

## Harlem, New York: City within a City

Margot Minardi, Humanities 110

“How do you get to Harlem?”

“That’s easy,” he said. “You just keep heading north.”

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

1. I had never seen so many black people against a background of brick buildings, neon signs, plate glass and roaring traffic.... They were everywhere. So many, and moving along with so much tension and noise that I wasn’t sure whether they were about to celebrate a holiday or join in a street fight. There were even black girls behind the counters of the Five and Ten as I passed. Then at the street intersection I had the shock of seeing a black policeman directing traffic—and there were white drivers in the traffic who obeyed his signals as though it was the most natural thing in the world. Sure I had heard of it, but this was *real*. My courage returned. This really was Harlem, and now all the stories which I had heard of the city-within-a-city leaped alive in my mind.... For me this was not a city of realities, but of dreams; perhaps because I had always thought of my life as being confined to the South. And now as I struggled through the lines of people a new world of possibility suggested itself to me faintly, like a small voice that was barely audible in the roar of city sounds. (Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* [New York: Vintage, 1995], 159)
2. The black movement to Harlem by the early twentieth century was only the continuation of a migration in which whites forced blacks northward up the island over two and a half centuries. The first free black settlements in the seventeenth century and the establishment of the African Burial Ground began this trend. With each movement of black people out of an area, new residents erased their history there, sometimes deliberately, other times incidentally. (Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003], 2)
3. In Harlem and throughout the city, blacks rebelliously crossed the color line, demanding equal access to and equal treatment in all places of public accommodations. These everyday acts of opposition were expressions of the politics of dignity.... [Black activists] wanted to extend the treatment they received in their own community beyond Harlem to white-occupied spaces.... Yet white New Yorkers, inflamed about losing Harlem to the black population, denied blacks full access to public places. Furthermore, the relative freedom blacks enjoyed in Harlem and the city in general—particularly their flagrant occupation of the subways, theaters, and restaurants among other spaces—incensed whites and incited them to verbally and physically abuse blacks in public places. Black Harlemites’ dogged commitment to make freedom real in the big city effectively matched whites’, city officials’, and proprietors’ efforts to abridge their civil rights and to maltreat them in public spaces. Blacks rejected whites’ attempts to control urban space. (Shannon King, *Whose Harlem Is This, Anyway? Community Politics and Grassroots Activism during the New Negro Era* [New York: New York University Press, 2015], 33-34)
4. The question naturally arises, “Are the Negroes going to be able to hold Harlem?” If they have been steadily driven northward for the past hundred years and out of less desirable sections, can they hold this choice bit of Manhattan Island?... When colored people do leave Harlem, their homes, their churches, their investments and their businesses, it will be because the land has become so valuable they can no longer afford to live on it. But the date of another move northward is very far in the future. (James Weldon Johnson, “The Making of Harlem,” *Survey Graphic: Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro* [1925; rpt. Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1980], 638)

*A bibliography for this lecture can be found on the course syllabus.*

## Questions for discussion: Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*

The theme for this module on Harlem is “aesthetics and politics.” Hartman locates an aesthetic quality in the everyday lives of her subjects, most of whom are young Black women. How does Hartman’s argument about “beautiful experiments” expand our understanding of aesthetics, politics, and the relationship between them, in and around early twentieth-century Harlem?

Some of the people whom Hartman discusses (such as Gladys Bentley) are well-known Harlem artists, but others are largely unknown individuals, such as Esther Brown, whose story forms the basis for the chapter on “The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner.” What, for Hartman and for us, is at stake in putting Brown’s story into dialogue with more familiar stories of the Harlem Renaissance?

Many scholars of race have analyzed how race is constructed in and through space. In a process some scholars call the “geography of confinement,” racist regimes impede the mobility of members of non-dominant groups, restrict their access to and use of particular spaces, and seek to confine racial minorities into certain controlled spaces (most notably, prisons and other carceral institutions). How do race and space intersect in Hartman’s narrative? You might pay attention here to the different spaces and places in the city through which Hartman’s subjects move (e.g. nightclubs, tenement apartments, city sidewalks, the “women’s court,” the workhouse). How does race operate in each of these spaces? How do each of these spaces shape the racial order of New York City? How does race intersect with other categories of difference—including gender, sexuality, and class—in creating a social and spatial order in New York?

Hartman’s book might itself be called a “beautiful experiment” for the ways in which it plays with conventions of historical narration, documentation, and the relationship between visual and verbal texts. Hartman describes her approach in her introductory “Note on Method.” But since we’re only reading short selections from the book, a few additional notes might help you navigate this reading:

- When text appears in italics or quotation marks, it is a quotation from another source. The sources are listed in the notes, which appear at the back of the reading PDF. It’s worth looking at the notes periodically as you’re reading, especially if you’re curious to know more about a specific argument or piece of evidence.
- The chapter on “Mistah Beauty” is particularly inventive in its construction. In it, Hartman tells the story of entertainer and musician Gladys Bentley as though Bentley’s life were the plot for a movie by producer-director (and novelist) Oscar Micheaux. Brief biographies of both [Bentley](#) and [Micheaux](#) are referenced on the bibliography.
- Hartman does not provide captions for the images she inserts in the text. Some of the images are photographs of well-known figures, some of whom are discussed in the surrounding text and some not: Gladys Bentley on p. 193, comedian Jackie “Moms” Mabley on p. 195, Bahamian dancer and entertainer Paul Meeres on p. 201, singer Billie Holiday on p. 224, Harriet Tubman on p. 231. In other cases the images are historical documents or photographs that Hartman has drawn upon to craft the surrounding narrative.

What effect do each of these authorial choices have on your understanding of the text? How does Hartman use the form and shape of the text to reinforce the argument she is making?

James Weldon Johnson’s “The Making of Harlem” offers a useful overview of how Harlem came to be a Black-majority neighborhood and the center of Black cultural and intellectual life. However, as scholars such as Shannon King and Daniel Matlin (see bibliography for citations) have pointed out, Johnson strove to represent Harlem in a particularly positive light as a “race capital,” and his account might therefore downplay some of the challenges of everyday life for residents of Harlem. How does reading Hartman’s history alongside Johnson’s change how you read Johnson? Does Johnson seem to account for the experiences of someone like Esther Brown?