

Introduction

Around 123rd Street, an enormous luxury high-rise is going up. The people of the neighborhood have scrawled, in white paint, on the walls of the construction site: Where will we live? For Harlem is an exceedingly valuable chunk of real estate and the state and the city and the real-estate interests are reclaiming the land and urban renewaling—or gentrifying—the niggers out of it.
—James Baldwin, “Whose Harlem Is This, Anyway?” 1986

In the summer of 1900, a race riot in the Tenderloin district of New York City set the tone for the relationships among blacks, whites, and the police in Harlem and the city at large for the remainder of the twentieth century. On August 12, at Forty-First Street and Eighth Avenue, police officer Robert J. Thorpe, in civilian clothes, attempted to arrest May Enoch, a black woman, he believed to be “soliciting.”¹ Arthur Harris, her common-law husband, ran to her aid, unaware that the white aggressor was a policeman. Officer Thorpe struck Harris with a club, and Harris retaliated with a penknife, fatally wounding Thorpe. On August 15 and then the following day (the day of Thorpe’s funeral), police and white gangs wreaked havoc on black populated streets and passersby throughout the Tenderloin district. These white mobs—comprised of civilians and police officers—attacked black pedestrians from Thirty-Fourth Street to Forty-Second Street along Broadway, Seventh, and Eighth Avenues. “They [police] ran with the crowds in pursuit of their prey; they took defenseless men who ran to them for protection and threw them to the rioters, and in many cases they beat and clubbed men and women more brutally than the mob did,” noted Frank Moss, who compiled a report of the riot.² Many blacks promptly armed themselves; the black elite trusting to a more pacific approach, formed the Citizens’ Protective League. The CPL requested Mayor Robert A. Van Wyck’s protection and cooperation, and he authorized the Police Board to investigate the police department. The Police Board only legitimized its officers’ actions. In each case, the state—the police, the mayor, and the police board—failed to protect black citizens’ rights. As Moss explained bluntly, “the ‘investigation’ was a palpable sham.”³ White civilians and the police doubly attacked the black community during the 1900 racial conflagration. None-

theless, the 1901 police report stated that the police's "prompt and vigorous action . . . kept the situation under control."⁴ In New York City, the police and white dailies invariably incriminated the black community, legitimating the targeting of blacks as well as police aggression.⁵ Black New Yorkers' violent encounters with civilian and police violence during the race riot of 1900, as well as entrenched overcrowding and landlord exploitation in the Tenderloin and then San Juan Hill, engendered the migration to Harlem.

In 1986, a year before he died, James Baldwin, Harlem native and expatriate writer explained that he was "in distress—but not in despair." His beloved Harlem was undergoing, again, a physical and demographic transformation wrought by rapid increases in real estate property values and rent. Harlemites' response to gentrification in the late 1980s mirrored the initial black hegira to Harlem more than eight decades before—exhibiting blacks' self-determination and dedication to creating and maintaining control over their community. Black people have always been fighting for Harlem. That they comprised the majority of the neighborhood's residents never precluded whites from contesting blacks' proprietary claim on the neighborhood. Despite white control over Harlem residential and commercial real estate then and now, blacks have persistently demanded that their community rights take priority. As Baldwin opined, "black people" sustained a resiliency and an integrity that "managed to survive White sympathy." While blacks queried where they would live, Baldwin argued that the "question is as old as our presence here, and every generation has had to deal with it." As if writing to himself, he asserted "each generation has had to look out on this dangerous and lonely place and try to invest it with coherence—striving to make it my home." This tradition of black New Yorkers investing the neighborhood of Harlem with coherence began in the early twentieth century in the aftermath of the race riot of 1900.⁶

In the pages that follow, I tell the story of black politics and community rights in Harlem during the New Negro era. Between the turn of the twentieth century and the Great Depression, as Harlem transformed from a white to a black neighborhood, I argue, black's grassroots activism around local issues challenged various manifestations of racial injustice and raised the racial and political consciousness of the black community.⁷ While blacks agreed with the claim that Harlem belonged to them, they often disagreed about whose vision of Harlem should take precedence—in ways that contributed to intraracial conflict as well as racial solidarity. Harlem grassroots activism, which consisted of neighborhood campaigns, fleeting alliances, and debates held on the streets and in the district's major black weeklies and New Negro journals, expanded and invigorated the black public sphere. By the Great Depression,

Harlemites had forged a dynamic political culture and infrastructure from which they launched a mass protest movement in the 1930s and 1940s.

