



The Mecca of Black America

Hardly four square miles, Harlem has been on New York's mind for four centuries

By Edward Kosner
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SAVE PRINT TEXT

The first tourists found the neighborhood people surprisingly attractive—tall and copper-skinned with shining black hair, but excitable and “stupid as garden dubs.” The visitors tried to kidnap two of them. The residents thought the outsiders were dumb, too, as well as short, weak, hairy and smelly. Recognizing marks when they saw them, the Indians sold the Dutch the whole island of Mannahatta—which they never thought they owned—for the equivalent of \$2,000. Then another band of hustlers sold the same real estate to the newcomers again. It happened a third time, too. And so began the long fraught engagement of Harlem with white folks.

Hardly four square miles, Harlem has been on New York's mind for four centuries. Nowhere else in America—and rarely in the world—has so much artistic and political energy and so much anguish been so concentrated in so confined a space.

Everyone from Aaron Burr to Malcolm X has lived there, along with Louis Armstrong, James Baldwin, Frank Costello, Father Devine, W.E.B. DuBois, Duke Ellington, Ralph Ellison, Marcus Garvey, George Gershwin, Alexander Hamilton, Billie Holiday, Harry Houdini, Langston Hughes, Joe Louis, Groucho Marx, Willie Mays, Arthur Miller, Charlie Parker, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Paul Robeson, Bayard Rustin and Fats Waller.



Speculators constructed rowhouses in the middle of empty fields along West 133rd Street in the 1880s. NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Ever since the 1920s, Harlem has been facile shorthand for black America, but for all their vivid history in the neighborhood, African-Americans were actually latecomers to its tenements, neat brownstone rows and gaudy mansions.

The Dutch still set the tone in the dozy farm village north of the city for a century after the English turned New Amsterdam into New York in 1664. Immigrant Germans, Irish, Italians, Cubans and Puerto Ricans followed. The Jews moved up from the Lower East Side before World War I. (My father, who grew up near Harlem's Mount Morris Park, used to brag about boyhood errands delivering bakery rolls filled with cocaine to the gangster “Gyp the Blood,” aka Harry Horowitz.) When blacks began renting in the blocks from West 133rd Street to West 135th Street in the 1910s, a group of white Harlemites proposed building a 24-foot-high fence, saying they wanted to keep out “the dark plague.”

More alchemist's cauldron than melting pot, Harlem turned outsiders into insiders: The Dutch became Knickerbocker aristocrats; the British became the WASP Establishment; and the Germans integrated so completely that they disappeared as an ethnic group. The Irish, Italians and Jews prospered and moved away. That left the Latinos, who went on to colonize much of northern Manhattan. It was a different story for the blacks. For them, more often than not, Harlem has been The Big Hard.

The whole epic—from that first encounter in 1609 between Henry Hudson and the Leni Lenape Indians along the river that memorializes him to Columbia University's thrust into the Manhattanville industrial slum in 2010—is told in “Harlem,” Jonathan Gill's panoramic history. An academic and magazine writer, Mr. Gill blends high-density research, political and cultural sophistication, and narrative drive to produce an epic worthy of its fabled subject.

BLACK GOTHAM

By Carla L. Peterson
Yale, 446 pages, \$32

Inevitably, the saga of black Harlem is the most compelling element in Mr. Gill's encyclopedic book. But before he gets to it, he does full justice to the whites—especially the countless scoundrels—who platted the street grid and literally paved the way.

