades before, the elevated train that ran through Harlem traveled over open fields, by the beginning of the twentieth century, available space was scarce. Even vacant lots between buildings were filled with refuse from overcrowded apartments.83 High economic value was placed on those commodities that were scarce and in high demand—qualities that manifested in public space in New York City. Allocating funds to carve out, beautify, or

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improve the quality of public space in Harlem was a low priority for those with the power to do so in the early twentieth century, as evidenced by the dearth and poor condition of such spaces in Harlem as compared to the rest of New York City.  

A speech captured by The New York Amsterdam News given shortly after the riot in 1935 stated that “[R]ecreation facilities are limited--totally inadequate for the Negro population and have not the same play facilities as other city parks. Only two school playgrounds are in use in Harlem, and those only part time, during the summer.”

Some efforts had been made to ameliorate this deficiency prior to 1935. In 1930, $1,834,000 was allocated to the creation of eight new parks in Harlem--this out of a city-wide budget of $20,423,000 for a total of twenty-six parks. That Harlem, which already had a deficit of acceptable recreational space, was only to receive less than ten percent of the total budget indicates the relatively low level of importance placed on the creation of new public space in that neighborhood. However, it appears that even the five percent designated for use in Harlem did not result in improved conditions by 1935. If left to the legislative bodies in New York City, it is questionable whether advancements in accessibility or condition of public space would have ever occurred. Rather, it appears that African American institutions, such as the New York Amsterdam News, which had its headquarters in Harlem, were instrumental in seeing that some of the legislative promises made to Harlem were

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kept. For instance, in 1931, the publication released an article, stating, "[A]nother addition was made Friday to the increasing list of civic improvements obtained through the efforts of The Amsterdam News, when 25 park benches were placed in Harlem Lane Park."\(^{87}\) The article continues to cite other renovations to public space in Harlem that resulted from efforts by the periodical.

The black press, black churches, and political groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) consistently placed pressure on the city government to keep its promises to Harlemites. Such organizations also intervened when the barriers to basic survival grew too onerous for Harlemites, providing social services and other kinds of support to struggling black and Latino individuals and families.\(^{88}\)

**Renaissance and Depression in Harlem**

For many of Harlem’s residents, the years between the riots of 1900 and 1935 were defined by unrelenting poverty and discrimination. However, these years also saw a vibrant and robust African American identity take shape. Writers, artists, musicians, philosophers, literati, and activists took up residence during these years, carving out a unique cultural enclave that presented a challenge to New York’s existing social mores. African American publications such as *The Crisis*, *The Messenger*, and *The New York Amsterdam News* began churning out articles and editorials that represented the black

\(^{87}\) Harlem Lane Park To Get Benches. *The New York Amsterdam News* (1922-1938); Sep 23, 1931; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *New York Amsterdam News*: 2.

community. The NAACP and the UNIA were among the organizations established in Harlem meant to agitate for equity and fair treatment for African Americans. The 135th Street Library provided a space for art shows, concerts, readings, and meetings during the day, while nightclubs and rent parties were popular for after-hour gatherings. The Renaissance wove together the disparate elements of the Harlem community, providing a sense of solidarity and communal purpose, a common vernacular and a shared will to improve conditions.

While the Harlem Renaissance is most often associated with its cultural contributions, black social activism was also a feature of the period. Galvanized by events surrounding World War I—the derogatory treatment of African American veterans, the Great Migration from the South, the obvious hypocrisy of the doctrine of self-determination denied to the colonial world—African American activists found in Harlem fertile soil for their message. Perhaps the most visible of these figures was Marcus Garvey, who descended on Harlem with a message of racial pride and solidarity, which resonated with many African American Harlemites. Garvey’s mission was to provide transport for African Americans to return to Africa, and to gather support, he staged frequent rallies and marches in the streets of Harlem.89

89 Gill, Harlem, 256.

While Marcus Garvey and other black activists led the charge for equitable treatment from forces outside Harlem, other organizations focused their energies on improving conditions within the community. During the Renaissance and Prohibition years, churches “led the fight against ‘drink, drugs, dice, and dance,’” as such vices were becoming increasingly prevalent in the neighborhood. While not strictly public spaces, churches provided places for members of the community to gather, interact, and share ideas. Many Harlem churches saw their mission as supporting the community through service and charitable activities, “offering everything from financial assistance to clothing and food banks to sports and education.”