Since the 1980s, historians of the urban North have effectively demonstrated that blacks built communities rather than ghettos during the first three decades of the twentieth century and, more significantly, that the black working class and its mainly southern culture shaped not only the community-building process but also black labor campaigns to desegregate industrial labor markets and trade unions during the 1930s and 1940s.⁸ While *Whose Harlem Is This, Anyway?*, like much of the recent scholarship, foregrounds the political agency of the black community, this book also situates community formation within the context of northern racism. In so doing, I endeavor to draw a balance between the salience of everyday and institutionalized forms of white supremacy and human agency that the community-building model employs. To do this, I also build on recent work on black New York and the urban North that has complicated our understanding of racial violence, crime, and social reform during the period before Great Depression. This scholarship has helped me understand the cultural and social world that black migrants confronted as they aspired to build their lives anew in the North; collectively, this scholarship demonstrates how the police and the carceral state criminalized black women and men in both popular culture and social science scholarship, barred them from preventive institutions and welfare agencies, and targeted and brutalized them in public and private urban spaces. This project zeroes in on the prominence of white racial violence and police violence as part of the everyday experience of Harlemites, and how the black community responded to these civilian and state-sanctioned forms of ordinary violence over the course of time.⁹

Black politics in the urban North, especially Harlem, generally revolved around the emergence of the New Negro movement—symbolized by the radical journalism and labor activism of socialist and labor leader A. Phillip Randolph and the black nationalism and Pan Africanism of Marcus Garvey—during and after the Great War. The New Negro movement represented a shift from the ideas and politics of “Old Negro” leaders, such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington.¹⁰ According to this “grand narrative” of the New Negro movement, by the early 1920s, New Negro politics declined as civil rights organizations redirected their attention to cultivating black arts and letters in what would become the Negro Renaissance. In the last decade or so, scholars have situated the New Negro movement and cultural politics outside of Harlem. This new research agenda has signaled a departure from what I call New York exceptionalism—the proposition that the city of New York and the neighborhood of Harlem were the epicenter of black intellec-

tual and cultural politics. These historians tell the stories of New Negroes in Chicago, Elaine, Arkansas, Paris, and London, and more specifically of Garveyites in the rural and urban South. This scholarship persuasively demonstrates that Harlem neither represented nor harbored the whole of the political and cultural activities comprising the Negro Renaissance and the New Negro movement.¹¹

Whose Harlem? similarly centers on community building and challenges New York exceptionalism. By foregrounding “local people” and neighborhood issues, this book alters the chronology of black politics in the urban North in the twentieth century. First, this work situates the beginning of Harlem’s political history before the Great Migration and the Great War, thereby locating Harlem politics in the specificity of community formation. Black community rights began with black New Yorkers’ efforts to transform the neighborhood of Harlem into a black metropolis in the aftermath of the 1900 race riot in the Tenderloin. Second, this work expands the spectrum of black politics beyond the organizational and discursive politics of Garvey, Randolph, and other intellectuals and artists usually associated with the New Negro movement. Thus, this book demonstrates not only that Harlemites engaged in racial consciousness-raising political activity before World War I, but also that they built upon the New Negro politics in *urban* and *social spaces* during and after the war. *Whose Harlem?* spotlights black grassroots activism around local issues—work and unionization, high rents and housing conditions, leisure life and vice activity, and police brutality and self-defense; it also maps the development of blacks’ efforts to establish their community rights during the first three decades of the twentieth century.