There is the disgraced, decrepit Aaron Burr in the 1830s, long after murdering the squire of Hamilton Grange. Alexander Hamilton's famous house, built on what would become 143rd Street, was subsequently moved twice within Harlem. Burr himself lived in luxury with the notorious widow Eliza Jumel, the richest woman in America, in her mansion 10 blocks or so north. There is Boss Tweed, the corrupt Tammany tiger, and his henchmen, who built Harlem castles in the 1870s with the kickbacks and outright thievery that so inflamed the political cartoonist Thomas Nast. Half a century later and to the east, Ciro Terranova, who hailed from—where else?—Corleone, Sicily, teamed up with “Lupo the Wolf” and Ciro's half-brother, Giuseppe, the “Clutch Hand” Morello, to become the founding fathers of the Italian Mafia. Gyp the Blood Horowitz, “Lefty Louie” Rosenberg and the rest of the Kosher Nostra were not far behind.

So Harlem was never paradise for honest citizens, no matter their race. The first black in Harlem was probably Jan Rodriguez, a Portuguese seaman who washed up in 1613. By 1664, 307 slaves were recorded in the area. By the 1830s, downtown whites were selling off their country places, Mr. Gill writes, because of the growing Afro-American presence.

HARLEM

By Jonathan Gill
Grove, 520 pages, \$29.95

The pattern was to repeat when Southern blacks poured in after World War I. But even as the Harlem Renaissance unleashed an explosion of creativity that still reverberates in American culture, the lives of ordinary people could be a torment. “Long before the stock market crash, black Harlem had become a community in crisis,” writes Mr. Gill, “leading the nation in poverty, crime, overcrowding, unemployment, juvenile delinquency, malnutrition and infant and maternal mortality.” In 1925, the homicide rate in central Harlem was almost twice the city's rate; a decade later it had metastasized to six times the city average.

In this whirl of misery, Harlem politicians—conventional or otherwise—had a habit of winding up in trouble and sometimes behind bars. Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican back-to-Africa promoter who mobilized vast throngs in Harlem, went to federal prison for fraud. Adam Clayton Powell Jr., the charismatic clergyman and pol, was nearly run out of Congress on a rail. Four decades later, the man who defeated him for Harlem's seat, Charles Rangel, was stripped of power by his House colleagues for, among other things, failing to pay his taxes and commandeering four flats in a choice Harlem apartment house.

HARLEM IS NOWHERE

By Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts
Little, Brown, 296 pages, \$24.99

No apologist for radicals, Mr. Gill nonetheless prefers two even more exotic but effective power brokers. One was East Harlem's Rep. Vito Marcantonio, a Depression-era communist in all but party card, who crusaded for the poor of all colors. The other was Bayard Rustin, the ultimate eminence noir, who was the strategist of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's 1963 March on Washington that galvanized the civil-rights movement and ultimately led to better lives for African-Americans wherever they lived.

With its essential focus on Harlem, the Gill book necessarily scants other chapters of African-American life in the city. Carla L. Peterson, who teaches English at the University of Maryland, fills in one of them with “Black Gotham,” her ingenious excavation of the history of her forebears, members of what W.E.B. DuBois would later call the “talented tenth.”

Starting from a few scraps unearthed in a file box at the New York Public Library's Schomburg research center in Harlem and branching out into obscure pharmacists' archives and other forgotten troves, Ms. Peterson painstakingly reconstructs the lost lives of a black “elite”—her term—who flourished in the 1830s in lower Manhattan and then, after vicious anti-black riots in 1834, across the river in Brooklyn.

Peter Guignon, Ms. Peterson's great-great-grandfather, and his son-in-law, Philip White, probably never set foot in Harlem. Their early presence in the city, she writes, “overturns the commonly held notion that New York's black intellectual life started with the New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s,” most of whose major figures came from elsewhere in the U.S. and from the Caribbean. Her kinfolk and their friends, New Yorkers born and bred, “lived downtown in the midst of the city's white population. . . . They were not bohemians or rebels; to the contrary, the held values remarkably similar to white middle-class norms.”

In the mid-1830s, only one in four African-American children went to school. But some of those who did were offered an education that might make today's ambitious private-school parents drool. At the Mulberry Street School, the curriculum included spelling, penmanship, grammar, mathematics, geography, astronomy and Bible studies. Some graduates went on to the Canal Street High School, where they were taught Latin, Greek and other classical subjects.