Houses of worship also sometimes acted as incubators for activism, gathering members from across the community to commiserate, share grievances, and dream up

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solutions. Churches in Harlem, such as the Abyssinian Baptist Church and the Mother AME Zion Church, moved from their downtown locations to Harlem, constructing impressive new structures. As discriminatory practices increased downtown, other churches followed suit, taking advantage of white flight in Harlem and moving into newly vacant houses of worship. Still others established storefront churches or basement temples. During the 1910s and 1920s, churches and charitable groups helped to support African Americans in Harlem struggling to secure lucrative employment because of racist hiring practices. These organizations filled an economic need not prioritized by the local or federal government. In his article on the daily life of Harlem residents during the 1920s and 1930s, Stephen Robertson explores the robust network of institutions, including churches, that supported Harlem’s residents:

> Hundreds of small clubs gathered in apartments or meeting rooms, to socialize, play cards, and to organize dances, lunches and excursions. Fraternal orders such as the Prince Hall Masons and the Elks, which set up a dozen or so lodges in Harlem, had more elaborate premises, with auditoriums, and rooms in which members could meet, and their renowned orchestras and bands could practice. Religious organizations existed on an even larger scale than voluntary groups. Forty-nine church buildings, and hundreds of storefronts and apartments converted to houses of worship, were scattered throughout the neighborhood. Each was "much more besides a place of worship," James Weldon Johnson wrote in 1930; the largest churches organized athletic clubs (particularly basketball teams), classes ranging from vocational training to art, choirs and musical groups, and social clubs. A similar range of activities could be found at Harlem’s thriving branches of the YMCA and YWCA.

The Depression hit Harlem harder than other neighborhoods in New York City, and so the need for such social services as described above was even greater than it had been.

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92 Gill, Harlem, 275.

during the pre- and post-war years. Plainly, the poor and unskilled suffered the most from the economic collapse. The suffering of those individuals who were also African American was compounded by racism. Historian Cheryl Greenberg writes that prior to the Depression, “[T]raditional ‘Negro’ jobs provided poor wages and no mobility, but they had offered job stability because white workers generally avoided them.” With the economic collapse of 1929, “every job was a ‘white man’s job.’” The same applied to better-off African Americans. While many educated black Harlemites were already excluded from white-collar fields, those who did hold such positions were excluded or fired when the Depression struck. According to Greenberg, “[A]s a result of this combination of economic hardship and racial discrimination, blacks at all levels were ‘last hired, first fired’ during the Depression years.” Black people continued to “pay higher rents for poorly maintained apartments, paid more for food, and had fewer playgrounds, parks, and medical clinics than did any other city neighborhoods.”

Greenberg’s inclusion of parks and playgrounds is significant, as housing conditions in Harlem had grown exponentially worse with continued population growth and very little new housing construction or improvement. Building maintenance was near non-existent, and overcrowding meant that rates of disease and death far exceeded those of the city’s white population. Indeed, the mortality rate in Harlem was 40 percent higher than that of

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95 Ibid., 398.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
98 Stephen Robertson et al., “This Harlem Life.”
the rest of the city, and diseases such as typhoid and tuberculosis were nine times the city average. In many buildings, heating was rare, vermin were common, and sanitation was poor. Most Harlemites still used outhouses or shared a single toilet with four or five other families. Thus, the desire—the need—for public space was quite high. Men, women, and children living in Harlem’s tenements required public space to escape the oppressive dilapidation of their congested apartments. Because playgrounds and parks were scarce, Harlemites spilled out into the streets, sidewalks, and stoops.

Figure 10: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. “Harlem residents in front of shop listening to the radio, 1930s.”


\(^{100}\)Ibid., 284.
“Pitiable Breath Seekers”: Adaptive Use of Public Space and Harlem’s Children

While inaccessibility to high-quality public space was only one factor contributing to the social unrest that transpired in 1935, it was inseparable from a larger web of discriminatory practices that prevented black Harlemites from improving conditions in their community. Evidence of this can be seen in an examination of how Harlemites used the space accessible to the streets. A textbook on landscape architecture uses Harlem as a case study to explore how a community with substandard housing makes use of what public space is available. As Ed Wall and Tim Waterman write, “[T]he street hierarchies, the buildings with their stoops, the shops on the street corners and the adaptive use of the
street have provided spaces for meeting outside of the cramped apartments of Harlem.”

African Americans used streets, sidewalks, and stoops to socialize, preach, or escape from the confines of their crowded apartments. In many ways, such gathering allowed Harlem’s residents to share ideas and strengthen community ties. However, for Harlem’s children, adaptive use of public space had dangerous consequences, consequences that were far too often deadly.