By situating Harlem’s political history in black struggles for racial autonomy and broadening the range of black political activity before the Great Depression, this book sheds light on the making of the black freedom movement in the North in the early twentieth century. Historians have explained the emergence of black mass protest in the 1930s and 1940s as either an outgrowth of New Negro activism during and after World War I or in terms of the political opportunities that the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the New Deal created for black communities and black activists in the North. However, this scholarship has yet to explicate the incongruence between the organizational and discursive politics of the New Negro intellectuals and the coalition-oriented and collective action-based politics of the black community during the Depression and World War II eras. *Whose Harlem?* demonstrates how black activism for community rights in the first three decades of the twentieth century formed a political infrastructure, giving rise to a black politics anchored in black institutions and receptive to forging coalitions.

tions across the political spectrum. By the 1930s, “new crowd” black activists, as historian Beth Bates has detailed, had begun to employ more aggressive forms of protests, such as labor strikes, and in black metropolises across the urban North, mobilized black communities boycotted local white-owned establishments that refused to employ blacks and waged rent strikes to challenge exploitive landlords. While these various forms of black protest were on a larger scale and more sustained than ever before, they were “predicated,” as sociologist Charles Payne describes the organizing tradition in Greenwood, Mississippi, “on the activism of an earlier, socially invisible generation” that came of age in Harlem before the Great Depression.¹²

Community Rights and Community Politics

Harlem grassroots activism emerged from blacks’ endeavors to realize their community rights. In this study, I conceptualize *community rights* as the community ideals, expectations, and objectives that blacks held for Harlem. While the struggle for community rights represented a form of grassroots activism, it was not a full-fledged social movement. Rather, it was a goal-oriented movement that belonged to what civil rights activist Bob Moses described as a *community-organizing* tradition, which served the purpose of long-term community development and community control.¹³ Moses identified another tradition, as well—the community-mobilizing tradition—and *Whose Harlem?* seeks to delineate the process by which blacks transitioned from community organizing to community mobilizing. Paraphrasing Moses, Payne writes, the latter “focused on large-scale, relatively short-term public events. This is the tradition of Birmingham, Selma, the March on Washington, the tradition best symbolized by the work of Martin Luther King.” In that sense, community rights activism can be distinguished from northern civil rights activism, broadly understood as a movement to effect antidiscrimination legislation in the arenas of housing, employment, education, and the like. During the period under study, from 1900 to the Great Depression, Harlemites’ strivings for community rights were often an expression of New Negro politics. Community rights was both a discursive formation and an assembly of political acts, articulating black self-determination as a measure of the black community’s aspirations for racial and neighborhood autonomy. Yet as historian Davarian Baldwin notes, “not every individual [or political act] . . . embodied the ideals of the New Negro.”¹⁴ The politics of respectability, for example, operating sometimes as a form of community discipline, was rooted in anti-racist and self-determinative sensibilities. *Community politics*, on the other hand, refers to the aggregate of blacks’ individual and collective struggles

for both “socially meaningful power” and community rights in Harlem and around the city. Harlem community politics represents the combined ways, as historian Robin D. G. Kelley writes, that “black working people struggled and survived without direct links to” established organizations, as well as how New Negro activists, neighborhood organizations, and reformers influenced the social, political, and economic conditions of the black community.¹⁵

Whose Harlem? considers individual, collective, and organized forms of political activity by focusing on the range of blacks’ responses to neighborhood issues. Hence, this work pays close attention to the ways that black institutions, black occupied spaces, and public and private spaces function as sites of contestation and consciousness raising as a means for understanding New Negro politics in urban and social spaces. In different ways, the often segregated spaces of black institutions and urban life contributed to the making of an *oppositional consciousness*—that is, according to sociologists Aldon Morris and Naomi Braine, a mental state that “prepares members of an oppressed group to act to undermine, reform or overthrow a system of human domination.” Black oppositional consciousness, I argue, developed in public and private spaces as well as in *agency-laden institutions*, which Morris defines as “those institutions, often long-standing, developed by potential challenging groups that house cultural and organizational resources that can be mobilized to launch collective action.” Collectively these semi-autonomous institutions, such as churches, reform agencies, and even cultural and leisure spaces like nightclubs and speakeasies, reinforced and restored black humanity.¹⁶