These schools and other bedrock institutions, like St. Phillip's African Episcopal Church, benefited from the philanthropy of rich whites, especially the Lorillard tobacco family and from John Jay II, the grandson of the first Supreme Court chief justice. In time, the black elite established a flourishing world of literary, musical and intellectual organizations for both men and women. For some, these separate but culturally equal groups represented not self-segregation but self-reliance and independence from their bossy white benefactors.

For all their striving, Ms. Peterson's forebears were subjected to endless humiliations in a racist society. They had to struggle to vote, to be admitted to white professional societies—even to evade “blackbirders” who broke into their homes in pursuit of runaway slaves from the South. And when anti-abolitionist mobs turned on the blacks in the ghastly riot of 1834, the police and their white neighbors stood by while their houses were torched.

Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts is a spiritual descendant of Ms. Peterson's ancestors. She is a Harvard magna cum laude from Houston and a Fulbright scholar with a curriculum vitae crammed with grants who made “A Journey to the Mecca of Black America,” as the subtitle of her impressionistic book, “Harlem Is Nowhere,” puts it. The resulting memoir mixed with social anthropology is at once affected and affecting.

Ms. Rhodes-Pitts takes her title from a 1948 essay by Ralph Ellison, who asked a Harlem man-on-the-street how he was doing and was told: “Oh, man, I'm nowhere.” She pays homage to Ellison and the other members of the black literary pantheon—Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston and James Baldwin—in a long essay that seems recycled from an earlier academic life. Once the lit-crit is out of the way, Ms. Rhodes-Pitts is free to evoke her adopted Harlem in all its thwarted intensity.

Before long, she has introduced a cavalcade of charming oddballs, including L.S. Alexander Gumby (1885-1961), who made it his life's work to compile “Gumby's Negro Scrapbook” or “Negroana,” a library-paste-and-loose-leaf-paper compilation of thousands of clippings that he had accumulated, indexed and sub-indexed according to a system only Gumby could fathom. Another lost original is Raven Chanticleer (1928-2002), the creator of Harlem's first and only wax museum. As Ms. Rhodes-Pitts shows, this tradition continues today. We meet Sister Doris Littlejohn, also known as Pastor Dorcas Lynn, outside the state office building at 125th Street and Seventh Avenue. Sister Doris soon produces a yellow legal pad in which she has written letters to powerful people, like Oprah Winfrey and Bill Gates, about alienation in the community. And then there's the man the author calls The Messenger, who chalks inspirational admonitions on the sidewalks of Lenox Avenue. “LIFE IS NO JOKE. THINK,” reads one. “Try to THINK better so that you can act better,” commands another.

By the time we encounter The Chief, an aging survivor of the black chauvinist African Nationalist Pioneer Movement, it's clear that a subtext of “Harlem Is Nowhere” is that the economic and psychic oppression of Harlem life has driven many of its most gifted citizens around the bend to the wilder shores of prophecy.

“It all comes down to a point that is as simple as it is terrible,” she writes. “It is a fact that closes in on itself, like the mythical serpent that devours its own tail: This is our land that we don't own.”

Indeed, the gaudy gentrification of Harlem spurred by the decade-long economic boom begun during the presidency of future Harlem luminary Bill Clinton, ranks Ms. Rhodes-Pitts and others who protest that outsiders are again thriving while the worthy poor suffer on.

Mr. Gill's “Harlem” provides the numbers behind uptown's latest rebirth. Between 1994 and 2001, more than \$1.2 billion in public and private money was pumped into the area. New condominium towers sprouted, and the value of vintage houses on Strivers' Row and Sugar Hill soared. Mom-and-pop stores on 125th Street and along the great boulevards gave way to national chains. And the black population in the Mecca of Black America plunged—from 88% in 1990 to 80% in 2000 to 40% in 2010.