A 1931 piece featured in the New York Amsterdam News details the crisis of public space facing families with young children in Harlem. The author describes a truly heart rending scene:

The most pitiable of the breath seekers are to be found in the tenement sections of the side streets. Here, gaunt faced little tots sit and lie on the concrete stoops in front of their wretched homes--their young-old faces distorted with the discomfort of their unyielding beds. A discomfort, however, which rises to a questionable bliss when compared to the stench and vermin encountered in the crowded hovels called “home.”

Though the paucity of quality public space adversely affected many of Harlem’s residents, it was perhaps most impactful for children, who had limited space for play and whose health and development is more frangible than that of an adult. Thus, the issue of availability of public space drove to the very heart of the Harlem community—the well being of its most vulnerable members. In addition to the obvious health concerns described in the quotation above, children in Harlem were forced to use congested streets as their playgrounds, resulting in a dangerous, sometimes fatal, situation.


In the first few decades of the twentieth century, there was a marked decrease in the use of playgrounds and parks by young New Yorkers.\textsuperscript{103} This decline can be attributed to the deterioration of available playgrounds or parks, or to the destruction of such spaces in favor of housing or commercial buildings. Because children in Harlem lacked access to parks or playgrounds, they were forced to play in the streets. During this same period automobiles were becoming more prevalent, crowding out or replacing more antiquated forms of transportation. Prior to the advent of the automobile, a street was considered public space that was relatively easy for pedestrians, vendors, and vehicles to share. With the introduction of automobiles, Harlem streets grew treacherous for children who continued to use them for play, as few other options existed.

In the few years prior to the 1935 riot, there was a concerted effort by concerned citizens to increase the number and accessibility of playgrounds in poor areas of the city. Organizations advocating for this change were right to connect the health of a community to the availability of recreational space. Children who are more physically active are both physically and psychologically healthier.\textsuperscript{104} Current research clearly demonstrates that physical activity leads to higher self-esteem and lower anxiety and stress in children.\textsuperscript{105} This is not to say that children in Harlem were not physically active. Most current studies look to availability of playgrounds as a counterbalance to sedentary acts like sitting in front


of a computer or watching television. Though even if such distractions existed in the early decades of the twentieth century, children in Harlem would not have chosen to spend their free time in cramped tenement apartments. Accordingly, they took to the streets.

A 1910 New York Times article, “Ask Mayor to Clear Streets of Children,” discusses efforts to provide additional playgrounds for children, especially for those living in poor neighborhoods like Harlem.\textsuperscript{106} The article quotes the Secretary of the National Highways Protective Association, Col. E. S. Cornell, as seeking to address the “chaotic conditions regarding the care and safeguards of the children which exist at present.” Cornell elaborated this point, stating, “[L]ast month there were thirteen children killed in the streets here--stricken down, simply because they had no place to go except the street, where they could get a breath of fresh air.” The proposed solution to this problem was to allow poor children to play in vacant lots, at no additional cost to the city. Not surprisingly, this does not appear to have resolved the issue of children playing in the streets, as evidenced by later articles featuring groups petitioning the city government to address the same problem.

The title of a 1930 article from The New York Times captures the tragic dilemma facing families in Harlem: “Playground Appeal Cites ‘Murder Map.’” The City Club of New York prepared the “Murder Map” to illustrate the number of children killed by automobiles while playing on city streets.\textsuperscript{107}


The article cites the allocation of funds as insufficient to the task of providing more space for play, as does another article written later that same year, “Smith Makes Plea for Playgrounds.” Such evidence points clearly to an endemic lack of personal and recreational space available to Harlemites. Lack of quality public space was a symptom of the pervasive discrimination that plagued black Harlemites. Both the concern over the scarcity of public space and the adaptive use of available public space served as catalysts for the events of March 1935.

![Figure 12: "Playground Appeal Cites Murder Map," The New York Times.](image-url)

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**Harlem Ignites: Riot in 1935**

In 1935, Harlemites were suffering. While federal programs like the New Deal promised to alleviate the economic hardship of the Depression years, this relief was not doled out equally. Even those black organizations that were not explicitly agitating for political change turned activist and engaged in visible public protests, often taking place in the streets. As Greenberg argues, “[I]n this way a mass-based, political culture emerged in Harlem in the 1930s; it spread from traditionally political black organizations to the black community at large.”¹⁰⁹ According to Greenberg, “African-American organizations ranging from the churches to the Communist party and the NAACP channeled the political energy of Harlem.”¹¹⁰ Such efforts were meant to combat the de facto policies that delivered relief more readily to white people than black. Public protests and displays of anger and discontent exacerbated tension between Harlemites and law enforcement. Black Harlemites were challenging the city’s racial status quo through such “broad-based, visible” political movements. Organizations such as the NAACP, the Urban League, and the Citizens League for Fair Play began collaborating on efforts to improve conditions for African Americans. However, persistent arrests, police harassment, and unsympathetic court rulings prevented the possibility of achieving meaningful change. Greenberg writes,