Black interracial and intraracial conflict often revolved around contests over the control of public and private space within and outside of Harlem. Harlemites used the streets, apartments, restaurants, theaters, and other spaces for work and pleasure, broadening the spectrum of historical agents in black urban politics. I read the acts of movie projectionists, tenants, sex workers, passersby, and street orators, among others in public and private spaces, as “audible texts” that speak to black women’s and men’s “values, ambitions, and frustrations.”¹⁷ This approach more effectively gauges the power dynamics between the less powerful and the powerful, demonstrating especially how the powerful “interpret, refine, and respond to the thoughts and actions of the oppressed,” including black political actors unaffiliated with organizations.¹⁸ These struggles over public and private space also fueled interracial, intraracial, and ideological alliances and coalitions along gender and class lines in Harlem. Many of these alliances were fragile and short-lived; nonetheless, they played a significant role in initiating political action and establishing networks in the black community. This political dynamic foregrounds James Baldwin’s timely query—whose Harlem is this, anyway?—which rhetorically

signifies the diversity of political activity in Harlem, the intraracial tensions that the diversity engendered, and, more significantly, the specific ways these tensions shaped black political struggles in New York City before the Great Depression.

The Making of Grassroots Activism

Harlem community politics emerged in the cauldron of both interracial conflict and intraracial clashes before World War I. Harlem's political culture was the product of community formation as well as transformations in blacks' political consciousness engendered by local political activity. Well before they constituted the majority of the Harlem's population, black New Yorkers and migrants had boldly claimed Harlem as their home. The grassroots struggle for community rights began immediately after the turn of the twentieth century as a steady stream of blacks searched for better housing and safer living conditions in the aftermath of the 1900 riot. Beginning around 1904, a coterie of black realtors, black tenants, and black churches waged a campaign for housing in Harlem. At the same time, black Harlemites launched a range of local initiatives to transform their new neighborhood into a black metropolis. By the 1920s, Harlem community politics had evolved into a grassroots struggle that employed a range of political tactics connected with early campaigns for community control and self-determination. At the end of the decade, these overlapping struggles against exploitive landlords and police brutality, along with community efforts to assert respectability and economic autonomy, comprised the fulcrum of Harlem's political culture.

Throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century, blacks remained at the bottom rung of the city's economic ladder. By contrast with other large cities, small-scale shops dominated New York City's industrial economy. Black New Yorkers competed against native and ethnic whites in industries that were controlled by contractors and subcontractors from the same ethnic groups and anchored in the same neighborhoods and institutional lives as their competition. Overwhelmingly disadvantaged in the labor market, black men toiled in the service and transportation sectors, and black women found jobs as domestics, garment workers, and launderers. Blacks also struggled to build successful race businesses in Harlem, where whites either refused to rent commercial spaces to blacks or charged them exorbitant rates. In spite of blacks comprising the majority of the district's residents and consumers, whites controlled Harlem's commercial sector.

Thus, before the Great War, the black metropolis was a black consumers' paradise where black and white proprietors competed for black patrons.

Harlemites delighted in the black metropolis's cabarets, saloons, theaters, and other places of public amusements.¹⁹ Much more than recreational places for dance, drink, and, sometimes, sex, these spaces for leisure pursuits empowered blacks to take back their bodies from alienating work. Blacks in Harlem found and enjoyed "congregations," places they endowed with cultural significance and meaning. Congregation, as historian Earl Lewis describes, enabled blacks to "gather their cultural bearings to mold urban" space—to create a sense of community rooted not only in blacks' shared experiences but also in their shared aspirations and expectations for Harlem. But Harlem's consumer marketplace also favored black consumers. Interracial and intraracial competition among Harlem proprietors and the range of commodities and services offered politicized black patrons, bringing their consumer rights into focus and calling attention to local proprietors' dependence on their business. These tensions between Harlemites' consumer power and white proprietors' commercial dominance would set the stage for black consumer and civil rights campaigns in the 1920s and beyond.²⁰