The flip-side of the long litany of Harlem despair is the nostalgic burnishing of the Harlem Renaissance. The great efflorescence coincided with the Jazz Age boom that led to the collapse of 1929. New York was as racist as ever and not ashamed of it. Blacks were barred from the iconic Cotton Club, where the chorus girls had to be light-skinned (“tall, tan and terrific”) and the great Duke Ellington had to turn out “jungle music” like “Creole Love Call” for them to shimmy to.

Did the very oppressiveness of the times for black writers, musicians and artists somehow concentrate their will and their talent? Or would this extraordinary outpouring of creative energy have been even more remarkable if conditions had been more benign? Certainly Harlem never experienced another cultural revolution to match it.

The next great boom, starting in the 1990s, spawned quite a different aesthetic phenomenon in black New York: the birth of hip-hop. Only two of the early rap stars—Tupac Shakur and Sean “P. Diddy” Combs—were born in Harlem, and Diddy actually grew up in Mount Vernon, N.Y. Run-DMC was the impresario Russell Simmons who Queens kids, Jay-Z came from the sprawling Bedford-Stuyvesant ghetto in Brooklyn. The closest hip-hop came to Harlem was when Public Enemy or another of the new big acts played the Apollo.

The Great Panic of 2008 deflated the most recent Harlem real-estate bubble. But some things never change. Just the other day, 80-year-old Charlie Rangel, censured but unfazed, announced that he would run next year for yet another congressional term, his 22nd. With its gentrified new gloss, Rangel's Harlem is no longer the throbbing heart of black America. It just might be settling into a 21st-century version of its original role as Manhattan's first suburb.

—Mr. Kosner is the author of “It's News to Me,” a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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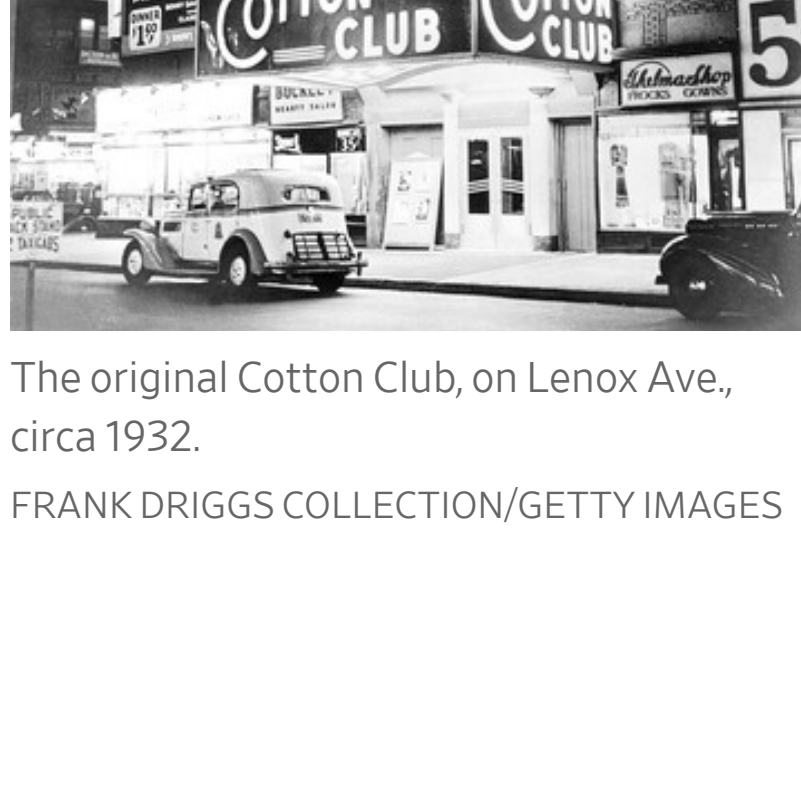
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The original Cotton Club, on Lenox Ave., circa 1932. FRANK RIDGGS COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES

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