> Thus Harlemites were left in 1935 with a strong sense of common grievance and a recognition of the potency of mass action but no organized way of channeling the struggle that had a broad appeal. Yet thousands of Harlemites were now accustomed to mass meetings, to listening to street corner orators define problems and offer solutions, and to breaking the law.¹¹¹

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¹¹⁰ Ibid., 401.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 406.
As Greenberg underlines in the above passage, though they had little choice in the matter, Harlemites claimed the public space available to them and asserted themselves within it, refusing to remain invisible, as in 1900. While black people in Harlem lacked personal space in tenements teeming with residents, and were forced to use sidewalks, stoops, and streets for recreation, socialization, and escape, they embraced those spaces in order to challenge the discriminatory mores that were entrenched in New York society.

On March 19, 1935, Lino Rivera, a sixteen-year-old black Puerto Rican boy, stole a penknife from a dime store on 125th Street in Harlem.\textsuperscript{112} The store’s manager, Jackson Smith, and an assistant, Charles Hurley, both white, witnessed the theft and confronted Rivera. Someone on the scene allegedly threatened to “take him down in the basement and beat the hell out of him.”\textsuperscript{113} A terrified Rivera resisted, and a struggle ensued, during which both Smith and Hurley received minor injuries. The police were called, and Mounted Patrolman Donahue arrived at the scene. The manager declined to pursue action against Rivera, and instructed that he be released. To avoid attention from the crowd gathering in front of the store, Donahue let Rivera out the back exit. However, observers in front of the store, aware of the struggle with Rivera, feared that Donahue had taken “the boy to the basement to beat him up”, and since Rivera did not reappear, this suspicion was seemingly confirmed. The arrival of an ambulance to treat the injuries sustained by Smith and Hurley further corroborated the crowd’s theory. Finally, by an “odd trick of fate,” a hearse, usually

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{112} “False Rumors of a Boy’s Death Sparks the Harlem Riot of 1935.” \textit{New York Daily News}, March 20, 1935.
  \item \textsuperscript{113} “Mischief Out of Misery.” \textit{Time Magazine}, http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,748651-1,00.html.
\end{itemize}
stored in a garage across the street, was parked in front of the store. People gathered outside the store assumed that Rivera had been fatally injured.

This chain of events ignited the crowd surrounding the store, with observers making comparisons to the rampant lynching of the South. The crowd grew, and many insisted that the police share news regarding the fate of the boy. Some entered the store to investigate, but the police pushed them out and “told them that it was none of their business.” This only galvanized the resolve of the growing crowd to discover what had happened to Rivera. Rumors rippled through Harlem that an African American boy had been lynched.

A group of men took over a corner near the store for the purpose of holding a public meeting. When the police told them to leave, they gathered in front of the store itself. Before the meeting began, someone threw a missile into the shop, breaking the front window. The police made unsuccessful attempts to disperse the crowd, which moved to the other side of the street where another speaker addressed the throng. The police began arresting people on the charge of “unlawful assemblage.” This only increased the fury of the group, which had grown and was becoming more disorderly. As onlookers joined the fray, the movement gained momentum. “A fever of excitement” gripped the crowd, and some began breaking shop windows and looting.

114 Grimshaw, A Social History, 125.
115 Ibid.
116 Ibid., 127.
Intensifying the riot, two groups, the “Young Liberators” and the “Young Communist League,” circulated leaflets alleging the murder of Rivera. The Communist League branded the conflict as a class-based struggle. This framing might have contributed to the fact that the crowds mainly attacked property rather than persons. The Mayor’s Commission on Conditions in Harlem, which investigated the causes and consequences of the 1935 riot, concluded that “[P]eople seized property when there was no possible use which it would serve.” The Commission observed that the rioters “acted as if there were a chance to seize what rightfully belonged to them, but had long been withheld.”

The vitriol that Harlemites felt towards property is revealing. The white-owned buildings that, in their suffocating dilapidation, had blocked out the sun and contaminated the air, had forced children into the streets and facilitated the spread of disease and the multiplication of vermin, were the focus of Harlem’s violence.