Harlem was no refuge from white violence. As in the Tenderloin and San Juan Hill districts in 1905, so in Harlem in 1907, 1909, and 1911, blacks fiercely battled white civilians, youth gangs, and the police in the saloons and on the streets. Whether appealing to the police commissioner to intervene or arming themselves for self-protection, black New Yorkers endeavored to shield themselves and their communities from police violence. These individual and collective forms of black expression and resistance in public and private spaces triggered coordinated and organizational responses from the black community and jump-started Harlem's social reform movement for community respectability. Concerned about the reputation and the moral fiber of the neighborhood, black spokespeople and the *New York Age*, the city's major black weekly, contended that they had the community right to establish a respectable neighborhood and enforce upright public and private behavior. These endeavors for respectability emerged from late-nineteenth and early twentieth century campaigns of black ministers, reformers, and citizens, who formed uplift organizations to accommodate the expansion of the black population during the pre-World War I migration and the steady growth of the black population in Harlem. Thus along with black churches, organizations like Victoria Earle Matthews' White Rose Mission (1897) and the National Urban League (1911), sought to equip black New Yorkers and newcomers with vocational training and welfare resources and to modify black behavior in order to ensure Harlem's reputation as a neighborhood of respectability and law and order.

The battle for better housing did not end with black occupation of Harlem residential spaces. Harlemites in 1916 launched a community-wide struggle for lower rents against exploitive landlords. The stream of black New Yorkers moving to Harlem before World War I became a flood of migrants coming from the South and the Caribbean during the war and significantly raised the demand for housing in a period of low residential building growth. With a surplus of renters, black and white landlords charged blacks higher rents than whites and used different methods to encourage, or sometimes to force, whites to move in order to exploit the ever-growing market of black tenants. For several winter months, black women led a housing campaign and organized tenants to decrease rents and ameliorate housing conditions. The tenants held mass meetings at local churches and schools, which had the effect of revealing the complicity of black real estate agents in the exploitation of Harlem residents. This community-wide campaign represented the culmination of Harlem's grassroots activism during the World War I era.

The 1920s saw a maturation of Harlem political culture and racial consciousness, as the black public sphere, previously led by the conservative *New York Age*, expanded to include a greater array of political actors and discourses. During that turbulent decade, Harlemites' attempts to realize their community rights engendered a myriad of political struggles over labor, housing, vice activity, and police brutality. While Harlemites continued to engage in everyday resistance, they pursued more organized forms of protest and employed a wider assortment of political tactics. Before and during the war, reformist organizations like the Urban League, periodicals like the *New York Age*, and New Negro activists such as A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen tried to open trade unions to black workers. By the mid-1920s, black labor activists individually and jointly courted the American Federation of Labor. The New York Urban League, the New Negro socialist Frank Crosswaith, and other black labor activists formed the Trade Union Committee for the Organization for Negro Workers in 1925. Black projectionists a year later staged a strike against the Lafayette Theater in Harlem, anticipating the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns of the Depression era. These coordinated endeavors among neighborhood organizations, black radicals and liberals, and black weeklies represented the community's effort both to organize Harlemites around labor issues and to leverage their consumer power to bring about community rights by pressuring white businesses to take seriously the economic aspirations of the black community.

Building on wartime tenancy struggles, Harlemites participated in a city-wide campaign for lower rents and political representation throughout the

1920s. During the Great War, the building construction industry had redirected its resources to wartime mobilization, resulting in widespread housing shortages across the entire city. In 1919, the State of New York enacted a series of laws known as the Emergency Rent Laws to protect tenants vulnerable to rent increases after the war. Black tenants, civic organizations, and black churches organized local meetings to educate the community about the new laws and their rights as tenants. Tenants, empowered by community organizing, challenged exploitive landlords in the courts. The Harlem Tenants League, a communist front, and a cadre of black journalists and politicians in the late 1920s mobilized Harlemites to extend the Emergency Rent Laws. Through Harlem's "vote black" efforts, led by the *New York Amsterdam News*, blacks voted in a slate of black Republicans to Harlem assembly districts 19 and 21, and in 1929, the assemblymen passed new housing legislation aimed at protecting their tenants.

In Prohibition era New York City, cultural politics consisted of interracial and intraracial struggles over urban private and public space in Harlem. The expansion of white-controlled leisure resorts and the invasion of whites in Harlem in the mid-1920s threatened blacks' autonomy in places of public recreation and challenged blacks' claim that Harlem belonged to them. Both white and black proprietors rapidly reconfigured Harlem night spots, where blacks had found pleasure and cultural rejuvenation before Prohibition, for the pleasure of white consumers. Compounding this move, whites' objectification and exoticization of black people and culture exasperated many Harlemites. As Levi Hubert, a contemporary, claimed derisively, white people's appreciation for black creativity amounted to "the applause given to a dancing dog."²¹ In an attempt to reclaim their autonomy, Harlemites refashioned residential spaces for pay, play, and pleasure. With the expansion of Harlem's geography of vice and leisure in public and private spaces, black spokespersons—journalists, reformers, and religious leaders—targeted private and public leisure sites as a moral and an urban problem that had to be rectified to restore community respectability. Harlemites concerns about respectability were followed by blacks' demands for ensuring the safety of their children and the privacy of their homes. Overall, blacks' sundry and competing strategies to control black community life highlight the economic vulnerability of Harlem and obstacles black residents faced to reclaim Harlem as their own.

In the aftermath of World War I, vigilance over Harlem's black public sphere combined with individual and collective acts of self-protection exposed and challenged patterns of police brutality. While the entire community loathed the belligerence of the police, various factions within the black

public sphere debated about the appropriate response to the unlawful acts of police violence in the early 1920s. The *New York Age* treated police brutality on a case-by-case basis, while the *New York Amsterdam News* and New Negro activists treated it as a form of institutionalized racism. In the middle of the decade, the act of assaulting prisoners under custody to force a confession or admit guilt, known as the “third degree,” held the attention and raised the furor of Harlem’s black public sphere. Ubiquitous cases of police malfeasance, especially the failure to address blacks’ complaints about police brutality, inaugurated a rebellion against the New York Police Department in the streets of Harlem in late July 1928. This so-called “near riot” represented the confluences of blacks’ ire towards the daily and the decades’ long indignities and invectives of the police department, as well as the unending occurrences of ill treatment, economic racism, and housing exploitation they endured in Harlem and across the city.

Whose Harlem Is This, Anyway? is organized thematically, with each chapter covering the period from 1900 to 1930. Chapter 1 delineates the making of Harlem as a political community. Harlem’s political culture derived partly from the cultural and religious institutions of the black enclaves in the Tenderloin and San Juan Hill districts. This chapter argues that through the process of community formation, blacks’ strivings for community control before World War I gave rise to the struggle for Harlem community rights. Chapter 2 examines the roles of New York City’s political economy, labor unionism, and black labor activism in Harlem from the postwar era to the Great Depression. Chapter 3 chronicles the deterioration of Harlem tenements, and tenants’ endeavors to reduce rents and improve living conditions. The 1916 housing campaign led by black women and the black tenant movement to extend the Emergency Rent Laws in the late 1920s frame this chapter. By mapping leisure and vice activity in Harlem apartments, chapter 4 highlights the intraracial and interracial conflicts and cooperation engendered by the debate over the proper use of public and private leisure space in Harlem in the 1920s. Chapter 5 narrates the various small-scale episodes of white civil violence and police brutality in black Manhattan in general and Harlem in particular from 1900 to 1928; this chapter focuses on the range of black responses to state and civil societal violence and community debate on police brutality and the efficacy of self-defense.

Throughout the 1920s, Harlemites worked together as a community to combat exploitative black realtors, unionize black projectionists, and sponsor public forums to establish their community rights. Harlem grassroots activism grew out of a defiant black public sphere and institutional and associational activism. Harlemites engaged in labor and tenant protest, community

organizing, litigation, letter-writing campaigns, and quotidian forms of resistance. Through these efforts, blacks established a community politics that challenged racial injustice in Harlem and forged a political infrastructure that was foundational for black political and radical activity throughout the 1930s and 1940s and beyond.