It had not taken much to energize the people to take action. Arrest for juvenile delinquency, like that committed by Lino Rivera, was not unusual or even unwarranted. On March 19, the arrest of Rivera happened to be the spark necessary to ignite the tinderbox that was Harlem in 1935. The Mayor’s Commission argued in its report that “[T]he very susceptibility which the people in the community showed toward this rumor--which was more or less vague, depending upon the circumstances under which it was communicated--was due to the feeling of insecurity produced by years of unemployment and deep-seated

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117 Grimshaw, A Social History, 125.
resentment against the many forms of discrimination which they had suffered as a racial minority.”¹¹⁸

The riot ended in the early morning hours of March 20. Three African Americans had been killed, nearly sixty were injured, and $200 million in property damage was reported.¹¹⁹ While Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia created the Commission on Conditions in Harlem to address the grievances of Harlemites, little was done in the aftermath of the riot. Less than a decade later, another riot would shake Harlem, and many more would follow during the civil rights years and after. Today, Harlem’s struggle with place, race, and identity continues.


Epilogue: “You see, I told you they didn’t plant those trees for us.”

A line can be drawn from accessibility to quality public space—areas created with the expressed intent of facilitating recreation, relaxation, and social or political gatherings—to the measure of equality felt by members of a community. As this work has shown, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Harlem was not the beneficiary of such space. Rather, Harlemites were forced to assemble in streets, on sidewalks, and on stoops. Limits on the availability and accessibility of public spaces affected the political, social, physical, and economic lives of Harlemites in the early twentieth century.

Accessible and quality public space is essential to a democratic society. Even in this digital age, where public discourse is increasingly taking place on social media platforms rather than the public square, such spaces remain necessary to a robust and vibrant democracy. In a democracy, public space “makes scrutiny of the powerful easier, and...provides symbolic cues that signal the importance” of political decisions.\(^{120}\) Demonstrating feelings of dissent or support is a vital element of the democratic process, and even when the seeds of such demonstrations may be planted on Twitter or Facebook, movements germinate and grow in the public sphere in the form of marches or protests. Recent movements such as Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and the Million Woman March on Washington are evidence of the contemporary relevance and necessity of public space to the health of a democracy. However, the emergence of Black Lives Matter has underscored how one’s experience while in public space is often determined by his or her

race. This example demonstrates continuity in the existence and use of public space for New Yorkers of color in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Indeed, as Du Bois argued, black bodies in public spaces were coded as problems, and this perception persists today.121

This work has argued that the denial of access to quality public space in the early twentieth century had profound social and political effects on Harlem’s residents. The dearth of both public and private space had significant implications on civil rights, and inaccessibility to such space had a fundamental and basic impact on Harlem’s residents between 1900 and 1935. Harlemites were forced to live in conditions that afforded very little personal space, a state that was not unique to the neighborhood. In other parts of the city, this situation was ameliorated because public spaces served as extensions to livable space. However, for black and brown people in Harlem, missing units of livable space were not replaced by quality public space. Though public space existed in the city in the form of parks, playgrounds, and plazas, people of color living in Harlem were barred from taking advantage of these spaces because of racial discrimination. Rioting in 1900 helped to create these conditions, while the events of 1935 were a response to them.

Riots continued the shake Harlem throughout the twentieth century. These eruptions were reactions to a variety of economic and political grievances, all of them circling around a central pillar of racial denigration, and all exacerbated by the physical state of largely black neighborhoods. Conditions in Harlem continued to decline in the years following World War II. As Jonathan Gill observes, while reasons for Harlem’s

121 George Yancy, Black Bodies, White Gazes: the Continuing Significance of Race in America (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 76.
deterioration in the second half of the twentieth century abound, “changes in the structure of New York City’s economy” was the most influential factor in the neighborhood’s downward trajectory. A drop in unskilled manufacturing jobs coupled with racial prejudice meant that Harlem’s black residents possessed fewer and fewer opportunities for upward social mobility. As un- or underemployment spiked, drug and alcohol abuse proliferated and participation in gangs rose. Gill points out that in the early 1960s, “a quarter of all businesses were bars and liquor stores, almost all of them white owned” and there were “ninety-three funeral homes but no museums.” Such conditions persisted through the 1980s.

The mid-1980s saw the start of Harlem’s revival. Harlem’s historic brownstones were well-preserved because of “fortuitous neglect,” and presented an opportunity for a new wave of affluent residents to move uptown. Real estate developers began buying Harlem brownstones for a few hundred thousand dollars, then renovating and flipping the homes for millions. Gentrification in Harlem meant eviction and harassment for the neighborhood’s long-time residents, who were kept out of the market “not by their incomes but by racism.” City and federal programs sought to provide support for Harlemites during this transition. In 1994, Harlem was identified as an Empowerment Zone, meaning the “area would be eligible for more than $100 million in federal development funds and $250 million in tax credits, as well as help in running programs devoted to job training and

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123 Ibid., 437.
creation, small business assistance, and support for cultural organizations.” However, the greed of those profiting from the revitalized real estate market proved powerful opposition to any efforts to support lower income Harlemites. The tension between personal and public space as related to social equality persists today.

A New York Times editorial from May 2016 entitled “The End of Black Harlem,” discusses the rapid changes the neighborhood has experienced in the past few decades and the implication those changes have had for the black community. According to the article, while gentrification has helped to “spruce the place up,” it has also led to the displacement of many low-income residents who have called Harlem home for generations. Rising rents and the razing of historic buildings have fundamentally changed both the physical and demographic character of Harlem. Author Michael Henry Adams writes that “Harlem is being remade, upgraded and transformed, just for them, for wealthier white people.”

When compared to the events of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there is a grim symmetry about what is happening in Harlem today. Its location attracted affluent white people in the late 1800s, displacing the poor black farmers who were already settled there, just as the recent influx of so-called “urban pioneers” is forcing out longtime black residents. In the early 1900s, when rents became more affordable because of a housing glut and black families began moving into the neighborhood, there was a concerted effort by the white community to keep Harlem white. Similarly, calls to end rent subsidies, which allow lower income residents to stay in their homes, grow as more and more upper-

124 Gill, Harlem, 439.

middle-class gentrifiers populate Harlem. Although by the 1930s Harlem was widely acknowledged as a black neighborhood, because of its location in Manhattan, this was a tenuous claim that is still being challenged today.

The current demographic shift in Harlem suggests a circular nature to the history of public and private space in the neighborhood. Adams challenges the argument that the present resentment felt towards black Harlemites by white gentrifiers “isn’t about race, but about wealth and social class” by contending that in Harlem, these two are more often one in the same. Newcomers paying market rates for their housing begrudge the presence of low-income families occupying the same public and private space. This resentment, coupled with the avarice of real estate developers, has forced many longtime Harlem residents to relocate. In his article, As James Weldon Johnson observed in Black Manhattan, “[T]he question inevitably arises: Will the Negroes of Harlem be able to hold it?” While Johnson asked this question in 1930, the same could be asked in 2017.

Tellingly, Adams writes of an experience he had while protesting the changes gentrification is bringing to Harlem. He encountered a young black man who asked after the objectives of the protest. When Adams explained the purpose of the demonstration, the young man turned to his friend, saying “[Y]ou see, I told you they didn’t plant those trees for us.” In reflecting on this exchange, Adams writes, “[I]t was painful to realize how even a kid could see in every new building, every historic renovation, every boutique clothing shop — indeed in every tree and every flower in every park improvement — not a life-enhancing benefit, but a harbinger of his own displacement.” In this way, the quality of public space available to this young man is contingent on the racial makeup of his
neighborhood. Whether this public space is implicitly accessible to him remains in question.

In *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, philosopher George Yancy argues that black people suffer in a “real world that is structurally dominated by white terror, white injustice, white microaggressions, white power.” He maintains that “the deeply violent and tragic encounters faced by Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Eric Harris, Renisha McBride, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Jordan Davis, and so many others, are inextricably linked to the hegemony and power of the white gaze.” Yancy echoes the words of W.E.B. Du Bois—that a black body in public space is expected to be invisible. Many of the men and women Yancy lists experienced fatal violence while in public space, largely because of the color of their skin. There exists a vital intersection between public space in a community—it accessibility, quality, and usage—and the equal and fair treatment experienced by those living in that community. Today, Harlem is undergoing revitalization to its public space, but history shows that public space is not always intended for the public. Decisions around the shape and use of public space can determine whether a community values inclusion, democratic exchange, and the physical and mental well-being of its members. Harlem, and more widely New York City, is again at a moment when such values are being tested.

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Images:

Figure 1:

Figure 2:

Figure 3:
Figure 4:  
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Figure 5:  

Figure 6:  
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Figure 8:  
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Figure 9:  
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Figure 10:

Figure 11:

Figure 12: