

**Making Harlem Visible:**  
**Race, Photography and the**  
**American City, 1915-1955**

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### **Abstract**

My thesis is that a critical reading of photographs can make a unique contribution to our understanding of racialised space and the struggle for the legal and symbolic ownership of place within black urban life, specifically in Harlem in the first half of the twentieth century.

As both a 'culture capital' and a ghetto in the popular imagination of the twentieth century, Harlem is a complex and ambiguous place. Located within the grid of the American metropolis but set at a distance by *de facto*, if not *de jure* segregation, Harlem is the paradigm of the black city within a city. Dominance and resistance are expressed spatially at all levels, from the cityscape to the space created by the body. I argue that, in depicting these spaces, photographs can serve as a powerful tool to perceive, imagine and make manifest the complexities of Harlem, exposing the effects of absent white power but also making visible the construction of spaces of resistance.

The **Introduction** outlines the historical and theoretical context and explains the methodology used in the critical readings of photographs that follow.

**Chapter One** looks at Harlem as a distinctive landscape, the paradigmatic black city produced by white power and black resistance.

**Chapter Two** looks at political events on the streets of Harlem, where African Americans write their protest on the urban fabric.

**Chapter Three** looks closely at street life, uncovering how city space is claimed and defended as African Americans become urban and learn to 'know their place'.

**Chapter Four** enters the Harlem apartment, a compromised private space where African Americans have, nevertheless, created a 'home place'.

**Chapter Five** examines the body as it performs in the space of the photographic studio and in the city.

**Chapter Six** brings these themes together in an analysis of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, a photo text about Harlem, as a story of spaces and spatial practices.

**Richard Ings**

**Versions of sections of this thesis have been presented as papers and/or published:**

- 'Strapped Pumps & Black Looks: identity and selfhood in the photographs of James VanDerZee' - presented as a paper to the annual conference of the British Association of American Studies in 1997
- 'Street Ballet/Urban Drama: Harlem Sidewalks in Photography, 1900-1960' - presented as a paper to the *Three Cities Conference*, jointly organised by the Universities of Nottingham and Birmingham in November 1999, and included on the *Three Cities* project website
- 'A Tale of Two Cities: Urban Text and Image in The Sweet Flypaper of Life' - essay included in Maria Balshaw and Liam Kennedy (eds.), *Urban Space and Representation* (London: Pluto Press, 2000)
- "'Here I am": the notion of homeplace in the photography of Harlem' - paper presented to the American Literature & Culture Seminar at the University of London in November 2000
- 'A city within a city: mapping the distinctive territory of "Negro Harlem" through photographs from 1900s to 1950s' - paper presented to seminar at University College London in March 2003
- 'Diminishing into shadow: Gothic space in the photography of Harlem 1930-1965' - paper presented to *Cultures and Representations II*, final *Three Cities* Conference at the University of Nottingham in April 2003

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## NOTE ON PHOTOGRAPHS

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***Making Harlem Visible* is dedicated to Marvin  
Smith (1910-2003)**

## Prelude

A sibyl, questioned about Marozia's fate, said: 'I see two cities: one of the rat, one of the swallow.'

Italo Calvino

According to the interpretation of this oracular pronouncement, Marozia is about to be transformed. Today, its people run like rats through its passages, fighting for leftovers to survive on, but a bright new century is about to begin, where they will 'fly like swallows in the summer sky'. At the height of this new era, the narrator returns to find that the promised change does not seem to have occurred: 'there are people who believe they are flying, but it is already an achievement if they can get off the ground flapping their batlike overcoats'.

Yet something unusual *is* happening: 'when you least expect it, you see a crack open and a different city appear.' These sudden irruptions in the city walls vanish just as swiftly but leave the viewer with an image of a city 'transfigured ... crystalline, transparent as a dragonfly' (Calvino, 1979: 119-120, *passim*).

Like many of Italo Calvino's other fables in *Invisible Cities*, this tale of Marozia can, I believe, provide us with a useful metaphorical starting point for exploring aspects of city space and urban life. In Marozia, we may find a trope for the mixture of hope and despair that afflicts city-dwellers, or for the promise that the city offers to rural immigrants against the bleak reality of the conditions they must live in. In literally breaking open the surface of the city to reveal a transfigured space, however, the story offers other possibilities: that solid appearances can be deceptive and that, with the right combination of words, actions or gestures, they can be pierced. This intrusion literally changes what we see – or forces us to look at what we might otherwise

miss. What Calvino describes here may be analogous to the act of photography: the shutter rapidly opening and closing, like the crack in the city walls.

## Introduction

In his philosophical treatise on photography, *The Engine of Visualization: Thinking Through Photography*, Patrick Maynard makes a detailed and convincing case that photography, like other technologies, has been developed to 'amplify our powers to do things' - in this case to imagine. Photography is, fundamentally, an 'imagining technology' and photographs - 'depictive pictures' - gain their extraordinary vividness from the efficiency of this technology:

Given that we have, in the first place, to look at their marked surfaces in order to be incited and guided to some imagining seeing, pictures of things *convert* that very looking into an object of imagining. We imagine the represented situation, and also imagine *of* that looking that gives us access to it that it - our own perceptual activity - is seeing what is depicted. (1997: 107)

Photographs are to be used in this thesis as part of an investigation, already proceeding in literary analysis, into representations of racialised space and spatial contest within black life, specifically in Harlem in the first half of the twentieth century.

John Roberts, another writer on photography, provides a critical starting point for this enterprise in his book on 'realism, photography and the everyday', *The Art of Interruption*, in which he applies Henri Lefebvre's theory of a 'critical practice of space' to photography. Roberts examines the part that this technology plays in revealing 'the violence inherent in the production of the abstract space of the market' through its representations of places and spaces. Roberts' belief is that to 'open up the social

landscape of the city to representation... is to see the permanent or transitory result of the complex and ongoing struggle over the legal and symbolic ownership of place' (1998: 194).

'Space,' writes Michel Foucault, 'is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power' (1994: 361). The practice of everyday life and the expression of dominance and resistance are expressed spatially at all levels, from the cityscape to the space created by the body. Such 'lived' spaces can be read. They can, as African American polemicist bell hooks remarks, 'tell stories and unfold histories' (1990: 152).

\*

Hailed once as the capital of the Negro world and just as swiftly transformed into the 'dark ghetto', Harlem is the paradigm of the black city within a city, placed inside the grid of the American metropolis but set at a distance by *de facto*, if not *de jure* segregation. Harlem's invisibility to the wider, whiter world is both symbolic and actual. When, in November 2000, I attended a celebratory reading of the work of the Harlem Renaissance writers, held at the Apollo Theater, perhaps the world's most famous black venue, the Parks Commissioner was due to open proceedings. Arriving late, he made his speech, in which he admitted that this was, after many years in post, his first visit to the Apollo. Venturing north of his main patch – Central Park – was clearly still an adventure, as it had been for the white bohemians and slummers of the 1920s, heading off for jazz parties and wild times.

In introducing an exhibition of Austin Hansen's photographs of Harlem in 1989 at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the photo historian Rodger C. Birt acknowledged this invisibility:

Harlem is as much a symbol as it is a real place. Harlem is uptown and its opposite, downtown, begins at 110<sup>th</sup> Street, where the park ends. Uptown is black. Downtown is white. Uptown is hip. Downtown is white. Uptown is poor. Downtown is white. Uptown is emotion. Downtown is white. These, and a myriad of other "definitions," ... have served to mark off Harlem from the rest of New York and, in effect, have created out of the reality a kind of *terra incognita*. (in Hansen, 1989: unpaginated)

The binary of black and white, split here by the colour line of 110<sup>th</sup> Street, runs through much of the writing and thinking about Harlem. What makes Birt's statement particularly interesting is not its reiteration of cultural stereotypes, powerful though they might be, but its unexpressed assumption that the 'white' section of New York is entirely *knowable*, a territory that – unlike Harlem – can easily be mapped.

Birt's suggestion is that photography can provide a map – a cultural guide to Harlem as it is, and was. While I do not accept that photographs are transparencies, or windows on the world, I will be pursuing and exploring the thought in this thesis that, in depicting 'black space' – that is, public and private space as it is and has been lived (and thus inscribed) by African Americans – photographers, both white and black, make Harlem *visible*.

I suggest that photographs themselves can, indeed have to be used as tools for imagining and telling stories. These stories are enacted in space, both the actual space that is recorded chemically or digitally on photographic paper and the virtual space that the photograph, as a (re)presentation of that space, frames and yet opens up to the mind and the senses of the reader. In the play between perception and imagination, between the fixed, indexical imprint and the world that the

photograph hints at in its fragmentary condition, we can find a way into Harlem's complexities and ambiguities.

\*

Before exploring these ideas through a critical analysis of selected photographs, the **Introduction** will provide an outline of the historical and theoretic context. Following an account of the development of photographic culture in Harlem from 1915 to 1955, I examine how the black photographic archive is currently shaped and presented, partly in relationship to the production of photographs by white photographers in Harlem during the same period. Finally, I explain my approach to reading photographs and the space they (re)present, and the way in which I have selected and organised the photographs to make my case.

The main body of this study then follows. This is divided into six chapters, each using photographic comparisons and analysis to map the struggle for legal and symbolic ownership of space. **Chapter One** looks at Harlem as a distinctive landscape, the paradigmatic black city produced by white power and black resistance. Having established how the colour line fractures urban space at this level, I then trace its course through other spaces and places. **Chapter Two** looks at political events taking place on the streets of Harlem, from marches to riots, noting that, by deliberately occupying and writing on the urban fabric, these events create a kind of place in time. **Chapter Three** looks closely at street activity in more general terms, uncovering how city space is negotiated, claimed and defended as African Americans become urban and learn to 'know their place'. **Chapter Four** enters the Harlem apartment, a private space compromised by social and economic forces but where African Americans have created a 'home place'. **Chapter Five** examines what Adrienne Rich calls 'the geography closest in': the body as it appears in the space of the photographic studio and in the

context of other places in the city. **Chapter Six** draws these themes together by looking at *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, a photo text about Harlem, as a story of spaces and spatial practices. Finally, my broad arguments and findings are briefly summed up in **Conclusions**.

## **1     *Pieces of Harlem: Harlem's photographic culture* 1915-1955**

Arguably the most significant development in American urban life over the last hundred years has been the migration of African Americans from the South and African Caribbeans from the West Indies to the cities of the American mid-West and the North. The successive waves of migrants in the early years of the twentieth century and after each of the two world wars have become known as the 'Great Migrations'. These black people sought new freedoms and new powers, creating, in the process of their gathering together, a dynamic and distinctive black culture that was, subtly but inexorably, to transform the American city.

The most important site of this culture was Harlem, eulogised famously by James Weldon Johnson, in his essay 'Harlem: The Culture Capital', in 1925, at the height of 'New Negro' boosterism:

In the make-up of New York, Harlem is not merely a Negro colony or community, it is a city within a city, the greatest Negro city in the world. It is not a slum or a fringe, it is located in the heart of Manhattan and occupies one of the most beautiful and healthful sections of the city. It is not a "quality" of dilapidated tenements, but is made up of new-law apartments and handsome dwellings, with well-paved and well-lighted streets. It has its own churches, social and civic centers, shops, theaters and other places of amusement. And it contains more Negroes to the square mile than any other spot on earth.  
(Johnson, 1925: 301)

Although that 'containment' was to prove more literal than Johnson had imagined at this moment of optimism, the black

'city within a city' allowed for a concentration of energies and self-assertion, producing an undeniable and powerfully influential, if problematic, black urban identity, as Alain Locke, another architect of the Negro 'renaissance' saw early on:

Each group has come with its own separate motives and for its own special ends, but their greatest experience has been the finding of one another. ...So what began in terms of segregation becomes, more and more, as its elements mix and react, the laboratory of a great race-welding.  
(Locke, 1925: 6-7)

Harlem provided black people with hitherto unavailable structures and meeting points, enabling them to forge – remarkably swiftly – a sense of community and, ultimately, solidarity amongst themselves and a loyalty to a place they christened the capital of the Negro world. One of the most important of these community meeting points was the photographic studio. The circulation of photographs in the home and among the various groups and organisations that developed in Harlem through the early decades of the twentieth century, and the increasing use of photography by African American newspapers and journals in the 1930s and 1940s suggest that 'Negro Harlem' and black photography matured together.

Photographic culture was an intrinsic and dynamic element in the process of urbanisation, first establishing, at least among the middle class, a recognisably urbane and modern identity during what might loosely be described as the Harlem Renaissance period, stretching roughly from 1915, the year of Booker T. Washington's death, to 1932 and the end of President Hoover's term of office in the first years of the Great Depression. The opening up of political debate among black leaders following the collapse of the 'Tuskegee machine', coinciding with the growth of a more informed and self-aware urban black population that

included a significant minority of politically seasoned and articulate Caribbean migrants, created fertile ground for the first mass political movement among African Americans - Marcus Garvey's pan-Africanist nationalism - as well as the more assimilationist strategy of the Negro (later, Harlem) Renaissance, the first great cultural movement of African America.

Both movements were extensively photographed and promoted through photography, leading to the development of a sophisticated black photojournalism from the mid-1930s through to the 1950s. Photographers left their studios and took, literally, to the streets to provide visual material for political mobilisation, participating in the debates and campaigns. Yet the artistic aspirations held by the early studio photographers, who perhaps saw themselves as inheritors of the golden age of the Edwardian studio, had not disappeared; the links between fine artists and photographers continued through the decades, right through to the emergence of a new breed of modernist and expressive photographers, led by Roy DeCarava in the early 1950s, who were as dedicated to documenting everyday life as any of their predecessors, but who pursued a personal vision that looked beyond the public events and society figures that had been their traditional subject matter.

This introductory section explores Harlem's photographic culture in more detail, taking its cues (and clues) from significant photographs taken in 1915, 1932 and 1955.

## 1.1 1915/Studio photography in Harlem

- **Fig. 001 Brown Brothers/A sidestreet between Lenox and Seventh Avenue (c. 1915)**
- **Fig. 002 Schomburg Collection/West 135<sup>th</sup> Street (c. 1915)**

The photograph most reproduced to signify the beginnings of Negro Harlem was taken by the Brown Brothers. Taken on a side street between Lenox and Seventh Avenues in around 1915, it is used to illustrate the first Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the Northern cities, in particular to the Harlem district of New York. The image has by now acquired an iconic quality, its posed black figures standing in for the thousands who came to claim this handsome territory during the first two decades of the twentieth century. By the time this picture was taken, the process was in full swing.

Indeed, the equivalent written text that is often cited comes a decade earlier, from a report on extraordinary scenes in Harlem, published in the *New York Times* in August 1905:

The street was so choked with vehicles Saturday that some of the drivers had to wait with their teams around the corners for an opportunity to get into it. A constant stream of furniture trucks loaded with the household effects of a new colony of colored people who are invading the choice locality is pouring into the street. (White, 1989: 46-47)

If the purchase, in December that same year, of 31 West 133<sup>rd</sup> Street by black real estate entrepreneur Philip Payton represented the initial substantial stake of African Americans in a 'Negro Harlem', the coup-de-grace came in 1911 when another black real estate concern, the firm of Nail & Parker, bought ten

apartment buildings on the north side of 135<sup>th</sup> Street between Lenox and Seventh Avenues - almost the entire block - on behalf of St Philips's Protestant Episcopal Church, and rented it to black arrivals. This purchase is generally regarded as triggering the eventual transition of Harlem from a white to a largely black district.

The fact that this photograph was taken and has been, again, reproduced in several histories of Harlem, captioned aptly in one text as *Nail and Parker's Big Deal*, suggests that the building may already have acquired a symbolic status; however unremarkable architecturally, it is now a landmark of black progress. By 1915, when this picture was taken, a number of businesses had established themselves here; one that opened at around this time was The Guarantee Photo Studio, at 109 West 135<sup>th</sup> Street.

- **Fig. 003 James VanDerZee/First photo studio on 135<sup>th</sup> Street (n.d.)**

At the age of 29, James VanDerZee (1886-1983) had been developing his photographic skills for over a decade, whilst waiting tables and operating elevators, and he now felt ready to embark on what turned out to be a remarkably long career as a professional photographer. This was his first independent studio in New York, an enterprise he was encouraged in by Gaynella Katz Greenlee, who is almost certainly the woman posing in her cape by the doorway in this undated picture he took of the studio. As VanDerZee's second wife, Gaynella proved an active partner in the business right from the start.

The studio windows are full of samples of VanDerZee's work, all portraits, including a large one of a black boxer posing in pride of place. As later photographs of the interior of their studios show, this display extended inside and, as such, was probably the only

kind of public exhibition of VanDerZee's work prior to his 'rediscovery' in 1969 by a black researcher working for New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. A much later photograph, taken in the 1940s, shows a corner store promoting his work with a similar display of photographs, but that was probably part of an increasingly forlorn attempt to market a business that was collapsing in the face of rapid social and technological change. All through this period, there had been no gallery exhibitions of VanDerZee's work, no publications produced for critics to review, no honourable mentions in the 'mainstream' photography world.

Where his photographs did appear was in the homes of the Harlem residents who had commissioned him to take portraits of themselves and their families, including their dead; in the club rooms of the Masonic and Greek letter societies he had photographed; in the archives of Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and in its newspaper, *Negro World*; and on illustrated calendars, which may have provided VanDerZee with his biggest audience. It is possible that some of his portraits of Harlem celebrities, such as Florence Mills, found their way into the African American press but VanDerZee was not a photojournalist.

Examining the archive of his pictures at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, I discovered remarkable examples of his 'street photography' – literally, photographs of snow-filled Harlem streets with the odd pedestrian struggling along, taken in the early 1920s but powerfully recalling Alfred Stieglitz's turn-of-the-century scenes of New York. These elongated photographs, taken with a panoramic camera, have never, to my knowledge, been published or even referenced, and that whole aspect of VanDerZee's practice – picking up a camera, as he himself told researcher Reginald McGhee, he would 'go out to shoot everything in sight' – is elided in the standard accounts of his achievements. It is in his role as a studio photographer that he

is remembered and celebrated, recording the people of Harlem usually in proud, formal poses that by the 1940s looked increasingly old fashioned and stiff.

The period covered in this study, 1915 to 1955, coincides with the rise and fall of the photographic studio in Harlem.

VanDerZee was not the only, and certainly not the first African American photographer to run a business in Harlem, although he is now considered the prime example, certainly of the studio output of the 1920s and 1930s. In fact, he himself was briefly employed by his own sister, Jennie Welcome, who had set up an art and photography studio in New York earlier, in 1910.

Although research has still to uncover precise dates of when particular photographers were active and for how long their studios survived, it seems that by the end of the 1920s there was a large and thriving community of practitioners in Harlem.

Cornelius M. Battey (1873-1927), more well known now for his work for Booker T. Washington at the Tuskegee Institute, was active in New York. At its first exhibition of work by black artists, the New York Public Library's (NYPL) 135<sup>th</sup> Street Branch (now the Schomburg Center), showed work by Battey alongside that of another black New York photographer active in the 1920s, Lucy Calloway. William E. Woodard ran a successful studio on 141<sup>st</sup> Street, which his 'apprentice' Winifred Hall Allen took over in the 1930s after graduating from the New York Institute of Photography. Walter Baker's studio and the Vernon & King Photo Studio were just two of the more well known studios established during the 1920s. According to VanDerZee, Baker was 'the most prominent' photographer when he was starting, though he 'wasn't an artist but... a fairly good workman' (De Cock & McGhee, 1973: unpaginated).

The presence of so many studios in the early years of 'Negro Harlem' – according to Rodger C. Birt, over 30 by the 1930s -

suggests that there was a thriving market for portraiture among Harlemites, keen to present themselves to the camera as civilised, urban, respectable black Americans (in Hansen, 1989: unpaginated). They wanted pictures that covered the formal events - graduations, confirmations, engagements and so on – but also, as in the annual family portrait, an intimate record of themselves and their loved ones. As VanDerZee's biographer, Jim Haskins (1991), notes, the average person in Harlem did not own a camera and, if they did, the results they got from it were not as accomplished; up until the early 1930s, equipment was still fairly bulky and expensive. Even in the late 1940s, when cheaper and more flexible 35mm cameras were mass produced and widely available, economic conditions in Harlem meant that most African Americans beginning to take photographs, even professionals like Roy DeCarava (b. 1919), were not able to afford the better makes; DeCarava's first camera was an Argus A, one of the cheapest 35mm cameras but one that did allow exposure control. Back in the 1920s and 1930s, however, such sophistication was beyond most black people's reach and not until the Second World War did their reliance on the professional studio finally slacken.

The investment in establishing the first VanDerZee studio in 1915 was amply – and swiftly – repaid two years later when the United States entered the First World War. The studio was filled with soldiers going off to war having their portraits taken for their families, followed by their families wanting portraits to post off to their relatives on the front. Around 400,000 black Americans volunteered to serve their country; despite egregious levels of racism within the military command, a tenth of these saw action in France, where they proved themselves heroes. The New York contingent, nicknamed the 'Hellfighters' by the French, proudly paraded through Manhattan on their return. VanDerZee was there to photograph their welcome 'home to Harlem', and, over the coming years, to portray the veterans in

their carefully preserved uniforms. VanDerZee continued to photograph black men and women in uniform when, in the early 1920s, he became the official photographer to the UNIA, which was led by a man who understood the power and importance of images in winning the hearts and minds of the masses.

In the so-called Jazz Age that followed the horrors of global conflagration, other Harlem studios and photographers emerged into the limelight, some literally so. The names of Eddie Elcha (active 1915-1930s) and Edgar Eugene Phipps (1887-?) stand out amongst a number of photographers who set out to capture the glamour and performance of Harlem nightlife. Little is known of Elcha beyond a handful of his photographs in the archive, half a dozen of which have been reproduced in print, other than that he was also a painter, providing VanDerZee with some vividly realised painted backdrops for his studio. What does survive of Elcha may suggest that his market lay among those African Americans involved in the burgeoning musical theatre and cabaret scene in Harlem, and those who aspired to the style and fashions of the dancers and singers of the time. Phipps, who, like VanDerZee, documented middle-class life as well as the glamour of the era, came to New York in the mid-1920s and opened a studio which he ran for several years before working as a retouch artist for Arnold Genthe (famed for his pictures of San Francisco's Chinatown).

While VanDerZee was also frequently commissioned to photograph celebrities and Harlemites keen to emulate them in dress and pose, it is not true, as is sometimes claimed, that he was the primary portraitist of the Harlem Renaissance. That honour, as Camera Dia Holloway has pointed out, must go to James Latimer Allen (1907-1977), in many ways the 'golden boy' of photography within the New Negro cultural movement (Holloway: 1999). Extravagantly praised for his artistry by Alain Locke, the editor of *The New Negro*, the bible-cum-manifesto of

the Harlem Renaissance, and by pre-eminent poet and essayist Langston Hughes, Allen was also the recipient of several awards and commissions from the William E. Harmon Foundation; Phipps, too, benefited from this source, as did Chicago's King Daniel Ganaway (1883-?). Set up in 1922 by a wealthy entrepreneur inspired by the notion of self-help, the Harmon Foundation extended its awards for achievement to African Americans four years later and regularly offered black artists the otherwise rare opportunity to exhibit their work (Reynolds & Wright, 1989).

In 1927, following the success of an independently organised exhibition of his portrait work with other young black artists in New York, Allen, only 20 years old, was the first photographer to receive a Harmon 'Award for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes'. He set up his first professional studio that same year, at 213 West 121<sup>st</sup> Street.

It is interesting that most studios in the 1920s and early 1930s were set up by recent arrivals. Many of the photographers coming to New York at this time were seeking patronage and training as well as the substantial market that Harlem provided for a black-run studio. As a native New Yorker, Allen was lucky enough to secure a four-year apprenticeship in still life and portrait photography at Stone, Van Dresser & Co., an illustration firm. More usual was getting some experience, as VanDerZee did on several occasions, working for a white photographic establishment.

As an early self-portrait demonstrates, taken in 1926 and depicting him wearing a smock, Allen saw himself very much as an artist (as did Locke and Hughes), embossing his prints with the legend:

PORTRAIT - JAMES L. ALLEN - NEW YORK

Although the history of black photography is littered with excruciating tales of neglect and loss – Allen’s own surviving work amounts to fewer than two hundred prints, as his widow threw boxes of them away – it is notable that, at that time, the photographers themselves felt that they were indeed artists, and many took great pains in composing and printing up their images for their clients. VanDerZee was not alone in occasionally stamping ‘Artist’ after his name and signature. Yet artists still needed to earn money and Allen’s main market was the flourishing magazine sector in African America. His portraits were published, sometimes as cover images, by the three most important black journals of the 1920s and early 1930s: *The Crisis*, published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP) since 1910; *Opportunity*, published by the Urban League since 1923; and *The Messenger*, published by labour activist A Philip Randolph and economist Chandler Owen since 1917.

Allen’s work was also used by advertising agencies; among the photographs of notable writers, musicians and society figures in his small portfolio in the Schomburg archives is an undated print of a smiling car salesman and a delighted and attractive female model at the wheel of a open-top sports car; both are black. Such photographs were used from early on in the African American press: many issues of such newspapers as the New York *Amsterdam News* feature ads that use photographs, especially to sell hair and beauty treatments to female readers.

Such promotions were not, in fact, that far from the way in which photographs were already being used in advertising political causes and celebrities’ latest shows. If one reason that studios run by African American photographers were initially so successful was that this was an area of ‘personal service’ that white people were unlikely to perform – the beauty business and

tailoring were among other trades where black people found they could make a living, thanks, fundamentally, to racism – the way that black photography developed over the 1920s suggests that Harlem's rapidly modernising citizens soon grasped that the power of photography could not just represent their newly acquired urbanity and respectability but actively promote their careers, their causes and their community.

## 1.2 1932/Photojournalism in Harlem

- **Fig. 004 James VanDerZee/A couple wearing raccoon coats with a Cadillac, taken on West 127<sup>th</sup> Street (1932)**

This image, more fully captioned as *A couple wearing raccoon coats with a Cadillac, taken on West 127<sup>th</sup> Street, 1932*, has become an iconic image of the Harlem Renaissance. Apart from its inclusion in photographic monographs, it has been reproduced in books about Harlem, and on their covers - from David Levering Lewis' cultural history, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, to *The Ebony History of Black America* - and it has been featured in exhibitions about Harlem, notably *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance*, the first major retrospective of all the arts of that period (Skipwith, 1997). In these contexts, the photograph has been used to illustrate the spirit of the Renaissance, to evoke the period or its glamorous style - in this way, rendered apparently unproblematic and transparent. Yet the date it was actually taken should give pause: 1932, three long years after the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the beginning of the Great Depression.

Harlem was the place to which migrants from the South and the islands of the Caribbean had come to pioneer a new, urban life. This was the moment, much mythologized by the fiction and art of the Harlem Renaissance, when the New Negro was born out of the Old. However, this was a moment of *qualified* optimism, as a close reading of that unprecedented artistic and literary outburst makes clear.

Frederick Douglass prophesied in a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1853 that: 'Colored people will congregate in the large towns and cities and they will endure any amount of hardship and privation' (Barth, 1980: 16). Hardship and privation among

Harlemites began well before the last notes of the Jazz Age had died away, yet that reality is hard to track down in the photography that emerged from the Harlem photographic studios. When, a bare three years later, the first Harlem riot erupted, the photographers that captured the mayhem were from downtown; the black press may have published some of these pictures, but, as far as I have been able to ascertain, black photographers did not document the event. A similar situation seems to have existed in 1943, when a number of residents died and the damage to white-owned businesses was even more serious. On that occasion, however, there was at least one black photojournalist present: Morgan Smith (1910-1993), who ran the M. Smith Photo Studio with his twin brother Marvin (1910-2003).

Rather than take the kind of dramatic shots of the riot that white press maverick, Weegee (Arthur P. Fellig, 1899-1968), was to include in *Naked City*, a warts-and-all expose of New York street life, Smith took pictures of the serviceman whose treatment at the hands of a white policemen triggered the whole outburst; these were published in the *People's Voice*. Sat in his hospital bed, Private Bandy pleaded for folks to cease destroying property and go home.

Looking back on his coverage of Harlem over the 1940s and early 1950s, Smith commented that he and his brother were 'striving all the time to present the community in a good light' (Smith, 1998: 9). Whether or not this was entirely true of their whole output – they did run a series of dramatic pictures of Harlem's criminal activities – Smith's comment seems to speak for almost all African American photographers in Harlem, at least until Gordon Parks (b. 1912) took up the commission that the Smiths had, I was told by Marvin, refused: to photograph Harlem gangs for *Life* magazine in 1948.

In assessing the work of Austin Hansen (1910-1996), another leading and highly prolific photojournalist of the 1940s and 1950s, Rodger C. Birt makes the point that '[l]ike his predecessor Van Der Zee [*sic*], Hansen documented success, whether it was corporate or individual' (in Hansen, 1989: unpaginated). The Smiths, too, took their share of pictures that extolled what few business successes there were in a Harlem devastated by the Depression, and their portfolio, as presented in a recent (the first) monograph of their work, is full of portraits of successful black people, from stars of stage and screen to doctors and society hostesses, as well as a number of so-called 'Negro firsts', ordinary folk that just happened to be the first ever black postal messenger or trolley operator in the city.

Yet it would be mistake to characterise these photographers as simply continuing to present the harmonious and prosperous, usually middle-class community portrayed in earlier studio photography. Times were hard and Harlem was in ferment through the Depression, its streets the site of frequent protests: the 'Don't Buy Where You Can't Work' boycotts on 125<sup>th</sup> Street, the campaign to free the Scottsboro Boys, the demonstrations against the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, the March on Washington Movement and so on. Poverty and unemployment were unavoidable sights; even VanDerZee can, if one looks hard enough, produce an image that speaks of the growing economic crisis and its social implications.

- **Fig. 005 James VanDerZee/Elementary school students in Lunch Line (1932)**

In the same year that he photographed the 'raccoon couple', the year that Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office, VanDerZee took this picture of what the standard monograph captions as 'elementary school students in lunch line' (Willis-Braithwaite &

Birt, 1993: 141). The lunch in this case is being provided by Catholic nuns and these children are charity cases.

- **Fig. 006 James VanDerZee/Distributing the *Chicago Defender*, 1928**
- **Fig. 007 M & M Smith/*People's Voice* offices, c. 1942**

Negro weeklies make no pretence at being newspapers in the strict sense of the term. They have a more important mission than the dissemination of mere news. ...They are race papers. They are organs of propaganda. Their chief business is to stimulate thought among Negroes about the things that vitally concern them. ('Do You Read Negro Papers?' October 22, 1914, in Johnson, 1995 Vol. 1: 151)

James Weldon Johnson was in no doubt, as early as 1914, that the black press was second only to the church in its popular reach and influence (ibid: 4). Like the church, itself often a platform for mass political movements, the African American press served (and helped to sustain) what Paul Gilroy has called 'active communities' – social networks radicalised by segregation, where marginalised groups found a basis for political mobilisation (in Worsley, 1991: 293). The black press offered a key structure through which African Americans could experience a new sense of national and urban community, rooted in a shared history and, increasingly, imbued with an urgent sense of militancy. *The Crisis*, for example, according to Matthew Pratt Guterl 'brought anti-imperialism, world politics, and antiracism together as no American periodical had ever done before' (2001: 115). Famously, it ran probably the first photographs of African Americans – as soldiers – wielding guns. Guterl concludes that *The Crisis*, *The Negro World*, *The Messenger*, and *The Crusader* 'crafted the shared sense of time, space, and culture that would help reshape the boundaries of race and race-consciousness after the coming war' (ibid: 116).

Yet, even into the early years of the Depression, some newspapers avoided open criticism of social and economic conditions, preferring instead to feed their readers with social gossip. While this may once have had its place in establishing the sophistication of black society at a time when racist Jim Crow stereotypes were almost all that was available in 'mainstream' white culture, the raw nature of the Depression called out for more realism.

In the case of the New York *Amsterdam News*, the society section was felt by its publishers to be very important. Although a broadsheet, the *News* used a tabloid reportage style to compete with the *New York Age*, a crusading paper that covered national stories. There was little place for candid or 'street' photographs in the paper and when they did appear, they were 'prettied up'. Conflicts between editors and publishers over how economic issues should be addressed came to a head in 1936, after which there was a change of ownership. A year later, the *Amsterdam News* appointed its first staff photographer: Morgan Smith.

The Smith brothers had arrived in New York from Kentucky in 1933 and developed their careers as fine artists and photographers through contacts at the YMCA, the 135<sup>th</sup> Street branch of the NYPL and the Savage School of Arts and Crafts, established at 315 W126<sup>th</sup> Street by Augusta Savage, a celebrated sculptor of the 1920s, on her return to Harlem from France in 1931. The brothers were soon involved with the '306' group of black artists working for the Works Progress Administration (WPA), one of Roosevelt's New Deal programmes that supported a number of African American artists and photographers. Morgan himself worked on murals at Harlem Hospital under Vertis Hayes for the Federal Arts Project in 1936.

The purpose of such projects was not simply to support artists but to bring benefits and good heart to the whole community.

Although both brothers painted, their major influence on the representation of Harlem and their main contribution to the black community was in the photographs they took for Harlem newspapers. Morgan continued at the *Amsterdam News* for two years before he and Marvin set up their first studio at 141 W125<sup>th</sup> Street. A year later, in 1940, they moved again, along the street to set up their operation right next door to one of Harlem's most famous venues, the Apollo Theater. Here, they were to establish the most celebrated photographic practice in the Harlem of the 1940s.

By this time, advances in camera technology had made it much easier for photographers to take pictures outside the studio, in the streets, without having to set up tripods or carry bulky equipment. Events could be captured on the hoof, even at night, as classic press cameras like the Speed Graphic and the Contax allowed for photography in lowlight conditions and were relatively unobtrusive. The film used now was 35mm, which allowed for much greater flexibility and spontaneity, even in the studio. However, it was the ability of photographers to be where the action was and bring back a visual story that transformed the relationship of image to text in the newspaper business and created a growing demand for photographic material. For the first time, a career in photojournalism was possible for black photographers, though financial rewards remained scanty and permanent jobs rare in the early years, when newspapers often only paid for the pictures they used; Morgan's staff position was, I believe, the first of its kind.

Although he did not establish a permanent studio until his return from serving in the Second World War, when he served as a Navy photographer and later for the Office of War Information

(OWI), Austin Hansen launched his own photographic career in 1929 by selling a photograph of Charles Lindbergh returning from his transatlantic flight to the *Amsterdam News*, a year after arriving in Harlem from the Virgin Islands, and he continued to supply this paper and others, such as the *New York Age*, with photographs of night clubs like the Renaissance and images of the community and Harlem notables, but hardly ever taken in the studio, as his predecessor VanDerZee would have done, but on location.

The Smith brothers had also, as James A. Miller explains, begun 'to experiment with street photography, scouting out social and political events in Harlem', using a new portable roll-film camera with a slide flash attachment (Willis, 2000: 86-87). In 1939, at the same time as setting up their studio, they launched Harlem's first newspaper picture service providing pictorial editorials of Harlem. The photojournalistic work they produced over the next decade appeared mostly in the *People's Voice*, a much more radical and crusading paper than the *Amsterdam News*, set up by the indefatigable preacher and civil rights campaigner, Adam Clayton Powell Jr in 1942. Driven more by political than financial considerations, this tabloid journal made effective use of photographs, printing them up bigger than ever before; through their increasingly sophisticated framing, the political campaigns and the social distress of the times were documented: parades and eviction scenes, street corner orators haranguing the crowds. As Melissa Rachleff has shown, the Smiths were also particularly effective in constructing a sense of black power through their images of Powell and their intimate series of portraits of Harlem's favourite son, boxer Joe Louis (in Willis & Lusaka, 1996: 15-59).

By the time that the Smiths had moved on to develop careers in television in the early 1950s – they had already developed a radio studio of their own – Hansen's studio at 232 W135<sup>th</sup> Street

was in full production. By the time he had retired, Hansen was able to deposit a vast archive, variously estimated at between 50,000 and 100,000 photographs, to the Schomburg Center. In it could be found pictures of virtually every famous Harlem figure and event of the period from 1945 to the early 1960s, as well as a comprehensive visual survey of the built environment of the black city. Birt describes Hansen as the VanDerZee of the 1940s and 1950s, chronicling the life of the community as his predecessor had done. One major difference, he points out, is that Hansen's style was 'straight' rather than 'pictorialist', as befitted the realism of the times (in Hansen, 1989: unpaginated). Gone were the fanciful settings of the studio; in their place were the recognisable streets and offices of a community in action. Nevertheless in the description Howard Dodman, then Chief of the Schomburg Center, gives of his first visit to Hansen in 1986, one can find an echo of VanDerZee's crammed studio window, and also, perhaps, a metaphor for both the fecundity and importance of the photographic studio in Harlem during the first half of the twentieth century as it passed into history:

Mr. Hansen's Studio doubled as his gallery and exhibition hall. Unframed photographs dating back to the 1940s covered every empty space – all of his walls, as well as the fronts and sides of cabinets, bookcases, and other furniture. They were not in any particular order. They were uncaptioned. Some were beginning to fade, others hidden. Each contained a bit of Harlem's heritage. There were portraits and pictures of baby showers, weddings and funerals. There were pictures of the famous and the ordinary, street scenes, pictures of social clubs and cabinets and religious sanctuaries. Everywhere one looked, one found pieces of Harlem – its people, its institutions, its social life. (ibid.)

### 1.3 1955: A decisive moment

- Fig. 008 William Klein/Harlem (1955)

This photograph was taken by William Klein (b. 1928) in Harlem in 1955 and included in *New York: Life is Good and Good for You in New York*, his first major photographic book, published a year later. In her study of what she has christened the 'New York School' of photography – basically, a group of street photographers of the 1950s and 1960s – Jane Livingston demonstrates that Klein's and other photography books of the period represented a new development in the dissemination of photographs. Although notable books of photographs as photograph (that is, not harnessed to a social documentary text) had appeared prior to the Second World War, including Walker Evans' *American Photographs* (1938) and Berenice Abbott's *Changing New York* (1939), 'the production of a volume with no more raison d'être than to offer a picture book for adults was an enterprise most publishers were unwilling to consider seriously' until now (Livingston, 1992: 267).

Among these books, which included Weegee's *Naked City* (first published 1945) and Robert Franks' *The Americans* (1958), one of the most influential was Henri Cartier-Bresson's *Images à la Sauvette* (1952), where he famously theorised the importance of the 'decisive moment' in taking pictures on the street. Roy DeCarava, the one African American photographer that Livingston includes in her definition of the New York School, was particularly indebted to Cartier-Bresson's approach in his early work made in Harlem at the beginning of the 1950s.

*Harlem* is, in many respects, a typical photograph by Klein at this moment, taken virtually on the run, blurred and dynamic in its composition and engaging directly with its subject. Klein seems to capture here a certain hip image of Harlem that is

under construction during this period, created by sympathetic white observers and, less self-consciously, by black writers and musicians - a faint echo, perhaps, of how another 'Jazz Age' was 'discovered' in the 1920s.

African American art historian Richard J. Powell writes of Harlem's 'mid-century mood of social separateness and cultural bravado', which he finds best exemplified in Langston Hughes' *Simple* short stories and Ollie Harrington's cartoons (1997: 103).

I would argue that it can also be found in the jazz then being produced in Harlem and Greenwich Village clubs, and in the poetry and fiction inspired, at least to some extent, by the existential glamour of bebop, hard bop and modal jazz.

According to A. Robert Lee, saxophonist Charlie 'Bird' Parker, who died in 1955, was declared the 'black godfather' to the Beat movement by John Clellon Holmes in 1958, and Harlem itself is seen as quintessential 'Jazz America' in novels like *On the Road* (1957) and *The Subterraneans* (1958), whose narrator is heard 'wishing I were a Negro' (Lee, 1996: 159). Norman Mailer, notoriously, waded into this particular fantasy in his essay 'The White Negro' in 1957. LeRoi Jones, however, was a genuine Negro and also the editor of the Beat poetry magazine, *Yugen*, from 1952 to 1962, a small but significant indication that this growing countercultural movement positioned itself, however awkwardly and naively, alongside those campaigning for equal rights for African Americans; in *Howl*, written in 1955-56, Ginsberg writes of 'the best minds of my generation... dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn', having himself decamped to a coldwater apartment north of Central Park.

The long struggle for civil rights through the twentieth century had now begun to enter a new phase. 1915 had seen a powerful national protest, led by the NAACP, against the screening of D.W. Griffith's problematic masterpiece, *The Birth of a Nation*, heralding four decades of persistent public campaigning against

lynching and numerous legal challenges to the discrimination against and abuse of African Americans, culminating in the landmark decision of 'Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (and Delaware, South Carolina, Virginia & District of Columbia)' on May 17 1954, which declared that 'in the field of public education the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place'. 1955 was the year of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, an event which is usually marked as the beginning of the modern Civil Rights Movement. NAACP activist Rosa Parks wrote her celebrated letter of protest on May 21, 1955; by the end of that year, on December 5, Martin Luther King Jr had made his first great speech.

- **Fig. 009 Roy DeCarava/Langston Hughes (1955)**

"What is it you love about Harlem?"

"It's so full of negroes," said Simple. "I feel like I got protection."

"From what?"

"From white folks," said Simple. "Furthermore, I like Harlem because it belongs to me."

"Harlem does not belong to you. You don't own the houses in Harlem. They belong to white folks."

"I might not own 'em," said Simple, "but I live in 'em. It would take an atom bomb to get me out."

"Or a depression," I said.

"I would not move for no depression. No, I would not go back down South, not even to Baltimore. I am in Harlem to stay. ... From Central Park to 179<sup>th</sup>, from river to river, Harlem is mine!..."

Langston Hughes, 'A Toast to Harlem' (Hughes, 1961: 20)

Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was one of the few artists of the illustrious Harlem Renaissance generation to remain in Harlem

after the war. Ironically, it was nothing as dramatic as an atom bomb that drove black folks, at least middle-class ones, out of Harlem but the postwar abolition of the restricted covenants that had kept African Americans from moving to most other parts of New York, and the ending of overt discrimination in housing. This, coupled with improved job prospects elsewhere, led to a steady flight of Harlem's more prosperous residents and a sharp decline in Harlem's general fortunes.

In comparing the differences between the two photographers, Rodger Birt suggests that the Harlem of James Weldon Johnson evident in Austin Hansen's photographs had become, for the new generation of photographers like Roy DeCarava, the Harlem of writer Claude Brown, a landscape of social breakdown fuelled by drug addiction and petty crime. The response among photographers, Birt suggests, was to move away from Harlem's 'public moments... and [attempt] to retrieve traces of lives lived outside the limelight' (in Hansen, 1989: unpaginated). DeCarava laid out his own vision in his application for the Guggenheim Fellowship he received in 1952.

I want to photograph Harlem through the Negro people. Morning, noon, night, at work, going to work, coming home from work, at play, in the streets, talking, kidding, laughing, in the home, in the playgrounds, in the schools, bars, stores, libraries, beauty parlors, churches, etc. ...I want to show the strength, the wisdom, the dignity of the Negro people. Not the famous and the well known, but the unknown and the unnamed, thus revealing the roots from which spring the greatness of all human beings. ...I do not want a documentary or sociological statement, I want a creative expression, the kind of penetrating insight and understanding of Negroes which I believe only a Negro photographer can interpret. I want to heighten the

awareness of my people and bring to our consciousness a greater knowledge of our heritage.' (in Galassi, 1996:19)

In this manifesto, DeCarava seems to position himself between and beyond the reportage of Harlem's photojournalists and the social documentary approach of the largely white group of photographers that had been involved in investigating and exposing urban conditions in Harlem over the previous decade. His concern for the black community is evident, couched in the language of an activist whose purpose is not to present or explain black life to a white audience but to use photography as a means of consciousness-raising among African Americans themselves.

In the event, according to Peter Galassi, DeCarava did find the streets of Harlem in the late 1940s rather tougher than he remembered from his own boyhood days in the late 1920s and 1930s, when he would chalk drawings on the streets, an early manifestation of his ambitions to be an artist. Much tougher, however, had been the racial discrimination DeCarava witnessed and experienced, first in trying to train as an artist and, more traumatically, in the brief period when he served in the army during the Second World War, when everything, he recalled to Galassi, was segregated apart from the psychiatric hospital he was invalided out to. Prior to that experience, he had found his first metier, as a painter, at the WPA-sponsored Harlem Community Arts Centre on 125<sup>th</sup> Street. Here and at Charles Alston's '306' gatherings, he met both generations of African American artists and activists, among them Hughes, McKay, Locke and Countee Cullen from the older set, and Romare Bearden, Charles White and Norman Lewis from the younger group. Drawn into the urgent debates of the time about how to make art for, by and about black people, and anxious to make up for lost time, DeCarava shifted first to silkscreen printing,

producing powerful and simple images, and then, by the end of the 1940s, opting decisively for photography.

Cartier-Bresson's influence on DeCarava, as Galassi has pointed out, extends beyond photographic technique to a shared belief in humanist values and a commitment to depicting ordinary people. This may partly explain why Edward Steichen, the *eminence grise* who had become Head of the Photography Department at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in 1947, responded so warmly to DeCarava's work when he saw some (and bought three) of his prints in 1950 and then included them in exhibitions, choosing four for *The Family of Man*, an exhibition of world photography held at MOMA in 1955.

In trying to satisfy the yearning for what the organisers described as 'the essential oneness of mankind throughout the world' (Rosenblum, 1997: 483), *The Family of Man* has been widely denigrated by photography critics since Roland Barthes' famous denunciation in his essay 'The Great Family of Man' in *Mythologies* (1957). However, as John Roberts argues, the show was, in its social and political context, a brave cry against the growing divisions of the Cold War and, more subtly, a blow for a more inclusive vision of photography than modernism (or, indeed, MOMA) had so far offered (Roberts, 1998: 122-126). DeCarava's own humanism is noted by Colin Westerbeck and Joel Meyerowitz in *Bystander*, their wide-ranging history of street photography. Here DeCarava is singled out from the rest of the New York School and its forebears:

Of all the street photographers who have worked in New York, from Riis to Weegee to Model, from Robert Frank and William Klein to Garry Winogrand, the only one whose pictures don't seem alienated is Roy DeCarava. ...he is the one photographer who is truly at home in the city, or at

least in the part of it where he photographs, Harlem. ...  
He is the American Doisneau. (1994: 41)

1955 was an important year in DeCarava's life. Not only was he included in Steichen's exhibition, which was to go on an acclaimed world tour, but Simon & Schuster published a large selection of his photographs in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, a remarkable book with an accompanying text from Langston Hughes. The photograph that DeCarava took of Hughes in 1955 is, in fact, a portrait of a close and sympathetic collaborator who saw immediately the cinematic possibilities of the photographer's prints and produced a fictional narrative that helped to turn a modest, pocket-sized publication into an award-winning bestseller – and the first ever book to depict the lives of ordinary African Americans in photographs.

The idea for such a 'photo-story' was not unprecedented. The one area where a significant number of photographic books had been published prior to 1945 was in the documentary field. Notable examples include James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937) and Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam's *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941). These books had developed partly out of the 'photo essay' beloved of Henry Luce, founder of *Life* magazine, who saw it as a vital means of communication. Through the 1930s and 1940s, *Life*, *Look* and *Fortune* magazines published the photographs of FSA and other documentary photographers as photo spreads. Inspired by this tradition, Ralph Ellison and Gordon Parks apparently discussed collaborating on a book in the late 1940s but nothing came of it, and Parks subsequently went on to *Life* magazine to publish his photo essay on Harlem gangs in 1948.

With the publication of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, African American photography came of age. In its vivid narrative of

Harlem, it displayed to a wide American (and foreign) public for the first time both the confident artistry of African American photography and the texture of everyday African American urban culture at a critical moment of hope. My analysis of this book will bring my thesis to a suitable close.

## **2 Photography in black and white: The black archive**

Shows based on ethnic or gender identity prompt the question: doesn't the photography matter more than the color (nationality, ethnicity, gender) of the photographers? Yes, but this photography remained virtually unseen by the larger culture for years, because it too was segregated until after the civil rights era. (Vicki Goldberg, 2000: 39)

In reviewing *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers from 1840 to the Present* by Deborah Willis in *The New York Times* in April 2000, photography critic Vicki Goldberg neatly summarises the paradox facing anyone trying to analyse 'African American' photography. On the one hand, the photographs themselves might not differ substantially from photographs by the white or any other community. On the other, books like Willis's are essential and long overdue, as photographs by black photographers had not been included in mainstream publications until very recently. As Goldberg points out in the same article, neither the 1982 edition of Beaumont Newhall's standard *History of Photography* nor Jonathan Green's *American Photography: A Critical History*, published in 1984, made any mention of black photographers.

Somehow the fact that African Americans had been enthusiastic photographers and consumers of photography since its earliest days was overlooked. One now immediately thinks of Jules Lion (1810-1866), who introduced daguerreotypy to New Orleans in the very early 1840s, or James Presley Ball (1825-1904/5?), who also ran successful studios in Cincinnati, Pittsburgh and Richmond, Virginia, but only because these names have been made more widely known by black scholars like Willis. Their painstaking research and recovery of this hidden history may well have been a crucial factor in persuading institutions like

MOMA finally to recognise black American photographers and bring them within the canon of American photography; Peter Galassi's recent *American Photography 1890-1965* published in 1995, for example, includes work by James VanDerZee, Gordon Parks and Roy DeCarava.

As the curator of American photographic modernism, of course, MOMA had long been a major part of the problem. John Roberts has pointed out that, although DeCarava's work was included in his exhibition *The Photographer's Eye*, John Szarkowski, Galassi's predecessor, 'silently excis[ed]' black (and women) photographers from the canon.

Szarkowski's modernism could tolerate the black photographer but not the *black archive*. (Roberts: 120; author's emphasis)

This judgement would seem to apply retrospectively to the way in which photographers like Chicagoan King Daniel Ganaway or Morgan Smith might win the odd State Fair or photographic society or photojournalism award, but black photographers as a whole were not embraced, supported or exhibited by the photographic establishment.

Even today, only a tiny fraction of the photographs stored at the Schomburg Center and other archives have ever been published or exhibited, and many of the black photographers discussed here have yet to receive their full due. Austin Hansen, probably the most prolific of Harlem studio and street photographers, has been honoured with only one exhibition (at the Schomburg in 1989), and its accompanying slender catalogue of around a dozen photographs is virtually all the published evidence there is of his vast archive. Although exhibited by the Harmon Foundation in mixed shows in the mid-1930s, James Latimer Allen's first solo exhibition had to wait until 1999. Even in the

case of those photographers who have now been 'recovered' through publication, only a tiny fraction of their work is available in print. The only black Harlem photographers of 1915-1955 currently represented by book-length monographs are James VanDerZee (Willis-Braithwaite & Birt, 1993), M & M Smith (Smith, 1998) and Roy DeCarava (Galassi, 1996).

James VanDerZee admitted he knew nothing of white contemporaries like Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946), Paul Strand (1890-1976) or even Carl van Vechten, who photographed some of the same people in Harlem. As far as I can discern, the amount of professional exchange between white and black photographers in the city remained minimal until Roy DeCarava established a gallery in his own house at 48 West 84<sup>th</sup> Street in 1955. A Photographer's Gallery lasted for two years; among its exhibitions was the first comprehensive show of Harry Callahan's work and a number of group shows featuring white and black photographers. Even this venture, however, would almost certainly have failed had it been located in Harlem rather than midtown. There, the gallery would have been rendered 'invisible', as Harlem itself was, effectively, out of the picture.

A recent PBS documentary celebrating Harlem's architectural heritage and cultural contributions marketed its tour of the district partly on the fact that many tourist maps of Manhattan printed and circulated downtown simply fade out above Central Park (Hartman, 1999). Although a fantasy for white bohemians and slummers in the 1920s and, by the 1950s, a lurid vision of urban decay, racial tension and social breakdown for white newspaper readers, Harlem as an actual place was not well known or recognised. In analysing the similar omission of Chapeltown, a black British community in Leeds, from smaller-scale city maps, Max Farrar calls the 'contrast between popular vision and cartographic blindness' a 'visible invisibility', a phrase that could equally be applied here, to Harlem (1997).

An explanation for this 'visible invisibility' must begin with the celebrated observation, made by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1903, that the 'problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line' (Du Bois, 1989: xxxi). This line both segregates and veils black people, placing them out of sight. Constance McLaughlin Green entitled her 1967 history of race relations in the capital *The Secret City*, as black Washington 'was psychologically a secret city all but unknown to the white world around it' (Green, 1967: vii). In the same way, even Harlem, the 'Negro capital', is pushed out to the edge and marginalised to the point of invisibility. This invisibility extends from the macro-spatial level of the 'black city' to the 'absent space' of the black person, as I discuss later in more detail.

As Goldberg suggests, the Civil Rights Movement, which might be seen as having set out, over the late 1950s and the 1960s, to make black Americans clearly visible to white America, was crucial to the emergence of the black photographic archive. The first inkling of this process came in January 1969, nine months after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr and the subsequent rioting across urban America, and three months after runners John Carlos and Tommie Smith had given Black Power salutes on their victory stand at the Olympics in Mexico City. To a chorus of disapproval from traditionalist art critics and provoking protests from many in Harlem's artistic community, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York held a groundbreaking exhibition, entitled *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America 1900-1968*.

## 2.1 A creative confrontation

Walking through the grand galleries of the Met, I heard sound – jazz, blues, and speeches. I heard the anonymous voices of the community and the familiar words of Malcolm X. There were small photographs and photographic murals, photographs mounted on masonite and images blown up to fifty feet of black people:

Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., the Sunday school classes at the Abyssinian Baptist Church, Paul Robeson, Marcus Garvey, Madame C.J. Walker. (Willis, 1994: 7)

\*

Deborah Willis' excitement at seeing such a vast exhibition about African Americans overcame any reluctance she might have felt walking through the picket lines, not once but five times to revisit and review the show.

As its curator Allan Schoener recalled twenty-five years later, *Harlem on My Mind* was the first major exhibition in any American art museum 'devoted to the accomplishments of the living people of a non-Anglo, so-called minority culture' (all references in this section, unless indicated, are to Schoener, 1995: *passim*, unpaginated). Over a space of 18,000 square feet – fifteen galleries on the Met's second floor – a history of Harlem through the decades unfolded, from its early transformation into a black community right up to a section on contemporary 'Militancy and Identity'.

Schoener first introduced his concept of 'orchestrated information environments' in 1966 at The Jewish Museum with *The Lower East Side: Portal to American Life*, which documented the history of Eastern European Jews through images and sounds. Schoener considered these exhibitions as documentary

projects and *Harlem on My Mind* might be seen as one of the last substantial projects inspired by the long social documentary tradition inaugurated in New York by photographer and social reformer Jacob Riis (1849-1914) with his exposure of *How the Other Half Lives*, first published in 1901.

As the first major exhibition to focus on African American culture, *Harlem on My Mind* provided a wide audience, including an unusually high number of black visitors to the Met, with a novel experience not entirely dissimilar from that provided by Riis with his slide-show lectures and illustrated publications. Where Riis had wanted to promote social reform by confronting his comfortable audiences with the appalling reality of the slums and by bringing them face to face with their hidden populations, Schoener's motive was to meet what one museum press release called a never more 'urgent need for a creative confrontation between white and black communities'. Out of this creative confrontation would come 'more respect for each other's roles in American life'. Without greater understanding of the nature of black history, of the achievements of the black community and of the unequal economic and political conditions imposed on it, it would be, as James Baldwin put it in 1963, 'the fire next time', a racial conflagration that must have seemed all too imminent at the time that this exhibition was being planned and staged. In this respect, at least, *Harlem on My Mind* was intended as a wake-up call to the Met's traditional audience about the existence of the 'other half', in this case that portion of population separated off and hidden from mainstream American culture by the colour line.

The difficulties that the exhibition ran into were partly due to the febrile political situation across the nation, with stand-offs between groups that had once been partners in the earlier stages of the civil rights movement. The show was seen by many black artists, including Roy DeCarava, as a white liberal

appropriation of Harlem's culture and history and, in DeCarava's view, the Met could not have got it more wrong:

It is evident from the physical makeup of the show that Schoener and company have no respect for or understanding of photography.... I would say also that they have no great love or understanding of Harlem, black people, or history. (from 'Can Whitey Do a Beautiful Black Picture Show?' *Popular Photography* Vol. 165 No.5, May 1969, in Galassi: 33)

As photography critic of the *Village Voice*, A.D. Coleman wrote that the show was the latest exercise in white 'slumming' (Coleman, 1979: 9). Certainly, the decision to take the title of the exhibition from an Irving Berlin song rather than from one of the many potential African American sources suggests that the organisers were somewhat naïve in their approach and perhaps not as knowledgeable as they might have been about black culture. It is interesting now to go back over the photographs reproduced in the exhibition catalogue and see how few of the photographers discussed earlier are featured. The one discovery, made by Schoener's African American researcher, Reginald McGhee, was James VanDerZee. That, of course, was a crucial discovery and the saving grace, surely, in any final assessment of the importance of this exhibition for African American photography.

The core of the fierce debate about *Harlem on My Mind* lay in its fudged position on issues of representation. Although Schoener was clear about its documentary intentions, the Met's director, Thomas Hoving, was quoted thus in the show's opening press release:

There is no difference between this show and one of Rembrandt or Degas. Through their works, these artists

reveal their individual worlds to us. The Harlem community becomes the artist in this case, the canvas the total environment in which Harlem's history was formed.

This may have an attempt to persuade the core audience and establishment critics that this exhibition was not the radical departure it seemed, but it must have incensed those actually trying to making a living as artists in Harlem. As well as implying that the only creativity in Harlem was collective, Hoving's analogy was also oddly forced. In what sense could Harlemites be said to have created their environment when so many of the images from the 1940s onwards were of the ghetto?

The protest of DeCarava and other visual artists over *Harlem on My Mind* was not merely about their effective exclusion as individuals from the show but, more fundamentally, because of the way that Harlem, the very capital of black culture, had been appropriated and represented. The questions raised then have reverberated ever since. Who owns Harlem? Who gets to represent Harlem? Who should represent – or interpret – those representations?

In the four decades since *Harlem on My Mind*, there has been a growing effort to recover and document 'lost' and 'invisible' black photographers and to restore and disseminate their work: to make the black archive visible. The pioneering work of Willis, who has researched and promoted African American photography at the Schomburg Center, at the Smithsonian and now at New York University, and of other (mainly black) photographic historians and curators represents an essential project of recovery and restoration, providing a wider community with a vital resource for scholarship and popular appreciation. The next section examines the way in which this archive is now presented and interpreted.

## **2.2 Defining reality, managing perceptions: A black canon**

Photography has, from its earliest days, been of great importance to African Americans, giving them, for the very first time, ownership of the means of representation. The significance of this is suggested by Roger Wilkins who claimed that segregation was not the greatest power used against African Americans – that lay instead, he said, in ‘the power to *define reality* where blacks are concerned and to *manage perceptions* and therefore arrange politics and culture to reinforce those definitions’ (in Goldberg, 2000: 40, my emphasis). W.E.B. Du Bois’s famous discussion of what he termed the burden of ‘double consciousness’ is clearly relevant here, as one important reason why (ownership of) representation may be even more crucial to African Americans than segregation. Through the technology of photography, African Americans were at last able to create their own pictures of who, what and where they were rather than have a dominant white racist image forced upon them. Stuart Hall argues that it is ‘only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are’ (Hall, 1992: 30).

Arthur Schomburg, who founded the archive where many of the photographs considered in this thesis are deposited, believed that ‘the American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future’. Many years later, the critic bell hooks described the use by African Americans of photographs of Harlem from its earliest days of black occupation as a means to ‘connect ourselves to a recuperative, redemptive memory that enables us to construct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonizing eye’ (hooks, 1994: 53).

As this implies, it is not simply a question of ‘recovering’ the past, but of going through a process, as Mihaly Csikszentihalyi

and Eugene Rochberg-Halton make clear in their analysis of the use of household objects, particularly the photograph: '[t]he meaning of the object... becomes realized in the activity of interaction and in the direction or purpose that this activity indicates: physical and psychological growth' (1981: 174). Reminiscing over the family photograph album has, in the contested space of African America, a particularly significant role in both constructing a positive identity and 'remaking' the past.

The recovery of the black archive is, therefore, not an academic exercise. The growth of research, publication and exhibition in black photography in recent decades has often been linked, overtly or not, to a political objective as well as a recuperative one: to accumulate enough cultural capital to challenge the dominant narrative. The problem with this is how easily one can slip into the political use of photographs without giving due attention to what they actually depict. A recent and interesting example of this is Manning Marable and Leith Mullings' book *Freedom: A Photographic History of the African American Struggle* (2002), which includes photographs of black people engaged in almost every conceivable form of social activity, from jazz singing to a dentistry class. No doubt a case can be made for harnessing such images to such a broad manifesto and I would not claim that such a political project is invalid within its own terms. Neither do I wish to deny the vital and particular importance of photography for black people right from its development in 1839, or to denigrate the ways that photographs of the past can be used as talismans to ward off the existential horror of slavery - which was, after all, a robbery of history as well as bodies - or to underestimate the power of self-representation in the face of the caricatures promoted by a racist society.

Nevertheless, treating the black archive largely as a validation of black community and strength is, in my view, problematic

because of the closure of meaning it often involves, especially in reading specific photographs, where, in fact, other possible meanings may *increase* their usefulness in analysing and critiquing racist culture. Furthermore, having a political aim, however worthy, in presenting this work to a wider white and black public may well affect the selection and even the captioning of the work and that in turn risks presenting an unbalanced view of a particular photographer's overall output.

This can be illustrated by considering Deborah Willis's comments on VanDerZee's iconic 'raccoon couple' ( ). Willis first encountered this photograph on her visits to the *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition in 1969 and found it the most compelling of VanDerZee's pictures, as she recalled 25 years later:

*Raccoon Couple* perfectly symbolized, in my mind, the celebration of black life and economic and cultural achievement. ... As I looked at the photograph, I romanticized this period of history through VanDerZee's portrayal of the couple. (Willis, 1994: 8)

In her monograph, she writes that, 'literally at the center of the image, framed by the luxurious automobile, [the man] has turned his eyes directly into the lens, inviting the viewer to join them for a moment in their world' (Willis-Braithwaite & Birt, 1993: 12). Willis' reading seems to come from the invitation of the man's eyes, which draw her not simply into that past moment but into a whole matrix of feelings and stories and memories she has as an African American individual. The fact that she universalises her response as that of 'the viewer' should not blind us to the active part she is playing in producing this meaning.

Willis then goes on to totalise this reading, by claiming that this one photograph could 'stand for all the rest', a metonym for all

VanDerZee's images, from which, she writes, 'one receives a sense of well-being and feeling that the African American community is healthy, diverse, spiritual, prosperous and productive' (ibid). Her readings seem to exhibit what Abigail Solomon-Godeau calls 'the primacy of desire in the interpretive enterprise' (1991: 31). Her reading of VanDerZee's body of work as 'the visual embodiment of the racial ideals' expressed in the 'New Negro', connecting with their demands for 'full democratic participation', places this photographer in a black canon, just as, in Solomon-Godeau's analysis, Eugene Atget's photographs have been, questionably, 'appropriated' by the modernist canon (Willis-Braithwaite & Birt, 1993: 12-13).

Another view comes from Daylanne K. English, who, pointing out that the 'raccoon couple' is 'without question the single photograph most closely associated with the Harlem Renaissance, despite its 1932 date', places it among 'a fairly random selection' of photographs from the African American press that 'discloses a rather aggressively optimistic visual construction of a thriving black community' (English, 1999: 812, footnote).

In *The Black Image in the New Deal*, his study of documentary photographs of and by African Americans in the 1930s and 1940s, Nicholas Natanson's rather damning critique of much African American photography not only includes studio photographers like VanDerZee with their 'polished versions of a polished portion of black society' but extends to black photojournalism where 'even the most politically militant black weeklies continued to accent the visually upbeat' through the Depression (1992: 29-30). Such photographs 'produced role-model types more often than they presented individuals':

If personalities were often submerged in the process, so was any questioning of an essentially conservative value

system underlying the definition of success. With some exceptions made for "special" black musical and artistic talents, blacks were to be, in this view, better white than whites. (Natanson, 1992: 32)

The question is whether VanDerZee's photographs *depict* or *assert* a thriving (or 'healthy, diverse, spiritual, prosperous and productive') community. If it is an assertion, is that something to celebrate and on what basis? That kind of question hovers over the black archive and the way that it has generally been presented to us. For example, if photojournalists set out to put the best face on their community, can their pictures be taken at face value?

If, as Natanson argues, much of the photography considered here is assimilationist, how far can we consider it an 'oppositional practice', as defined by bell hooks? In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks calls for 'revolutionary interventions in the area of race and representation' to oppose many images of black people circulating in the dominant culture that 'reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy' (1992: 1-2). Willis seems to be responding to this, by offering readings framed by the need to be 'visually upbeat'. She is clearly not alone in this.

For writer Albert Murray, it seems perfectly possible for 'good' photographers to take pictures that refute the naysayers and doom merchants, whether white or, like Kenneth Clark, author of *The Dark Ghetto*, black, who 'almost always proceed in terms of the liabilities of Harlem', 'documenting the pathological' (1983: 71). In writing an essay to accompany a 'group of fine photographs' (by Fred McDarrh), Murray inveighs against 'mass media images' that derive from 'psychopolitical gossip about Negro self-hatred' and closes his article with the recommendation that 'those who would help Harlem achieve its

aspirations ... approach the people of Harlem with the attitude that good photographers seem to take when they aim their cameras at the streets and the buildings' (ibid: 76-77).

Murray's exhortation suggests that it is through such representations that friends of Harlem can defend and promote their community. It also begs an important question in assigning this task to 'good' photographers, who can apparently see (and help us to see) beyond the stereotyped image of Harlem in the mainstream media. This sidesteps the obvious question of whether such 'good' photographers can genuinely fulfil this brief, and fails to address whether and in what way such 'good' pictures are truthful.

In defending his participation as an African American in the *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition, Reginald McGhee commented:

'I want to teach [ghetto kids] how to take a camera and go out in the streets and record their neighborhoods in a meaningful way. ...Militancy is getting at the white power structure with your talent.' (Schoener, 1995: unpaginated)

McGhee's position is similar to Murray's in his faith in the ability of photographers to change perceptions simply by 'recording their neighbourhoods' and he, too, wants their work to be 'oppositional' to dominant representations. The question is whether he means that doing this recording 'in a meaningful way' to get at 'the white power structure' involves simply showing the community in a more positive light or, rather, adopting a critical 'social documentary' approach, which might, indeed, produce disquieting images of social and economic breakdown. Would the latter not be closer to a genuine 'oppositional practice in producing pictures' or a more cogent and direct form of criticism of 'white supremacy'?

Outside Harlem, in fact, there were black photographers involved in such documentary projects. The most well known are Robert McNeill (b. 1917) and Gordon Parks, both of whom generally worked out of Washington. While studying at the New York Institute of Photography, however, McNeill published a remarkable series of pictures of African American women seeking employment and negotiating with white employers on the streets of New York in 1937, calling it, pointedly, *The Bronx Slave Market*. This secured him work with the WPA, which used his photographs in *The Negro in Virginia*, published in 1940. In 1942 Parks secured work with Roy Stryker, the director of the FSA photography project, in Washington. Here, he produced a celebrated series of photographs of charwoman Ella Watson. Parks may be the one black photographer in the 1940s to depict the ghetto that Harlem had become without pulling his punches; he later called his autobiography *A Choice of Weapons* to refer to his use of the camera to battle poverty and racism (Parks, 1966). A similar militancy can be found among younger black photographers of the later Civil Rights Movement, such as Robert Sengstacke, who commented that they saw themselves 'as graphic historians, conveyors of love, combating what we felt were negative photographic images of blacks in the major American press' (in Willis, 2000: 112).

However, the Harlem photographers discussed earlier did not adopt such critical approaches to depicting or documenting social conditions. As Morgan Smith put it: 'I had negative feelings about showing anything that was negative activity going on in Harlem, or any place else – such as kids not clothed well, not groomed, and so forth' (Smith, 1998: 12).

Even though his aim of combining 'creative expression' with 'penetrating insight' into African American urban life brought DeCarava close to contemporary documentary principles of

artistic expressiveness and social concern, his intention was also not to 'mirror social problems and promote social change' but to 'heighten the awareness of my people and bring to our consciousness a greater knowledge of our heritage'.

Those photographers who *did* take a more critical approach to Harlem, at least from the mid-1930s to the late 1940s, were mostly members of the Photo League. As white photographers and outsiders, they produced a body of work – an archive – which has been almost as neglected as that created by black photographers in Harlem. Yet much of the commentary on this work from those creating and defending the black canon has been dismissive or disparaging, which is, in my view, to some extent a misreading of the work and its intended purpose and, more importantly, a missed opportunity to build a more critical analysis of what these representations of Harlem can contribute to an understanding of the structures of racism and the shaping of black life.

## 2.3 Essential differences?

The Photo League's activities need to be seen in the context of the wider history and practice of white photographers working in Harlem up to the 1950s.

The first white Harlem photographer of note was Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964), the leading light among the downtown bohemians who 'discovered' Negro Harlem in the 1920s. An immensely influential figure, not least as the leading patron of the Harlem Renaissance writers and artists, he moved from a writing career to photography in the aftermath of the scandal his novel, *Nigger Heaven*, caused on its publication in 1926. He continued to take photographic portraits of African American celebrities right through to the 1960s, when he photographed such figures as LeRoi Jones (Imamu Amiri Baraka) (Byrd, 1993).

When the Depression hit Harlem, white press photographers were there to document news stories and, up to the Second World War, WPA-sponsored and other photographers came to carry out social documentary projects. The best known press pictures were taken by the maverick photographer, Weegee, described in a recent monograph as a 'hard-bitten tabloid news photographer, aficionado of the New York City underworld, and urban storyteller *par excellence*' but also 'a modern master of the art of photography' (Barth, 2000: 148). He was, typically, in the right spot at the right time when a riot broke out in Harlem in August 1943, but he had been in the district several times before. In the section of *Naked City* called 'Harlem', Weegee manages to encompass the elegance of Easter Sunday on Seventh Avenue with the Harlem riot - dancing *and* dying - in only seven spreads (Weegee, 1985: 190-203).

Among other independent photographers who covered Harlem as part of a wider project about New York was Berenice Abbott

(1898-1991), who, in *Changing New York*, was basically creating a topography of Manhattan in her pictures during the 1930s and early 1940s, and Helen Levitt (b. 1918). With some WPA support, Levitt photographed mainly in Manhattan from the mid-1930s onwards. Her interest in Harlem ran deep; in 1945 she and James Agee (subsequently replaced by Janice Loeb) began a candid movie project about Harlem, edited six years later into *In the Street*.

However, the most substantial body of work in Harlem in the pre-war period was created by members of the Photo League, founded by Sid Grossman (1914-1955) and Sol Libsohn (1914-2001). Although differing emphases between reform-driven photography and more artistic concerns had by 1936 splintered the New York Workers' Film and Photo League into three separate organisations, one of which was the Photo League, the philosophy behind the work of the Photo League and its practice seem very close to that of mainstream documentary photography. An example of this can be seen in Grossman's own work for the WPA Federal Arts Project. His visual survey of Harlem, entitled *Negroes in New York*, was carried out between May and July in 1939, mainly focusing on businesses on 133<sup>rd</sup> Street.

The guiding principle for the Photo League, as summed up by Anne Wilkes Tucker, was the 'desire for social change and a belief in photography as an expressive medium that could mirror social problems and promote social change' (Tucker, Cass & Daiter, 2001: 9). Its own magazine, *Photo Notes*, stated that the League's task was to 'put the camera back into the hands of honest photographers', in other words out of the hands of pictorialists and modernists with their 'cult of red filters and confusing angles' (ibid: 13).

In contrast to the largely agricultural brief of the FSA, the Photo League focused mainly on the urban environment; most of its key members were New Yorkers, the League's headquarters were in Manhattan and many of its major portfolios were of New York neighbourhoods. Already interested in photographing the poorer sections of Manhattan, Aaron Siskind (1903-1991) joined the League in 1932 and began taking pictures of Harlem. In 1936, Siskind formed a production unit called the Feature Group, which included eight younger photographers whom he mentored - Harold Corsini, Morris Engel and Jack Manning among them. The first and, according to Nancy Rosenblum, the 'most fully realized' of five major portfolios from the Feature Group, was the *Harlem Document* (1997: 375). This was suggested by Michael Carter, the African American editor of *Photo Notes*, who helped to research the project and was to provide it with a written text.

In 1940 Siskind began another project with Carter and Max Yavno. Called *The Most Crowded Block*, it documented what was known as the 'lung block' at 142<sup>nd</sup> and 143<sup>rd</sup> streets, so called because of the high incidence of TB among its residents. This project also focused as much on the built environment as on the people living in it.

Siskind would prepare for producing 'a photographic document' by making visits, talking to people, doing research and then planning the actual taking of the pictures. Despite all this care and the crucial role played by Carter, Siskind and his team were, in the end, on the outside looking in. This, of course, applied as much to other Feature Group portfolios, such as *Dead End: The Bowery*.

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The distinction between Harlem as a community and as a ghetto is a critical one and it is often claimed as the difference between

the Harlem photographed by black people and that photographed by white people. Ironically, perhaps, one of the most damning assessments of white documentary work in Harlem that I have come across was penned by A. D. Coleman, a white critic, who attacked Bruce Davidson's *110<sup>th</sup> Street*, a series of photographs taken in East Harlem and first published in 1970, partly because he has 'the option of leaving' the ghetto. Conceding that his privileged status does not invalidate the quality of the work, Coleman argues that it is limited because:

...no matter how insightful a white photographer may be, and despite all the precautions he may take, he remains white and therefore alien. Thus, even where there is mutual admiration and respect between photographer and subject, there is automatically a barrier, for they stand on different sides of the socio-cultural fence.' (Coleman, 1979: 46)

So, does the difference of photographer's 'race' mean a difference of engagement? Are there 'essential' differences between white and black?

This raises as a critical issue the relationship between the subject of a photograph and the photographer. At one extreme is the photographic *flâneur*, present but detached, a recognisable figure among the street photographers of postwar New York like William Klein or Garry Winogrand. At the other are photographers 'who have sought an experience which is about being part of, rather than apart from, the scene which they are recording' (Borden, 1996: 11). The Harlem photographers discussed here fit into the latter category. The question is whether that makes the pictures which white photographers took in Harlem *untruthful*, as Coleman suggests, simply because they were neither black nor members of the local community.

In commenting on what he calls the 'reformist look' in photographs taken of the 'Windrush' generation, African Caribbeans who migrated to Britain after the Second World War, Stuart Hall argues that they are made 'almost the passive objects of forces that they could not control or actively oppose'; similar analyses are made of projects such as the *Harlem Document* (Hall, 1984: 26). The perennial debate about conventional social documentary is sharpened by this racial context.

- **Fig. 010 James VanDerZee/Black Cross nurses (1924)**
- **Fig. 011 Aaron Siskind/Untitled (n.d.)**
- **Fig. 012 N.Y. Daily News Photo/Marcus Garvey (c 1922)**
- **Fig. 013 John Launois/Hard-Core Poverty (1966)**

Willis, for example, is able to distinguish significant differences between two images of black women marching in Harlem street parades, one by VanDerZee of Black Cross nurses and the other of a follower of Father Divine by Siskind. The fact that the parader is on her own, she claims, makes Siskind's march seem 'futile', while VanDerZee's depiction of a group displays, on the contrary, 'a mutual purpose and goal' (Willis-Braithwaite & Birt, 1993: 24). This is as debatable a position as Robert Hill on the attitudes he assumes for the white press photographer snatching a picture of Marcus Garvey in his limousine, a photograph that apparently lacks what Hill calls, rather inaccurately in my view, VanDerZee's 'characteristic honest, down-home style' in his version of Garvey and the UNIA:

Determined to capture the image of the leading black dissident of the era, to acquire it for the visual archive of white superiority, the camera attempts to objectify and come away with an exhibit of Garvey. (Hill, 1994: 187-8 *passim*)

Less tendentious is Paul A. Rogers' detailed critique of John Launois's 1966 photograph of an African American family in a decaying tenement room, featured in the final section of *Harlem on My Mind*. Rogers is concerned by 'the way this static image of dystopia ... signifies "blackness" as an irreducible condition upon whose body poverty is mapped, organized, and finally, firmly ... situated as natural' (1994: 27).

The implication of these criticisms is that 'white supremacy' may be inscribed as much in the documentary photographs of Siskind and Launois as in the blatantly racist imagery of popular white culture. The case against Siskind and his like is that they map failure, anomie, poverty, dirt, indeed everything that is other than the American norms of success and clean living onto the 'real' space in which black people live and work, and ultimately onto their bodies. But just how fair are these readings?

To some extent, the criticisms of Siskind and others do identify a common problem of such documentary work: that it is an outsider's interpretation imposed on an 'othered' community. The very title of Siskind's second series of Harlem photographs, *The Most Crowded Block*, could easily be the title of a section from Jacob Riis' expose, *How the Other Half Lives*, and this does raise a legitimate question over how far attitudes had changed over the preceding four decades. Natanson notes that the cruder forms of Depression-era social documentary photography ended up by simply adding another demeaning stereotype to a long tradition:

On the opposite end of the spectrum from the 'noble primitives,' the 'loyal Georges,' and the 'colorful Negroes,' one finds the black-as-extreme-victim. (Natanson, 1992: 24)

Despite their effort to raise social concerns, unaddressed cultural prejudices 'banished from the front door [may] creep in the back', subverting some white photographers' good intentions. 'Hence,' Natanson writes, 'particularly for black subjects, an angry camera becomes a demeaning camera' (ibid: 26-27).

- **Fig. 014 Aaron Siskind/A. Philip Randolph (n.d.)**
- **Fig. 015 M & M Smith/A. Philip Randolph (n.d.)**

Although Natanson concludes that this is not as true of the Photo League's work in Harlem, white critics Westerbeck and Meyerowitz make a persuasive case that much of Siskind's work there is unsympathetic to his subject matter, citing his photograph of A. Philip Randolph, taken as part of series on the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters:

What political implications there were in Siskind's own Harlem work often seem inadvertent, or even inappropriate. For instance, [a photograph of] the black union leader is shot from a low angle in such a claustrophobic way as to make the subject look almost like a gangster. (1994: 251)

Westerbeck puts this down to Siskind's gradual move away from social to graphic patterns en route to abstraction, but that does not exclude the possibility that Siskind is simply not as interested or as informed about Randolph's stature in the black community as M & M Smith seem to be in their photograph. The distance between us and Randolph in Siskind's picture has been abridged in this photograph, as the black photographer has been able to get much closer to his subject. The low angle in this case serves to give Randolph an air of authority rather than inaccessibility.

Nevertheless, Natanson generally praises the Photo League's *Harlem Document* for its 'care and imagination' in how it approached the black community, and for largely meeting the challenge of the photographic times, where 'reform-minded photographers' often tried 'to *shock*', 'government agency photographers... to *celebrate*' and 'black photographers... to *glorify*' (1992: 42; author's emphasis).

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While white photographers could never become 'participant observers' in Harlem in the way that black photographers could, it would inaccurate to assume that there was never a personal connection between them and the community they photographed.

Van Vechten, still known principally for his portraits of the artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance, also took photographs of parades in Harlem. Some of those passing marchers notice that he is taking a picture – he seems to be standing fairly close to the action - and they smile warmly in response. Sid Grossman sometimes matches DeCarava's warm engagement and his lively outdoor scenes of family and community life seem a long way from what might be called classic social documentary, as described here by Rosenblum:

By selecting sympathetic types and contrasting the individual's expression and gesture with the shabbiness of the physical surroundings, the photographer frequently was able to transform a mundane record of what exists into a fervent plea for what might be. This idealism became a basic tenet of the social documentary concept. (Rosenblum, 1997: 361)

To assume that a white photographer is bound not to get at the truth or bound to denigrate the black community sails, in my view, perilously near essentialism. Such critics should perhaps heed George Hutchinson's criticism of the pejorative use of 'whiteness', a word which has become 'a ubiquitous cultural signifier... to represent a vast array of shifting negative positions in relation to which a positive black presence is constructed' (1997: 21).

How much are the problems that have been identified here to do with race? Is perhaps what makes the black photographers distinctive here not their race but the fact that they are *local*? Luc Boltanski and Jean-Claude Chamboredon argue that local studio photographers are 'readily integrated' into their community:

Directly in touch with the public who commissioned them, they were able and obliged to adapt to the tastes of the public. Repositories of specific knowledge which was enough to confer authority upon them, they fulfilled – and were the only ones who could do so – a well-defined social function, and fulfilled it in conformity with precise norms; they filled a need. (in Bourdieu, 1990: 172)

In many ways, the community brief that VanDerZee, Hansen and other studio photographers up to the Second World War fulfilled was an essentially 'colourless' one. It is worth noting in this respect that, when 'Negro Harlem' was not uniformly 'black', the clientele of photographers as skilled as VanDerZee included many white and Hispanic Americans as well as African Americans. We need, in any case, to remember the different effects and meanings produced when photographs are made for 'the benefit of the photographer' (Siskind, say) and when they are made 'for the eyes of the people they represent', as in studio portraits (Wells, 1997: 127). We should also keep in mind that,

as poor communities rarely photograph their own straitened circumstances, often the only depiction available to us is that made by outsiders.

- **Fig. 016 Roy DeCarava/Dancers (1956)**

If there are differences between black and white photographers' work, do they relate instead to a 'black way of seeing' - a black aesthetic? One simple answer to that question comes from a younger black photographer, Carrie Mae Weems (b. 1950):

A black idiom is simply one that comes out of the peculiar social economic and cultural conditions that mold black people. If a photographer is sensitive and understands the idiosyncratic gestures and rituals of the culture and employs this understanding while shooting, then that person is working out of a black idiom or a black aesthetic. (in Galassi, 1996: 26)

This formula elegantly avoids the essentialist taint, whilst insisting that only those who know the culture from the inside, as it were, can produce 'black' photographs. This has implications, too, for reading 'black' photographs, as the example of Roy DeCarava's photograph, *Dancers*, demonstrates.

This picture was taken by DeCarava at a social club at 110th Street Manor on Fifth Avenue in 1956, and it depicts two dancers providing entertainment during an intermission. In considering the photograph twenty-five years later, DeCarava confesses to 'a terrible torment' about the image:

What they actually are is two black male dancers who dance in the manner of an older generation of black vaudeville performers. The problem comes because their figures remind me so much of the real life experience of

blacks in their need to put themselves in an awkward position before the man, for the man: to demean themselves in order to survive, to get along. ... And yet there is something in the figures that is very creative, that is very real and very black in the finest sense of that word. So there is this duality, this ambiguity in the photograph that I find very hard to live with. I always have to make a decision in a case like this - is it good or is it bad? (Galassi, 1996:25)

Peter Galassi observes that DeCarava's response may derive from 'broad social and historical concerns that, in principle, are open to all', but asks rhetorically, 'What white viewer has experienced a "terrible torment" while looking at this picture?' (ibid). This strikes a strong cautionary note on just how much close attention and thought needs to be brought to a photograph to determine its possible meaning(s), and what care we must take to recognise, acknowledge and critique our own position as readers, especially, in this case, if we are white readers and unaware of 'special resonances' that may be visible only (or most clearly) to black readers. DeCarava's comments, for example, circle around the notion of double consciousness and 'knowing one's place', themes that are peculiarly significant to African Americans enduring white racism.

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DeCarava concludes that the duality or ambiguity of this photograph does not invalidate it – on the contrary, 'it is still a good picture. In fact, it is good just because of those things and in spite of those things. *The picture works.*' (ibid; my emphasis) The next section outlines a methodology that I hope will help in exploring the complex ways in which photographs 'work' in the dynamic way that DeCarava suggests.

### **3     *Points of entry, springboards for speculation:* Reading photographs**

Think only how different the whole field of history would be if visual texts were used, not as mere illustrations, selected to confirm what has been previously determined through written sources, but instead as points of entry and springboards for speculation. (Kasson, 1998: 95)

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Arguing for the desegregation of the canon is a vital task but editing and shaping the black archive around a project of racial self-assertion and celebration can limit the meaning of photographs and curtail their usefulness in understanding Harlem's complexities. Equally, there are many other narratives into which photographs may be subsumed: historical, as in *Harlem on My Mind*; humanist, as in *The Family of Man*; art historical, based, for example, on individual photographic careers; genre such as 'street photography'; even the photographic archive itself, such as the one held by the Schomburg Center.

Douglas Crimp's critique of the way that the New York Public Library has treated its photographic archives, filing photographs under the names of individual photographers, is particularly pertinent:

What is lost in this process is the ability of photography to create information and knowledge through its interaction with other discourses. ... [leaving photographs] doomed to the visual solitude of the art object'. (Wells, 1997: 35)

That 'solitude' is even more pronounced when drawn into art historical categories shaped by modernist or other ideologies.

- **Fig. 017 Roy DeCarava/117<sup>th</sup> Street (1951)**

This is well exemplified by the way in which DeCarava's photographs have often been manoeuvred into an abstract, aestheticised space largely removed from the social/spatial struggle. The lengthy reading offered by Sherry Turner DeCarava of a photograph captioned simply *117<sup>th</sup> Street, 1951* is a good sample of this approach. The photograph depicts a large vacant lot created by the demolition that year of an entire block of late-nineteenth-century cold-water flats:

that urban desecration in its turn bestowed an unintended renewal as it allowed a swathe of light to descend softly to the ground ... The curtain of the buildings ... is presented as a range of modulated tones, pushed toward subdued hues... and becomes a singular spatial structure against which the narrative elements can then clearly project themselves. ... All the wonderful particulars of the narrative – from flowerpots precariously placed at a window ledge ... to the *contraposto* strides of child and woman – then develop their own rhythm and the picture becomes an image more felt or imagined than concretely perceived. (in Galassi, 1996: 41)

Without dismissing its perceptive formal analysis and its suggestive mention of the shift from perception to imagination, the general effect of this reading is to suggest that this woeful disruption in the fabric of the city is there primarily to provide the artist with an opportunity to direct all the pictorial elements, *including* the human figures, into pleasing forms. There are other, equally valid ways of reading this photograph – indeed, Turner DeCarava's own phrase 'urban desecration' suggests an entirely different frame through which to view it, one that takes more account of social realities.

The fact that photographs can shift category whilst continuing to depict what they depict, exemplified by the way that VanDerZee's work has moved from studio photography to documentary to art history and black studies, demonstrates the variety of investments made by readers and institutions in them - and the need to return again to the photograph itself and its depiction of a real space at a moment in time.

Nicholas Natanson argues for a 'more systematic, less deterministic' approach to photographic context. This is to be based largely on 'historical framing', even though he admits that this process 'demands a level of experiential reconstruction that, in most cases, cannot be reached'. Nevertheless, this is preferable to other methods, whether aesthetic or poststructuralist:

Despite its limitations, historical framing, when performed with sensitivity to *multiple connotations* in a given image..., can at least begin to draw out the richness of the photographer's encounter with place and person, and, through that richness, the play of cultural ideas.  
(Natanson, 1992: 9-10; my emphasis)


If photographs are to be more than illustrations to a pre-existing thesis, and if they are to be a useful tool in exploring the Harlem they depict, we need a more rigorous form of photo analysis. We need to develop a way of reading photographs that respects their historical genesis and whatever intentions we know or suspect their makers had, while opening up their content to legitimate questions about the Harlem that they claim to represent (and thus mediate).

In the following section, I argue that photography is more complex, ambiguous and 'imaginative' than the ideologies that

attempt to co-opt it assume, even the 'ideology' or intentions of the photographer or the institution commissioning the photographer. Through a series of critical manoeuvres designed to disrupt easy closure of the meaning of photographs, I hope to explore their 'multiple connotations'. My preferred option, in short, is to make photographs 'work' rather than try to fix their meaning, to explore them rather than caption them.

### **3.1 Incompleteness and innuendo**

As excerpts from a world that was, photographs are understandable as fragments, which means that they carry with them an invitation to reflect and even reconstruct former environments and totalities. The history of photography is a history of responses to that invitation, most of which are studiously hesitant and doubtful of an outcome. (Ian Jeffrey, 1992: 351)

Simply combining what is known (if anything) of a photograph's historical production and reception will only get us so far in reading it. Ian Jeffrey's suggestion that a photograph is a 'fragment' that can be used to re-create a totality in the mind of the viewer – who attempts, in other words, to restore it to the world it was first 'taken' from – is helpful in beginning to explore the photograph's further possible meanings. Lyn Lofland's concept of 'perceptual innuendo', developed as part of her exploration of how people negotiate the public realm, seems to echo Jeffrey's insight. One of the visual pleasures of strolling, Lofland argues, is to glimpse things that trigger the imagination because of 'the very incompleteness of the information one is able to gather' (Lofland, 1998: 81). Unlike most paintings, most photographs invite the viewer to imagine what lies beyond the frame. VanDerZee's photograph of the 'raccoon couple' ( ) serves to show how this works in practice, producing a

multiplicity of possible uses and readings of the same photograph but leaving its final 'meaning' always open.

Unlike Willis, I was attracted to the 'raccoon couple' not by any invitation in the couple's eyes – perhaps as a white viewer I could not be drawn in in quite the same way – but to the matching raccoon fur coats that literally marry the two of them. I map onto their bodies this signature of glamour and wealth, reinforced and framed by the lacquered sheen of the Cadillac, and produce black doubles of that ultimate Jazz Age Couple, Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald. It is like the moment in *The Great Gatsby* when Gatsby is driving Nick Carraway across Queensboro Bridge towards the city 'always seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world':

As we crossed Blackwell's Island a limousine passed us driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled towards us in haughty rivalry.

'Anything can happen now that we've slid over this bridge,' I thought; 'Anything at all...' (Fitzgerald, 1991[1925]: 72)

The city, part American Dream, part an ever-inviting frontier, is apparently up for grabs. This couple appear to compete for the same glittering prize.

When I showed this same photograph as a transparency to accompany a paper at a seminar, another reading emerged. The woman appeared white or very light-skinned to this audience, and several read the photograph as that of a pimp and his moll. When Willis recalls Harlem as a 'source of pride', she lists 'the dances, the rent parties, the plays, the musicians and the numbers' (Willis, 1994: 8). The numbers racket made a society

figure of Caspar Holstein during the 1920s, and it may be that this man dressed in furs is a similar line of business.

On the other hand, another viewer might simply see in this photographic image a trope for the conspicuous consumption and display that Thorstein Veblen first described in 1899 in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* and that both W.E.B. Du Bois and black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier attributed to the 'black bourgeoisie'. The photograph then seems to depict a couple, however black, who have been effectively shaped by the norms and aspirations of dominant white society, their status confirmed by the gleaming Cadillac.

Nicholas Natanson's reading is a subtle variation of this idea. Like Willis, he is drawn to the couple's expressions but finds something less appealing there, which he links to the photographer's own desire to 'tell it as it should be' rather than as it is:

[These] fashionable Harlemites... show only the slightest of emotions. Even in VanDerZee's particularly opulent world, one find the note of polite reserve that, repeated time and again in the work of other portraitists, lay at the core of black "class." ...Asserting a world untouched by the depression, asserting a world that defied traditional white assumptions about black behavior, these portraits often ended up as rigidly stylised as their "colourful darky" and "pathetic victim" opposites. (Natanson, 1992: 30-31)

Other viewers might come to this photograph for more prosaic reasons, researching 1930s fashions for example, or seeking evidence of car ownership amongst African Americans. Others might see a story of gender unfolding here, the male possessing the car and at the wheel, the female more decorative, a story that may have elements of intra-racial colour politics where

light-skinned women – ‘high yallers’, in the jargon of the day – are apparently more prized by successful black men than their darker sisters.

None of these or other possible readings help us learn the exact details of that moment on West 127<sup>th</sup> Street when the couple posed for VanDerZee’s camera. We do not know whether the man or the woman asked for the photograph to be taken. We do not know for certain their names, their backgrounds, their lives, although Michael Henry Adams, a highly knowledgeable architectural historian, has recently suggested that they may be Paul and Thelma Meers, a popular ballroom dancing team, the Astaire and Rogers of Harlem.

We are not sure what happened to the original print, whether it hung on a wall in the couple’s home or was sent off to folks back down South to demonstrate that (as Willis puts it in yet another reference to this photograph) ‘the migrant’s northern experience has been positive and productive’. Yet what this photograph can offer, as in all the readings above, is material for thinking about Harlem and how it is (re)presented. Willis puts it this way:

It is such visualizations, both fictive and real, of middle-class life that give VanDerZee’s images much of their power to enchant and engage the viewer. (Willis, 2000: 43)

My argument in this thesis rests on the belief that all photographs have this power to enchant and engage and that, in producing and reading photographs, we cannot help but create such visualizations out of their incompleteness.

### 3.2 The telling detail

In developing a working method for the close reading of photographs, we should begin with the photograph itself and its physical recording of visual data. As John Kouwenhoven suggests, the usefulness of the photograph is that it is 'a specific and individual thing, not a generalization' (1982: 26). Its details go well beyond anything possible in written records, making it a unique and potentially useful tool in historical enquiry. The sheer abundance of detail, however, can arguably work against a coherent analysis simply through information 'overload' – although, simply by being there, it can serve to disrupt attempts at closure. Barthes' notion of the *punctum*, which can be related back to earlier observations of a photograph's 'telling detail(s)', can offer one method of selection.

- **Fig. 018 James VanDerZee/Family Portrait (1926)**

Moving, in *Camera Lucida*, from his previously strict semiological approach to photography to one based on phenomenological enquiry, Barthes describes the recognisable code of the photograph as 'a field, which I perceive quite familiarly as a consequence of my knowledge, my culture' (Barthes, 1993: 25). Of the vast mass of photographs, he discovers that what he feels about them 'derives from an *average* affect', a 'general interest', which he names as the *studium*. In trying to account for the far fewer photographs that move or excite him beyond an obvious, rational, culturally trained response – the response presumably desired by the photographer – he identifies a second element in such pictures that 'breaks (or punctuates) the *studium*'. This '*punctum*' is an accidental 'element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me' (ibid: 26), very often 'a "detail," i.e., a partial object' (ibid: 43). Happily for this study, he picks as the first in a list of examples of the *punctum* a

photograph by James VanDerZee, *Family Portrait*, taken in his studio in 1926. The *studium* is clear:

It utters respectability, family life, conformism, Sunday best, an effort of social advancement in order to assume the White Man's attributes (an effort touching by reason of its naiveté). (Barthes, 1993: 43)

He swiftly moves on from this 'obvious' meaning to a detail - one of the women's 'strapped pumps': a *punctum* that 'arouses great sympathy in me' but that ultimately shifts to her necklace, as he tries to retrieve the presence of his own mother – thus exposing, as he freely admits, the personal investment he is making in the photograph.

Despite the highly personal nature of his readings here and elsewhere, Barthes' emphasis on the detail can offer a useful tool for photo analysis. In fact, as several commentators have pointed out, the significance of the unintended or 'telling' detail has long been acknowledged. In 1859, Oliver Wendell Holmes observed that the 'distinctiveness of lesser details... often gives us incidental truths which interest us more than the central object of the picture ... What is the picture of the drum, without the marks on its head where the beating of the sticks has darkened the parchment?' ('The Stereoscope and the Stereograph' in Trachtenberg, 1980: 78-80)

The *punctum* can, of course, be personal as in the case of Barthes, but more generally useful is that detail which, in Bourdieu's terms, 'betrays' the *implicit* meaning of the photograph:

Adequately understanding a photograph... means not only recovering the meanings which it *proclaims*, that is, to a certain extent, the explicit intentions of the photographer;

it also means deciphering the surplus of meaning which it *betrays* by being part of the symbolism of an age, a class or an artistic group. (Bourdieu, 1990: 6-7)

Natanson's critical reading of the 'raccoon couple', noted above, is a good example of such a 'betrayal'.

### **3.3 Dialectical realism**

While some theorists argue that a dominant ideology can shape the way that pictures are taken and read - for example, in the commissioned work of the FSA photographers or in the 'bourgeois' portrait studio - John Roberts demonstrates that the subjects (with or without inverted commas) of photographs *can* answer back if we, as readers, engage as fully as we can with the subject-matter not simply as the past but as it emerges in the present.

Roberts's 'dialectical realism' draws on Walter Benjamin's and Lefebvre's writings on art's potential to intervene in and transform the 'alienating forms of everyday life' (Roberts, 1998: 8). He describes this approach as 'historical interruption and redescription ... a redemptive historiography "from below"'. This redemption involves two 'dialectical moves':

the recovery of objects and events from the patina of official histories..., and the reassessment of objects and events from the standpoint of their contemporary significance. To examine a particular object or event is to link up its particular causal significance or drag on the present. The dialectical realist as a redemptive historian takes the present to be imbedded in the past, although the effects of this interpresence may take different forms: latent, manifest or agentive. (Roberts, 1998: 12)

Past and present thus intersect on the surface of the photograph. Whilst trying to determine the historical circumstances of its production, the overriding interest I have in the photograph lies in its *present* meaning, as 'an imaginative engagement with everyday forms and practices' (Roberts, 1998: 8).

Roberts' useful clarification that the photograph is 'not simply an effect of dominant power relations, or evidence of the optical unconscious' but also 'a form of *practical* knowledge, an inscription of, and an intervention in, a socially divided world' reminds us to pay attention to content and context, and leads towards a dialectical theory of photography that may allow photographs to 'speak back from the past in non-objectified ways' (Roberts, 1998: 4-5 *passim*). Dominant power relations may still retain their determining effects on the production and consumption of culture, but Roberts argues that there is a negotiation between social agency and social structure.

Following Steve Edwards' critique of the 'monologism' produced by post-structuralist photographic theory, in which Edwards argues that the documentary photograph contains the voice of the subjects as well as that of the photographer 'objectifying' them, Roberts is able to 'conceive of reported speech in the photograph'. Edwards calls this 'the answering word of those who are imaged' (Roberts, 1998: 162).

This is an important insight, one used effectively by Robert A. Hill in his analysis of a press photographer's image of Marcus Garvey (1900). According to Hill's reading, Garvey 'rewards' the (white) gaze of the camera with 'the allure of his defiant otherness' among a whole range of other, conflicting emotions, from uneasiness to hostility. Hill argues that the 'communication of the photograph is visual *and* vocal, encompassing several layers of meaning that have a special resonance in black culture'

and that the camera not only scrutinises but also 'polarizes through its depiction of what it sees and how it in turn is seen by those whom it scrutinizes' (Hill, 1994: 181-186 *passim*).

Drawing on Robert's dialectical theory of photography, photographs are, therefore, not necessarily 'monologic'; their subjects need not be entirely 'subjected' (subjugated) but can 'answer back' and have some say in their own representation.

### **3.4 Sourcing and selecting photographs**

In sourcing the photographs used here, I have looked beyond the published monographs, which offer the editor's ideology as part of the package, and sought to familiarise myself with as many Harlem photographs as possible from the archives held at the Schomburg Center and at the Museum of the City of New York, as well as photographs reproduced in books about Harlem and New York.

The potential photographic archive to draw on is vast: the Schomburg alone holds around 300,000 prints and negatives. Even though much of the work of many of the earlier African American photographers has been lost or destroyed, there remain large collections of glass and film negatives and prints, going back to the late nineteenth century.

In this context, my selection of just over 260 photographs for this thesis is relatively tiny. Nevertheless, I believe that it is close to representative of the archive. In the end, although everything is photographable (as Italo Calvino remarked), not everything is photographed, even today, and this is even more true of the period studied here, when photography was dominated by institutions like the portrait studio and the newsroom, which had well defined if not always articulated

agendas and ideologies to promote. Photographs are taken for a purpose and, in this case, the range of those purposes is limited largely to those discussed in my earlier account of Harlem's photographic culture.

The selection of particular photographs has also been shaped by my focus on particular spatial themes, so the first step was to construct a taxonomy based on the themes of cityscape, street demonstrations, street life, the home and the presentation of the body. Choosing which photographs go where in such an argument, which sidesteps art historical and chronological neatness, has been challenging, and so has managing the 'chicken and egg' dialectic of the photograph and the spatial issue it depicts – i.e. which should come first. If at times photographs seem to be used here to 'illustrate' a spatial concern, my defence is that those spatial concerns first came to my notice through my readings of a number of actual photographs. In any case, it is difficult, in my view, to avoid some 'slippage' between the space and the photograph that (re)presents that space.

Recognising the risks in treating individual photographs in isolation, I have sought resonances and coincidences among the metaphorical piles of photographs, finding pairs, sometimes series, of photographs which, together, provide useful comparisons and contrasts, their affinities and duplications opening up the spaces of Harlem in an interesting way. Whilst endeavouring to choose photographs that were, as far as possible, fairly representative of their subject matter (the *studium*), I was often drawn to those had something more eye-catching about them – the kind of photographs Dorothea Lange called 'second-lookers', those that, perhaps, contained a 'telling detail'. The overriding principle has been to find and use photographs that might make the reader think more intently about Harlem and its relationship to the white world,

photographs that reveal more the more they are looked at, photographs with a greater complexity of meaning, photographs that make Harlem more *visible* – or, to put it in Maynard's terms, more *imaginable*.

In his catalogue essay for an exhibition of Austin Hansen's photographs, taken in Harlem mainly during the 1940s and 1950s, photographic historian Rodger C. Birt claims that each photograph is 'an exact fragment of time and space', capturing a fraction of real history and thus capable of dispelling the 'uncertainty and confusion' that has bedevilled outsiders' understanding of Harlem. By seeing these pictures, in other words, we learn what Harlem is really like. Hansen's work, Birt writes, 'serves as a map and compass', a surrogate enabling us to actually see Harlem, rather than simply look at it through the veil of race or metaphor (Hansen, 1989: unpaginated). The relationship between the photograph and the scene is not as transparent as Birt appears to believe, but I would argue that 'an understanding of the real Harlem' is indeed possible through close readings of photographs, in particular those that, in their ambiguities and complexity of meaning, offer 'an imaginative engagement with everyday forms and practices' (Roberts, 1998: 8).

#### 4      **Photography in space: The thesis**

The 'geographies of exclusion' (David Sibley, 1995)... are not only demographically delineated but ... are imaginaries linking the social and psychic, placing race at the centre of the cityscape... Diffuse and general as forms of commonsense racism may be, they are also constructed within time and space and *it is spatiality which is ever present in encounters benign and violent*. (Westwood & Williams, 1997:9; my emphasis)

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Using the methods outlined in the previous section, I hope to show how photographs can be used to explore and analyse the racialised space of Harlem. By making an indexical record of the surface of things, photography – or, more accurately, the *reader* of photography – turns them into objects of thought. In the photographic record, I argue, is (re)presented the results of a struggle for the legal and symbolic ownership of place: the structures and features of a racist system, the impact of invisible white power on black everyday life, and the construction of spaces of resistance ('black space'). As (re)presentations of space, photographs inevitably, in my view, contain its pathologies; double-consciousness and the fissure of the colour line, for example, must lie somewhere within or around the frame. As bell hooks writes in her essay 'Photography & Black Life', 'the sites of contestation were not *out there*, in the world of white power, they were *within* segregated black life' (hooks, 1994: 48). I would make a similar claim for *photographs* of segregated black life: that they contain the sites of contestation within them.

Before proceeding to my analysis, I want to clarify the theoretical links I am making between photography and space by

bringing together Maynard's thesis about photographic 'manifestation' and Lefebvre's writings on 'lived space'. In doing this, I am particularly indebted to Edward Soja's analysis of Lefebvre's spatial theories and how he links them to bell hooks' polemics about black space (Soja, 1996).

#### **4.1 Photographic 'manifestation'**

The pictures presented here are documents of history but they are also experiences in their own right; they offer us a privileged opportunity to witness the past as if it were, momentarily, present. (Trachtenberg, 1979: x)

Yet that photography inevitably has reservations about the past as past. If its personnel still exist, and if its events are still in progress, photographic representations would be better termed presentations. (Ian Jeffrey, 1992: 351)

Photography begins in the act of looking. It ends as an act of representation or framing, but the looking comes first. The eye looks through the lens, the scene looks back, and we look now at the printed image, all as if at the same instant. Photographs are *presentations* as well as *representations*, simultaneously past and present. Moreover, this 'presence' is not just a question of time but of space: the photograph is a result of activity in space as well as time. We, as viewers, seem to occupy the same space as the photographer, viewing the same scene (or at least an indexical record of it). We *participate* in the photograph through what Patrick Maynard describes as 'manifestation', when our 'vivid imagining of direct seeing' moves the photograph beyond mere information or resemblance to its subject (1997: 114):

photographic pictures are particularly marked out for their powers to extend sense experiences to past times and

distant events, powers assisted by their detective dimension. ... Yet testimonies about "nearness," "contact," "emanation," "vestige," "trace," "co-substantiality," and so on, register a sense that photographs of things can combine with these characteristics a strong *manifestation* function as well. (ibid: 246-247)

Before reaching this point in his argument, Maynard has described the two other functions of photographic pictures: *depiction* and *detection*. The first is simply the presentation of physical data on the indexical record made by photography: what we *perceive*. However, Maynard continues, we look at photographs differently from other pictures, using them as 'tools for a certain kind of visual detection and indirect seeing' of the 'things, events, states of affair *that they depict*' (ibid: 217). The interaction of this *detective* with the *depictive* function of photography strengthens a parallel interaction between *imagination* and *perception*. Combining these functions with that of *manifestation*, we become, in Maynard's words, 'part of a wider social situation'. (Maynard, 1997: 53). We are, truly, *in the picture*.

## 4.2 'Lived' space

A more familiar triadic analysis is rehearsed by Soja, who shows the parallels between the notion of 'lived space' (his substitute term for Lefebvre's 'representational space'), hooks 'real-and-imagined space' and Soja's own 'Thirdspace'. Whatever the label, *lived* space is both distinct from and encompassing of *perceived* space and *conceived* space.

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre attacks the 'double illusion' of idealist *transparency* and materialist *opacity* (Lefebvre, 1991: 27-30). The first confines reality to 'thought things', thus

keeping actual social and spatial practices out of sight. The second is a refusal to see beyond the surface of things, thus making the imagined unseen and unknowable. These subjective and objective views are not rigidly antagonistic, however, but flicker back and forth, so that each mode of thinking about space should, Soja argues, be seen as 'simultaneously real and imagined, concrete and abstract, material and metaphysical' (Soja, 1996: 65). Out of and beyond this dialectic emerges space as it is 'directly lived, with all its intractability intact, a space that stretches across the images and symbols that accompany it, the space of "inhabitants" and "users"' (ibid: 67).

There seem to me to be some intriguing analogies here between the photographic and the spatial, where perception and imagination (and the constant dialectic between the two) are combined and surpassed by a vivid sense of *being there*, amongst all the intractable complexities and ambiguities of the world as it is.

#### **4.3 A trialectical theory of photography?**

Photographic theorist John Roberts suggests that, by recording, imagining and opening up the spaces they (re)present, photographers are, consciously or unconsciously, participating in the struggle over space – who owns it, why and wherefore. This argument is also derived from a reading of Lefebvre's theory of a 'critical practice of space'. Photography, Roberts suggests, can play its part in a political economy of space, revealing 'the violence inherent in the production of the abstract space of the market' through its representations of places and spaces, and offering answers to two key questions:

What places and spaces are given visibility in the culture?  
In what ways does photography, consciously or

unconsciously, pick out the changing spatial relations in the city and the countryside, under the impact of capital accumulation? (Roberts, 1998: 195)

Soja also makes clear the political choice involved in giving 'special attention ... to the spaces of representation, to *lived space as a strategic location* from which to encompass, understand and potentially transform all spaces simultaneously'. This, he writes, is:

the space of radical openness, the space of social struggle. ...vitally filled with politics and ideology, with the real and the imagined intertwined, and with capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and other material spatial practices that concretize the social relations of productions, reproduction, exploitation, domination, and subjection. They are the "dominated spaces," the spaces of the peripheries, the margins and the marginalized, the "Third Worlds" that can be found at all scales .... They are the chosen spaces for struggle, liberation, emancipation.'

(Soja: 68)

In taking these arguments forward in an analysis of photographs of Harlem, I will also be making a case for the use of photography as a unique tool for such an analysis, as it offers not just an indexical record of the past about which we can imagine but it makes us, as it were, present in that past.

#### 4.4 Reading contested space

A whole history remains to be written of spaces – which would at the same time be the history of *powers* (both terms in the plural) – from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat. (Michel Foucault, 'The Eye of Power' in Soja, 1996: 99)

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Harlem could be seen simultaneously as the big city which represented everything the small town or village did not ... and as the true home of the black, the place where he was most at home, the place where he came into his own. (Mulvey, 1990: 155)

Chris Mulvey's summary of the important status of Harlem to black Americans identifies the spectrum that I want to explore in this thesis, starting from the metropolitan ('the big city'), moving then to the local community ('the true home'), and, lastly, to the self ('into his own'). It affirms that the notion of home extended from the thrill of being back among the crowds of the black city to the feeling of a self being fully reflected back in personal encounters. This passage also suggests how what is otherwise viewed as overdetermined and peripheral space might also provide a space of recuperation and of resistance.

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Writing in 1975, George A. Davis and Fred O. Donaldson compared the black ghetto to the plantation: both, they wrote, 'are adaptations in space and time to the racism of the society in which they exist' and in both cases whites are in control (Davis & Donaldson, 1975: 4). For Kenneth Clark, African American sociologist and author of *The Dark Ghetto*, the appropriate

analogy for the ghetto was “a philanthropic, economic, business and industrial colony” of the wider society’ (in Kasinitz, 1995: 438). Loic J. D. Wacquant also argues that the ghetto is the paradigmatic demonstration of the *institutional* production of places ‘by social and political struggles over competing uses of space, resources, and people’ (ibid: 427).

In his wide-ranging analysis of racist culture, David Theo Goldberg argues that the notion of overdetermination is crucial in any consideration of this kind, whether considering public or private places. In all such spaces, Goldberg notes the distancing impact involved in this process:

The segregated space of formalized racism is overdetermined. Not only is private space restricted ... by the constraints of poverty, so too is public institutional space, and purposely so: cramped corners of upper galleries in movie theaters and courthouses... In every case the construct of separate (racial) group areas, in design or effect, has served to constrain, restrict, monitor, and regulate urban space and its experience. The spatial economy thus constituted along racial lines determines a discipline, ‘a type of power [or] technology, that traverses every kind of apparatus or institution, linking them, prolonging them, and making them converge and function in a new way’. (Deleuze) *Apartheid* circumscribes township ‘locations’ with barbed wire fences and entry checkpoints. Racialised urban sites throughout Europe and the United States are distanced, physically or symbolically, in the master plan of city space. (Goldberg, 1993: 196)

At the other end of the spatial scale is the black body. Frantz Fanon’s remark that, as a black man, he was ‘overdetermined from outside’ is taken up by Lewis Gordon, who concludes that a ‘stark evasion manifests itself in the face of the black body. The

black body lives in an antiblack world as a form of absence of human presence' (Gordon, 1997: 72).

This spatial distancing or evasion of the black body is most famously expressed by Ralph Ellison in his novel, *Invisible Man*:

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. ... it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me. (Ellison, 1965: 7)

This is made vividly clear by the violent incident at the beginning of the book, when a blond-haired, blue-eyed man bumps into the narrator in the dark street and calls him an insulting name only to find himself brutally beaten by someone he cannot even see. The narrator refuses to accept responsibility for the attack – even if the man 'was lost in a dream world [. ...] didn't *he* control that dream world – which, alas, is only too real! – and didn't *he* rule me out of it? (ibid: 16)

Despite all this, indeed *because* of all this, spaces of resistance and freedom can be carved out from 'an otherwise repressive world' (David Harvey: 213). Such spaces are termed *heterotopias* by Foucault, a term developed here by J. Yolande Daniels:

Heterotopic constructions are defined in their spatial localization and marginalization. They are also spaces of segregation. Heterotopic classifications occur in both physical and metaphysical space: 'other worlds', open, yet closed, they involve projection and mediation. They may have 'mass' as in heterotopias of consumptive accumulation: museums and libraries, or be fleeting, as in

heterotopias of celebration: rituals, festivals, spectacles.  
(Daniels, 2000:197)

Harlem in this dual guise – dystopia and heterotopia - is the  
subject of this study.

## **Chapter One**

### ***A section cut off: The Harlem cityscape***

Have you ever stopped to think what the future Harlem will be? It will be a city within a city. It will be the greatest Negro city in the world within the greatest city in the world.

In the next thirty years the Negro city of Harlem, roughly speaking, will embrace the territory from 110<sup>th</sup> Street to the Harlem River and from Fifth and Madison Avenues above 110<sup>th</sup> Street to Morningside Park. This territory will contain a colored population in the neighbourhood of a half million.

In that time 135<sup>th</sup> street will have become a great business street, and 145<sup>th</sup> street will be following fast behind it. More than that 125<sup>th</sup> street will have passed under the control principally of colored businessmen. The great stores and shops and the theatres and hotels and office buildings of that thoroughfare will be controlled and patronized chiefly by colored people.

**'The Future Harlem' James Weldon Johnson, *New York Age*, January 10, 1920 (in Johnson, 1995 [2]: 100-101)**

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The most profound change that Harlem experienced in the 1920s was its emergence as a slum. Gilbert Osofsky (Greenberg, 1991: 31)

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In Michel de Certeau's famous view of Manhattan from the 110<sup>th</sup> floor of the World Trade Center, his gaze moves from the skyscrapers of Wall Street, dips at Greenwich Village, rises again at Midtown, then, after passing 'quietly' over Central Park, even more quietly seems to omit Harlem altogether as the island 'finally undulates off into the distance beyond Harlem'. Despite this, the passage provides a way into the Harlem landscape, not least because, when de Certeau describes how the 'agitation' of this 'wave of verticals' is 'momentarily arrested by vision', he, intentionally or not, conjures up the photographic. Once the mass of Manhattan has been 'immobilized', he writes, it is:

transformed into a texturology in which extremes coincide  
– extremes of ambition and degradation, brutal  
oppositions of races and styles, contrasts between  
yesterday's buildings, already transformed into trash cans,  
and today's urban irruptions that block out its space. (de  
Certeau, 1988: 91)

Harlem may be out of focus from de Certeau's viewpoint at the southern tip of the island, but the notion of a texturology of social, economic, architectural and urban 'agitation' captured by his 'arrested' vision is highly suggestive for a photographic mapping of Harlem. It also evokes both the white/black binary running through accounts of Harlem, and more specifically the transformation from 'yesterday's buildings' (the Negro capital) to the 'trash can' (the dark ghetto), which de Certeau characterises as the rational and 'enlightened' city producing its 'excess' of dirt and decay.

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The photographs considered in this chapter that contain this landscape come from a variety of personal and institutional angles, although a documentary impulse, whether 'straight', as in architectural photography, or sociological, is in many cases a likely explanation for their existence.

## 1 **Avenues of coal: Occupying the grid**

One of the most interesting tropes in the writing about Harlem as a 'race capital' collected in Alain Locke's seminal 1925 volume, *The New Negro*, is of the way this section of Manhattan seems to these authors physically almost identical and interchangeable with all the rest. Paul U. Kellogg ponders how he can explain the remarkable cultural renaissance underway here, when Harlem 'presents to the eye the look of any tenement and apartment district of New York'. The whole phenomenon was 'unobserved and swathed in the commonplace' ('The Negro Pioneers' in Locke, 1997: 276).

Long-term resident, writer and political leader James Weldon Johnson also commented in his essay 'Harlem: The Culture Capital' that Harlem could not even be called a 'quarter' as it was 'not a section cut off' but 'merely a zone through which the four main arteries of the city run' (Johnson, 1997: 309/10). This apparent merging of Harlem into the rest of New York is due, it seems, to the operation of the grid, criss-crossed by avenues and streets, and its elevation into regular patterns of apartment buildings and tenements. The underlying grid provides my base point for a consideration of the photographed landscape of Harlem. It also produces a framework for what Kevin Lynch (1998) calls, in his classic 1960 analysis of urban legibility *The Image of the City*, paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks – elements that I will be drawing on in this photographic mapping of Harlem.

### • **Fig. 019 Roy DeCarava/Coalman, man walking (1952)**

an axe/ is ground to silence in the/ shoveling/ of  
miscellaneous streets paved/ with people/ who set up  
drums and sweep avenues/ of coal

In Roy DeCarava's photograph, *Coalman*, a stooped figure has lifted the cover of a coal hole to sweep the remnants of a delivery into the chute. DeCarava took the picture in 1952, and a decade later included it in *the sound i saw: improvisation on a jazz theme*, a remarkable volume of jazz and street photography, accompanied by a spare, poetic text (DeCarava, 2001: unpaginated).

Taken near the beginning of the golden age of New York street photography, DeCarava's is *literally* a street photograph, a depiction of an almost unbroken surface. The street provides the two figures here with a total environment: there is neither sky opening up nor a backdrop of apartment buildings, just the sidewalk and the road. If the deep shadows and dark greys of DeCarava's interior spaces are often remarked on, the frequent use of solid wall-like surfaces as the defining backdrop to his exterior photography is less recognised. Sometimes, that surface will indeed be a wall of bricks; at other times, as here, by taking the photograph from above and using photographic perspective, DeCarava turns the sidewalk itself into a kind of never-ending walled background against which human figures can move but are unable to move beyond.

Many pictures that are categorised within street photography depend for their visual impact on unexpected juxtapositions or gestures or events seen and photographed on the hoof. Many of the other 'New York School' photographers seek to depict and project a sense of urban vitality and potential. DeCarava's picture is hardly an event of this kind, nor does its linear rhythm suggest a city's dynamism. If it is closer, then, in its depiction of the bowed figure as a sign of 'hard labour', to a social documentary photograph, then we have to observe, too, that the expected didacticism or 'message' is not immediately apparent.

Often, the photographs that DeCarava chooses to turn into art objects - that is, those personal photographs that he has not been commissioned to take - share this picture's designed, almost 'still' appearance and its understatement. There is a 1960s photograph that represents a civil rights protest simply by depicting part of a black woman's leg held horizontally as she (when we build the totality from this fragment) is carried through the crowd. DeCarava frequently seems to invite us to find such synecdoche in his photographs.

In *Coalman*, he creates a tension between the language of the street's grids and perspectival lines and that of the men's bodies, between concrete and flesh. The man's figure makes an awkward shape, the back bent right over and arm twisted. Behind him the pedestrian makes his way slowly up the sidewalk, round-shouldered himself, matching the weary body language of the coalman. Although that rhythm of the rhyming bodies against the formal linearity of the sidewalk is aesthetically pleasing, this could end up fixed as a banal, documentary statement about work. That expectation is subverted, however, by the quiet drama implicit in the removal of a square from the bleak grid of paving stones.

It is to this 'event' that our attention is drawn to by the lines of the two-dimensional grid and the vertical lines of the coalman's limbs and broom handle. In exposing dark material both within and under the white surface, making it - temporarily - visible, this picture seems to point metaphorically to a black section with the white grid, and thus to the whole environment of Harlem within a white city that is constructed on lines and divisions.

An important question through this chapter is the relationship of the universal(izing) grid to the emergence of black space and containment. The Harlem landscape is at its base a typical American cityscape, fashioned on the grid, an ideological

ordering of city space that is both ruthlessly rational as a physical layout and transcendent in its promise of equity among its residents. The grid, like the dominant white power that has produced it, is both invisible in its operation and visible in its effects. One practical implication for photography is that, unlike older world cities, such as Paris or London, the city on a grid offers few points for panoramic or comprehensive viewing from ground level.

- **Fig. 020 Roy DeCarava/Stickball (1952)**
- **Fig. 021 Sid Grossman/Under the 'El' tracks (1939)**

DeCarava's photograph is relatively unusual in its godlike perspective and distance from the 'action'. As it continues into the far distance, its lines emphasised by the parked cars, the avenue can be read as a graphic sign of the grid's infinity, again unbroken by sky or horizon. Again, its linearity is broken up by the human body; the tiny figures of children playing 'stickball' and some moving traffic inscribe a social meaning into the frame. This, again, is a curiously literal 'street' photograph, mapping human activity within the built givens of the grid.

Sid Grossman's picture of an intersection on 125<sup>th</sup> Street, in contrast, looks skyward to depict the line of the 'El' overhead, reminding the viewer of its crucial historical role in bringing new populations north of Central Park. It is presented here as a complementary linear system to the grid, following the avenue's line out of picture. People are in the background in this depicted city of rational and geometric systems.

## 2 The node

- **Fig. 022 UPI/Policeman at Lenox Avenue and 135<sup>th</sup> Street (1927)**

Casting about for direction, the tall newcomer's glance caught inevitably on the most conspicuous thing in sight, a magnificent figure in blue that stood in the middle of the crossing and blew a whistle and waved great white-gloved hands. The Southern Negro's eyes opened wide; his mouth opened wider. ...For there stood a handsome, brass-buttoned giant directing the heaviest traffic Gillis had ever seen; halting unnumbered tons of automobiles and trucks and wagons and pushcarts and street-cars; holding them at bay with one hand while he swept similar tons peremptorily on with the other; ruling the wide crossing with supreme self-assurance; and he, too, was a Negro! (Fisher, 1925: 58-9)

The new arrival from the South is the inaptly named King Solomon Gillis, hero of 'The City of Refuge', a story by Rudolph Fisher included by Alain Locke in *The New Negro*. This humorous tale tracks the swift downfall of the naïve newcomer at the hands of his more streetwise companions, and ends with Gillis facing arrest. This defeat, however, becomes a strange kind of victory for the underdog, when Gillis, preparing to resist, is confronted with another *black* policeman, a confirmation of this extraordinary upside-down world.

Gillis's arrival is from underground; he emerges from the subway station on Lenox Avenue and 135<sup>th</sup> Street. It is precisely at this junction in 1927 that a press photographer took this picture of a traffic policeman. One can almost read the image as an illustration of Fisher's fiction:

... most of the vehicles that leaped or crouched at his bidding carried white passengers. One of these overdrove bounds a few feet and Gillis heard the officer's shrill whistle and gruff reproof, saw the driver's face turn red and his car draw back like a threatened pup. (ibid: 59)

We are positioned, in this reading, as the white passengers, held still (halted) in this frozen instant as if by the policeman's commanding gesture and the silent but unmistakable shrillness of the blown whistle. In *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto: Negro New York 1890-1930*, historian Gilbert Osofsky relates the struggle to appoint the (aptly named) Samuel J. Battle as Manhattan's first African American patrolman. After Battle was finally accepted into the force in 1911, Osofsky writes: 'People were taken on guided tours to see the strange phenomenon – a Negro policeman patrolling his beat' (Osofsky, 1996: 166). The sight was still unusual enough a decade and a half later to warrant this striking portrait for a New York newspaper. Fisher articulates Gillis's sense of shock at this apparent reversal of the normal white/black power:

... It was beyond belief impossible. Black might be white, but it couldn't be that white! (ibid: 59)

At a time when African Americans were barred from meaningful participation in political activity and held few positions of influence and authority, the visibility of this upholder of New York traffic laws would have been seen as a significant achievement 'for the race', just as Battle is remembered as one of those pioneers, the 'Negro firsts'.

The potential status of this image as a representation of a figure who himself stands for a complex historical text is curiously strengthened by the fact that Battle was, according to Osofsky, 'a giant of a man'. The figure stationed so centrally in the

photograph dominates the space around him and, thanks to the perspectival vision of the camera, dwarfs the tall apartment buildings and passing motorcars. His splendid isolation and domination over the vast space of Lenox Avenue seems to be summed up and exalted in the patrolman's pose: a black statue of liberty. The selection of viewpoint and pose enables the figure of the black policeman to point both up and beyond his allotted place. He is on the way up, a black man claiming a 'white' uniform and an authority as an American official. His territory stretches beyond him, the tramlines under his command inscribing an infinity of progress.

This junction, between Lenox Avenue and 135<sup>th</sup> Street, is one of the places where the subway surfaces on its circulation beneath New York's grid. This photograph is thus not simply a portrait of a man but of a particular place, an intersection in the grid that may be considered, in Kevin Lynch's terminology, a 'node': a strategic spot in a city that may be either a junction or a concentration (the 'focus and epitome of a district') or both; it may also be, Lynch writes, a moment of 'shift from one structure to another' (1998: 71-75 *passim*).

For Gillis, emerging from underground into Harlem for the first time, this location seems to mark his shift from the 'medievalism' of the South to the modernity of the Northern city and, at the same moment, to epitomise for him what makes Harlem unmistakably Harlem: the black crowds that swirl around this intersection.

There is no doubt, either, that the policeman in the photograph is standing in 'Negro Harlem': the caption's precise naming of the intersection refers us to a section of the grid which is as blackened as the faces Gillis reads all around him.

• **Fig. 023 *New York City Census/Black Harlem (1930)***

From the early decades of the twentieth century, New York had been the site of fierce territorial competition, most significantly between black migrants and white residents fighting block by block for ownership of the city's space. The New York population of African Americans swelled at this time - over 100,000 African Americans headed North between April and October 1917 alone, many of them settling in Harlem. By the time of the 1930 census, the city plan shows that a substantial portion of Harlem had turned black. The completely inked-over section here represents an area where 90 per cent of the total population in 1930 was black; as the Negro population thins out, the blocks within the grid lighten.

Without the insertion of this demographic information, the grid would re-emerge as the utopian attempt by Thomas Jefferson to impose on cities a universal system that would, in Joan Copjec's words, sweep away 'any and all natural or subjective particulars by which America - the "melting pot," the "nation of immigrants" - might otherwise begin to define itself' (Copjec: 13). At least initially, James Weldon Johnson and his contemporaries in the black cultural leadership seemed to be in that universal system, arguing that Harlem was as American as the rest of New York, just 'coloured in':

A stranger who rides up magnificent Seventh Avenue on a bus or in an automobile must be struck with surprise at the transformation which takes place after he crosses One Hundredth and Twenty-fifth Street. Beginning there, the population suddenly darkens and he rides through twenty-five solid blocks where the passers-by, the shoppers, those sitting in restaurants, coming out of theaters, standing in doorways and looking out of windows are practically all Negroes; and then he emerges where the

population as suddenly becomes white again. There is nothing just like it in any other city in the country, for there is not preparation for it; no change in the character of the houses and the streets; no change, indeed, in the appearance of the people, except their color. (Johnson, 1925: 301-2)

The belief that the grid of democracy could transcend this detail of colour seems to underlie this assumption. However, colour turns out to be the telling detail.

- **Fig. 024 Roy DeCarava/White Line (1960)**

In another photograph of a street surface where nothing significant seems to be happening, the telling detail here is the way in which the pedestrians appear to obey the rule implied by the 'white line' by staying on its right side. Again, the sidewalk evokes the grid, this time bisected by the white line. One group of people walk in one direction, while the others march in the opposite direction.

The line that divides black areas from white, and whose evolution may be tracked across the grid plan, seems to be a two-dimensional version of the colour line. The way that it intersects with and contains sections of the grid is reflected in DeCarava's line here, enforcing a mysterious injunction. The perception of such a definite line, drawn initially at 135<sup>th</sup> Street, then (by the end of the 1920s) 125<sup>th</sup> Street, and later still by 110<sup>th</sup> Street (Central Park North), is frequently commented on by black and white visitors to Harlem.

As they approached One hundred and twenty-fifth Street, the blacks began to predominate. Almost immediately after they passed through that thoroughfare they met only

Negroes. They had crossed the line. (Carl Van Vechten, 1971 [1926]): 148/9)

In fact, a literal line had indeed been proposed in the early years of black migration, by John G. Taylor, president of the Harlem Property Owners' Protective Association, in the shape of a twenty-four foot fence to provide a "dead line" between white tenants and homeowners on 136<sup>th</sup> Street and black newcomers (Anderson, 1982: 54).

### 3 Territorial contest and change

- **Fig. 025 Byron/Seventh Ave. & West 30<sup>th</sup> St. Colored District (1903)**

My New York was limited to ten blocks: the boundaries were Sixth Avenue from Twenty-third to Thirty-third Streets, with the cross streets one block to the West. Central Park was a distant forest, and the lower part of the city a foreign land. (Johnson, 1990 [1912]: 82-83)

Johnson's protagonist, a prototype of Ellison's Invisible Man, lives in the Tenderloin district of lower Manhattan, where this photograph was taken by Percy Byron in 1903. It was one of a number taken that day, probably in an attempt to record the African American community; at that period, most of the African American population of New York (about 36,000 out of the 60,000 blacks who comprised 2 per cent of the total city population) lived around this area and San Juan Hill, west of Columbus Circle. As Peter Bacon Hales has noted, the purpose of the photographic survey tradition of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had shifted from exploration to sociology, though the underlying structure of such projects remained the modernising grid, with all elements of the city entered into it, each photograph properly 'texted' and 'intersected' with each other (Hales, 1991: 251).

The history of the shift through the grid from south to north in New York, each delimited section occupied by African Americans 'blackened' by nicknames such as 'Negro Plantations' or 'Black Bohemia', demonstrates the truth of Rem Koolhaas's dictum that, within the 2028 blocks of the grid, 'one form of human occupancy can only be established at the expense of another'. The city thus becomes 'a mosaic of episodes ... that contest each other through the medium of the Grid' (Koolhaas, 1994: 21). Byron's photograph is a kind of investigation into this contest of

episodes, producing a cross-section of a block being 'coloured' in. Noting developments in Harlem over the previous decade or so, Mary Ovington White believed that this concentration of the 'colored population' was a relatively new phenomenon in New York; this, she thought, could present a problem, for 'while you seem an inappreciable quantity when you constitute two per cent of the population in the borough, you are of importance when you form one hundred per cent of the population of your street' (White, 1969 [1911]: 48).

- **Fig. 026 Works Progress Administration (WPA)/The Harlems (1939)**

As the WPA map of Harlem shows, other ethnic sections developed along with 'Negro Harlem', each of them to stake their own claim to territory defined by the lines of the grid. By 1940, Italian Harlem stretched from 106<sup>th</sup> to 125<sup>th</sup> Street in the east, while on the west up to 116<sup>th</sup> Street was Spanish Harlem. Negro Harlem now occupied the section marked by the Harlem River in the east to St Nicholas Avenue on west, and from Central Park up to 155<sup>th</sup> Street: 400 blocks over 3½ square miles.

- **Figs. 027-034 Charles Van Urban/Eight photographs (1932)**

In 1932, Charles Van Urban was commissioned by a real estate agent to photograph all the wooden buildings left in New York. In fulfilling this brief with admirably clear and stylish architectural depictions, Van Urban also inadvertently mapped the process of territorial contest and change north of Central Park.

In the photograph of 155 E 126<sup>th</sup> Street (**Fig. 027**), the furniture business built onto the front of this wooden building is named E. Kosches & Son, almost certainly a German Jewish concern, and a

remnant of that population which had previously occupied part of what became 'Negro Harlem'. Perhaps significantly, the property next door is for sale. The picture of 208 E 119<sup>th</sup> Street ( ) shows, next to a synagogue, a two-storey wooden building used as a Hebrew School for the Beth Israel of Harlem. The picture of 331 E 125<sup>th</sup> Street ( ), includes a neighbouring wholesale grocery business; again the name over the store front spells out its ethnic occupancy: Cosimo Daniele. Similarly, in the photograph of 162 E 117<sup>th</sup> Street ( ), a commercial vehicle bears its territorial stamp: Frank Desanti. The two men – brothers, possibly – may be delivering or collecting goods, but they are fairly close to home, as the business is based two blocks south of here, in Italian Harlem.

The photograph of 73 W 141st Street ( ), shows another business with a vehicle at its disposal, Hart's Paper Supply Company, with its slogan 'Everything Made of Paper' peeling away from an earlier advertisement. An even less sophisticated business frontage is located to its left: a one-storey shack, bearing the legend 'Herbs of Healthy Blood'. Judging from the bystanders here, three African American men and a child all focusing on some event out of frame, this is 'Negro Harlem'. It is tempting to speculate on the herbal business, that it might derive from Southern folk culture.

The final three photographs, all of 51-53 E 118<sup>th</sup> Street ( ), provide evidence against any assumption that the divisions between these different Harlems are impermeable, although, as Chapter Three argues, 'turf' is of great importance in negotiating around the city. Taken from slightly different angles, we are shown three views of a three-storey building. The ground floor appears to accommodate one or, possibly, two stores; in the large window on our left is a propped up card bearing the words 'Nonpareil (?) Painting' and, in one photograph, the lower part of painted legend on the glass can be

read: 'Architect & Builder'. Over one doorway is another sign, referring to the upper floors: 'Furnished Rooms ...Reasonable Prices'; we can see some of the current occupants in two of the photographs. Number 49 next door was also a store, now 'For Rent'; in one picture we can see the word 'Moving' on the glazed door. These details in themselves create a sense of transition, people and businesses moving in and moving out. This impression is deepened by the differences caught by accident, as it were, of the people in this neighbourhood. We are already fully alerted to a particular local ethnicity by the vast painted advertisement in Spanish on the side of the apartment block looming over Number 53. In encouraging custom from Spanish Americans who have dental problems, Dr Wolfe, based on W 117<sup>th</sup> Street and Lenox, assures them that 'the Latino colony calls me The Dentist You Can Trust'. In one photograph, a white woman, dark haired and soberly dressed, possibly Hispanic, waits to cross the road as another pedestrian hurries past the building, blurred by the slow exposure. In another, a pushcart has appeared, selling refreshments; the white owner in apron and cap has broken off from his conversation to wait for the photograph to be taken. Three curious African American children have appeared; by the third picture, ten of various ages are sat by the sidewalk, some evidently intrigued by the photographer's presence.

This selection of photographs thus provides a cross-section of a process at work across the city grid, a shifting and claiming of territory which, as the dentist's advertisement implies, is openly defined by ethnic and cultural markers.

- **Fig. 002 Schomburg Collection/West 135<sup>th</sup> Street (c. 1915)**
- **Fig. 035 Schomburg Collection/Seventh Avenue and 124<sup>th</sup> Street (1925)**

By 1915, the meaning of the block on W 135<sup>th</sup> Street, discussed earlier, has shifted; although visibly unchanged, it is now encoded as 'black' space, inside and out. It has become one of those landmarks significant, as Dolores Hayden puts it, to 'populations fighting spatial segregation' (Hayden, 1996: 35). Through a change of legal ownership, it has achieved symbolic status – a 'Negro first'.

The transformation of Harlem into a black city did not disrupt the fabric of the built environment of avenues and streets, tenements and apartment buildings. Many of the churches and clubs that migrated from the Tenderloin simply moved into existing addresses, and new buildings, like that built for St Philips by black architect Vertner Tandy, remained within the accepted architectural language (in this case, early Gothic). Often the only visible change is the colour of the people in the pictures. The transformation of Seventh Avenue is only made visible in the uncredited photograph from 1925 in the form of the lone black pedestrian crossing over it.

Nevertheless, through time, visible changes do occur through people's activities in space. What strikes many visitors to Harlem, even today, is its distinctiveness within Manhattan. This should remind us that, as Henri Lefebvre argues, such territory is read not just as buildings and streets but as a product of human labour and social meaning. With this in mind, we now turn to look at landmark buildings and other sites that might, like Nail & Parker's block, be seen as successful outcomes in the battle for legal and symbolic ownership of Harlem.

#### **4     *A landscape of possibility: The contest over symbolic sites***

- **Fig. 036 Austin Hansen/View of Hotel Theresa looking south west along Seventh Avenue (1953)**

In this and the following section, I am following Lynch's definition of landmarks as 'simple physical elements which may vary widely in scale'. Their key physical characteristic, he writes, is *singularity*: 'some aspect that is unique or memorable in this context' (Lynch, 1998: 78). The most obvious landmarks are those which have a clear form, stand out from their surroundings and are spatially prominent. One such Harlem landmark is the Hotel Theresa, designed by George and Edward Blum and completed in 1913. It displays the firm's 'distinctive use of shallow, overlapping, geometric patterns of white terracotta ornament' (Dolkart and Sorin, 1997: 126), and is twelve storeys high, topped by an elaborate roof, so that it towers over the surrounding apartment and retail buildings, few of which exceed five or six storeys in height. In its location on Seventh Avenue, the greatest boulevard in Harlem, and on the corner with 125<sup>th</sup> Street, Harlem's main commercial thoroughfare, the hotel not only gains the prominence of any building set at a major intersection but becomes a symbol of this vital node at the heart of 'Negro' Harlem.

Austin Hansen's photograph, looking south, probably from the roof of a building on Seventh Avenue, depicts the hotel in all its vertical glory, as if planted in the city. The hotel's sweeping upward lines are echoed only faintly in the trees dotted along the median and the Alhambra's neon sign hovering above the facades of what is, even in 1953, still a mainly horizontal streetscape.

- **Fig. 037 James VanDerZee/The Hotel Theresa (1933)**

However impressive the architectural design or the height of this building, the Hotel Theresa's huge significance as a black landmark, resonant still, even after its closure in 1970 and conversion into an office building, lies more in how the building was occupied and used. In considering representations of such buildings, my emphasis will be on their social significance – an emphasis shared by many of the photographers themselves, in choosing to take such pictures. Even where the intention is partly to depict architectural detail, as in Hansen's vast archive of commissioned pictures of Harlem churches, the photographs represent, ultimately, an engagement with the social importance of the building. I take my cue from this observation in Thomas Markus's book *Buildings and Power*:

Buildings are treated as art, technical or investment objects. Rarely as social objects. (Markus, 1993:26)

The Hotel Theresa is photographed here by James VanDerZee, in 1933. VanDerZee's 'street' photography was often as formal and considered as his studio portraits. To make this photograph, he has chosen (or arranged for) a moment when no one is entering or leaving the hotel. This provides the viewer with a 'timeless' moment, free of passing distractions, in which to contemplate the elegant architectural forms.

The hotel's opulence is signified by its smart rectangles of doors and windows and its decorative flourishes: the wrought-iron balcony and patterned glass above the tap-room doors. The equally elegant and formal display of shoes in the shop window might be read synechdochically for the hotel's clientele. To move beyond this formal appreciation towards an ideological or cultural reading, it is important to note that it will be another four years before this hotel is finally desegregated and accepts black guests. The entrance looks then more like what Lynch

would call an 'edge', edges being 'barriers, more or less penetrable, which close one region off from another' (Lynch, 1998: 47). In Markus's analysis, the space around and within buildings is 'a continuous structured entity, which allows strangers to move around but only to admit into buildings two categories of people – "inhabitants" and "visitors"' (Markus, 1993: 13). Those who are not admitted, who are neither hotel owners nor guests, but 'strangers', are given voice here by Harlem writer Claude McKay:

Your face is shut against my face,  
And I am sharp as steel with discontent;  
...  
The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet,  
And passion rends my vitals as I pass,  
A chafing savage down the decent street  
Where boldly shines your shuttered door of glass. (in  
Lewis, 1995: 291)

The 'chafing savage', McKay's bitter, autobiographical figure of the excluded African American, is unable to enter the 'white house' of the poem's title. The glass that should be transparent is shuttered and impenetrable, just as, until the end of the 1930s, the glass doors of the Hotel Theresa formed an organically fragile but equally impassable barrier to the black 'strangers' on Harlem's 'decent' streets. Similar barriers – in effect, manifestations of the colour line – had been erected across the district, most notoriously by the white owners of jazz cabarets such as the Cotton Club. The only black 'visitors' to these establishments were the musicians.

This evidence of the colour line emerging within the 'black city' complicates Gillis' awed recognition of 'Negro Harlem' in Fisher's short story. What appears to be black territory is in fact permeated by an invisible structure of white power. This power,

as the history of the Hotel Theresa suggests, is expressed in spatial terms.

- **Fig. 038 Schomburg Collection/View of West 125<sup>th</sup> Street, Harlem, looking west towards Eighth Avenue elevated subway line, 1920s**

If there is a *locus classicus* for the way apparently public Harlem buildings were actually carved up and sectioned off by the colour line, it would probably have to be Hurtig & Seamon's Music Hall on 125<sup>th</sup> Street, where the upper mezzanine, reached by dimly lit stairs up the back of the building, was the only place where African American patrons were permitted to sit. This segregated space was nicknamed 'Nigger heaven', an ironic term that white author Carl Van Vechten would extend in his controversial and eponymous novel of 1926 to the place of Harlem itself within the great segregated theatre of New York.

Change came in 1934 when this theatre, renamed the Apollo, was taken over by Frank Schiffman and Leo Brecher, white impresarios and former owners of the Lafayette Theatre, which had been desegregated twenty years earlier and was by then Harlem's 'America's Leading Colored Theater'. As the uncredited photograph of West 125<sup>th</sup> Street shows, the iconic sign for the Apollo is in place with the star names listed on the marquee: 4 Ink Spots, Claude Hopkins & Band, Hamtree and Pigmeat. As this line-up suggests, the original intention to create both 'the finest theatre in Harlem' and 'a resort for the better people' had come down to providing a platform for the broadest of black culture (Anderson, 1982: 237) – comic Pigmeat Markham would probably not have been numbered among the 'Talented Tenth' – and the Apollo became instead one of the most, powerful engines in the creation and promotion of black popular entertainment.

- **Fig. 039 Aaron Siskind/Interior shot, from stage at Apollo (c. 1936-39)**
- **Fig. 040 Austin Hansen/Billy Eckstine at the Apollo Theatre (c. 1943)**

These two, roughly contemporaneous pictures of the interior of the Apollo demonstrate that this is an overwhelmingly 'black' space, packed out with African Americans, where the only white face 'present' is Aaron Siskind's, unseen behind the curtain and behind his camera. Siskind's location might be seen as privileged in comparison to Hansen – he has backstage access – but it also positions the white photographer, as an invisible observer of black space and black people, well outside the space he depicts and only able to eavesdrop on the black comedian's patter. This dapper figure, frozen in a rigid pose, fists clenched and mugging for laughs is seen only at an awkward angle. He has to prove himself to this audience – this may be Amateur Night where unpopular acts are unceremoniously hauled off stage – and Siskind's role here is, in all senses, incidental.

Hansen's photograph is, in contrast, taken from the stalls, where the photographer is sat watching, along with everyone else, as Billy Eckstine and his orchestra play. From this humble yet privileged position, Hansen sees and records a historical moment in jazz history – the musicians that fill the stage include Dizzy Gillespie, Earl Hines, Sarah Vaughan and, seated far right, Charlie Parker. He also presents a picture of the Apollo that complements Siskind's, by depicting black people – the 'true' audience at the Apollo – watching black people. Between the two, we can conceive of the theatre's transformation into a cultural landmark, of an apparently commonplace building becoming what Elizabeth Ewen calls a 'mnemonic device' for black Harlemites, helping to create 'a new visual landscape of possibility' (Brown and Kimball, 1996: 84).

- **Fig. 041 M & M Smith – ‘Mr. and Mrs. Eddie “Rochester” Anderson at the Theresa Hotel (1939)**
- **Fig. 042 Austin Hansen, - Lena Horne at window of Hotel Theresa (1945)**

Well before 1960, the year when Fidel Castro, on a visit to the United Nations, caused an international outcry by entertaining Nikita Khrushchev in his rooms there, the Hotel Theresa had undergone a comparable socio-spatial re-inscription to that of the Apollo. Once desegregated, the hotel became, according to *Ebony* magazine, the ‘social headquarters for Negro America, just as the Waldorf is the home for the white elite’. (Anderson, 1982: 320)

Although business and community leaders stayed at the Theresa, it was celebrities like boxer Joe Louis and that the Apollo nurtured that generally drew most attention – and often large crowds - to this building. In the photograph of Eddie Anderson, who made his name as ‘Rochester’, the house servant in Jack Benny’s popular radio show, M & M Smith offer visual evidence of the cultural shift that has occurred in the two years since desegregation. Pointing the camera up from near the spot where VanDerZee took his portrait of the hotel’s closed face, the photographer depicts Anderson and his entourage waving from the balcony like members of a black royal family. The juxtaposition of this promotional stunt for Anderson’s latest film, a comedy western, with the hotel’s own neon advertisement of ‘Rooms with Bath from 2.<sup>00</sup>’ points out graphically the benefits of such ‘appearances’ to both business enterprises.

While we are positioned here below the balcony, gazing up at the ‘stars’, Hansen’s interior portrait of Lena Horne at the window of her hotel room both suggests a less mercenary identification of celebrity with building and brings us, at the same time, into privileged proximity with the singer. Horne, who began her

career in Harlem in the 1930s, was one of the biggest black female stars of the time. Here, she is pictured, in 1945, looking out over Harlem, a gaze that extends beyond what is visible to us, to the territory that is both the 'race capital', to which she owes so much, and that is home to her black audience. Like many other African American celebrities to this day, Horne was acutely aware of her responsibilities to the black community. Two years earlier, she had been pictured in the *People's Voice*, with her musical colleague from Cotton Club days, Duke Ellington, helping to promote war bonds on West 125<sup>th</sup> Street. In housing the offices of the March on Washington Movement and Malcolm X's Organization of Afro-American Unity, the Hotel Theresa was a vital locus of political as well as popular culture; the lines between the two were never sharply drawn.

Photographs of such buildings as the Apollo Theater and the Hotel Theresa may be read less as straight documentary images than as stories of their use. The historical, social and cultural importance of such landmarks imbues their solidity with a mythic quality, connoting the African American version of the 'dream' and contributing to a landscape of possibility.

- **Fig. 043 Federal Theatre Archive, Library of Congress/Outside the theatre on opening night of *Macbeth* (1936)**

The Lafayette, which had staged the most popular black performers for the previous two decades, including Bessie and Mamie Smith, Ethel Waters, Duke Ellington and Fletcher Henderson, is the physical and 'mythical' background to this uncredited photograph taken in 1935 on the opening night of a landmark event in American theatrical history, Orson Welles' production of the 'voodoo' *Macbeth*.

The popular success of this show – 3,000 people had already been turned away from the preview – is made flesh in the enthusiastic faces in front of the theatre. A poster at the back, promising a parade by the brass bands of the Monarch Lodge Elks, indicates that this is an event that the community has embraced, even if that were not obvious in the grins and waves of the crowd. The flash of the camera, perhaps from one of the photojournalists present, captures this excited moment when the *Depression* is held at bay (the show itself was created through the WPA's Federal Theater Project). Even the lone white face – a policeman's – seems relaxed and happy, as if standing in for Welles himself, a 20-year-old impresario who had earned the respect of the black actors from the Negro Theater Unit.

Such landmarks shaped by such events turn avenues and streets, in Lynch's terms, into prominent 'paths'. Seventh Avenue is made recognisable largely through the presence of the Theresa, the Lafayette and other landmark buildings, that once included the Renaissance Ballroom, Connie's Inn, Small's Paradise, Black Swan (the premier African American record company), and Michaux's celebrated bookstore.

- **Fig. 044 M & M Smith/Striver's Row (n.d.)**
- **Fig. 045 Roy DeCarava (n.d.)**

The relatively classless crowd outside the Lafayette is nowhere to be seen in the street photographed here by the Smiths and DeCarava. Indeed, when it was also featured in *The Crisis* magazine as the 'finest residential street in High Harlem' (July, 1930), it is still strangely empty of traffic.

The 'Kingscourt Houses', Stanford White's smart row of houses on West 139<sup>th</sup> Street, between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, were built in 1891. The photograph taken by M & M Smith around four decades later looks east, towards the tower of

Harlem's best known church, the Abyssinian Baptist, founded by its black congregation in 1922. This important occasion occurred only three years after the Equitable Life Insurance Company had finally relented and allowed blacks to purchase properties on this street.

The church tower forms a natural point to the narrowing perspectival lines of the street and, set against the sky, it is an obvious example of a landmark as a 'simply defined physical object' that is 'unique or memorable'. These photographs depict a perhaps less obvious kind of landmark, a row of houses that have become a site of great symbolic importance in the landscape of black Harlem, now known to most Harlemites as Striver's Row.

This nickname derived from the general perception that those African Americans able to afford such properties were 'strainers' or 'strivers', upwardly mobile blacks, often stereotyped as 'dickty' or bourgeois by waspish commentators like Adam Clayton Powell Jr. In truth, the residents of Striver's Row were a more eclectic group than this, and included at various times architect Vertner Tandy, comedian Stepin' Fetchit, physician Louis T. Wright, composer Noble Sissle, as well as people engaged in law, real estate and the beauty business.

While the Smiths choose a high vantage point across Eighth Avenue from which to photograph the street, DeCarava has decided to take his picture down at street level, possibly crouching slightly in order to fit as much of the houses as he can within the frame. Whether viewed from below or above, this thoroughfare lined with trees and numerous automobiles seems to stretch far into the distance. The Smiths' image sets it into its own photographic version of a street plan, emphasising its breadth and importance and crowning it with a church tower. DeCarava, instead, pays tribute to the pleasing patterns made by

its Florentine Renaissance-style railings and facades. In both cases, the photograph is shaped by what it photographs: a certain architectural elegance, in which the black reader can take pride.

- **Fig. 046 James VanDerZee/Dinner party with boxer Harry Wills (1926)**

In this photograph of a dinner party held in honour of boxer Harry Wills, 'the Black (or Brown) Panther', VanDerZee takes us behind one of those facades to discover a gracious occasion among the wealthier members of Harlem society. The perspectival lines of the table in this picture seem to echo the lines and forms of the street itself, as photographed by the Smiths and *The Crisis*. The elegant symmetry of the raised glasses and smiling faces turned towards the head of the table, seem to lift these diners up towards the crown of the chandelier. VanDerZee has used flash on this occasion, the brilliance of which has cast sharp shadows of the diners' profiles onto the surrounding walls; that of the woman proposing the toast turns her gesture into something hieratic, symbolic perhaps of the consumption for which such residents were frequently lampooned.

This dinner party captured as a glamorous tableau by VanDerZee's camera is, in its way, as shaping of this space as the performances at the Apollo. This is a coded space, inscribed by wealth and its physical trappings but also by the strangely cheek-by-jowl cultural mix that is 'High Harlem' - boxers and businessmen, lawyers and tap-dancers - all thrust into the same segregated space. Class divisions of a kind did exist in this Harlem - Striver's Row is undoubtedly *exclusive* space - but not in precisely the same way as they did in white culture; several commentators have argued that the so-called 'black bourgeoisie'

had, in fact, little claim on the second word in that title, as they wielded very little economic power or influence.

- **Fig. 047 Special Collections, Fisk University Library/Sugar Hill (n.d.)**
- **Fig. 048 Uncredited/409 Edgecombe Avenue (n.d.)**

Nevertheless, the gap between rich and poor was evident, nowhere more clearly than in the contrast between Sugar Hill, the neighbourhood between Amsterdam Avenue and Edgecombe Avenue stretching from 145<sup>th</sup> to 155<sup>th</sup> Street, and the Valley: central Harlem, from 130<sup>th</sup> to 140<sup>th</sup> Streets east of Seventh Avenue. This much reproduced photograph, taken above what is now Jackie Robinson Park, depicts how the physical landscape enacts the elevated social life on 'the Hill', with Edgecombe Avenue looking steeply down on an area that was simultaneously a slum and a vibrant cultural centre. Out of frame and to the right is the most prestigious address of all: 409 Edgecombe Avenue, the subject of another uncredited and much reproduced photograph, taken shortly after its completion in 1917. This apartment house, like the Hotel Theresa, is twelve storeys high and, like the hotel, was opened up to black residents in the 1930s, whereupon it attracted an elite clientele, which, in this case, included virtually the whole of Harlem's black political leadership, from W.E.B. Du Bois on down. NAACP chief executive Walter White's apartments on the top floor were known as the 'White House of Harlem' because there he entertained anyone who was anybody in black culture and politics.

As this black 'White House' suggests, these elevated spaces, although fractured by disparities in wealth and intraracial cultural differences, have become defining landmarks of black achievement and take their place on the symbolic map of 'Negro Harlem'.

## 5 ***Harlem on their mind: A white landscape***

Black Richmonders not only manufactured a built environment that could generate new meanings and possibilities, they also struggled for control of those meanings and symbols. Among the principal places in which they did so were the contested arenas of leisure space and public behaviour. (Brown and Kimball, 1996: 105)

- **Fig. 049 Billy Rose Theatre Collection, NYPL/Lulu Belle production photograph (1926)**

Another symbolic map of Harlem existed of course, during the Jazz Age, the period when, as Langston Hughes put it, 'the Negro was in vogue'. The fascination with black culture, most particularly with the physical excitements of jazz music and dance, took shape in the 'slumming' cult that began among a cultured minority (personified by Carl Van Vechten) and developed at the end of the 1920s into a more general influx of voyeuristic white New Yorkers. In *Interzone*, his book on black and white sex districts in early New York and Chicago, Kevin Mumford charts how the new nightclubs were popularised by guidebooks, with the effect of creating a 'virtually all-white leisure zone within Harlem' (Mumford, 1997: 155).

While Iris Marion Young's observation that city life 'instantiates difference as the erotic' is helpful in understanding the underlying reasons for such phenomena (in Kasinitz, 1995: 266), tracing this particular vogue for 'the Other' to a particular event is impossible. One factor was certainly the success of African American musicals from *Shuffle Along* in 1921 through the rest of that decade (Connie's Inn was opened as *Shuffle* in 1921 in an early unsuccessful attempt to cash in on the craze); David Levering Lewis points to a point of critical mass when a

melodrama set in a fantasy Harlem, called *Lulu Belle*, was staged at the Belasco Theater downtown in 1927. This, he believes, marked the point at which the trickle of white visitors to black cabarets and clubs became a flood.

The production photograph depicting the street set for *Lulu Belle* seems the epitome of an imagined 'black Bohemia'. Most of the cast – some of them actual African Americans, though the lead was a blacked-up Lenore Ulric – are clustered densely around a smart and expensive limousine driven on stage by a glamorous couple, an iconic symbol not far removed from that composed by James VanDerZee five years later. Ordinary folk hang out of every window and from every fire escape to watch the spectacle. The only identifiable business is a cabaret called the Bijou Dream (itself a potential caption for the whole image). The street, narrow and dominated by the height of the apartment blocks, bears less resemblance to the Harlem cityscape than to the traditional Bohemia of opera and popular imagination. This was, as far as its spectators were concerned, Harlem made visible and many must have taken that image with them into the New York night, as they headed north of Central Park into taboo terrain.

What greeted them in Harlem was an apparently determined attempt to maintain the illusion: cabarets that once again placed them in comfortable seats for an evening of entertaining performances, often inspired by Broadway stage shows, but this time - thrillingly - presented within touching distance of authentic black Americans. However, these controlled environments, most famously the Cotton Club, kept all but the most celebrated or lightest-skinned blacks well out of the customers' space. Whether they were dining or on the floor trying out the latest jazz dances, these whites were separated from the performance space by an invisible but unbreachable line, the same line that, as David Nasaw observes, had always divided black vaudeville stars from their white audiences.

Segregation on the dance floor was, he writes, still essential to the entertainment experience:

The African-American music on the bandstand combined with the exclusion of black dancers from the floor to accentuate and celebrate the “whiteness” of the audience. In dancing to animal dances accompanied by ragtime music, the white audience was ritually acting out its “whiteness” by playing black. When the music stopped, the play-acting also did. (Nasaw, 1993: 116)

- **Fig. 050 M & M Smith/A Cotton Club chorus line (1938)**
- **Fig. 051 Frank Driggs Collection/Still from Black and Tan (1929)**

Built in 1918 as a casino above a theatre, on 142<sup>nd</sup> Street near Lenox Avenue, and briefly run by former boxing champion Jack Johnson as the Club Deluxe, the venue was reopened in 1922 by white mobster Owney Madden as the most celebrated whites-only cabaret in Harlem: the Cotton Club.

The photograph by M & M Smith depicts a chorus line, dressed in diaphanous floor-length dresses with feathered headdresses. It was taken in 1938, two years after the club had closed its doors in Harlem and moved downtown, to Broadway and 48<sup>th</sup> Street. What the photograph depicts, however, has not undergone a change. It is still a fictive space, framed by racist clichés. The murals are still the ‘old Kentucky home’ plantation scenes; Cab Calloway, the flamboyant ‘Hi-de-ho’ man is still strutting manically; the chorus girls are as ‘Tall, Tan and Terrific’ as they were in Harlem. The only difference is that the same customers now have less far to travel to sample what Lewis calls the Cotton Club’s brand of ‘barbarism – exotic, explosive, and caged’ (Lewis, 1997: 210).

A more dramatic shot of this 'barbarism' comes from a short film, *Black and Tan*, made in 1929 and featuring Duke Ellington and his orchestra. Ellington's reputation had recently been made by his 'Jungle Music' residency at the Cotton Club and, typically, the dancers here are dressed in what Geoffrey C. Ward calls 'some white choreographer's ludicrous notion of African costume' (Ward, 2001: 152). The stage is mirrored, expanding the space of fantasy into a virtual world where, enticingly, the girls' tantalizing flesh seems doubly exposed.

The voyeurism implied and encouraged by such photographs is not limited to white photographers' representations. In photographs to illustrate Harlem nightlife in Claude McKay's book, *Negro Metropolis*, Eddie Elcha and the Smiths fill the frame with similarly provocative tableaux of chorus girls. Another picture, by James Latimer Allen, depicts a cramped stage filled with women dressed in tiny skirts and skimpy halter tops, dancing with their arms around each other.

However, this sexualised space, created largely by and for men, is also – for all the lightness of complexion on show – ultimately about the presentation of the black body to a white audience that has drawn the official line between white and black performance, both artistically and sexually.

- **Figs. 052-055 Aaron Siskind/Cabaret sequence (c. 1936-39)**

The four-picture sequence of a cabaret performance photographed by Siskind in the late 1930s could not make this line clearer. The grand production numbers of a decade earlier are scaled down here, in what seem to be a somewhat starker, smaller venue. Siskind has taken up his position in a gallery above the dance floor and trained his camera down on a corner of the room, where he can photograph both the main

performers, including most of the musicians in the band, and a table for four, occupied by two white couples out for an evening of sophisticated fun. In the first picture, a light-skinned male singer is accompanied by a pianist; in the second the band plays while a couple perform an energetic dance. The man, stripped to tasselled shorts and boots in some approximation of 'tribal' dress, leans his partner back. Her abandon to his exhibition of muscled virility, signalled by her flung back arm, prepares us for the final two pictures, where another female dancer performs solo with a veil, first topless, then naked apart from a g-string and a pair of high-heels; another dancer and two male performers await their turn to perform at the side, behind the white customers.

Throughout these performances the four at the table have largely been content to smoke and watch politely. In the second picture, however, the two women seem to be particularly interested in the male-led 'African' dance. In the third picture, one of the men has moved forward, grinning, to admire the finer points of the female soloist - the 'long-veiled beauty' of her race. Perhaps admonished by his partner or perhaps catching sight of the camera lens, he has settled back to his original position by the time she has reached the final stages of her dance. Her white veil conceals her from the band but exposes her fully to the white audience.

This scene recalls the comment of Langston Hughes, writing in 1940 and looking back over the period of the 'Negro vogue', when the colour-line was mapped into these interior spaces, turning all black people into performers for a white audience:

Harlem Negroes did not like the Cotton Club and never appreciated its Jim Crow policy in the very heart of their dark community. Nor did ordinary Negroes like the growing influx of white toward Harlem after sundown,

flooding the little cabarets and bars where formerly only colored people laughed and sang, and where now the strangers were given the best ringside tables to sit and stare at the Negro customers – like amusing animals in a zoo. (Hughes, 1993: 224-225)

- **Fig. 056 Corbis Images, Inc./Small's Paradise (1929)**
- **Fig. 057 E. Simms Campbell/A Night-Club Map of Harlem (1932)**

Although the light-skinned dancer in this 1929 photograph (from Corbis Images Inc.) is performing for a racially mixed audience at Small's Paradise, one of the larger African American-owned clubs, the preponderance of whites among the customers (only one is black here) points to the way in which such venues, deliberately or not, ensured that few blacks were admitted through instituting high cover charges.

It would be inaccurate to claim that the Harlem club scene benefited and served only whites – a map of popular cabarets widely published in the black press demonstrates that, by the time of the Depression, African Americans were willing and able to enjoy a good night out. A vast cohort of African American show business stars were born and reborn here, from Ethel Waters, returning to Harlem in 1934 to triumph at the Cotton Club with the so-called 'Stormy Weather' show, to a string of jazz giants like Ellington. However, the main point of it all was to drum up white trade on the basis of a fantasy of black life. The thrill and the shame of such a visit is plain in the mildly salacious figure of the performing black woman here and in the looks on the white faces, including the hidden one on the left, of those sitting at the ringside tables.

- **Fig. 058 Edgar E. Phipps – Chorus Line, Harlem, ca. 1920s**

Let us turn now to the gentle subject of hooch. Harlem is hooch-ridden. He is a bold man who will undertake to say what part of a city like New York, with its many congested foreign and native quarters, is the wettest. The wash of the booze sea has not left Harlem out; that district may well claim a deeper inundation than any other. Winthrop Lane, 'Ambushed in the City: The Grim Side of Harlem' (quoted in Haskins, 1994: 94)

Of other factors that underlay the vogue for Harlem, the passing of the Vollstead Act in 1919, ushering in Prohibition and widespread national drunkenness, must score very highly. This photograph of yet another chorus line was taken in the 1920s by Edgar E. Phipps, an African American studio photographer. It depicts 'high yaller' glamour, presented this time in revealing wide-mesh net dresses (with strategically positioned buttons) and dominated by a Manhattan backdrop of giant dry gin and whisky bottles: a classic cityscape of barely concealed and forbidden pleasures. Drink fuelled the Jazz Age, creating and destroying much in its path; when the Act was repealed, scenes and places like this would begin to fade, like the dreams and fantasies they were.

## **6      *The inscribed façade: Reading the black streetscape***

- **Fig. 059 Charles Van Urban/136 W.137<sup>th</sup> Street (1932)**

Among the box of Charles Van Urban's prints from his 1932 survey of New York's remaining wooden buildings is this image of Negro Harlem. It depicts 136 West 137<sup>th</sup> Street, a low-rise dwelling with two floors and a basement, and a crooked lintel over the front door. Its apparent tenant is an African American, standing on the first step and looking slightly awkward. He is smartly dressed, in waistcoat and tie, but his lack of a jacket suggests that he may be at work. A large homemade sign is affixed below the ground-floor window, bearing the legend: 'Della's Dinning Room – Home Cooking'. A boy, perhaps his son, sits on an upturned barrel on the sidewalk; he, too, is smartly dressed in a suit and cap. The photograph has a composed look, possibly because we are positioned as potential customers (though 'home cooking' suggests that the main clientele would be black migrants anxious for a taste of the South). The man may be the proprietor of this modest business, his wife, the eponymous Della, hidden away, cooking in the kitchen. Whatever the case, this photograph introduces a distinct subgenre in documentary depictions of the Harlem streetscape: proud shopkeepers posing outside their businesses.

- **Fig. 060 Aaron Siskind/Shopkeeper (1938)**
- **Fig. 061 Brown Brothers/Godfrey's Beer Garden & Restaurant (c. 1935)**
- **Fig. 062 Winifred Hall Allen/Lilac Beauty Shop (n.d. [pre-1950])**

Aaron Siskind's portrait of a shop and its proprietor, taken in around 1938, is similar in some ways to the Van Urban picture. There is no doubting the expression of pride of the African

American man standing in the doorway, nor mistaking his relaxed pose, legs crossed, one hand in pocket, the other resting on the wall. This body language might indicate simple pleasure at being photographed, but the fact that this shop is called 'Our Own Community Grocery & Delicatessen' suggests that this business is African American-owned.

It is a remarkably optimistic picture of black entrepreneurialism, signified as much by the neatly displayed prices of basic foodstuffs as by the shop's name. The serried ranks of bottles and cans in both windows rhyme with the repetitive diamond pattern of the shop front tiles, conveying an overall sense of order and plenty.

In the Brown Brothers photograph of Godfrey's Beer Garden & Restaurant, taken three years earlier, the (presumed) owner and his wife stand proudly outside their business, which offers customers 'Teleflash', the latest in sports broadcasting as well as food and drink.

Although the woman standing in the doorway of the Lilac Beauty Shop in Winifred Hall's Allen undated photograph (pre-1950), is not the proprietor (as an interior shot of the whole staff team, identifying the actual manager, verifies), she still takes up the classic pose of the proud shopkeeper. Perhaps she has been asked to stand in to exemplify the fine results of the product on sale here: 'beauty', as created through the Apex System. Despite being dressed in her working clothes, her fashionable and sophisticated look and hairstyle provide a human, black version of the stylised bust modelled in the window.

Such pictures indicate the growth, however limited or qualified, in an urban black economy based on a modern distribution system of goods and images.

- **Fig. 063 Schomburg Collection/Kid Chocolate at shoe store (1929)**
- **Fig. 064 M & M Smith/A Harlem haberdashery (1938)**
- **Fig. 065 Winifred Hall Allen – Brown Bomber Bread (n.d. [ pre-1950])**

This economy is promoted, as in the wider culture, by a range of methods, including the endorsement of businesses and commodities by celebrities. These three photographs depict spaces where those connections are made, recording the transaction, in this case, between boxing and commerce. In an uncredited photograph, Kid Chocolate, alias Eligo Sardinias, is shown trying on shoes in around 1929. Like the display case above him, he presents a picture of elegance. With rakishly tipped hat and gleaming spats, he relishes the photo opportunity, pausing to face the camera with a broad smile. The assistant also looks at the camera, equally posed with one of the 'Ideal' shoes that the boxer is trying on. Although ownership may be difficult to prove here, in areas of 'personal services', including tailoring, African Americans tended to have to provide for themselves. The neat crammed shelves speak, like the grocery windows, of order and plenty.

The photograph of boxer Henry Armstrong examining a hat in a Harlem haberdashery in 1938 is one of a number that the Smiths took of African American businesses that were weathering the Depression. While the previous photograph might have been taken as much to promote Kid Chocolate as the shoe store, this picture shows a more subtle narrative of helpful service and judicious consumption. Armstrong was at the peak of his fame, having become that August the only fighter to hold three world titles at the same time: featherweight, welterweight and lightweight. Again, this place of business is defined and shaped by black celebrity and service; it is now an *owned* space, not simply owned by the proprietor (represented by the man

proffering the hat), but – it is implied – by the community as a whole, personified by one of its own, someone who has achieved fame in the wider (white) world.

The need to support the African American economy is literally spelled out in Winifred Hall Allen's undated portrait of a mobile advertisement for Brown Bomber Bread, a '100% Negro Owned & Operated' bread company. Boxer Joe Louis, nicknamed the 'Brown Bomber', is not present in the flesh but his name is enough promotion. Taken probably between 1937 and 1947, when Louis was thrilling Harlem with a series of knockouts that kept him heavyweight champion of the world for over a decade, the photograph depicts the company's strenuous efforts to promote its product, not just through this apparent endorsement by Harlem's most popular figure but through a gospel of self-help, written out in the open book on the promotional trailer and headed 'What Every Negro Should Know':

3,000,000 a year, that's Harlem's bread industry. What about those 500 jobs in that industry..... Demand Brown Bomber Bread & watch the results..... If 2/3 of Harlem's Negroes buy Brown Bomber Bread ... we guarantee a Negro pay roll of one 1 million dollars a year...

The direct link made in the written text between buying a brand of bread and improving African Americans' employment prospects is visually inscribed into this image by the physical connection between the car, with its stylish logo, and the two-wheel trailer: one pulls the other along.

In *Harlem at War*, Nat Brandt writes that, until the 1930s, African Americans believed that they owned almost the whole of Harlem and 'controlled their own economic destiny'. However, by the time that the Brown Bomber Bread company was making this appeal, Harlemites knew the truth: that Harlem was not self-

supporting. 'In truth,' Brandt concludes, 'blacks owned less than 20 percent of Harlem's businesses' (Brandt, 1996: 30/1).

- **Fig. 066 Berenice Abbott/422-424 Lenox Avenue between West 131<sup>st</sup> and 132<sup>nd</sup> Streets (June 14, 1938)**
- **Fig. 067 Aaron Siskind/Untitled streetscape (May 15, 1938)**

The landmark status of the buildings, considered earlier, is founded on the social meaning(s) which people have invested in the object. Even the humblest detail of the urban landscape may be similarly shot through with a particular significance, especially for those people who pass them by on what Tuan Yi-fu calls 'their familiar round':

Many places, profoundly significant to particular individuals and groups, have little visual prominence. They are known viscerally, as it were, and not through the discerning eye or mind. A function of literary art is to give visibility to intimate experiences, including those of space. (Tuan, 1997: 162)

These two photographs of a stretch of sidewalk on 422-424 Lenox Avenue between West 131<sup>st</sup> and 132<sup>nd</sup> Streets may also make visible places that are intimately characteristic of particular individuals and groups. This streetscape exhibits details that Lynch argues are kinds of landmark:

Other landmarks are primarily local, being visible in only restricted localities and from certain approaches. These are the innumerable signs, store fronts, trees, doorknobs, and other urban detail, which fill in the image of most observers. They are frequently used clues of identity and even of structure... (Lynch, 1998: 48)

The streetscape may be considered an inscribed façade, bearing recognisable clues of the struggle for legal and symbolic ownership of space. These two photographs could only be of a Harlem street, a cross-section of a 'crafted landscape' (Elizabeth Blackmar's term) that speaks of black enterprise and creativity. Both Aaron Siskind and Berenice Abbott photographed this street within a month of each other in 1938. As white photographers coming into Harlem, they both seem to have been drawn independently to the deeply inscribed surface of the street frontage, written over with signs of commercial, legal and religious activity.

Abbott's photograph places these details within a more dynamic space enlivened by human activity – the woman passing by, the grocer sat outside his store waiting for business, a barber taking a break by the steps leading up to an apartment house, where two women are perched by the door, watching the human traffic. The busy-ness of the signage certainly registers as part of this ebb and flow of urban energy, but does not invite us to pay it the detailed attention that Siskind demands. He has chosen a quieter day – none of the establishments look open – and filled the frame with the frontages, reducing the sense of three-dimensional depth created by Abbott, who took her picture at a sharply oblique angle. Siskind chooses instead to face the scene directly and shoot close up, intrigued perhaps by the complex two-dimensional pattern that the doors, windows and signs compose.

The façade is almost completely written over with a plethora of written and pictorial texts, each signifying a human endeavour, each vying for visual attention and for business of one kind or another. At No. 424, M. C. Jones's barber shop offers haircuts for 25c and – in three versions - shaves for 15c, signalling in the window that 'Our aim is to please You!'. On the next floor up is the Inter-denominational Pentecostal Church, with a neatly

chalk-written sign of the day's various services, which seems to indicate that this photograph was taken on Sunday May 15<sup>th</sup> 1938. A linked organisation, the Young Students Interdenominational Alliance, is also running services according to a third notice. The four painted windows depict the Good Shepherd and the Bible, closed and opened. Next door, at No. 422, the ground floor is occupied by the entrance to the beauty businesses upstairs and by the frontage of what Abbott's picture confirms as the A.B.C. Auto-School. If this is indeed a driving school, it is hard to know where it might be located, as sample photographic portraits fill the display case on the left of the door ('Chauffeur Photos' at '6 for 50c') and, as shown in Abbott's version, the main store window ('4 Radio Photo Poses for 10c'), suggesting that this is instead a modest commercial photography establishment. The lettering on the glass door indicates that not only are these two businesses run here – the Auto-School and Radio Photo Studio – but also accommodated are the offices of a notary public, someone authorised to perform legal formalities such as certifying contracts and deeds. An equally complex set of signs is written over the floor above, although all seem to relate to the same business. Mrs Johnson may be the overall owner, as one sign identifies her as the proprietress of the 'Johnson Beauty Shoppe', based nearby at 63 West 132<sup>nd</sup> Street. What looks like a more established sign, painted on the next window is 'Mae's Beauty Salon'. The two women appear to have joined forces, according to the sign over their ground-floor entrance, in setting up 'May's & Johnson's Beauty School' – possibly switching from one beauty 'system' (Apex, created by one of Harlem's leading beauticians, Sarah Washington) to another (Bonaparte) in the process.

There are grander sights on Lenox Avenue than this; it is one of the broadest thoroughfares in New York, with some of Harlem's oldest and grandest brownstone-fronted houses and, like Seventh Avenue, it provided a popular 'path' for strollers as well

as the site for street corner speakers and protest parades; it is landmarked by major churches, businesses, community organisations, and clubs and bars, including the Lenox Lounge, close to where James VanDerZee had his final studio, at No. 272. Both photographers have eschewed these sights, however, in order to focus on what they considered more 'typical' of working-class Harlem life. In choosing this site, they have depicted the peculiar intensity of land-use in Harlem, the accommodation of multiple businesses and other concerns within the same building, and the typology of African American businesses.

- **Fig. 068 Sid Grossman/Harlem street scene - Sybil's Beauty Salon**
- **Fig. 069 Sid Grossman/Ye Olde Barber Shop, 133<sup>rd</sup> Street between Fifth and Lenox**
- **Fig. 070 Sid Grossman/Street scene in Harlem in front of Daniel's Bar and Grill (Figs. 53-55 taken May-July 1939)**

A 1963 survey of 'characteristic Negro land uses' – based on 47<sup>th</sup> Street Chicago but found to conform closely to Harlem's Eighth Avenue between 125<sup>th</sup> and 135<sup>th</sup> Street – confirms both that the scenes caught in these photographs, taken a year after those of Siskind and Abbott by another white documentary photographer – Sid Grossman – are not untypical, and that the overall picture that they create was to continue unaltered for at least another three decades (Pred, 1963: 319-335 *passim*).

Grossman is drawn repeatedly to such streetscapes as these, all taken between May and July in 1939 as part of his survey, *Negroes in New York*. In the first photograph here, he depicts a row of one-storey Harlem shops, including Sybil's Beauty Salon, a Harlem luncheonette and a tailor's called Appareil, each store front itself a frame within the wider frame of the photograph, giving visual form to a number of the categories that sociological

surveys, carried out both earlier and later, identified as the most frequently found black businesses.

Among the most common storefronts were those of beauty parlours (Allen Pred [1963] notes 'staggering numbers' off Eighth Avenue) and barbershops, as well as dry-cleaning and valet services and tailor-made men's clothing. As black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier had also noted, in the late 1950s, nearly half of African American businesses were 'service establishments' that had developed to provide the personal services that white people refused to provide for blacks. Frazier added undertakers and shoe repair shops to the list of such businesses (Frazier, 1957: 55). Furthermore, stores with multiple uses, such as those depicted by Siskin and Abbott, were physical evidence of low economic conditions, as were – in both white and black areas of poverty – 'greasy spoon' eating places, bars and liquor stores, and loan offices. The presence of minor religious establishments in many photographs also conforms to a typical black retail façade, where storefront churches vied with 'spiritual consultants' and billiard parlours.

The other photographs here seem to show either that Grossman has been guided by a local or is himself sensitive to the kind of businesses typically run or owned by African Americans - a tiny minority by a long way: one survey carried out in 1930 calculated that of 12,000 stores in Harlem, only 391 were actually owned by blacks (Brandt, 1996: 37). Alternatively, it may be that 133<sup>rd</sup> Street, Grossman's chosen patch, was a particularly dense area of such businesses. In any case, his photograph of 'Ye Olde Barber Shop' between Fifth and Lenox Avenues, is notable for its juxtapositions, not just with another characteristic business, a laundry, but with the antique motor car parked outside in what may be a clever marketing ploy to drum up trade. The flash-lit photograph of Daniel's Bar & Grill, with its knot of men on the street corner, is evidence not just of this

business and its gender-specific clientele, but of a more common form of '100% Negro Owned & Operated' concern: the push cart operation.

- **Fig. 071 Aaron Siskind/Push cart girl (c. 1940)**
- **Fig. 072 Aaron Siskind/Eighth Avenue shoe shines, (c. 1936-9)**

Although not unchallenged by other ethnic groups for particular commodities – Italians, for example, fought for control of the trade in ice – African American push cart vendors appear in many street photographs. In a picture taken for the *Most Crowded Block* project, Siskind singles out a young woman standing beside a pushcart, with its scales and prepared bags of merchandise; her stance suggests that she may be connected in some way with the actual owner (a tee-shirted arm is visible on the left) rather than a customer. Siskind has photographed her from behind as she seems to wait, one foot edging into sunlight. The shadow of the cart defines the section of the sidewalk that has been claimed as black territory.

Siskind's earlier, aerial shot of shoe shines on Eighth Avenue for the *Harlem Document* depicts another typical inscription of black enterprise on the sidewalk. Although popularly identified as a stereotypical occupation for African Americans, the shoeshine trade was also one that blacks had to fight to retain. Each pitch here, stretched by this photograph into an alternative streetscape to that of the shop fronts we have been considering, represents a toehold on territory and a step towards self-sufficiency.

- **Fig. 073 Schomburg Collection/Dunbar Bank Staff (1928)**
- **Fig. 074 Schomburg Collection/Dunbar Bank Guard (1928)**

The financial modesty signified by such enterprises is written large across the Harlem streetscape, where institutions seemingly vital to urban life and frequently visible downtown were conspicuous by their absence. This goes some way to understanding the photograph taken outside a building along Eighth Avenue, at 150<sup>th</sup> Street, ten years earlier. Here, the staff of the Dunbar National Bank poses happily for the (uncredited) photographer. The guard, too, seems happy to stand at attention for his own picture outside the bank's smartly lettered glass doors. Despite all the efforts to realise the hopes of financial independence, urged on in speeches and by example by numerous black leaders, from Booker T. Washington to Marcus Garvey to street corner speakers, African Americans were in no position to run or sustain banks. The opening of the Dunbar National Bank in 1928 – these photographs may well have been taken to mark the occasion – must therefore have seemed, as these faces indicate, a hopeful sign of change.

- **Fig. 075 Underwood & Underwood/Interior of Dunbar National Bank (c. 1928)**
- **Fig. 076 Morris Engel/Harlem Merchant, New York (1937)**

The bank had been opened, the philanthropist said, to 'help the Negro help himself' (Osofsky: 157). In this photograph by Underwood & Underwood of the marbled interior of the bank, that sentiment is carved over the cashier's window in the single word 'Thrift'. A female cashier – perhaps one of the two women in the group portrait – is serving a male customer through a grille in the grid of windows separating the two. The main subject and point of the photograph is its depiction and affidavit of the transaction made across this division by two African Americans, a symbolic moment of mutually affirming financial independence.

Only a decade later, the bank closed down as a result of the general collapse of the initiative that had spawned it in the first place, the Paul Lawrence Dunbar Apartments, a purpose-built and self-contained complex financed by white benefactor, John D. Rockefeller. In his account of this failed attempt to put 'philanthropy on a business basis', Gilbert Osofsky explains how this sincere but misguided and inadequate attempt to solve Harlem's chronic housing problems was scuppered in the main by the inability of the middle-class tenants during the Depression to maintain regular payment of rent, let alone build enough capital to own their apartments, the original hope that had encouraged Rockefeller to start the bank.

The 'Harlem merchant' depicted by Morris Engel in his 1937 photograph, is like the cashier, enclosed within another square space between the windows. His transaction, however, is with the white photographer, a member of Siskind's *Harlem Document* team, whose eyes he does not quite meet. Engel has either cropped this picture or positioned himself right in front of the kiosk, so that just a detail of it fills the frame. The lack of any visible space behind the merchant contributes to the flat, painterly quality of the image. Compositionally, the windows in the top half of the picture form a triptych in which he is the central figure. On either side sit bottles of candies and chews, only one of which is full. The lower half of the picture, headed with a line of advertisements for chewing tobacco, bleeds off at the sides, so that the chaotic pile of tins and packets on display underneath seems to flow across the frame like a stream of detritus. With it, it seems, has leaked away the sense of order and pride detectable in the shop windows and proprietorial poses considered at the beginning of this analysis of black ownership.

If many of these photographs of the black streetscape broadly expose the limits to African American legal ownership of space, this striking portrait of a man trapped in a claustrophobic grid is

much more specific about the spatial consequences of an economic Depression unfairly weighted against an impoverished community, already cut off from wider financial opportunities by the colour line.

## **7      *Nearly autonomous territory: Black heterotopias***

In everyday speech, many residents of an urban area of black settlement would readily comprehend a phrase such as 'black space' or 'black time' in terms of their effort to forge discourses and practical activities in a particular part of town which are, to some extent, 'free' from the discourses and practices which they associate with a coercive white power structure. Establishing nearly autonomous territory is the conscious aim of all sorts of actors in the black inner city – in churches, mosques, temples, community centres, clubs, pubs, and in certain 'open' spaces. (Farrar, 1997: 108)

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Having surveyed the black streetscape, this section focuses on photographs that depict 'black space', as defined here by Max Farrar. While some of the sites that Farrar suggests may turn out to be well known and unique landmarks, others will be humbler and more generic places in which African Americans congregate to pursue their own discourses.

By imposing the colour line and *spatially*-expressed segregation on African Americans, the power structure also – inevitably – created the *spaces* for what James C. Scott calls a 'hidden transcript' to develop. Scott distinguishes between 'the open, declared forms of resistance' – considered in my next chapter – and 'the disguised, low-profile, undeclared resistance' of *infrapolitics* (ibid: 198). Writing of a range of suppressed groups, from slaves to subjugated races, Scott argues that '[b]ehind the scenes... they are likely to create and defend a social space in which offstage dissent to the official transcript of power relations may be voiced'. (ibid: xi)

Such social spaces have also been described as 'safe spaces' or, following Foucault, 'heterotopias'. Drawing both on Foucault and on de Certeau's notion of ways in which the subject can create for himself 'a space in which he can find ways of using the constraining order of the place or the language' (de Certeau, 1988: 30), J. Yolande Daniels describes heterotopia (in contrast to an unlocatable utopia) as the 'place that is other and is yet *localizable*' (Daniels, 2000: 198).

Drawing on the same sources, Farrah Griffin, in her examination of the African American migration narrative, argues that migrants benefited from a 'whole street and domestic culture' that enabled them to 'counter efforts to discipline them' (Griffin, 1995). Some of the places she lists as 'housing' such efforts are similar to those noted by Farrar - churches, dance halls, pool halls and barber shops, which are discussed here. Others seem to expand on what Farrar calls 'open' space: parties, kitchens, families, and friendships and these are considered in Chapter Six (Farrar: 107).

- **Fig. 077 Austin Hansen/Congregation of Abyssinian Baptist Church (c. 1954)**
- **Fig. 078 James VanDerZee/ The funeral of Blanche Powell, Abyssinian Baptist Church (1926)**

In *12 Million Black Voices*, Richard Wright identified two 'safe' spaces: the church and the dance hall, both 'sites where elements of the South are retained'. The church had been, of course, the central social and political institution in black life, from slavery days on. The distinctiveness of the Harlem built landscape is partly due to its hundreds of churches, from landmark buildings like the Abyssinian Baptist Church to the (then) innumerable storefront congregations.

Hansen's vast photographic projects documenting the fabric and the activities of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and of the Abyssinian Baptist Church are represented here with a picture taken of the congregation at the latter in around 1954. As official photographer to the church for forty years, Hansen is very familiar with this space; perhaps the congregation is as comfortable with him, as few notice his presence here. The inability of the lens Hansen is using to encompass the entire space, perhaps because of the position he has taken up, means that the mass of worshippers on both levels seems to extend infinitely beyond the right and left edges of the frame. This is not only one of the oldest African American congregations in New York, but the largest. A relatively late migrant to Harlem in 1923, when a new, Neo-Gothic building was built on West 138<sup>th</sup> Street, its number had doubled to 15,000 by 1938, the year when Adam Clayton Powell Sr. retired and his son took over his 'social gospel' ministry. Church members were among the most dynamic in charitable and political campaigns in Harlem.

In VanDerZee's picture of the same church three decades earlier, we are given a view from high above the choir and the congregation. This photograph, taken in 1926, depicts a particularly solemn occasion: the funeral of Blanche Powell, the minister's daughter. As in many of his other funeral and mortuary portraits, VanDerZee has montaged in a picture taken in life of the deceased, as if to indicate the continued presence of her spirit. The scale he has chosen is striking as is her 'risen' status, like ours, up in the air. She seems to emanate light like that blazing through the stained glass windows. The association of flowers and plants with funerals is made both in the bouquets placed around the coffin and in the fronds that frame her reincarnated form. Where Hansen's picture depicts the vast and vital black body of the congregation, VanDerZee's suggest its deep spirituality (visually expressed, too, in the depth of sanctified space we look through). In both, a proud and self-

sustaining community is portrayed; together they suggest a continuity of worship and assembly through the intervening years.

- **Fig. 079 Aaron Siskind/Storefront church (c. 1936-9)**
- **Fig. 080 Berenice Abbott/Church of God, 25 East 132<sup>nd</sup> St. (December 8, 1936)**
- **Fig. 081 [Variant image of Fig. 80]**

The African American church was not monolithic and, however much some in the black elite might regret the fact, the majority of religious sites in Harlem were so-called 'storefront churches', housed, according to Jervis Anderson in 'former candy stores, groceries, and shoe-repair shops, or in basements, lofts and the back rooms of tenements'. Anderson quotes civil rights activist Bayard Rustin recalling how differently the worshippers behaved from the more established congregations of the Northern city: 'They were used to screaming and yelling at services, rolling in the aisles, and speaking in tongues.' (Anderson, 1982: 247, 248)

Some of that spontaneity is depicted in a photograph taken by Aaron Siskind, some time in the late 1930s. Amongst more restrained members of the assembly, the woman, who is already visually distinctive in her white dress and shoes, makes her voice heard. Her voluble testifying contrasts with her baby's more restrained demeanour, in a reversal of the usual image of mother and crying child. Although the woman on her left seems mildly amused, it is clear from the other facial and body language depicted here that this woman's behaviour is not unexpected or unwelcome; someone behind her is perhaps clapping assent, so this may be part of a call-and-response session. The seated woman to the mother's right stares unsmilingly at the photographer, reminding us that this white photographer is not only entering distinctively black space, but

space that is feminised and sacred. Here, Siskind again demonstrates what begins to look like intrusion in photographing the audience rather than the 'action'. Yet his depiction also manages to convey the energy and spontaneity that is missing in Hansen's depiction.

On December 8, 1936, Berenice Abbott took at least two pictures of the Pilgrim Pentecostal Church of God at 25 East 132<sup>nd</sup> Street. One, showing just the frontage and steps leading up to the main entrance, was used in the *Harlem on Your Mind* exhibition. Above the blackboard and notice of services is a dramatic portrait of the minister holding an open bible and with one finger pointing heavenward to the word, 'Behold'. As if in obedience, the next frame, taken from exactly the same angle, shows the plump figure of Reverend Elder Johnson, as he hurries down the steps. He is a busy man. Although his flocks numbers only 28, there is a daily service through the week and a Sunday school to run. Although lodging free, he has to make an income by selling insurance. Apparently, the ground floor houses the Pentecostal Barber Shop, 'run cooperatively by the brethren'. With this information the picture becomes even busier with enterprise.

Part of the experience of worshipping at such churches was, as Siskind's photograph suggests, the chance of relatively uninhibited physical expression of pent-up feelings. The emotional intensity of the black preacher leading call and response or of the singers from the gospel choir are almost indistinguishable in photographs from that of the jazz musician bent in sweaty concentration over his bass or of the Lindy hopper 'stompin' at the Savoy'. From these pictures emerge the black body, carving out space through movement and sound.

- **Fig. 082 M & M Smith/Tiny Bunch stompin' at the Savoy (1938)**
- **Fig. 083 M & M Smith/Ivie Anderson performing with the Duke Ellington, Savoy Ballroom (1936)**

The largest dance hall in Harlem - it occupied the second floor of an entire block from 140th to 141<sup>st</sup> Street - opened on Lenox Avenue in 1926. The impact on America of the grand opening of the Savoy Ballroom was, according to David Levering Lewis, comparable to the 1913 Armory Show (Lewis, 1997: 170). The dance floor was 250 feet long and 50 feet wide with two bandstands so that the music, supplied by, amongst others, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Lionel Hampton and house favourite Chick Webb, never had to stop. An estimated 28 million 'stomping' feet in its first twenty years meant that the gleaming maple wood flooring had to be replaced every few years (Anderson, 1982: 307). The most popular form of dance, one of the first created in the Northern city, was the Lindy Hop. Richard Wright claimed that this dance held 'a sense of what our body wants, a hint of a hope of a life lived without fear...' (Griffin, 1995: 81).

Owned by a white impresario and with a black manager, the Savoy was open to all colours and classes, a dynamic and democratic black space of passionate performance that appealed to both white and black photographers. The interior of the Savoy may well be the most photographed site in Harlem, visited by, amongst others, M & M Smith, Robert McNeill, Austin Hansen, Sid Grossman and Cornell Capa.

The Smiths' photograph, captioned *Tiny Bunch 'stompin' at the Savoy*, was taken in 1938. The centre of attention and of the photograph is dancer Tiny Bunch, who seems to be whirling his partner over his shoulder; in many such pictures it is actually very difficult to work out just how such moves were

accomplished, seemingly against the laws of gravity, as the cameras often fail to freeze the speed of the movement. Bunch is not a diminutive man, but his exertion, written on his face and in the strain of the material of his jacket, attached with a single button, has a delicacy and grace to it. There are other dancers here, all pausing in a line by the bandstand to watch the star turn; the Lindy Hop began, like many such dances, in competition on the dance floor and there is defeat as well as admiration in these gazes.

The shell behind the band is so familiar from jazz photographs that a caption is not needed to identify the venue. Two years earlier, the Smiths took this picture of Ivie Anderson, one of Duke Ellington's featured singers, famed for her rendition of 'It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got that Swing)'. Allowed to shoot photographs during performances here (at the Cotton Club they could only work during rehearsals), the Smiths create a powerful portrait of the young singer and the community brought together by her performance. Anderson seems to rise up out of this packed audience of attentive and – particularly in the case of a young woman gazing up at the star – adoring faces. The closest faces in are black, but there are white admirers as well, towards the back of the crowd. Around her, the cymbal, the piano and the double-bass provide a visual accompaniment to the voice, which soars up and out of the frame.

In both photographs, the Smiths produce depictions of that moment when a performer moves beyond self-consciousness into an ecstatic realm. The audience are rapt in admiration, recognising this reaching of the body towards its transcendence, and for that moment the cares of everyday life in the Depression dissipate and the Savoy becomes a black heterotopia.

- **Fig. 084 Otis C. Butler / 'A last drink' (1920)**
- **Fig. 085 Corbis/Night Club in Harlem (9 July, 1934)**

The 'slumming' craze was, in reality, a short-lived phenomenon. These two photographs of black-filled venues seem to bookend that feverish period. The first, taken by Otis C. Butler in 1920, and captioned 'A Last Drink', shows a V-shaped group of dapper African American men, most posing self-consciously against the bar. The mosaic floor opens up in front of the photographer as if declaring its amplitude as elegant male space. At least two of the men behind the bar look white – such an establishment would most likely be white-owned – reminding the viewer that, whilst legal ownership of such leisure venues (theatres included) might not have shifted, rules banning African Americans as customers made little commercial sense. This, symbolically at least, has become black space.

The photograph of a Harlem nightclub, taken by the Corbis picture agency in July 1934, depicts a more intimate and indeed humble space than the Savoy and shows a rather less exhausting dance routine in progress. Customers not dancing sit at tables on the right; most of them and several on the floor have noticed the photographer whose presence seems to add a little more excitement to their night out. The dance couple who have turned to pose for the camera seem to be those ordinary Harlemites that Langston Hughes described, for whom the period of the Negro vogue had passed by virtually unnoticed.

- **Fig. 086 James VanDerZee - Barber shop (n.d.)**
- **Fig. 087 James VanDerZee - Billiard Room (n.d.)**

Like Butler's photograph of the bar, these two pictures taken by VanDerZee, depict largely male space, though that of the barber shop is somewhat compromised by the two women seated by the window and engaged in a manicure session (they seem,

however, to be ignoring the photographer). In his 1927 study of African American recreation, William H. Jones suggests one reason why the barber shop became such a social centre:

Being adornment of the head and face, to man the most significant part of the body, it naturally calls attention to the *ego* and accentuates discussion of personal values.  
(Jones, 1927: 89)

Not just of personal values, one presumes, but of political and other matters: a varied but vital 'hidden transcript'. As in the bar, everyone seems to have moved back, in this case perhaps to show off the panoply of equipment necessary to the business. The mirrors at the back multiply the number of staff and clients, giving the impression of a small community of men behind this enterprise.

The photograph of the billiard room again seems to set the venue's male customers in the background and to draw attention to its commercial function, in this case represented by the tables set up with their neat triangles of billiard balls. Again, most of the men have turned to face the camera and are posing. Noticeably, it is daytime, perhaps suggesting these customers have time on their hands. Employed or not, the venue they are patronising is another of those black businesses characteristic of the African American streetscape.

- **Fig. 088 James VanDerZee/Tea time at Madame C.J. Walker Beauty Salon (1929)**
- **Fig. 089 Underwood & Underwood/Soda Shoppe (c. 1929)**

The equivalent female space to that of the barber's is the even more ubiquitous beauty parlour. VanDerZee's picture of tea-time at one of the most prestigious, the Walker Beauty Salon,

was taken in 1929, exactly ten years after the death of the founder of one of the most celebrated beauty businesses in the country. Sarah Breedlove Walker, who made a fortune in hair products was a consummate self-publicist, transforming herself into 'Madame C.J. Walker' and making effective use of photographs in her self-penned newspaper editorials and in her lectures, as Noliwe Rook (1996) shows. She had a grand house on the Hudson built for her by Vertner Tandy, contributed generously to race causes (she was an admirer of Tuskegee) and was able to pass on a large inheritance to her daughter, society hostess A'Lelia Walker.

Once again, the staff is posing for a picture of a business, emphasising the space into which customers are to be welcomed. The various groups of women are sat in curves and half circles, most clustered around a samovar. This is a feminine space, dedicated to enhancing women's looks, a service of immense importance in giving women customers a sense of themselves as stylish, urbanised black Americans. The scene is rather genteel but this space is also a workplace; these women are workers earning a salary. It is also a brand image, standing for the chain of such businesses set up by Walker and her successors, a small empire of shops and beauty schools with a travelling sales force.

Underwood and Underwood took a picture of another tea-time that same year. The two female customers here look as if they might well be patrons of the beauty salons, in their fashionable coats and cloche hats. Going out to a café and not being relegated to the basement or the kitchen of a white establishment was one of the new opportunities offered in the black city. This is also, therefore, a picture of urban sophistication and of African American progress; the waitress is also part of the picture, in her smart outfit, smilingly serving tea, another black woman drawing a wage. The composition of the

photograph creates a circle of glances, included that reflected in the mirror, which seems to make a network of female and economic connections. This is shared space, safe to speak in.

- **Fig. 090 Eddie Elcha/Women basketball players (1924)**
- **Fig. 091 Austin Hansen/Group portrait of the Sixteenth Patriarchy Regiment of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows outside of the Harlem Headquarters (n.d.)**

The photographic archives are full of such photographs as these, depicting the posed, often uniformed members of a bewildering variety of fraternities, Greek letter societies, sports teams, bridge clubs and other organisations, the larger ones, such as the Elks, developed as parallel versions of white institutions. Although often divided by gender, these community groups created and shared similar spaces and social functions. The photographs generally do not depict the spaces these organisations work in, but represent membership through uniform and a conventional sports team or school photograph pose.

Eddie Elcha's photograph depicts three women basketball players who are probably linked to the popular journal, the *Interstate Tattler* (the picture is taken from its archive). They may be posing for the photograph to mark the occasion of the founding of the Tattler Girls' Athletic & Social Club, or simply to promote it. The photograph serves in either case as a portrait of membership. Hansen's picture depicts what Roi Ottley terms Harlem's 'loud Rotarian pride'. In frequent parades and other rituals, as well as in setting up, as here, permanent headquarters, such groups created spaces in which they could experiment with roles not readily on offer in the white world. As the next chapter suggests, the often military nature of this experimentation was not coincidental.

- **Fig. 092 New York Historical Society/Headquarters of the Harlem branch of the Communist Party (n.d.)**
- **Fig. 093 Schomburg Collection/Reading room of the Schomburg Collection (1920s)**

The (undated and uncredited) photograph of the headquarters of the Harlem branch of the Communist Party is reproduced in Jervis Anderson's entertaining history, *Harlem: The Great Black Way*, with a caption ('God and Marx') pointing out the irony that this organisation, based upstairs, shares the building with the 'Orthodox Religious & Department Store'. Looked at in another way, in the search for 'nearly autonomous' black territory, these two enterprises look very similar. Although dominated by white cadres, the Communist Party briefly offered space for the development of a hidden transcript, as did churches and religious groups; political radicalism and the 'social gospel' came together in such campaigns as the 'Don't Buy Where You Can't Work' protests, also considered in the next chapter.

In a sense, the other (uncredited) photograph shows the institutionalisation of the 'hidden transcript', as embodied in the Schomburg Collection of African American texts, which these students, split equally between the sexes, are engrossed in. Arthur A. Schomburg pioneered the study of what would now be called *Africana* or African diasporic studies in the early years of the century, collecting together books, artwork, newspapers and photographs from all around the world, which were then bought by the New York Public Library and housed in its branch at 135<sup>th</sup> Street. Each researcher is intent on their own particular projects but shares a space defined by its walls of portraits and landscapes and its cabinets of books and manuscripts. No one is talking, probably conscious that they need to present an appropriately studious image for the photographer (who is perhaps creating another item for the archive), but the sense of

a shared conversation and a common culture seems inscribed here.

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Both Richard Wright and James Baldwin wrote about the potential of such places as the church and the dance hall to be more than 'safe' spaces. According to Griffin, for Richard Wright, although the church was a sustaining institution and the dance hall a therapeutic plunge into pleasure, neither provided the means or analysis to resist the social order. Baldwin's view was that they were, nevertheless, essential to the development of such resistance in the way they build confidence and agency in the face of white racism (Griffin, 1995: 78-82, 89 *passim*). A similar view is expressed by Earl Lewis who concluded that although 'congregation in a Jim Crow environment produced more space than power', African Americans 'used this space to gather their cultural bearings, to mold the urban setting' (in Kelley, 1994: 45).

In his analysis of declared resistance to domination and to its undeclared expression in the form of 'infrapolitics', James Scott argues that creating autonomous space to assert one's dignity and where, for example, anger and outrage can be expressed in the form of gossip, is the way in which oppressed people deal with the everyday humiliations practised on them. It is the undeclared equivalent to the declared resistance of political speeches and symbolic public assertions of worth. What these photographs depict are places in which dissident subcultures are able to develop. How, Scott asks, in a direct reference to the African American situation, can we understand the modern civil rights or Black Power movements without understanding 'the offstage discourse among black students, clergymen, and their parishioners' (Scott, 1990: 199)?

'While Jim Crow ordinances ensured that churches, bars, social clubs, barber shops, beauty salons, even alleys, would remain 'black' space,' writes Robin Kelley, 'segregation gave African Americans a place to hide, a place to plan' (Kelley, 1994: 51). The next chapter considers photographs that depict the public emergence and declaration of the hidden transcript planned and discussed in such places.

## 8     ***A very small room: The landscape of the ghetto***

...I feel confident that the Negro is in Harlem to stay. And what a fine part of New York City he has come into possession of! High and dry, wide and beautiful streets, no alleys, no dilapidated buildings, a section of handsome private [*sic*] houses and of modern apartment and flat houses, a section right in the heart of the empire city of the world.

James Weldon Johnson, 'The Future Harlem',  
*New York Age*, January 10, 1920 (Johnson,  
1995 [2]: 101)

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James Weldon Johnson's optimistic declaration of 1920 was proved correct in one respect at least: the Negro *was* in Harlem to stay. The way in which the segregating power of white supremacy operated, most of the black community had little choice. Having considered Harlem as a place of congregation and explored the representation of the struggle for symbolic space through the creation of black places, I return now to the issue of the colour-line and the grid and to consider photographs that depict the struggle over legal ownership of the district as a whole.

Although Harlem might have been culturally defined by its inhabitants, the fact of legal ownership remains fundamental and it is evident in the results of a tightening containment of 'Negro Harlem', leading to chronic overcrowding of the kind represented in pictures from the *Most Crowded Block* project. It is evident, too, in the decaying fabric of the cityscape, neglected and overlooked in the 'creative destruction' of downtown Manhattan. As we have seen, photography can represent black space, but the archive as a whole also presents Harlem moving through the

fourth dimension, investigating and exposing not just the spatial claustrophobia of the 'dark ghetto' but the ruin that was made of it through time.

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...as stunning as the disappearance [in the 1920s] of the important landmarks was the removal of the anonymous buildings that were the very fabric of the city. Rows of brownstones and acres of tenements were demolished to make way for widened thoroughfares, skyscrapers, bridges and tunnels. ...The physical transformation of the city was glorious because it gave visual form to the consciousness of its inhabitants. (Max Page, 1999: 6-7)

- **Fig. 094 Corbis/Bettman – Looking north from the Hotel Theresa on Seventh and 125<sup>th</sup> Street (1927)**
- **Fig. 036 Austin Hansen/View of Hotel Theresa looking south west along Seventh Avenue (1953)**

As photographs taken through this period and beyond demonstrate, Harlem does not develop in the same way as much of downtown Manhattan does. Throughout this period, it remains low-rise, as can be seen by comparing this aerial view of Seventh Avenue taken in 1927 with that taken in 1953; Johnson's 'wide and beautiful streets' still characterise the built landscape in the 1950s, though their beauty has been compromised. Harlem is to a large extent still identified through its broad avenues and brownstones rather than, as downtown is, by canyons and skyscrapers; by the elevated subway rather than the Empire State Building. The grid has not become vertical. The fact that the Hotel Theresa, decades after its completion, still stands out at a mere twelve storeys high betrays a fundamental lack of development, photographically evident in the decay, collapse and erasure of buildings.

Harlem's urban landscape is far removed from the dominant architectural discourse written across the celebrated Manhattan skyline, the result of what Max Page has described as the 'creative destruction' of Manhattan (Page, 1999). As Page describes it, the psychological impact of this process was profound; one might, then, wonder about the impact on those living in the relative stasis and persisting horizontality of Harlem. Perhaps, if the white city of Manhattan might be called a theatre of prophecy, ever forgetful of its past, Harlem has remained largely marooned in its past.

Change did come but through the corrosive effect of time and neglect rather than any more 'creative' destruction. Johnson's claim in 1925 that Harlem 'merely a zone through which the four main arteries of the city run' could no longer be sustained; thirty years later it was not possible to make the journey through Harlem without noticing the dramatic differences in the physical fabric across 110<sup>th</sup> Street.

- **Fig. 095 Roy DeCarava/Street in financial district (n.d.)**
- **Fig. 096 Roy DeCarava/Back of Harlem tenement (n.d.)**
- **Fig. 097 Aaron Siskind/Backs of tenements (c. 1940)**
- **Fig. 098 Aaron Siskind/Airshaft (c. 1940)**

The two photographs taken by Roy DeCarava, probably in the late 1940s or early 1950s, face each other in the photographer's 1962 text, *the sound i saw*, contrasting white and black Manhattan. The photographs follow a double spread that fills the pages with the shaking tops of winter trees, perhaps the city's (and DeCarava's) brief nod to the pastoral before plunging into the claustrophobia of the built landscape. On one side is a photograph of a dim and narrow canyon in the financial district, empty apart from a cat strolling up its sterile, scoured sidewalk – an unheroic version of Paul Strand's Wall Street; on the other is

what looks like an updated scene out of Jacob Riis's social documentary, *How the Other Half Lives*, depicting the back lot of tenement buildings, filled with debris, above which the flags of washing fly, a trope for the slum used in many other photographs of Harlem from the 1930s onwards, including those taken by Sid Grossman and Aaron Siskind; the first picture by Siskind here is another example.

Siskind's second photograph plunges the viewer into vertiginous shadow and down an airshaft of the kind that, even in the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance, was a site of intimate horror. Rudolph Fisher's protagonist King Solomon Gillis sits in a room 'half the size of his hencoop back home', a single window opening into an airshaft filled with 'waste noises, waste odors of a score of families, seeking issue through a common channel; pollution from bottom to top – a sewer of sounds and smells' (Fisher, 1925: 61).

These are unpeopled scenes, allowing us to study in detail the detritus gathering in the corners of untended lots, confirming Kenneth Clark's observation that the 'most concrete fact of the ghetto is its physical ugliness – the dirt, the filth, the neglect. ...Everywhere there are signs of fantasy, decay, abandonment, and defeat' (Clark, 1965: 27). The pictures depict what Grady Clay, in his mapping of urban features, describes as 'sinks', degraded areas of the city where African Americans usually lived and which were 'historically sequestered and hence ... invisible' (Clay, 1980: 145).

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All of Harlem is pervaded by a sense of congestion, rather like the insistent maddening, claustrophobic pounding in the skull that comes from trying to breathe in a very small

room with all the windows shut. (James Baldwin, 1991: 59)

- **Fig. 005 James VanDerZee/Elementary school students in Lunch Line (1932)**
- **Fig. 099 Roy DeCarava/Woman in kitchen (1951)**

The urban social crisis caused through overcrowding, inadequate housing and lack of many basic services is evident in photographs taken during the Depression, most dramatically in those used in the chapter 'Death on the City Pavements' in Richard Wright's book *12 Million Black Voices*. It is even evident in the largely upbeat work of James VanDerZee. In this photograph of elementary school students taken in 1932, the same year that he photographed the *Raccoon Couple in Car*, VanDerZee creates a powerful image of economic and spatial constraint.

In his depiction of children queuing up for the parcels of food, VanDerZee has depicted a strange well of space; daylight penetrating from above confirms that this is photographed in the open air, except that 'open' is the opposite of the spatial quality that the picture suggests. Like a vacant lot surrounded by tenement walls, this is a claustrophobic, almost interior space, at the bottom of something not unlike an airshaft. The barred windows signify an imprisoning space, such as that of the workhouse. Such detectable economic metaphors from this image are potentially extended by another oddity in the composition; a *punctum* may be identified in the form that the queue for charitable help takes. Presumably, those children coming down the steep set of stairs will be collecting their bags from the nun standing in the doorway on our right and then going back up the stairs. As, however, we see no child exiting this space – indeed, the nun at the top of the stairs seems to

block any escape - the visual assumption is that this queue is proceeding on an endless loop of continuing need.

In DeCarava's picture, taken in 1951, the narrow and gloomy corridor leading (the caption tells us) to a kitchen also depicts a foreclosed space. In contrast to the more dramatic work of most documentary photographers, DeCarava provides a (visually) quieter picture but one equally devastating and claustrophobic in its depiction of constraint and poverty. A kitchen is ideally an expansive space, where the family gathers to cook, talk and eat. Here, it seems but an extension of the hallway with enough room only for the woman to make her way up and down. The carving up of apartments into kitchenettes, explored further in Chapter Four, was written large over the landscape of Harlem, as Baldwin's image of the 'very small room' makes clear.

That striking conceit, from an essay called 'The Harlem Ghetto', suggests that Harlem, once a site for the expansive African American boosterism of Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, has been reduced to a tiny space with 'all the windows shut', a section of New York segregated and cordoned off, where you can hardly breathe. There is no room left for the African American population to expand into. The implied reduction of Harlem as an entity to a 'very small room' can be linked to a range of other written and photographic texts that find the entire black condition represented in the typical smallness, congestion and stifling airlessness of a ghetto home.

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lonely cats and neglected/ children/ who prowl the streets/  
of man made/ worlds within worlds of/ steel and brick/  
squared and cubed by stoned men/ of intricate/ duplicity  
who produce little/ room (DeCarava, 2001, unpaginated)

Taken from the first page of DeCarava's free-form poetry in *the sound i saw*, this passage seems to refer forward to the spread, two pages later, of the two contrasting Manhattan cityscapes. The apparently equitable nature of squaring and cubing – grid-making and skyscraper-building – is duplicitous, cheating this world within a world (Harlem, 'a city within a city') of room.

As Geoff King observes, 'the imposition of rigid cartographies can be a way of securing or maintaining the domination of the powerful (King, 1996: 48). The rational organisation of city space, exemplified in the American city by the grid, is also critiqued by de Certeau in his analysis of spatial practices. The utopian city, he claims, is founded on the 'production of its own space', a process that tries to 'repress all the physical mental and political pollution that would compromise it' (de Certeau, 1988: 94) This production, written most obviously in the 'letters' of the skyscrapers in downtown Manhattan, is, however, only one side of the profit and loss equation. For de Certeau, the expenditure is the 'waste' of poverty; from another perspective, what escapes from the grid (or pollutes its attempted neutrality) is a broader excess, that unpredictable result of cultural, historical and other forces which, Mario Gandelsonas argues, 'stop the uninterrupted flow of movement implied in the geometric grid' (Gandelsonas 1991: 26).

This image of interrupted flow returns us to the figure of the traffic policeman halting traffic at the intersection of Lenox Avenue and 125<sup>th</sup> Street ( ). When I showed this photograph to a seminar group and presented a version of the analysis made earlier in this chapter, one research student commented that, for him, this figure personified not authority, but a form of minstrelsy. His exaggerated physical gesture, the white gloves, the whistle: all conjured up a blackface routine. The likelihood is that this photograph was taken simply to mark the fact that African Americans were now being given new tasks

and responsibilities by the municipal authorities, and the thought lingers that he is, after all, just a *traffic* policeman, unarmed, with only token status; Cheryl Lynn Greenberg notes, for example, that the New York Police Department assigned African American policemen to black areas only, and set a no-promotion policy that remained in force until the end of the 1920s (Greenberg, 1991: 26).

- **Fig. 100 Roy DeCarava/Woman and children at intersection (1952)**

DeCarava's photograph, taken in 1952, shows a woman and her children at an unnamed intersection. This is a beautifully composed, even tender picture, the ordinary figures making diminutive silhouettes as they cross through the dark city. In its own way, this is as iconic an image as that of the policeman but, where he once dominated the urban environment at a significant node in the grid, this fatherless family is now dwarfed by its surroundings. The impersonality of the urban plan is exposed, its anonymous avenues and streets endlessly crossing and recrossing. This repetition grinds these figures down to a statistic in the calculus of the grid.

- **Fig. 101 Roy DeCarava/Child playing at curb, Eighth Avenue (1952)**

Michael Stanton notes how the other great Jeffersonian idea, nature, is imbricated in the operation of the grid, and argues that the use of the 'language of nature' to articulate the city lot as a 'fertile field' for economic growth (itself a 'natural' process) ultimately leads to the ghetto:

In the rigorous frame of the grid, the rhetoric of agriculture imbues economic development with inevitability and benevolence. Suffering and exploitation

are 'natural' processes. Red-lining and the institutionalization of the ghetto are perversely viewed as ecological, necessary quarantines within the bountiful fabric: middle-class, middle-America, middle-landscape. (Stanton, 2000: 124)

Comparing the Harlem streetscape depicted in DeCarava's 1952 photograph of a child playing at the kerb on Eighth Avenue to that of the section of Lenox Avenue photographed by Siskind and Berenice Abbott, it seems that the life has now been sucked out of the store fronts. Most are blankly shuttered; the neon sign on the window of the Bar-B-Q seems unlikely ever to light up and the rotisserie outside the other business looks as if it has been dumped on the sidewalk. The washing on the line in the background signals that, behind the single storey shops, there is yet another patch of wasteland backed onto by grim tenement walls. The sidewalk is empty apart from the solitary and diminutive figure of the child, poking a stick into a pool of water that has gathered in the gutter. Two spatial stories are told in this composition. The first is that of the ghetto, a bankrupt landscape of defeat written into the fabric of the buildings and underlined by the bleak grid of the sidewalk. The second is that of the pastoral, the lonely child playing as if by a stream, engrossed in a small, pleasurable world of his own making. It is as if the city itself has been abandoned along with the child, who sits on the edge of it in an imagined space.

- **Fig. 102 Aaron Siskind/Building with boarded windows (c. 1936-39)**

Siskind's love of pattern can be detected in this architectural composition of the late 1930s. All but two of the windows in this building are neatly boarded up, in a parody of shutters. This, like DeCarava's photograph, is a picture of the virtual death of a city; the only hopeful sign of life here is in the two windows left

uncovered. Otherwise, Siskind suggests, by allowing the subject to bleed off all the sides of the frame, that this blanked off edifice carries on infinitely. A three-dimensional building with its suggestion of depth behind the frontage has been reduced here to a flat surface, more like a wall to come up against than a place to enter. In this and other photographs of buildings that appear to be abandoned, both Siskind and DeCarava depict them as physical, linear barriers. I would suggest that these illustrate what Kevin Lynch calls an 'edge' or a boundary 'between two phases':

Such edges may be barriers, more or less penetrable, which close one region off from another, or they may be seams, lines along which two regions are related and join together. (Lynch, 1998: 47)

Although related and joined to the rest of New York along the 'seams' of the grid, Harlem seems to have been quarantined, to have become 'a section cut off', after all.

## Chapter Two

### ***Liberty is a practice: Street protest***

The public declaration of the hidden transcript, because it supplies a part of a person's character that had earlier been kept safely out of sight, seems also to restore a sense of self-respect and personhood.

James C. Scott (1990: 210)

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This chapter focuses on photographs of what, in sociological terms, have been called *urban communicative events*. Susan G. Davis, in her consideration of parades and street theatre in Philadelphia in the nineteenth century, offers a useful list of what could then be included within the same 'generic context' as parades:

orations, lectures, sermons, elections, riots, demonstrations, balloon ascensions, commercial promotions, charitable balls, executions and punishments, market days, building dedications, concerts and political meetings. (Davis, 1986: 14)

The (perhaps) surprising inclusion of 'riots' amongst the more formal events itemised here illustrates Davis's inclusive view of street theatre, which she claims people use 'like other rituals, as tools for maintaining, and confronting power relations' (ibid: 5). This interpretation of riots as *political* acts is shared by some commentators on the Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943. In *Or Does It Explode? Black Harlem in the Great Depression*, Cheryl Lynn Greenberg argues that the riots represented 'not a rejection of political activity, but rather extensions of it'

(Greenberg, 1997: 214). So, in its broad sweep, Davis's list is a useful reminder of the varied collective expressions urban communication can take.

The events on Harlem's streets from the late 1910s through to the 1950s and beyond was indeed varied; they included religious meetings and parades, political demonstrations and protest marches, street-corner speakers and Garveyite ceremonies, informal celebrations, block dances and riots. These are all events that are 'both shaped by the field of power relations in which they take place, and are attempts to act on and influence those relations' (Davis, 1986: 6). They take place on the street, space that may appear neutral or even, to the Southern newcomer to Harlem, liberating, but which is always 'structured and contested terrain' (ibid: 13).

'Liberty', Michel Foucault asserts, 'is a *practice*' and 'must be exercised' (Foucault, 1994: 354). By taking to the streets, the people of 'Negro Harlem' redefine the space, sometimes bringing what Davis calls 'new, oppositional meanings into street theatre'. These meanings will often have a direct relevance to the 'practice of freedom' in a literal and historical sense, as in the case of an anti-lynching parade, where African Americans deliberately write this message on their placards *and* on the spatial text of the urban grid.

Implicit in the marching and in the writing of placards is the effort to be visible, an effort of particular importance for African Americans, given their virtual exclusion from 'mainstream' American political and cultural life. Whether the parade is protesting Italian aggression against Ethiopia or showing off the membership of the Black Elks in their full regalia, the purpose is to make identity and feeling and belief visible.

- **Fig. 103 UPI/Elks parade (August 22, 1939)**
- **Fig. 104 UPI/Riot (1943)**

Both of these photographs are credited to UPI, a mainstream press agency, whose photographers were almost certainly white. In one source, the first is captioned *Despite the Depression, black folk in Harlem enjoyed events like this Elks parade on August 22, 1939 (Ebony, 1971)*; the second is captioned *Riot 1943*. The riot itself took place, like the Elks parade, in the month of August, beginning in the early evening of August 1 and continuing through to the early hours of August 2. Between these two events, Langston Hughes published a biography, *The Big Sea*, in 1940, and a year later, with 'photo director' Edward Rosskam, Richard Wright produced *12 Million Black Voices*, the first black contribution to a new genre of books that interwove documentary photographs with text. The following extract comes from Hughes:

Harlem likes spectacles of one kind or another - but then so does all the world. On Sunday afternoons in the spring when the lodges have their turnouts, it is good to stand on the curb and hear the bands play and see the women pass in their white regalia with swinging purple capes, preceded by the brothers in uniform, with long swords at their sides and feathered helmets, or else in high hats, spats and cutaway coats. Once I saw such a body parade with an all-string band leading the procession, violins and mandolins and guitars playing in the street. It was thrilling and the music was grand. (Hughes, 1996: 274)

The second extract comes from Wright:

When the fighting is over we bind our wounds and count our dead, and another day finds us still marching for jobs. Again we say, of the North as of the South, that life for us

is daily warfare and that we live hard like soldiers. We are set apart from the civilian population; our kitchenettes comprise our barracks; the color of our skins constitutes our uniforms; the streets of our cities are our trenches; a job is a pill box to be captured and held... (Wright, 1988: 124)

Hughes's celebration of Harlem street spectacle and Wright's bitter picture of black riots and unemployment marches seem to have as little in common with each other as the two photographs with each other. In fact, one could easily caption the Elks parade with Hughes's text and the riot scene with Wright's, the kind of procedure usually adopted in the photographic essays in *Life* magazine as well as the books produced out of the FSA and WPA enterprises. By deliberately mismatching these 'captions', however, new interpretations may be evoked, connecting the two photographs in unexpected ways.

Wright's military metaphors, for example, originally inspired by riots in Northern cities, seem echoed in the style of representation chosen by the Black Elks, as they march in full uniform, according to a formal hierarchy and bearing aloft the American flag. Hughes's sense of spectacle, which he extends to Harlemites' enthusiasm for night-time funeral parades, and of spectatorship, finds its echo in the crowd that has gathered to watch at the end of the street where the truck burns. The link that Wright makes between economic struggle and actual warfare can trigger a deeper response to the photograph of the Elks' display, to look beyond the easy enjoyment of the spectacle to its political purpose at a time of economic collapse and widespread unemployment. The photograph now begins to look like a picture of men fighting back. On the other hand, there is a certain 'thrill' in the photograph of the burning vehicle, a deliberate and public display of assertive violence that produces its own kind of savage music.

In this light, both events - the Elks parade and the riot - may be seen as territorial claims staked on the streets and as subversive *rewritings* of the urban grid. The fact that the Black Elks *can* march is significant in a culture where whites historically have, on the one hand, discouraged black parading and, on the other, invested considerable importance in these public displays as civic rites of acceptance and assimilation. The riot is a more obvious attempt to occupy and own the street, through deliberate breaking of civil and criminal law. Susan Davis comments that riots, as much as parades, may address questions 'about the nature of power, the sources of legitimacy, and the criteria for belonging' (Davis, 1986: 164).

## **1     *An Army with Banners***

From the early years of the American republic, parades have served both to mark significant dates in the national calendar, notably Independence Day, and also to express civic and, later, ethnic identity and pride. Susan Davis describes how African American abolitionists, excluded from the July the Fourth militias, created their own counter-Independence parades, drawing on their own popular tradition of fife-and-drum marching bands; the liberation of the West Indies from British rule finally provided African Americans with their own 'independence day' on 1st August. These and other parades not only 'demonstrated blacks' unwillingness to acquiesce in their inferior status' but threatened whites 'when the image of a unified black community with moral and political claims on the rest of society was projected into the streets' (Davis, 1986: 46-47).

- **Fig. 105 Schomburg Collection/Harlem Protest March, East St Louis Race Riots [The Silent Parade] (1917)**
- **Fig. 106 NAACP/The 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry ['Hellfighters'] in victory parade up Fifth Avenue (1919)**

No written word can convey to those who did not see it the solemn impressiveness of the whole affair. ... The power of the parade consisted in its being not a mere argument in words, but a demonstration to the sight. ...The impact of this demonstration upon New York City was tremendous. ... More than twelve thousand of us marching along the greatest street in the world, marching solemnly to no other music than the beat of muffled drums bearing aloft our banners on which were inscribed not only what we have suffered in this country, but what we have accomplished for this country, this was a sight as had never before been seen. (Johnson, 1995 [2]: 65)

The first two photographs to consider in detail here, which depict respectively the Silent Parade of 1917 and the 'Hellfighters' victory parade two years later, seem to demonstrate that, despite the very different events that occasioned them, both demonstrations share a common purpose: not just to write African American history onto the fabric of the streets, but to stake a claim for full citizenship through what amounts - in both cases - to a military display; James Weldon Johnson's editorial following the success of the Silent Parade, quoted above, was headed 'An Army with Banners'.

The 'Negro Silent Protest Parade' of 28 July 1917 marks the inception of mass urban protest organised by African Americans in the twentieth century, almost exactly 90 years after they had celebrated the end of slavery in New York with a march through the 'principal streets, under their respective banners, with music' (Ryan, 1997: 91). The trigger for the protest was 'the worst race riot in American history', according to David Levering Lewis (1997: 9). The unleashing of near-hysterical violence against black residents on 2 July 1917 in East St. Louis, Illinois resulted in thirty-nine black and eight white fatalities. Hundreds more African Americans were injured and around 244 homes and other buildings were partly or entirely destroyed. According to Johnson, who was the instigator of the Silent Parade, 'the reaction to the East St. Louis Massacre was widespread' and it led to a Congressional investigation (Johnson, 1990: 319).

The NAACP swiftly took up Johnson's suggestion of a protest parade in order to draw attention to the general situation facing African Americans at a time of national calls to defend democracy. Behind the march, therefore, was a wider organisational agenda: 'While never misrepresenting the nature and extent of mob violence, the NAACP used the phenomenon to mobilize the black community, achieve recognition, add new

members, both black and white, and solicit funds in the fight against lynching and racial injustice.'

The photographer has clearly taken considerable trouble to capture the size and drama of the parade, selecting a vantage-point several feet above the heads of the crowd on the sidewalk, putting the viewer into the position of a privileged onlooker, able to survey the breadth of the march and appreciate its length - the perspective narrows at the top, suggesting that the march goes back even further: an infinite solidarity.

Given contemporary accounts that the only sound made during the march was the beat of muffled drums, it is significant that he includes a drummer apparently at the head of the procession, walking through the bottom of the frame presumably into unoccupied space framed by the wide avenue and the waiting crowds ahead. His blurred drumstick is the one sound made visible; no other musicians are visible, no marching band. The presence of the drummer strengthens the military, even funereal solemnity of the photograph. It seems that all these marchers step to a single drum in an expression of their unity, as if their sorrow and anger (described on the placards they carry) are focused on that wordless, eloquent beat.

The anarchic horrors of mayhem and bloodshed enacted in East St. Louis are commemorated and confronted here by disciplined ranks of men walking with calm dignity down Fifth Avenue in a protest that is neither violent nor chaotic. Sixteen years later, recalling the burning of Ell Persons, James Weldon Johnson wrote that 'the truth flashed over me that in large measure the race question involves the saving of black America's body and white America's soul' (Johnson, 1990: 318). The Silent Parade presented to the white gaze an unbroken black body - unbroken in its evident health and vigour, and, in this photograph, unbroken in its seemingly endless procession of black people.

By including the ground about to be marched over, the photograph(er) emphasises the tide-like motion that will ultimately fill the street, the frame and the eye, presenting a clear threat or visual shock to those who would keep the African American invisible and in their place. James Scott makes a relevant point here when he writes of 'the visual impact of collective power that a vast assembly of subordinates conveys both to its own number and to its adversaries' (Scott, 1990: 65). Judging by those faces that can be made out among the onlookers, this photograph was taken in Harlem itself; we are left to imagine the impact such a demonstration will have once it reaches the white sections of Manhattan. The parade can, in fact, be seen in terms of an 'occupation' of space (another classic style of protest, adopted later by the civil rights movement, was to occupy and thus 'liberate' the actual rooms and buildings of those in power). By 'taking place', as Douglas Tallack has pointed out to me, the parade becomes a kind of 'place in time'. With the strength of numbers now enabled by the growth of black residence in Harlem, and with a growing urban element and influence among the African American political leadership, the Silent Parade is able to represent a new and dramatic intervention in the white grid of power, establishing the 'place' of African Americans in white territory - at least for the duration of the march.

The banner carried by the two men marching behind the drummer editorialises the Parade. It quotes the famous opening to the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence - 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' - but adds the ironic rider: 'If of African descent tear off this...'. By including this message, the photographer provides a caption within the photograph,

anchoring this passing event to an enduring claim for full citizenship.

The photographer also places its central subject - the marchers - into what may be read as a theatrical framework. The angle at which the photograph is taken allows the apartment blocks to form a solid 'set' behind the marchers, while the spectators on the left (amongst whom we are placed as viewers) form the front rows of the audience. The text of the drama is unfurled in the banners and picked up by other 'speeches' to come on the following placards (according to witnesses, these included such dramatic statements as 'We are maligned as lazy and murdered when we work' and 'We have fought for the liberty of white Americans in 6 wars, our reward is East St Louis'.

Two years after the Silent Parade, another march reversed its route, carrying *up* Fifth Avenue the apparent approbation of white America into Harlem.

This was the Victory Parade of the 369th Regiment, dubbed the 'Hellfighters' by their admiring French comrades and returning from a gruelling six months in the trenches. Uniquely among American units, this black regiment had been awarded the Croix de Guerre, and was now to be publicly acknowledged by the City of New York. On the 17<sup>th</sup> February 1919, with their eighteen white officers, these 1,300 black men, led by Col. William Hayward, marched in French army formation out of 34th Street onto Fifth Avenue and up through Manhattan, swinging 'eyes right' at 60<sup>th</sup> Street at the official reviewing stand, and finally 'Home to Harlem', as this picture is captioned. At this point, the parade is passing the New York Public Library (on the marchers' left, but not included in the frame) and the (uncredited) photographer has positioned himself at a window high above the intersection with E42<sup>nd</sup> Street.

This point of view has clear similarities with the previous photograph. The men march diagonally down left across the frame and past the lens. We are again in a privileged position, at the side of the avenue with the masses of other spectators but high above them with a much better view of the extent of the march. The actual individuals on parade are reduced here to blocks of marching men, dwarfed by the frame the photographer has chosen to put around this grand event. The building that fills the top right hand quarter of the photograph and the edge of the buildings on the left, from which flags are being waved, serve to position the parade in the heart of New York and of American patriotism.

The chosen scale, on one hand, reduces the visibility of racial difference between the ranks of (we assume) mainly white spectators and the ranks of black soldiers, while, on the other, heightening the drama of what the viewer knows from the caption to be a black regiment marching up Fifth Avenue like a liberating army. Instead of placards, these Harlemites shoulder rifles, a metaphorical call to arms for blacks to become full citizens of the American republic - and a metaphorical provocation to those forces in white America keen to put African Americans back in their place. The photograph depicts a potential assimilation - among the American flags are fluttering banners reading 'Our Heroes - Welcome Home' - but, like Roland Barthes contemplating Alexander Gardner's photograph of the condemned prisoner, we '*shudder over a catastrophe which has already occurred*' (1993: 96; author's emphasis). We know the season to come is, in Johnson's grim phrase, the 'Red Summer' of 1919, when lynchings of black Americans will reach new peaks and cities like Chicago and Washington will erupt in unprecedentedly vicious racist riots.

W.E.B. Du Bois wrote of this parade: 'This is the country to which we Soldiers of Democracy return. This is the fatherland

for which we fought! But it is *our* fatherland!’ (Lewis, 1995: 5). Not, however, according to the US War Department, which refused to allow the 369th to participate in the Champs Elysees victory parade, or to be depicted in the heroic frieze in France’s Pantheon de la Guerre. The photographs remain, however, of the parade as it marched up through Manhattan, then west on 110<sup>th</sup> Street to Lenox Avenue and home to Harlem, where the band struck up ‘Here Comes My Daddy Now’:

For the final mile or more of our parade, about every fourth soldier had a girl upon his arm – and we marched through Harlem singing and laughing.’

Major Arthur Little (ibid.)

## **2     *Marching Blacks***

The fact that African Americans were generally excluded from full participation in official parades, as they were from most other forms of public expression, turned their marches, however peaceful and apparently non-political, into ipso facto statements of resistance and protest. In adapting the American parade to these uses, African Americans have drawn on other black traditions, notably carnival from the West Indies and on potent religious metaphors favoured by the 'Negro church', such as the exodus from Egypt and the march to the Promised Land.

They also drew on a tradition of street protest and marches from the 1860s onwards. Mary Ryan describes how the parade was transformed into the 'demonstration' or 'protest march' by the labour movement during the following decade:

Working men had found a way to come together even within the compacted and confusing spaces of the city of the industrial city. As the major summary ceremonies of industrial America assumed a more universalizing and transcendent aspect, and because the public calendar was less open than in the past, those excluded from public culture became more aggressive and forceful in their ceremonial offensives. ...They defied the culture of transcendence and unity as they mobilized on two fronts, at once political and cultural, both to proclaim their identity and to make demands on the polity. (Ryan, 1997: 256-257)

These parades and protests were part of a variety of *social movements*, defined by Sidney Tarrow as 'collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities' and, according to Bert Klandermans, characterised by 'individuals sharing

collective goals and a collective identity who engage in disruptive collective action' (Klandermans, 1997: 2). The protest march as 'disruptive collective action' has particular importance in the black struggle for civil rights; its continuance virtually unchanged over so many decades suggests both the slowness of the state to respond to African American demands and the need for black citizens to make their presence felt physically, through the militant display of themselves both as individual bodies and as a body of people, in order to draw attention to racism, an issue barely acknowledged, much less debated in the dominant culture. This may explain why so many of the elements apparent from photographs taken in the 1920s remain constant in later marches, right through to the contemporary period of the Million Man March: the ordered ranks of marchers, often in an agreed hierarchy; the formal dress code; the banners and placards with slogans and statements written or printed on them. The two photographs here were taken decades apart, yet they share a great deal in content and form in what they depict and how they depict it.

- **Fig. 107 James VanDerZee/Protest Parade (1924)**
- **Fig. 108 Schomburg Collection/Pickets outside the African consulate building, Madison Avenue, New York City (1952)**

The first of these photographs was taken by James VanDerZee, in his role as official photographer to Garvey and the UNIA during the 1920s. The placards carried by the marchers provide further captioning text - 'Can Aliens Fight Negroes in Africa?' and 'England Would Do Well To Let Gandhi Go' - which locate the trigger for this demonstration: the imprisonment of Mahatma Gandhi by the British authorities in South Africa for his campaign against racial discrimination. Gandhi's example of peaceful protest - exemplified most famously by his 1930 protest march of 241 miles - was a major inspiration to the civil rights

movement; this may be one of the first African American parades to make a fraternal link with Gandhi's campaign for racial justice.

The second, uncredited photograph was taken in 1952. Captioned 'Pickets outside the African consulate building, Madison Avenue, New York City', the placards provide further written explication: 'We Demand That All Europeans Get Out Of South Africa Now', 'We Demand That All Adults in South Africa Have The Right To Vote', 'We Demand! Africa For The Africans'. This clearly relates the protest to the beginnings of a campaign of civil disobedience led by the African National Congress, following the establishment of apartheid in South Africa four years earlier.

In considering social movements in *The Social Psychology of Protest*, Klandermans explores the relationship between individual and collective beliefs, arguing that individuals not only 'relate to collective beliefs as they relate to their language' but, speaking together, effectively 'mould and renew' that language (Klandermans, 1997: 206). These two photographs, which focus more closely on individual participants - or 'speakers' - than did the earlier photograph of the Silent Parade, may be read as representations of that collective belief or 'language'.

Klandermans believes that 'we will never be able to give an exhaustive account of the collective beliefs of a community, but ... we can document its sedimentation in the form of written materials, articles of faith and the like' (ibid: 207); I believe that photographs can also provide this kind of documentation.

What collective beliefs, then, are 'sedimented' in these two photographs? Both overtly question the right of white power to determine black lives and implicitly make the connection between the abuse of black African and African American rights as citizens. Both photographs reveal a shared belief in the

power of the formal tactics of marching or picketing to disclose facts that may be absent from or misrepresented by other media. Along with other, non-photographable activities (such as legal challenges and data gathering), these public demonstrations are held in the hope of influencing public opinion and mobilising the support of the black community. Behind them, as behind any social movement, is organisation, represented here by the linear formation of marchers, clearly distinguishable from the relatively unstructured patterns of casual strollers.

Identifying the foreign event or campaign that has acted as the immediate trigger for these two demonstrations is only one stage in determining the wider cultural meaning of these photographs. The fact that people have come together to march under these placards suggests the presence of organisation, a suggestion literally confirmed in writing in the 1952 photograph, where the acronym U.A.N.M. is appended to the placard slogans; the nearest placard even identifies Lenox Avenue as (we presume) the local branch organising the parade. Organisation is vital to social movements, and specific organisations play a key role in generating behavioural support and ultimately participation in the movement. The demonstration by these protesters and the photographs made of it are aimed at winning support - 'consensus mobilization' in Klandermans' terms - and are themselves living evidence of 'action mobilisation': people taking collective action and thereby becoming visible.

Since the latter half of the nineteenth century, social movements have used protest marches and, with increasing sophistication, photographs of such events to make collective beliefs, grievances and identity visible to the onlooker. In these two photographs, as in that of the Silent Parade, we can discern a response to a kind of social breakdown (attacking the lack of racial equity), a rational attempt to advance collective interests (marching in

good order), and a search for a new collective identity (making themselves visible). The photographer, too, may participate in this collective action, interpreting and re-presenting it through the lens. Like the protest march itself, the photograph may challenge the assumed neutrality of the observer, even inviting participation. While the militant masses parading up and down Fifth Avenue are distanced from us, turned into spectacle, these other protest photographs bring us virtually into the ranks of the marchers.

VanDerZee seems to have positioned himself or at least his camera at or below eye-level with the protesters - one of the leading participants looks into the lens and our eyes in acknowledgement of our presence. We have become rather more than spectators: while the crowds opposite maintain their position up to the edge of the sidewalk, we seem to have stepped out into the road into the path of the parade. This effect is more marked in the 1952 photograph, where we seem to join the end of the parading pickets, as they walk in front of us along the sidewalk. The female protester on the right-hand side of the photograph seems close enough to touch; her scarf recalls both the headgear of the Black Cross nurses in VanDerZee's photographs and that worn traditionally in Africa. She is the *punctum* of the photograph; through the blur she makes as she moves, she introduces a moment of active participation.

### 3 Two traditions of protest

- **Fig. 109 M & M Smith: Adam Clayton Powell Jr. leading a strike against McCrory's on 125<sup>th</sup> Street (c. 1940s)**
- **Fig. 110 European Picture Service/UNIA parade (c. early 1920s)**
- **Fig. 111 James VanDerZee/Marcus Garvey and other UNIA officials reviewing a parade (1924)**

Although most of the photographs considered so far show black people using street theatre as a way of confronting power relations, such performances, as Susan Davis points out, are 'shaped by the field of power relations' as much 'attempts to act on and influence those relations' (Davis, 1986: 6). In the two photographs compared here, we can discern two approaches to such attempts that indicate the differences between what have become two traditions of African American protest, both certainly shaped by the fact of white power and supremacy but also, I would argue, by different social and cultural relations and traditions *within* the black community, continuities that run through the fluctuating objective economic and social conditions in Harlem from the 1910s to the 1950s and beyond.

The first photograph to consider here depicts one of the most famous and most photographed black leaders, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr, who succeeded his father as minister of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in 1938 and who, like his father, saw little contradiction between religious and political activism. The photograph was taken by M & M Smith in the early 1940s and shows Powell leading a strike against McCrory's on 125<sup>th</sup> Street. Powell developed his large black following through staging street protests of this kind, many of them aimed at breaking down the refusal of white-owned stores to employ black workers.

Although some activists, notably supporters of Communist Party 'Popular Front' policies, felt that they were a distraction from

broader attempts to recruit black workers to the union movement, 'Don't Buy Where You Can't Work' and other such campaigns were in many cases successful in getting African Americans hired. In the case of Blumstein's, a landmark department store on 125<sup>th</sup> Street, in 1934, Powell claimed that blacks from Striver's Row and Sugar Hill 'marched side by side with Valley Negroes and Lenox Avenue zealots' and 'turned the six-story department store into a tomb' (Powell, 1945: 80). In July that year, 34 black sales staff were taken on. This photograph, organised, as Powell's sign indicates, by the Harlem Labor Union, shows how such protests were then extended in the early 1940s to agitating for better pay and conditions.

The success of all such campaigns, I would imagine, must be derived in large part from the fact that these protests were, unlike the traditional tactic of the boycott, highly visible and thus highly provocative to white power-holders. In putting black bodies on the line (foreshadowing the lunch-counter sit-ins at the beginning of the modern Civil Rights movement), they enacted their demands in person in public space and for public dissemination: this photograph was probably taken for *The People's Voice*, Powell's own newspaper. As such, the picture is undoubtedly effective in its probable intention as a record of protest, but details within the photograph point out to a particular protest tradition that may be contrasted with that depicted in another newspaper photograph taken of a UNIA parade.

The first details lie in the written texts carried by the pickets and pasted onto the store window. On the left, a woman carries a placard declaring that 'The Employees of this Store are on Strike'. In the windows, McCrory's signed riposte announces that, on the contrary, 'Employees in this Store are *Not* on Strike'. Powell's own placard, in the middle of the photograph, seems to mediate between these two with its own statement that 'The

*Regular Employees are Out on Strike'* (both my emphasis). This sets up in the picture a dialogue or argument between protesters and employers. Despite the transfixed figure of the (probably) white woman hesitating on the sidewalk and seemingly oblivious to the demonstration to her right, there is an evident relationship, however difficult it might be, between the visible black pickets and the invisible white employers. The photograph speaks of negotiation, a tone confirmed in the words 'an appeal' on Powell's placard; although in this case the appeal is directed at potential black customers to dissuade them from patronising the store – to stay 'out' with the striking employees – it is also the language of a petition, rather like those carried aloft during the Silent Parade, and it does indeed convey the message of the picket and the photograph itself, which is an appeal to the employers for fairness in their dealings with African Americans.

The smart dress and deportment of the protesters, at least some of whom must be the striking employees themselves, are - like the deliberately formal appearance of the 1917 marchers – also indicative of conformity to American norms, serving to strengthen the impression they hope to create among white observers of their status as responsible citizens with legitimate grievances.

The formality of dress evident in the uncredited photograph of a parade by the UNIA in the early 1920s serves a very different function. Such parades were described by one participant as 'a spectacle which truly reveals the ancient glory of Ethiopia'; although undated, this may be a picture of the famous parade that followed the UNIA convention in 1920, when 50,000 Garveyites marched through the streets. Marcus Garvey's African nationalist movement drew its support, in a sense, from these streets rather than from, say, the book-filled offices of W.E.B. Du Bois. As Robert A. Hill and others have pointed out, the streets were turned into a brilliant kind of political theatre by

Garvey's carnivalesque parody of regal white authority (Hill, 1994: 181-186 *passim*).

In this picture, a smartly turned out member of the African Rifle Corps, few of whom, according to David Levering Lewis, could even fire a weapon, awaits the march past of the Black Cross nurses; the professional capabilities of these 'photonegative nuns' are again witheringly dismissed (Lewis, 1997: 40). Other cohorts of marchers along with vehicles stretch up the avenue in a formal line, revealing a military nature to this demonstration that is confirmed by numerous photographs of uniformed members at drill and on parade by VanDerZee.

A clear depiction of UNIA pageantry can be found in VanDerZee's photograph, where Marcus Garvey and other UNIA officials are reviewing a parade. Here, the uniforms are all on the reviewing stand, while the parade features ordinary followers in civilian dress carrying supportive placards. Through its evocation of deep perspective, the first photograph makes the marchers the overwhelming focus, as they parade in a seemingly infinite (and constantly moving) line out of the distance before turning past. Behind and above the sidewalk spectators, we are placed on our own reviewing stand. In the second photograph, VanDerZee focuses his lens not on the nearer figures of ordinary folk, but on the row of UNIA leaders, some dressed – like Garvey, placed appropriately in the centre of the photograph - in resplendent ceremonial uniforms, and others in quasi-academic garb.

The parade moves along but we remain on the spot, with a proscenium-arch view of the pomp and circumstance of the UNIA, which has turned the Harlem sidewalk into a platform for a theatrical tableau of *national* political and cultural self-assertion (Willis-Braithwaite and Birt, 1993: 24). Instead of appealing to (white) authority, in these events and photographs the UNIA *performs* authority. Whether or not this is, as Robert A. Hill

argues, a deliberate 'burlesque of power' connecting 'the black tradition of satire and signifying with the quest for respectability' or, as one critic claims, a 'racialised rhetoric' that 'embraced the trappings of empire' (Gaines, 1996: 240), these (re)presentations reveal a desire to establish a counter-authority to white supremacy. It is no coincidence that both Elijah Muhammad, the founder of the Nation of Islam, and the father of its most famous member, Malcolm X, took part in these militant Africanist displays, as the desire for separate development, whether economic as expressed in Booker T. Washington's credo or political as in the Muslims' demand for a separate black state or racial as in Garvey's cry of 'back to Africa', forms an alternative protest tradition to that being played out by Powell on 125<sup>th</sup> Street.

Apart from the West Indian influence on the performative activities of the UNIA, principally, the carnival and the political tradition of the 'man of words', the adroit and spectacular use of the street, as evident in these photographs (particularly the sight of uniformed and armed black men, evoking the Hellfighters and other returned black soldiers betrayed by the Red Summer), helped to create the first mass black organisation. While the middle-class black leadership made their civilised appeals principally to white conscience on behalf of the black masses, a tactic scathingly dismissed by Garvey as the old strategy of 'petitioning the masters', the UNIA tapped into the anger and frustration of ordinary folk through splendidly affirming ritual and militant racial nationalism.

- **Fig. 112 Underwood & Underwood/Klu Klux Klan marching in Washington (1926)**
- **Fig. 113 Schomburg Collection/'The New Negro Has No Fear' (c. early 1920s)**

- **Fig. 114 Underwood & Underwood - Abyssinian Baptist Church parade (1924)**

Street theatre can, of course, be used as a way of *maintaining* power relations as well as confronting it (Davis, 1986: 5), as this photograph, taken in 1926, of Ku Klux Klan marchers suggests. Like the first picture of the UNIA above, this photograph makes full use of perspective, again achieving a sense of an endless flood of people moving down and across our vision. In this case, they seem to emerge ultimately from the Capitol, which is where the lines of perspective meet, as if this fount of government were producing a stream of flag-waving white patriots. Looking now, with this powerful visual rhetoric in mind, at the uncredited image of a Harlem parade in the early 1920s, again shot at a turning point in the procession, the placard held up by occupants of the second automobile is revealed in all its temerity: 'The New Negro Has No Fear'. This is also, then, a turning point historically, when black people have become visible *en masse*, the avenues and streets of the American city boldly inscribed with a new confidence evident as much on the enthusiastically packed sidewalks as in the ritual display of motorcades and marching.

Two years before photographing the KKK parade, the same photographic agency, Underwood & Underwood, took this picture of a parade by members of the Abyssinian Baptist Church. Here, those who march literally write history onto the street, by carrying written and pictorial texts of a pantheon of 'saviours'. Led by Christ 'Our Savior' and then the Madonna, a band of freedom fighters follows: Antonio Maceo, 'The Liberator of Cuba'; Frederick Douglass, 'Emancipator of the American Negro'; and Booker T. Washington. The link between the African American church and the hope for political liberation could not be spelt out more clearly: the march provides subtitles to a visual catechism of black heroes.

#### 4 The war cry and picket sign

- Fig. 115 Culver Pictures, Inc./March on Washington Movement (1942)
- Fig. 116 M & M Smith/Anti-lynching bill demonstration (c. 1940s)

In *Marching Blacks*, his 'interpretive history of the rise of the Black Common Man', published in New York in 1945, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. wrote: 'The new Negro had arrived, but he had his war cry and the picket sign was his ammunition' (Powell, 1945: 57). These by now familiar military metaphors for the struggle for civil rights serve as an intriguing notional caption to these two photographs from the 1940s. The first photograph is reproduced in *Harlem on My Mind*, credited to Culver Pictures, Inc., and captioned 'March on Washington Movement, 1942'. The second photograph was taken by the Smith brothers and reproduced in *Harlem: The Vision of Morgan and Marvin Smith* with the caption 'Anti-lynching bill demonstration, 1940s'.

The picket signs in photographs considered earlier played a captioning role; in the first picture here, they have become the main content of the photograph, dwarfing and obscuring the people holding them up. Gone are the varied emotional appeals of the Silent Parade ('Mother, Do Lynchers Go To Heaven', 'Give Me A Chance To Live') to be replaced by a forest of succinct demands: for the abolition of the poll tax system; the enforcement of the Fifth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments; an end to racial discrimination in industry ('No Color Line On The Assembly Line'), and a halt to 'lawless lynchings'. One at the back seems to sum them up: '13,000,000 Negroes Demand Equality'. In the foreground is what appears to be a campaign truck, fitted with a loudspeaker, with posters pasted onto its side; close inspection reveals that these commemorate the Silent Parade.

What this photograph depicts and contributes to is a burgeoning campaign for black rights. The demands have grown and multiplied, and organisation has developed. The March on Washington Movement was initiated by A. Philip Randolph, but its immediate and widespread appeal to large numbers of African American citizens soon persuaded the NAACP and other organisations to put their weight behind it. The machine behind the protest has become more sophisticated; the highlighting of the Silent Parade suggests that the construction of an African American tradition of protest is well underway.

The content of the second photograph also establishes a thematic link with the earlier protest. The Anti-Lynching Bill proposed in 1918 by Congressman Dyer of Missouri following the East St. Louis Riot formed the basis of every subsequent attempt to end the practice through Congress, right up to the campaign featured here. Instead of massed ranks of protesters, however, this photograph represents the campaign through a mere three figures outside a movie theatre. A black man holds the placard aloft, with its practical advice to 'Wire or write Senators Wagner and Barkley, Washington DC Pass Anti-Lynch Bill Before Senate Adjourns', while a black woman hands out leaflets. Marching off left is a white woman, the only passer-by included in the shot. The three figures occupy only the bottom third of the photograph; the rest is taken up with a mixture of graphics: the placard held by the campaigner on the right, another placard fixed at the same height to a film poster display, whose own text and imagery is only partly obscured. The photographer seems to have carefully selected these human and graphic elements to create a dynamic and complex satire.

The supporters of anti-lynching legislation would often take advantage of public occasions, such as movie premieres, to demonstrate - this, it is suggested, is what is happening in this

photograph. The appeal comes straight from the man with the placard; his serious look is directed at the camera and thus at us - those he would persuade. His female companion is smilingly offering leaflets to the unseen pedestrians passing by. Our attention is then drawn to the only figure moving - she is a little blurred. Fortuitously or not, Smith has captured this white American matron on her way past the protest and placed her under a placard reading: 'It Only Happens in the USA - Stop Lynching - Shame of America'.

The photographer has also deliberately included graphic information about the movie itself, which is called - aptly enough - *They Won't Forget*. Three decades have passed since the NAACP was formed in the wake of the Springfield, Ohio riot, and made anti-lynching its prime campaign; from numerous attempts to get a bill through Congress and numerous demonstrations from the Silent Parade onwards, it is clear that it and the African American community has not 'forgotten'. Apart from the stars' portraits, we can also see a clenched fist and the words 'knock' and 'heart'. While a closer look at the smaller print reveals that this is a typical Forties melodrama, the immediate impact of the poster is to reinforce the impact of the campaign 'literature': the 'knocking on the heart', in the way that the Silent Parade aimed to appeal to white consciences, and the black fist raised as if in a gesture of solidarity, foreshadowing the Black Power salutes of the late 1960s.

- **Fig. 117 Schomburg Collection/NAACP Banner in New York City (1920s)**
- **Fig. 118 M & M Smith/Fredi Washington wearing an anti-lynching armband (c. 1938)**

According to Robert Zangrando, the anti-lynching campaign was the 'number-one priority of the [NAACP]'s public programs and the issue best conceived to redirect white America's perceptions

of interracial realities' (Zangrando, 1980: 33) The use of graphics in these campaigns, exemplified in the Smiths' photograph discussed above, is further displayed in these two photographs. The first, taken in the 1920s, is evidence of the NAACP's practice of hanging a flag hung outside their Fifth Avenue offices when a lynching occurred. The second photograph, by M & M Smith shows 'Freda' Washington wearing an anti-lynching armband in around 1938. Most widely known for her role in the film *Imitation of Life*, as a black woman who passes, Fredericka Carolyn Washington appeared at the age of 19 in the chorus line of *Shuffle Along*; she later co-founded the Negro Actors Guild, serving as its first executive secretary.

Both photographs have been made in order to create powerful visual statements. In the first, the news of a lynching, a barbaric holdover from Southern racism, flutters like a tabloid headline above the light-filled avenues of New York, a city synonymous with civilised modernity. The elegant beauty and clear intelligence of Washington's face is caught in reflective mood, as she bears the image of a lynched black body, whose skin, however dark, she shares and with whose outraged flesh she identifies her own.

## 5 A sense of solidarity

- **Fig. 119 M & M Smith/Adam Clayton Powell Jr. leading a rent strike (n.d.)**
- **Fig. 120 Willard Smith/Relief pickets on 124<sup>th</sup> Street (1949)**

In his analysis of the 'culture of poverty', Oscar Lewis dissects the psychological pathology of poverty, arguing that, while economic gains might help, an organising movement that 'gives hope' and 'effectively promotes a sense of solidarity with large groups' can be even more effective. He cites civil rights campaigns as ways in which people can gain greater self-respect and confidence (in LeGates, 1996: 223).

The two photographs selected here record moments and representations from two different campaigns of this kind. In different ways they exhibit a sense of organization, ever more sophisticated in its staging of protest, and both evoke a certain hopeful warmth. The first photograph, taken by M & M Smith, is of Adam Clayton Powell and Dr A. Freeman leading a rent strike. In step between the two men is, we must assume, a tenant already persuaded of the importance of organisation. This trio represents a truncated but still effective version of other, more crowded street protests. In walking at either side of the elderly and modestly dressed woman, the smartly besuited men both frame and protect the token figure of the people they seek to defend. Although attracting some mild attention from passers-by, two details suggest that this photograph has been specifically staged for the camera rather than for people on the street.

First, there is the striking symmetry of the two men, their firmly clenched pipes mirroring each other's, both sets of eyes firmly ignoring the camera as they march forward, while the woman looks over at the photographer – as, indeed, do two of the

bystanders. This seems to be a bit of humorous playacting – Roi Ottley commented that the 'Jobs-for-Negroes movement is a profoundly serious business to Negroes, but Powell always has an immense time' (Ottley, 1948: 178). The men seem to be represented by their two-dimensional placards, while the tenant presents her own, three-dimensional body as a physical sign of the exploited tenantry. The second detail is the awning under which they have just walked and which offers a suggestive caption - Lincoln Court – which may or may not be the building targeted by this protest. In any case, it suggests that this is a judgement call on what local black people can expect from American democracy.

The second photograph was taken by Willard Smith in 1949 on or around June 19, when singer and civil rights activist Paul Robeson was due to speak at a 'welcome home' rally to at the Rockland Palace. Exactly two months earlier, Robeson had told the World Peace Conference in Paris that it was 'unthinkable' to expect African Americans to fight in Korea against the Soviet Union, comparing its full recognition of blacks' dignity to the oppression of blacks at home. A year after this rally, Robeson's passport was seized and he was banned from performance for most of the 1950s. This photograph's caption identifies these women as 'relief pickets on 124<sup>th</sup> Street'; while three of them are carrying printed placards, which encourage attendance at the rally, another woman turns to show a different notice to the camera. This urges readers to 'Fight for a Decent City Administration'. The board affixed to the wall identifies the building, behind which they are regrouping, as a welfare centre, raising the possibility that the pickets are linking specific local demands for better services with the return of a celebrity campaigner, who, since the end of the war, has intensified his political activities and joined many such pickets himself, across the country.

The photograph thus represents the backstage machinery of organised protest, showing not only the links between local activism and the larger, worldwide protest movement represented by Robeson, but the political mobilisation of ordinary folk – notably, in this instance, women, who have confidently taken up their new roles in the struggle.

## 6 The political voice

- **Fig. 121 M & M Smith/A street-corner orator, 125<sup>th</sup> Street, (c. 1938)**
- **Fig. 122 Roy DeCarava/Woman speaking, street corner (1950)**
- **Fig. 123 Austin Hansen/Rev. Adam Clayton Powell campaigning to return to Congress (c.1946)**

From a step-ladder platform on Lenox Avenue, an area where people were suffering most acutely the pangs of the Depression, he harangued crowds with some truth and much steam about the millions of dollars Negroes poured into the coffers of white retail merchants. ... Dramatically, he would point to the doorways of the stores, and in his deep, rumbling voice, cry, "Share the jobs!" Roi Ottley (1948: 92)

Like many such photographs, this picture by M & M Smith of a street-corner orator on 125<sup>th</sup> Street in around 1938 was taken after dark. This was when speakers would spin their political spiel for the benefit of the unemployed and of those on their weary walk home from work downtown. The tradition began in the 1910s around 135<sup>th</sup> Street, where many of Harlem's political and community organisations were based, mainly on the corners on Lenox and Seventh Avenues between 134<sup>th</sup> and 137<sup>th</sup> Streets. According to Roma Barnes, socialist Hubert Harrison was the founder of secular speaking in Harlem; from the Virgin Islands, he helped to popularise what was a West Indian tradition of the 'man of words' (in Mulvey and Simons, 1990). The heyday of speakers' popularity was reached during the Depression years, the 1930s and early 1940s, but the practice continued into the 1960s.

The street corner was where many future black leaders trained their political voice, from Marcus Garvey (whose first speech in Harlem was made from a stepladder in 1916) to Malcolm X. As those two names might suggest, black nationalism and race pride was a common thread in the discourse of such speakers, who provided a very different political message to the Progressivist notions of those leading the NAACP. That message was that they, as the open-handed stance of this speaker suggests, had a direct relationship to the ordinary African American on the street and could voice their demands for jobs and justice. Most were radical conservatives, rejecting the more genteel paths to acceptance by white Americans in favour of Booker T Washington's gospel of self-help and the dream of a self-sufficient black community.

This photograph brilliantly typifies the street-corner speaker and their context. The photographer represents the speaker in full persuasive flood, engaging his crowd with his eyes and his oratory. Unlike the complexity of mainstream political activity, to which after all none of those present has access (it will be three years before Powell is elected to the city council), the structure beneath this man is clear enough: a simple wooden stepladder to raise him to pulpit height, an improvisation like his makeshift speechifying. In fact, the chalked board by his side may suggest a little more sophistication; a rough timetabling of speakers was agreed on in order to stop the squabbles over pitches common earlier in the decade.

Although the crowd that has gathered this warm evening to hear the speaker out is almost entirely male, suggesting perhaps the gendered bias of this tradition (indeed, of political speaking in general), the apparent connection between him and the sole woman in the centre of the photograph seems, at least in terms of composition, to be the vital one. She, like the speaker, exists in her own independent space, unlike most of the men; although

the speaker seems to address the back of the crowd our sense of these people considering the arguments comes largely through her pose of close attention. The photograph therefore reminds us that talk of the 'masses', popular at this political moment, may conceal the individual decision-making that could lead ultimately to activism. This is potentially an intensely political moment.

When Invisible Man emerges into Harlem from the subway for the first time, he almost immediately encounters a street-corner speaker:

Before me, a gathering of people were almost blocking the walk, while above them a short squat man shouted angrily from a ladder to which were attached a small collection of American flags.

'We gine chase 'em out,' the man cried. 'Out!'

'Tell 'em about it, Ras, mahn,' a voice called.

And I saw the squat man shake his fist angrily over the uplifted faces, yelling something in a staccato West Indian accent, at which the crowd yelled threateningly. It was as though a riot would break out any minutes, against whom I didn't know. (Ellison, 1965: 132)

'Ras the Destroyer', who arrives in the final apocalyptic moments of that riot, at the end of Ellison's novel, thirsting to string the protagonist up, is probably based in part on the colourful figure of Sufi Abdul Hamid, a supporter of store picketing in the early 1930s and described by Roi Ottley as 'resplendently dressed in turban green velvet blouse, Sam Browne belt, riding habit, patent leather boots, and wearing a black, crimson-lined cape carelessly around his shoulders' (Ottley, 1948: 91-2). The figure

here, photographed over a decade before *Invisible Man* was published, is rather more typical of such speakers, but there is a legend painted onto the side of the stepladder strange enough to give one pause: it seems to read 'Ras D. Killer'.

The idea of the stepladder as a kind of pulpit and, by extension, of the speaker as a kind of preacher is taken a step further in the photograph of a woman speaking on a street corner by Roy DeCarava. Shot in 1950, again after dark, this moment of oratory is pictured from an entirely different viewpoint; DeCarava is almost on a level with the speaker, and aims his camera from behind. His focus, however, photographically as well as in terms of subject matter, is on the performer – her shoulders and arms back, her mouth open as if in song, she resembles other portraits by this photographer, like that of Mahalia Jackson, singing in 1957. Speechmaking and preaching come down, it seems, to singing a kind of gospel. The putative crowd around her are almost entirely out of focus – the performance, not the argument is now the point, but the carrying voice remains.

Even in the more conventional political process, set in train when Adam Clayton Powell Jr was elected to the city council and then to Congress, the street corner exerts its pull. This photograph was taken by Austin Hansen in around 1946, when Powell was standing for re-election. Once again, this charismatic leader is on the streets, this time at night and not with a placard but a microphone and a loudspeaker to make his voice heard to this mass of potential electors.

The public space here is apparently on the corner of 125<sup>th</sup> Street and Seventh Avenue but only the presence of the cabs, slowly nosing their way forward through the crowds, indicates that there is a road here at all; Powell's vast audience extends over the median and to the other side of the avenue and out of frame.

Standing on a raised platform and marked out by his dark suit in a sea of white shirts, his figure acts like a magnet across the field of gazes, as if drawing them to him like so many iron filings across the flat surface of the photograph. It is a power that draws on and expends the energy of the street corner speaker, feeding ultimately into the rhetoric of the auditorium and the larger halls of state.

## 7 The promised land

- **Fig. 124 James VanDerZee/UNIA assembly, Liberty Hall (1926)**
- **Fig. 125 New York *Daily News* Photo/Greeting Father Divine (1938)**
- **Fig. 126 Carl Van Vechten/ Father Divine parade (April 21 1935)**

The first UNIA conference was held in August 1920 at Liberty Hall, the organisation's main venue. According to journalist Roi Ottley it was 'a monster affair, almost approaching medieval splendor in regalia of lush colors'. The parade that followed included Marcus Garvey in a Packard wearing a plumed hat, 'the Black Nobility and Knight Commanders of the Distinguished Order of the Nile', officers and men of the African Legion '[a]rrayed in gorgeous uniforms of black and green, trimmed with much gold braid', Black Cross nurses and, finally, 'kilt-clad Boy and Girl Scouts' (Ottley, 1948: 60).

The regalia survived some while after the arraignment, imprisonment and, ultimately, deportation of Garvey on fraud charges in 1927. In the photograph of a UNIA assembly held in 1926 shows it already leaderless, Garvey's uniform ceremonially draped over his seat. The entire hall of his followers stares towards the photographer, as if waiting for a command. A band of white figures – Black Cross nurses – occupy the middle distance; behind them the men of the African Legion; on the dais, flanking and behind the leader's chair, are the dignitaries and leading officials – the 'Black Nobility' - of the UNIA. No one is moving.

Such social and political movements have their roots in what Paul Gilroy calls 'a radical sense of powerlessness'. This explains their tendency to utopian elements – the return to a fantasy

Africa, in this case – and their dependence on the only political strategy open to them: grassroots activism (Gilroy, 1991: 329). The rhetoric and pomp of the UNIA and its cult-like apparatus serves, however, to transform despair among ordinary Harlemites, born of social, political and economic oppressions, into a kind of hope through organisation and ritual. That lends a particular poignancy to this picture which is, in an important sense, a portrait of an empty chair, a foreshadowing of other lost black leaders through the twentieth century.

As the Depression bit deep, other leaders emerged who also seemed to win crowds of followers with a combination of millenarian dreams and entrepreneurialism, often couched in theatricality and the cult of celebrity. The *Daily News* photograph of a crowd greeting Father Divine in 1938 shows a stocky figure in a loose-fitting suit reaching down to grasp of few of the scores of open hands reaching out and waving at him. Six years earlier, the *New York Age* had written of Father Divine's appearance in front of thousands of followers at the Rockland Palace Ballroom: 'At this moment, the entire world needs a savior. And Harlem is no exception' (Anderson, 1982: 252).

Before his work in Harlem was also set back by a lawsuit, Father Divine had set up a wide range of businesses there, from groceries to lodging houses, as well as his 'Peace Mission' which offered, amongst other things, 15c dinners for hungry Harlemites. He had also established a remarkable cult: women known as Father Divine's 'angels', often clad in white. One day in April 1935, white photographer Carl Van Vechten took a series of pictures of one of these parades. In the example selected here, the parading women wear white hats, jackets and sashes, wave pennants and carry placards, many of them home-made. These signs boldly assert the divinity of Father Divine - 'Father Divine is God Almighty' – but many also reveal that what inspires these women is the possibility that social and political wrongs will

be put right through their faith in this leader. One reads: 'Peace. When the world recognises Father Divine as God there will be no more wars or worry. I thank you Father.' Another reads: 'There shall be a righteous government.' The interwoven religious and political hopes and desires evident at these grassroots gatherings are the speaking of a hidden transcript; their voices merge into the civil rights demonstrations that are to come, fired by the complex notion of the Promised Land.

## 8      **Owning Harlem**

- **Fig. 127 Weegee/Easter Sunday in Harlem (April 26, 1943)**
- **Figs. 128-133 Weegee/Six photographs [from 'Harlem', *Naked City*] (1943)**
- **Fig. 134 Roy DeCarava/Two women, mannequin's hand (1950 )**

I truly had not realised that Harlem had so many stores until I saw them all smashed open; the first time wealth ever entered my mind in relation to Harlem was when I saw it scattered in the street. But one's first incongruous impression of plenty was countered immediately by an impression of waste. None of this was doing anybody any good. It would have been better to have left the plate glass as it had been and the goods lying in the stores.

It would have been better, but it would also have been intolerable, for Harlem had needed something to smash. To smash something is the ghetto's chronic need.

James Baldwin, 'Notes of a Native Son' (Baldwin, 1995: 106-7)

The Harlem riot of 1943 was not unprecedented. On March 19, 1935, false rumours of the death of a young Puerto Rican boy caught trying to steal a 10c penknife from Kress's five and dime store on 125<sup>th</sup> Street led to the first ever riot actually started by African Americans. The smashing of Kress's window with a rock spread into a general attack on businesses along 125<sup>th</sup> Street from Fifth to Eighth Avenue. By the end of the night, 626 windows had been broken, 75 arrests had been made and over 60 people, including seven policemen, were injured. Writing about the riot for *The Nation*, Claude McKay concluded his analysis of its causes thus: 'On Tuesday the crowds went crazy

like the remnants of a defeated, abandoned, and hungry army. Their rioting was the gesture of despair of a bewildered, baffled, and disillusioned people' (in Lewis, 1995: 193).

Cheryl Lynn Greenberg draws the same conclusions to both the 1935 and 1943 riots, both triggered by the false reports of a police killing and both explosions of pent-up anger about fundamental inequities directed, not at white persons, but at white property. What was remarkable, according to Ottley, was the way in which looters targeted only white-owned stores: 'the discrimination was almost studied' (Ottley, 1948: 119).

Geoff King remarks that the riot in Los Angeles in 1992, following the acquittal of the white policemen responsible for beating Rodney King, exposed the city's 'repressive grid' (King, 1996: 11). Baldwin's observation that the 1943 rioters did not cross 'the ghetto lines' to 'wreak havoc in white neighbourhoods' but vented their fury on their own – but not *owned* – territory suggests that the Harlem riots also served to expose the repressive grid containing and stifling black aspirations. Baldwin's conclusion that the mob was 'mainly interested in something more potent and real than the white face, that is, in white power' (Baldwin, 1995: 106) is reflected in Greenberg's argument that the riots represented 'not a rejection of political activity, but rather extensions of it' (Greenberg, 1991: 214). The smashing and looting of white-owned stores along 125<sup>th</sup> Street was no less a political act than the organisation of pickets outside their doors.

Scott notes that the scale and intensity of resistance to domination will depend partly on how far the subjugated are hopeful of one day becoming, if not dominant, then accepted into the dominant group (Scott: 82). The frequent use of the dominant language by black leaders, including their acceptance of race as a fundamental organising concept, indicates that the

'hegemony' of American democratic institutions over African Americans has been largely successful. The so-called 'petition the masters' strategy that many black leaders pursued in their writings and that many black people demonstrated in parades and strikes is a symptom of this 'patience'. The corollary to this, Scott asserts, is that when this faith is betrayed the inevitable result is an outpouring of anger (ibid: 107).

That this anger was not simply about the economic consequences of white supremacy but about wider political and civil rights issues was clear enough to Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, who commented of the 1943 riot, ignited on August 1 by the wounding of a black soldier on leave by a white police officer, that: '[t]he Harlem mob... could not reach the Arkansas cop who fired a full magazine of his revolver into the prone body of a Negro sergeant, or any other others, so it tore up Harlem' (Brandt, 1996: 188). Although it followed the same pattern, this second riot was much more serious than the first, leaving six blacks dead and nearly 700 injured; 32 fires were set amid the devastated stores.

One photographer present at this dramatic scene was Weegee. A year earlier, on at least his second visit to Harlem on Easter Sunday, he took a photograph that contains a clear clue to the coming eruption. Caught in the characteristic full glare of Weegee's flashgun – he worked mostly at night – two women stride out in their finery, one grinning happily at the photographer. In the background a more serious figure stands against the wall, studiously ignoring or perhaps oblivious of the women and the photographer. He creates a static counterpoint to the hopeful setting forth of the two women. Fixed to the same background is a notice of an Easter sermon to be preached that evening, which sits like a caption within the frame: 'The Rev. Ethelred Brown will speak on An Easter Dream: The birth of a new Harlem. No more exploitation. No more mugging. No

more POLICE BRUTALITY.' Consciously or not, Weegee has created a dramatic contrast between the garishly lit glamour of the women intent on their night out and the shadowed figure who looks off into space, as if pondering a problem.

In the 'Harlem' section of his most well known book, *Naked City*, published two years after the riot, Weegee included five photographs of the night-time riot that summer and captioned them himself. The first, a confused crowd scene, its volatility signalled by the blurred young boy running across the frame ('Here is the actual birth of a riot in Harlem...') is set opposite a picture of a group of baton-wielding police officers in the process of jumping down from a 'sanitation' truck ('The cops arrive... to clean up...'). The second double-spread shows the kind of damage done to the stores; the photograph on the right depicts a cross-section of the inside and outside of the street. While the right-hand third of the photograph depicts a woman shopper walking towards the camera along the row of shops, a picture of normality, the rest of the frame is filled with a denuded shop window, decorated simply by a rather enigmatic notice pinned up, reminding people that: 'This was a dress store - remember?' Overleaf, the final picture of the riot was apparently taken at its height, and shows a black man being 'hustled into a police station' by white officers. This is balanced opposite by a picture of a smiling black couple dancing 'at a Saturday night masquerade at the Savoy'; it is hard, however, not to suspect Weegee of some irony in choosing to photograph, and then to place opposite the picture of an arrest, a couple where the male dancer is dressed up in prison stripes.

The flower of "America's pure white womanhood, is saved from a fate worse than ... Death."

In the third photograph, Weegee provides this humorous caption to what might be considered a classic visual trope for black riot:

the sight of white female mannequins, toppled and broken; store dummies stripped of their clothes and hats, spilling out over the floor and into the street. From the UPI press photographs of the 1935 and 1943 riots to Joe Flowers' photograph of the Watts riot in 1965 (Willis, 2000: 146), these pictures provide a haunting image, not so much of destruction as of violent death by proxy.

Ahead of me the body hung, white, naked, and horribly feminine from a lamp-post. ... I whirled, still moving by reflex, back-tracking and stopped and now there was another and another, seven – all hanging before a gutted store-front. ... I steadied long enough to notice the unnatural stiffness of those hanging above me. They were mannequins .... Hairless, bald and sterilely feminine. ... But are they unreal, I thought; *are* they? What if one, even *one* is real...? (Ellison, 1965: 447)

The horrific *trompe-l'oeil* described by Invisible Man differs from the photographs in that these mannequins have been lynched in a deliberate reversal of a common racist atrocity. The quotation within Weegee's caption is not identified but it resembles an intertitle from *Birth of a Nation*, and points towards the enduring myth of the predatory black male rapist, who is punished with 'the faggot and the rope'. The white man grasps the thigh of a broken mannequin, while another hands up a severed arm, a scene with both gruesome and comic potential, but which also hints at a powerful desire of black folk to 'smash' and to be revenged. While the Silent Parade had sought, in one respect, to save white souls in the wake of riots that deliberately targeted the black body, the Harlem riots struck at the invisible face of white power through a violation of its symbols. To put this more prosaically, in a situation where black women were not allowed to try dresses on in 125<sup>th</sup> stores like Blumstein's and Koch's, the stripping of mannequins looks less like violation than self-assertion; the fact that the mannequins themselves are all white

when they are there to sell clothing to people of (another) colour compounds the sense of injustice.

\*

Finally, the white mannequin returns in a photograph by DeCarava, taken in 1950. His caption – *Two women, mannequin's hand* – shows that he is well aware of the source of the drama of this composition. Two black women are photographed in close up as they stand next to a shop window, out which appears to emerge a white, claw-like hand. Although presumably in separated spaces divided by the window, the lack of reflection from the glass gives the illusion that the white hand, reaching down from its elevated but concealed location, is about to reach out to them unawares and exert its uncanny power.

## Chapter Three

### ***One black among many: The street ballet***

...the freedom of the city, an order that exists in a state of perpetual motion and change, the evanescent but intense and complex face-to-face communication and communion of what Baudelaire called the family of eyes.

Marshall Berman (in Kasinitz, 1995: 150)

No images are more rigorously bound to both the contemporary moment and instantaneous vision than photographs are, and street photographs most of all.

Colin Westerbeck and Joel Meyerowitz (1994: 72)

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At first, writes Paul Dunbar in his 1902 novel, *The Sport of the Gods*, the newcomer to New York will feel 'shy and helpless amid the hurrying crowds' and retreat to his room, made lonely, almost grief-stricken at how 'cruel and cold and unfeeling' the city is. Yet, soon he 'will be glad to strike elbows with the bustling mob and be happy at their indifference to him, so that he may look at them and study them' (Dunbar, 1969: 81-82). For African Americans like Dunbar's protagonists, arriving in the city meant a dramatic change from their earlier, usually rural or small-town existence in the South or the West Indies. This is still the case half a century later, when Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is utterly bewildered at being thrust into close proximity with white people on the subway heading towards Harlem; he is equally disturbed at the violent rhetoric of the black street corner orators once he has emerged onto the sidewalk (Ellison, 1965: 131-133).

What the black newcomer to the city experiences with particular force is the difficulty and ultimately the euphoria of negotiating their way around what Lyn H. Lofland and others have called the public realm. In her book of that name, amongst other things a spirited defence of city life lived amongst its crowds of strangers, Lofland draws on the work of earlier scholars and commentators on urban space and behaviour (Lofland, 1998). From Gregory Stone, she takes the notion of strangers forming secondary relationships with each other (as when a relationship is established with a local retailer). From Jane Jacobs, she takes the idea and image of 'webs of social linkages', the pattern behind apparently random street life. From Erving Goffman, she takes the idea of real interaction occurring in the public realm, as in presenting and negotiating the self amongst others. From William H. Whyte, she takes the idea that public space is indispensable to the life of the city. With these ideas in mind, she makes an important distinction between public *space* - space open and accessible to everyone - and the public *realm*, which is a social rather than a fixed geographical territory. Similarly, she distinguishes between these two kinds of territory (social and geographic) in terms of the 'private' - that is the network of household, friend and kinship relationships - and, following Albert Hunter, the 'parochial' - that is, the network of neighbourhood, workplace and acquaintance relationships. All three realms - public, parochial and private - coexist in the city, in buildings and in public places, in the streets and on the sidewalks.

Perhaps looking first is particularly important for practitioners of street photography - actively looking for or having the wit to notice potential subject-matter as it appears or passes by. In this way, if no other, the act of photography is akin to the classic encounter with the modern metropolis in its discovery and

fascinated examination of the crowd, of the strangers it is composed of, and of the places these people create and shape.

What follows is a consideration of the street photographer at large in the modern city, as a privileged member of Baudelaire's 'family of eyes', an observer with potential access to the three realms I have described. Although it is usually the case that street photographs are going to depict what most of us would recognise as the public realm, there will be some photographs that capture private and/or parochial 'bubbles' in the midst of public space. Such representations of already inscribed social spaces will be further complicated when the territory in question is fiercely contested.

In order to explore the links between behaviour in the public realm and the role of the street photographer in both depicting and mediating it, I will therefore be drawing on parts of Lofland's analysis - particularly her 'principles of stranger interaction' and the sources she identifies of both interactional and aesthetic pleasures experienced in walking the streets. Behind this lurk the more familiar notions of the city as theatre and of the way in which everyday transactions on the sidewalk may be described as a 'great dance' or 'ballet'.

## 1 *The hurrying crowds: Co-operative motility*

- **Fig. 025 Byron/Seventh Ave. & West 30<sup>th</sup> St. Colored District (1903)**

This photograph serves to illustrate the pre-history of what James Weldon Johnson called 'the greatest Negro city in the world'. It is of a street scene from 1903 and typical of the kind that Percy Byron would snatch on his way to his official assignments; in this instance he stopped at Seventh Avenue and 30th, around four blocks away from the Byron studio on Broadway.

Byron seems to have looked carefully at the scene, placing his camera on the sidewalk in order to create a cross-section of pedestrian activity, from the young men standing in the shop doorway to the ladies promenading down the street across to the various male figures grouped by the kerb. By including an empty space in the foreground, he has provided us with our own place on the sidewalk, so that we can imagine stepping into this lively social world. There is an interesting tension in the photograph - we would normally expect a focus on the centre of the frame (there is a reason for many of our own cameras being pre-set to do just this) but the most clearly focused and largest figure, an elegantly dressed African American, is right over to one side. He is detached, at ease, independent, a kind of flaneur casting his gaze over the street scene, studying 'the bustling mob'. In this respect, he can stand in for the photographer or for us as we too look at the numerous others using the space, the shapes they make as they form groups, break off to chat, or glance at the shops lining the street. Together we witness 'cooperative motility' - 'the dancelike, almost choreographed character of pedestrian behaviour', identified by Lofland as one principle of stranger interaction (Lofland, 1998: 29).

The sense of separateness within the crowd evoked by Dunbar finds its photographic expression not just in the main figure but also in the young men marooned in the doorway. These figures, along with the white man breaking off from conversation as he catches sight of Byron, are separated from the crowd by being held in focus. Those who pass along the sidewalk are made indistinct, blurred by the failure of the camera to freeze movement. This 'failure' was to be turned to advantage by later street photographers like William Klein, who recognised (as maybe Byron did) blur's suggestion of kinetic energy. Here it crystallises the distinction between the stately dance of those using the sidewalk and those who watch the dance.

As Harlem began to grow into 'a city within a city', the phenomenon of the black crowd is frequently evoked in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance. Arriving in Harlem for the first time, King Solomon Gillis, in Rudolph Fisher's story 'The City Of Refuge', grins at the sight of 'Negroes at every turn; up and down Lenox Avenue, up and down One Hundred and Thirty-Fifth Street; big, lanky Negroes, short, squat Negroes; black ones, brown ones, yellow ones; men standing idle on the curb, women, bundle-laden, trudging reluctantly homeward, children rattle-trapping about the sidewalks; here and there a white face, but Negroes predominantly, overwhelmingly everywhere' (Fisher, 1925: 57-58).

- **Fig. 135 New York Public Library/Armistice Day, Lenox Avenue and 134<sup>th</sup> Street (November 11, 1918)**

This photograph was taken on Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, on Lenox Avenue and 134<sup>th</sup> Street. Like Byron's street scene, the frame includes the full width of the sidewalk, this time crammed with pedestrians dressed in winter coats, negotiating their way up and down the street, while some, again on the edges, pause to watch and comment - as in Gillis's vision, there

are one or two white faces, but most are black. From our position of authority, vouchsafed to us by the elevated point of view chosen by the photographer, we have an omniscient view of the new black crowd. The lines of perspective are similar to those in Byron's street scene, so that we can see the edges of the crowd disappearing into the distance framed by the edges of the wide avenue, so that the two are coterminous: the crowd is the city and this city is black. What we are looking at is what Johnson described as the 'rapidity with which Negroes become good New Yorkers' - the way in which the African American, as we can see from the range of social interaction depicted here, has become fluent in the public realm (Johnson, 1925: 310).

- **Fig. 136 Brown Brothers/Harlem street scene (c. 1920)**

The change and challenge that African Americans experienced in coming to New York and other large cities was fundamentally spatial.

What is the city's discourse? How does it name itself? The complexity of a city's texts makes it impossible to know that answer completely – one's gaze is only a glance, after all. Yet the attempt to read its streets is the essential first step for any traveler making his or her way through town. (Langlois, 1983: 121)

In this photograph, taken by Brown Brothers in around 1920, one black policeman gives directions to a well-dressed and prosperous-looking black pedestrian, while another witnesses this initiation into becoming a 'good New Yorker'. The picture, which looks a little staged, is nevertheless a classic urban scene: the newcomer gets orientation, useful in New York, where the grid is not always the easiest system to find your way around. The fiction of the 1920s is full of such new arrivals getting the

'Cook's tour' of Harlem, as Wallace Thurman put it in his novel of 1929, *The Blacker the Berry*.

It was John who had taught her how to find her way up and down town on the subway and on the elevated. He had also conducted her on a Cook's tour of Harlem, had strolled up and down Seventh Avenue with her evenings after they had come uptown from the theater. He had pointed out for her the Y.W.C.A. with its imposing annex, the Emma Ransom House and suggested that she get a room there later on. He had taken her on a Sunday to several of the Harlem motion picture and vaudeville theaters and he had been as painstaking in pointing out the churches as he had been lax in pointing out the cabarets. (Thurman, 1994: 82-3)

The Harlem buildings and streets discussed earlier were used as landmarks and woven into a narrative exploring the district's topography and topology, as James L. de Jongh notes of a similar tour in Carl Van Vechten's novel, *Nigger Heaven* (de Jongh, 1990: 133). Indeed, Van Vechten himself was such an eager and knowledgeable guide to Harlem, especially its nightlife, that a popular song of the time urged listeners to 'Go Inspectin' with Van Vechten'.

Janet Langlois discusses how 'locational socialization' – Lofland's term for the connection between urban space and action – leads on to other sign systems based on behaviour. In making sense of and getting around the fixed and moving systems of the city, new 'competency and performance skills' are needed to read the 'signs', from the verbal systems of visible signage to the oral narratives told by locals (Langlois, 1983: 121).

- **Fig. 137 WPA Art Project/125<sup>th</sup> Street and Eighth Avenue (1930s)**

The uncredited picture taken here in the 1930s for the WPA can serve as an example of how dense the city is with systems and signs. There are recognisable landmarks here – the Apollo Theater and Blumstein’s department store – which help to identify this as 125<sup>th</sup> Street near Eighth Avenue, but they are subsumed within a forest of signs for keys and chiropody, advertisements for candy, shop fronts and parked cars, and, driving down and across the scene, the elevated subway and the street itself. These pedestrians, most of them out strolling, perhaps on a late Saturday afternoon, with the sun in their eyes, are clearly at ease in their negotiations with this multi-layered public space and able to maintain their private and parochial spaces as they go along. The three young men, like the two women on the right, have seen the photographer but this encounter, like so many others, will be over in a curious second or two, and the crowd will move forward and on.

- **Fig. 138 UPI/School’s Out (1927)**
- **Fig. 139 Roy Perry/Harlem pushcarts (145<sup>th</sup> Street and Eighth Avenue) (c. 1940)**

Within this larger scene, there are other negotiations and dramas still to take place, when, for example, the crowd reaches an intersection or moves past market stalls. A UPI press photograph, taken in 1927, shows the intersection of 135<sup>th</sup> Street and Lenox Avenue. The reason for the photograph, captioned in one source as ‘School’s Out’, is evident in the gaggle of children and parents on the corner. As an observer of crowd behaviour, William Whyte believes that the street corner is ‘the most vital space of all’:

Watch one long enough and you will see how important it is to the life of the larger spaces. There will be people in 100 percent conversations or prolonged goodbyes. (in Legates, 1996: 116)

Although the pupils of Public School 89 are eager to be off home, some of the adults have stopped to chat. It was often said that if you stood on the corner of 125<sup>th</sup> and Lenox, 'you would see every important person you ever knew' (Brandt, 1996: 183). The choice of Harlem's grassroots politicians to set up their ladders at street corners is no coincidence, nor is the later development of a post-war disaffected youth culture 'on the corner'. In such scenes, the 'invisible city' emerges, according to Langlois: 'Knowledge of what power struggles are secretly coded in street corners and of what the city *does not* say about itself ultimately makes one street-wise' (1983: 122).

Roy Perry's aerial photograph of Harlem pushcarts on 145<sup>th</sup> and Eighth provides an almost diagrammatic image of urban negotiation, both of space and financial exchange. Perry, an independent white photographer taking documentary photographs for his own interest, has taken this shot from above a pawnbrokers - aptly enough, as this is around 1940 and the Depression is still in full swing here. One vendor is doing a brisk trade; the other two have paused to note this worrying development. A small queue has formed through which other pedestrians have to make their way. A knot of small boys is also hanging around, one possibly helping out, carrying flat pack cartons. This is evidently a poor working-class area of town, and here is a scene not dissimilar to others that could be found (and were photographed) elsewhere in New York. What draws the photographer here is the fact that this is Harlem: *black* New York.

As Dorothea Loebbermann observes of Harlem literature in general, the black crowd was not, as in much white modernist writing, a threat to individual identity but, rather, 'the stroller embraces the multifaceted crowd as a spectacle in which he or she can position him – or herself- as an individual within a group' (Loebbermann, 1997: 9-10). This is clear from Claude McKay's moment of baptismal immersion in the black crowd in his 1937 book, *A Long Way from Home*:

A wave of thrills flooded the arteries of my being, and I felt as if I had undergone initiation as a member of my tribe. And I was happy. Yes, it was a rare sensation again to be just one black among many. It was good to be lost in the shadows of Harlem again. It was an adventure to loiter down Fifth and Lenox avenues and promenade along Seventh Avenue. (McKay, 1937: 95-6)

## **2     *Versatile thoroughfares: Interactional pleasures***

The promenade along Seventh Avenue was, of course, one of the most celebrated performances in Harlem. It demonstrated how the physical space of the street can be used as a stage or platform for urban communication and display. In the last chapter, the theatricality that characterises the public realm was illustrated in the gestures and harangues of the street corner speaker and in the brilliant variety of parades and marches, most of which headed down Seventh Avenue. Such performances need an audience; another principle of 'stranger interaction' given by Lofland is 'audience role prominence', where 'inhabitants of the public realm act primarily as audience to the activities that surround them' (Lofland, 1998: 31)

- **Fig. 140 Austin Hansen/Crowds awaiting visit of Haile Selassie I to the Abyssinian Baptist Church (1954)**
- **Fig. 141 Carl Van Vechten/Negro Elks (Philadelphia Lodge) Parade (August 22, 1939) – before parade**
- **Fig. 142 Carl Van Vechten/Negro Elks (Philadelphia Lodge) Parade (August 22, 1939) – during parade**
- **Fig 143 Carl Van Vechten/Watching Elks Parade, Brooklyn (August 25, 1936)**

In Austin Hansen's photograph of the crowd awaiting Haile Selassie I's visit to the Abyssinian Baptist Church in 1954, the police barriers seem to have sliced through the black crowd, providing us with a cross section image of it. Like the Armistice Day photograph, the city street is filled with black faces and bodies, a whole variety of hats and jackets and coats and ties, of people of different ages and incomes, all brought together and united as an audience, patiently waiting for the Emperor of Ethiopia to arrive. Nearly twenty years earlier, in 1935, the street corners of Harlem had resounded to fierce diatribes

against Italian aggression against Ethiopia, the place of liberation promised in the Bible and after whose ancient name the Abyssinian Baptist Church itself was named. This meeting of Selassie with the most visible black leader in Harlem, the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell (an event photographed by the Smiths) counted as a major event in the drama of Harlem and black nationalism.

A much more regular occurrence on the streets of black New York was a parade of the Elks. One such parade, held by the Philadelphia Lodge on August 22, 1939, was photographed by Carl Van Vechten. Taking up a position on Lenox Avenue, near 145<sup>th</sup> Street, he was able to take a sequence of photographs before and during the parade. In the first picture, he shows part of the crowd happily anticipating the event. Organising chairs by a bus stop and equipped with umbrellas against the heat of high summer, these are ordinary Harlemites in holiday mood. One smiling woman has turned to wave, it seems, at the camera, becoming briefly a performer herself. The second photograph shows the event in progress, uniformed lodge men and women in parade, proudly bearing banners aloft, including their own and the American flag. Beyond them the attentive crowd has filled the sidewalk. A leading officer of the Elks has turned, perhaps to check that the marchers are in step, while the woman nearest to us is clearly conscious of the crowd's and perhaps the photographer's attention and places her best foot forward. The smart formality of the parade, both in its disciplined pattern of lines and in the solemn expressions of the marchers, presents a certain dignity against an impoverished streetscape of small one-storey businesses signalled by the reiteration of a 'Junk Shop' sign. Comparing the two photographs, it is possible to see both those on the parade and those on the sidewalk as participants in a mutually affirming performance of black pride.

Three years earlier, Van Vechten had taken pictures of another Elks parade, this time marching through Brooklyn on August 25, 1936. In this photograph, families and neighbours are coming out onto the stoops of their brownstone-fronted apartments, presumably glad for an excuse to get out of their hot, cramped apartments into the fresh air. In selecting this picture, an incidental reminder that the popularity of such parades was not limited to Harlem, I am struck by the man in the foreground and his gaze at the photographer. With his smart hat shading his eyes and a neatly pressed jacket, he has something of the contained elegance of the figure in Byron's picture considered earlier. Standing near a group of children awaiting the event, he is evidently a local resident; he may just have broken off his conversation with the other man. Unlike that earlier pedestrian, he is set within what looks like an entirely black community. As a spectator, he seems slightly surprised to be the subject of the attention of a white photographer who evidently considers him and this scene worth taking a picture of.

- **Fig. 144 Austin Hansen/Joe Louis Day (1946)**

In his 1928 novel, *The Walls of Jericho*, Rudolph Fisher writes:

And so Seventh Avenue, most versatile of thoroughfares, becomes Harlem's Broadway during the week and its Fifth Avenue on Sunday; ... remains for six nights a carnival, bright with the lights of theatres and night clubs, alive with darting cabs, with couples moving from house party to cabaret, with loiterers idling and ogling on the curb, with music wafted from mysterious sources, with gay talk and loud African laughter. (Fisher, 1995: 102-103)

Michel de Certeau describes pedestrians moving through the streets of the city as writers of a text, as 'trailblazers in the jungles of functionalist rationality'. There is a prescribed 'syntax'

which ordinary citizens flout, using the 'vocabulary' of official systems to write their own 'indeterminate trajectories'. Although operating within a system the 'ruling order' has itself created, this 'creativity' is invisible to the 'proprietors': 'like those "bosses" who simply *can't* see what is being created within their own enterprises' (de Certeau, 1988: xxi-xxii).

In the two-dimensional grid, Seventh Avenue is simply another north-south line; in the third and fourth dimensions (depth and time) – Harlem in the 1920s – it accumulates a richly detailed life as a result of the kinds of creative use or subversion de Certeau describes. In Lynch's terms what is ostensibly a *path*, a channel 'along which the observer moves', has become a *core*: a 'concentration node'. Such cores 'are the focus and epitome of a district, over which their influence radiates and of which they stand as a symbol': a definition that, according to numerous accounts from the 1920s, applies fully to Seventh Avenue (Lynch, 1998: 48).

Seventh Avenue was the Great Black Way, a 'boulevard of high style' (Anderson, 1982: 320) where parades such the one depicted here, held in honour of Joe Louis in 1946, were held on a regular basis: funeral processions of such notables as Florence Mills; parades of the followers of Father Divine and of Garvey militia; marches with music played by the brothers of the fraternal societies of Harlem; the annual Easter Parade and, indeed, the regular streams of finely dressed Harlemites on Saturday night by the theatres and on Sunday afternoons after attending church. When her partner suggests a walk, Emma Lou, heroine of Wallace Thurman's 1929 novel, *The Blacker the Berry*, chooses Seventh Avenue 'in preference to some of the more quiet side streets':

She still loved to promenade up and down Harlem's main thoroughfare. As usual on a warm night, it was crowded.

Street speakers and their audiences monopolized the corners. Pedestrians and loiterers monopolized all of the remaining sidewalk space. The street was jammed with traffic. Emma Lou was more convinced than ever that there was nothing like it anywhere. (Thurman, 1994: 195)

- **Fig. 145 Schomburg Collection/The 'Gay Northeasterners' strolling on Seventh Avenue (c. 1927)**
- **Fig. 146 Austin Hansen/Four women strolling on Seventh Avenue in Harlem (c. 1938)**

If people watching is a source of what Lofland calls 'interactional pleasures', there is also the pleasure of being seen. One of the new social forms created by the modern city, the promenade is perhaps the clearest example of the pleasure of being seen. When Louis Wirth writes (in 'Urbanism as a Way of Life') that the 'urban world puts a premium on visual recognition' (Kasinitz, 1995: 90), he is drawing on Georg Simmel's argument in his 1903 essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' that, in the city streets, 'one seizes on qualitative distinctions, so that... the attention of the social world can, in some way, be won for oneself' (Simmel, 1903: 77). What Simmel goes on to describe as the 'specifically metropolitan extravagances of self-distanciation' to be found in a form of "'being different" - of making oneself noticeable' can be seen perhaps in this uncredited photograph, taken on Seventh Avenue in 1927.

The three women of 1927 are identified in one source as Edith Scott, Helen Corbin and Rosie Swain (Schoener, 1998: 239). We might guess at how their names have come down to us; perhaps they are privileged daughters of the Harlem 'black bourgeoisie' or, perhaps more likely, performers from the chorus line of a current musical like *Blackbirds*, 'high yaller' beauties who were privileged over darker-skinned women in shows aimed at the

downtown audience. Similar glamorous scenes were repeated in other cities from Kansas to Pittsburgh to Chicago's South Side, where 'the Stroll' took place on State Street.

It seems reasonable here to make a direct comparison between the fictive characters posed in the theatrical setting of the photographic studio by James VanDerZee and others and those presented on the street. As M. Christine Boyer observes, in 'the world of the market as well as the stage, one judged by appearances, not words, where close observation of posturing and posing were keys to successful performances' (Boyer, 1996: 87). The sidewalk is, in this sense, a stage set, though it is not a set than can be struck without changing the full meaning of the photograph – why the photographer looked and why Edith, Helen and Rosie looked so happily, boldly back. It is a picture grounded in the concrete fabric of a Harlem street – *the* Harlem street. They embody its famous glamour; it embodies theirs. Toni Morrison explores this identification between the body and the built environment in the following passage from *Jazz*:

The woman who churned a man's blood as she leaned all alone on a fence by a country road might not expect even to catch his eye in the City. But if she is clipping quickly down the big-city street in heels, swinging her purse, or sitting on a stoop ... dangling her shoe from the toes of her foot, the man, reacting to her posture, to soft skin on stone, the weight of the building stressing the delicate, dangling shoe, is captured. And he'd think it was the woman he wanted, and not some combination of curved stone, and a swinging, high-heeled shoe moving in and out of sunlight. (Morrison, 1992: 34)

This gendered encounter is echoed in Austin Hansen's photograph, taken a decade later, in 1938, where the four women, finely dressed and linking arms as they stroll along

Seventh Avenue, present themselves with a smile to the photographer, perhaps unaware that they have another male audience in the pedestrian who has paused to look back and ogle them. The predatory nature of male women-watchers, noted by some observers here, qualifies the usually celebratory tone of most accounts of the stroll along Seventh Avenue, such as James Weldon Johnson's famous encomium: 'This is not simply going out for a walk, it is like going out for an adventure' (Lewis, 1997: 322).

- **Fig. 147 Weegee/Easter Sunday (1943)**
- **Fig. 148 M & M Smith/Easter Sunday in Harlem (c. 1938)**

Another regular and much photographed promenade was that of churchgoers stepping out in their best outfits, above all on Easter Sunday morning. Weegee, who visited Harlem at this time of year on at least two occasions, published this photograph from 1940 in his book *Naked City*. Morgan and Marvin Smith took their photograph of a similar scene two years earlier. In Weegee's picture, the central figure looks back with a broad smile at the look of the camera, evidently conscious of the elegant picture he presents. In the Smiths' picture, his doppelganger is not so attentive to the camera - perhaps whichever brother took the picture was quicker off the mark or made less directorial demands on his subject. Rather than presenting us with a full-frontal image, a deliberate portrait, the photographer places us within the crowd itself. We could be one of these churchgoers in their Sunday finery.

We might speculate about the reasons for the formal differences in the two photographs: perhaps Weegee always saw the people on the street, black or white, as a spectacle, and saw himself as a reporter-outsider; perhaps the Smiths, about to set up their first studio on 125<sup>th</sup> Street, were reporter-insiders - they too

supplied photographs to the press, to the *Amsterdam News* around this time, and later to Adam Clayton Powell's *People's Voice*. The content of the photographs, however, demonstrates Alan Trachtenberg's comment that '[s]ome degree of theatricality, of performance, appears in most pictures of people' (Trachtenberg, 1979: xxviii).

The way in which the 'Gay Northeasterners' and the Easter Sunday promenaders present their sophistication to the camera's gaze suggests their awareness of their power to catch the eye and to dominate their surroundings. To juxtapose these images with those taken from above Seventh Avenue of it filled with vast crowds out to celebrate boxer Joe Louis – and others leaning out of the Hotel Theresa's windows to cheer him on – is to witness how, at such moments, this black city is shaped and defined by the idea of spectacle.

### **3     *Something always going on: Perceptual innuendo***

- **Fig. 149 Carl Van Vechten – Watching the Negro Elks parade, Lenox Avenue, August 22, 1939**
- **Fig. 150 Aaron Siskind/Girl looking out of window (c. 1940)**

In another photograph of spectators of the Elks on parade in 1939, Van Vechten shows occupants of an apartment block on Lenox Avenue with a grandstand view. Whole families have emerged to watch, leaning out of windows or perched on the sill; others have found somewhere to sit on the ladders and platforms of the fire escape which seems to link all these separate groups and individuals into a community. In Siskind's picture, taken a year or so later, a young girl and her dog lean out into the sun, probably more in hope than expectation of something worth watching on the street. This watching of watchers is virtually a photographic trope, as if the photographer felt some kinship with others on the look out for visual excitement.

- **Fig. 151 James VanDerZee/Refreshment truck on 135<sup>th</sup> Street (1928)**

The photographer is, of course, also a member of the 'audience' on the street, one whose pleasure is in looking - not a neutral, invisible figure but a public one, observing and often enjoying the drama, however mundane. Although James VanDerZee continued to specialise in studio portraits of Harlem residents until his business failed in the 1950s, he was also drawn to the life of the street, snatching moments like Byron between commissions. In a picture of a refreshment truck on 135<sup>th</sup> Street, taken in 1928, VanDerZee is an unexpected presence - some of the youngsters and one of the adults on the left have

just caught sight of the photographer, and heads are still turning. It seems likely that VanDerZee has heard the commotion and come out to seize this photo opportunity - the awning of his studio G.G.G., with its slogan 'Photos: Come rain or shine' is visible on the left. Away from the carefully wrought studio poses and props, VanDerZee is discovering the rough blurred energy of the street in flux. He becomes a participant in a moment of urban drama. His look, which is also our look, is returned by the children, one of whom, in the long tie, seems prepared to give the camera as bold a stare back.

- **Fig. 152 Roy DeCarava/Louis Armstrong (1952)**

Someone used to the camera's stare is the figure caught in this photograph taken by Roy DeCarava in 1952: Louis Armstrong. Like VanDerZee's picture, this looks unpremeditated and unposed, but Armstrong automatically offers a smile and acknowledgement to the brother with a camera. A group standing at the entrance to the building he has just passed seem a little puzzled: was that really him or, perhaps: who was that and why is he being photographed? Someone with a clearer view of Armstrong watches him from a window, like the girl in Siskind's photograph. Suddenly an ordinary, drizzly day in Harlem, trashcans out for collection, is transformed by this hurrying man. It is a street photographer's version of the pictures of Harlem celebrities like Joe Louis and Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson that constantly appeared in the black press, images of celebrity turning the streets of Harlem into a spectacle.

What attracts a photographer to the sidewalk is not just what attracts Dunbar's newcomer back out of his curtained room to 'knock elbows with the bustling mob' - that is, simply to look at and study strangers, or indeed celebrities. In Lofland's analysis, the pleasures of the public realm are aesthetic as much as interactional. As well as the theatre of people watching and

being watched, there is 'the experience of enjoyment occasioned by certain (mostly visual) qualities of the built environment'. This visual excitement, Lofland argues, is 'not the exclusive province of grandeur: it resides as well in humble spaces'. Her list of sources of aesthetic pleasure in walking through the city streets reads like a 'what-to-look-out-for' guide to apprentice street photographers: 'unexpectedness' (as appealing as familiarity); 'whimsy' (eccentric arrangements or objects); 'historical layering' or 'physical juxtaposition' (setting old buildings against new, for example), the stimulus of crowding and spectacle as people go about their everyday interactions, and - most suggestive for our experience of looking at photographs as well as at strangers - what Lofland calls 'perceptual innuendo' (1998: 81).

- **Fig. 153 Roy DeCarava/Woman walking, above (1950)**

A photograph, taken by Roy DeCarava, may serve to illustrate 'perceptual innuendo'. Here we are looking down at the solitary and elegant figure of a woman strolling along the sidewalk. As Westerbeck and Meyerowitz point out, DeCarava's photographs are often taken from the window of a Harlem brownstone or tenement, as if in homage to the people-watching habit. (1994: 341-342). This point of view is very different from that of Siskind or Van Vechten (Figs 149-150), who do not look from the inside out but are positioned on the street turning the audience into the event.

Unlike the earlier photographs of crowds taken from an elevation, in DeCarava's picture our point of view is more intimate, although an important gap separates us. The figure is isolated in an expanse of stone, with only the brief tracery of bare branches offering any information other than that provided by the solitary walker herself. The photograph, like all photographs, is a fragment of space and time, necessarily

incomplete. The pleasure of this photograph lies in that incompleteness, 'giving rein to imagination'. Where are we? Who is this elegant figure? Where is she and where is she going? When he included this photograph in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, Langston Hughes turned her into 'Chick's girl', an embodiment of black respectability living on Sugar Hill. Our own stories will be different.

#### **4     *A more complicated dance: Entering the territory***

- **Fig. 008 William Klein/Harlem (1955)**
- **Fig. 154 Sid Grossman/Harlem street scene (May-July 1939)**

Rather than the 'indifference' described by Paul Dunbar, white photographer William Klein was challenged when he took pictures in Harlem in 1955. He admits that pretending to the assembled black teenagers that he was a foreigner - in order to extricate himself from this sticky situation - was not his only pose: 'I was under assumed papers, posing as a newspaperman, posing as a Frenchman, posing as a photographer' (Westerbeck and Meyerowitz, 1994: 350)

This story of tactical retreat is particularly interesting as no photographer - with the possible exception of Jacob Riis and Weegee, Klein's own models - has had such a (literally) in-your-face approach as Klein to taking pictures of strangers on the streets; he has even compared the activity to boxing. Equally interesting is Klein's remark that he was 'posing as a photographer', recalling us once more to the essential 'people-watching' voyeurism of the practice.

One other principle of stranger interaction enumerated by Lyn H. Lofland is 'civil inattention'. This 'sine qua non of city life' is familiar to all of us who have, for example, travelled on the underground. A brief acknowledgement through body language that the other person is there and then, please, no staring or conversation. Klein's deliberate photographic 'attack' on the New York crowd in the 1950s must certainly count on this basis as uncivil and attention-seeking, whereas the principle is more than met in Walker Evans's celebrated subway portraits taken of

fellow travellers completely oblivious of the camera hidden in his coat.

While these two photographers are united by the desire to take pictures of complete strangers, to 'look at them and study them', those who look back are clearly marked by the difference in their approach. Evans's subjects are caught unawares; if they appear to respond at all, it is to Evans's own if not neutral, then camera-less gaze. The young man in Klein's picture, grinning and hurrying past the shop front, is, on the contrary, clearly aware of the camera - indeed, he is, in Klein's words, 'horsing around... trying to escape the lens, but playful, a game' (Klein, 1995: 11). The looking of the photographer is met by his subject looking straight back in a kind of ritual exchange, much as strangers negotiate room for each other as they pass, on the principle of 'cooperative motility'. In this particular case, however, it is or was, as Klein indicated, a more complicated 'dance' than usual. He was taking photographs in Harlem.

The photograph that emerged from this interaction can be read, then, on several levels. First, that this is a fragment of time and space, necessarily incomplete and giving rein to imagination. The space is generically captioned *Harlem, 1955*. Like the photograph of the three young women on Seventh Avenue, it seems to stand as a representation of one idea about Harlem. It is congruent with the jazz image retained of the black 'city within a city'; through its masterly use of blur, the rhythm of the street is made visible. It has style and energy. It is the Harlem beloved of Allen Ginsberg and the Beat Generation, and thus appears open to our imaginings as a dynamic fragment of urban space.

Yet, we should also recall the notion of the public realm, that it is only one of three possible realms of city life. Could it be that the anecdote ruefully recalled by William Klein is a story about the

ambiguities of public space? That what he sees as the public realm is in fact the parochial? That he operates not as a stranger might amongst others unknown to each other, but as a stranger intruding on a 'hangout' or 'home territory', where people know each other and define this space as their own place - as (in Jane Jacobs's more critical term) their 'turf'? And what effect does this have on our reading of the photograph?

A happier encounter is a street scene, taken in 1939 by Sid Grossman, a white photographer and a leading light of social documentary group, the Photo League. It shows a number of figures against the backdrop of Harlem brownstones, young and old, seated and standing, moving and still. As in the Byron picture, we are given a choreography of movement and stasis, of activity undertaken and activity watched, including the act of photography. If we look carefully, we may be able to read how private, parochial and public realms coexist on the sidewalk. The photograph might serve as an illustration of Jane Jacobs' famous description of the sidewalks of the Great American Cities: 'In real life to be sure, something is always going on, the ballet is never at a halt...' (Jacobs, 2000: 64).

Like Morrison's young woman, these figures exist in relation to their physical environment: the geographical space of the street is socially inscribed. In her book, *The Power of Place*, Dolores Hayden describes how '[a] world of shared meanings builds up, couched in the language of small semiprivate and semipublic territories between the dwelling and the street that support certain kinds of typical public behaviour' (Hayden, 1996: 35).

Unlike Klein, Grossman has not entered this space, but has stood back and carefully framed the scene, as if painting a picture. Strangely, even serendipitously, he captures a small boy running past right at the centre of the frame. In one story we could make out of this incompleteness, the blurred figure, older and

more streetwise, briefly turns to give us the same grin he will give William Klein as he playfully, but purposefully, tries to escape our look.

## 5     ***The turf: Spatial estrangement***

- **Fig. 155 Sid Grossman/New York, Harlem (1939)**
- **Fig. 156 Richard Saunders/View of Street from fire escape, Harlem (1950s)**
- **Fig. 157 Roy DeCarava/Girl and chain-link fence (n.d.)**

From the earliest photographs of black Harlem, children have been visible in the street, playing on the stoop, sitting on steps or on the sidewalk. In Grossman's picture, taken in summer 1939, he presents another of his sidewalk portraits of activity. Once again, a number of people are out and hanging around the stoop. Of around a dozen adults and children, only the man entering from the right seems to be a purposeful pedestrian. He is passing a sign reading 'No loitering' but may not, as we do, see the irony. The notice over the next doorway identifies this as West 133<sup>rd</sup> Street – Grossman's main patch for his WPA project – and this office as an Advance Division of the UNIA. It is not clear whether the woman in the window above calling down to the children is connected with this political activity, but in any case the crudely painted sign poignantly fails to evoke the polished discipline of the early 1920s when black nationalism was young. A pushcart is parked in the gutter, but does not seem to be in use. The other men – and they are all men – are either enjoying a Sunday off or are among the 60 percent or so of African Americans unemployed in Harlem. The five small children have been interrupted from their skipping game, possibly so that they can make way for the pedestrian. They have marked out this space as theirs, as their playground. Although relief for African Americans during the Depression was, in many ways, more effective than in other cities, few resources were made available to children; only one new playground was established in Harlem in the 1930s, compared to 254 in the rest of the city (Brandt, 1996: 41).

The cramped conditions of Harlem apartments, claustrophobic and stuffy, of the kind grimly evoked by Ann Petry in *The Street*, published in 1946, meant that children had to seek space elsewhere in the city to play. The picture taken, in the 1950s, by Richard Saunders, shows the 'view of a street from fire escape' possibly on Seventh Avenue. This reveals that even the sidewalk, so often claimed for play, may not always be an option. The cheeky game of peek-a-boo being played with the photographer is certainly charming and may be the photographer's point, but the eye is soon drawn down into the vertiginous well of dangerous space below the child and to the fire escape's patterns of bars and struts that offer only a precarious and caged place to play.

DeCarava's undated and uncaptioned photograph depicts a young girl gingerly making her way through a hole in a chain-link fence, into what seems to be a vacant lot. Such lacunae in the city fabric provided impromptu playgrounds, often littered with rubble and rubbish, but open space nevertheless. Curiously – and this must have drawn DeCarava's eye – the gap in the fence is just the right height and width for the girl to get through, as if a magic door has opened up (a button pressed) to allow her in. However, she is to step from sunshine into the threatening shadows, as if into a cellar (large chalked graffiti is all that can be clearly made out) and her hesitation is palpable.

- **Fig. 158 Aaron Siskind/Boys sword-fighting (c. 1940)**
- **Fig. 159 Helen Levitt/Boy with gun (1936-48)**
- **Fig. 160 Gordon Parks/Harlem Gang Wars (1948)**

The youthful playfulness and the sense of threatened territory in Klein's act of photography point out to other photographs that trace both the creativity and the defensive aggression of young black men (usually, men) on the streets of Harlem. As Farah Jasmine Griffin points out in *'Who Set You Flowin'?': The African-*

*American Migration Narrative* (1995), the street is in some ways an oppositional symbolic site to that of the home, which is a feminised space of safety but one which young men long to escape. The street presents dangers and risks but it also offers opportunities for self-definition.

Siskind's picture, taken from the same project as the previous photograph, shows young boys sword-fighting on a makeshift plank bridge. Helen Levitt, a sensitive and prolific photographer of children at play on the street, took the photograph of a young boy holding a toy gun at some time between 1936 and 1948, probably around the time, in the late 1940s, when she was working on *In the Street*, a documentary film set in Harlem. Both photographs seem to foreshadow the more serious 'games' - over territory, over membership of gangs, and over weapons - that Gordon Parks photographed in his photo story on Red Jackson, a gang leader, for *Life* magazine in November 1948.

This photograph, included in Peter Galassi's 1995 revisionary collection *American Photography, 1890-1965*, is a dramatic depiction of the struggle for territory, its violent choreography taking place in the middle of an almost empty avenue; one lone cyclist is approaching. It seems to be a running battle between the young men, witnessed by the blurred figures on the sidewalk, whose distance from the fight and closeness to the home space of the apartment houses emphasises that the streets are beyond their control. The members of the gang, however ragged, dominate this street, thanks to the low position that Parks has taken his photograph.

- **Fig. 161 Aaron Siskind/Boys in abandoned building, (c. 1940)**
- **Fig 162 Helen Levitt/Boys in vacant lot (1936-48)**

Both Siskind and Levitt, in these photographs, show an environment already scarred by an unequal battle. The scrawled and misspelt notice 'Dange – Kee Out' on the door seems to have been written mockingly by a child, perhaps one of those now entering the abandoned building. The ornate sphinx heads carved out of the brownstone seem to be lost icons of a departed age of order and elegance. In Levitt's image a gang of boys are playing among what looks like the ruins left after aerial bombardment. The sense of organisation in play has become chaotic, anarchic. This is the turf that Jackson's gang goes to war over, the home territory from which no comfort seems possible.

- **Fig. 163 Roy DeCarava/Sun and shade (1952)**

The avenue is elsewhere the renowned and elegant Fifth. The area I am describing, which, in today's gang parlance would be called 'the turf', is bounded by Lenox Avenue/ on the west, the Harlem River on the east, 135<sup>th</sup> Street on the north, and 130<sup>th</sup> Street on the south. We never lived beyond these boundaries; this is where we grew up. (Baldwin, 1991: 56/57)

In yet another photograph by DeCarava of a colour line, this one, captioned *Sun and Shade* and taken in 1952, marks out two distinct territories: one light, one dark. Separated by this dividing line are two young boys with toy guns; their play of gunfire connects them, however, *across* the boundary and, indeed, the section they each run on is unified by the same underlying pattern. As in *Coalman, man walking* (Fig. 016), DeCarava seems to bring the grid to the surface through the square lines of the paving stones. This photograph is shot from above, a position normally implying dispassionate analysis rather than the warm engagement DeCarava is often noted for. His

seems to be an objective, sociological gaze. Is he observing play or war, division or connection?

In his discussion of 'spatial estrangement', Anthony Vidler notes how Simmel's revolutionary assertion that space is the *expression* of social conditions rather than their determinant led on to sociological examination of spaces as indicators of social processes. In arguing that the space between individuals is not empty but, rather, filled with reciprocal relations, Simmel was able to show how exclusivity and nonexclusivity were expressed in spatial terms. In terms of sociological boundaries formed by territorial groupings, these could be discerned spatially as imaginary boundary lines intersecting social space. Vidler quotes a summary of Simmel's argument:

This border line has for the group a significance similar to that which a frame has for a picture. It fulfils the double function of separating it from the outside world and of closing it within itself. The frame announces that within the border line is a world subject to its own norms entirely divorced from the world outside. (Vidler, 1991: 39-40)

Such determined control over territory seems, at root, to be a defensive gesture - the need 'to cultivate the institution of the Turf', as Jane Jacobs puts it. Sociologists show how migrants define their boundaries to defend neighbourhoods and avoid danger, insult and the impairment of status claims, and argue that the exclusion of groups from different ethnic or class background produces a city as an array of neighbourhoods in which family and property rights are maintained by segregation, a situation hinted at in Van Urban's photographs of Italian, Spanish and Negro Harlem, considered earlier.

- **Fig. 164 Richard Lyon/Harlem (c. 1937)**

Following Simmel's theory of estrangement, which seems highly relevant here, I would argue that by placing African Americans at a spatial distance, contained within a 'ghetto', the white metropolis may have 'blindly' created the conditions for a distinctive, even at moments autonomous black territory to emerge (and to be defended), but it has also confirmed the status of its occupants as 'strangers'. To be black is, at some level, to be displaced or set apart, for all the early hope that the grid might subsume the differences and that, in Solomon Gillis's terms, 'black might be white'.

In this final photograph, taken by Richard Lyon in around 1937, the elegant black pedestrian of Byron's 1903 picture seems to return, uncannily, to view again the life of the street. The figure's dandyish quality, the tipped hat, the cigarette in its holder, the relaxed hand in the pocket seems to flicker into another form, that of the black 'loafer' of white stereotype, unemployed or with nothing better to do than hang around on the street corner. The picture is captioned, simply, *Harlem*, enough to indicate that this is a black street in a black city within a city. The pedestrian is therefore, unlike his earlier incarnation perhaps, truly on home territory, yet he does not look like the master (or owner) of all he surveys. He seems both wearily familiar with and utterly estranged from the structures and systems that circulate around him.

As Simmel puts it, 'distance means that he who is close by is far, and strangeness means that he who is also far is actually near'; as Vidler puts it (1991: 40-41):

Fixed within a particular spatial group, the stranger is one who has not belonged from the beginning.

## Chapter Four

### ***Ghosts of homes: Gothic space and homeplace***

The first, the oneirically definitive house, must retain its shadows. ... All I ought to say about my childhood home is just barely enough to place me, myself, in an oneiric situation, to set me on the threshold of a day-dream in which I shall *find* repose in the past.

Gaston Bachelard (1994: 13)

\*

On blocks where some buildings remain standing, and others demolished, nothing remains of formerly inhabited apartments except the colored walls that were once rooms. On roofs and in abandoned lots where ailanthus grows rampant, the accoutrements of daily life are also abandoned, an old-fashioned bathtub with clawed legs, a rotting mattress or a rusting coffee pot, stray curtains, or a flower pot or hot plate on a window sill. ... For residents, daily life goes on among these ghosts of homes...

Jacqueline Leavitt and Susan Saegert (1990: 20)

*From Abandonment to Hope*, from which this second passage is taken, is an account of Harlem entering its final decade of the twentieth century. Focusing on the hopeful development of so-called 'community-households' and how they might mediate between urban blight and corporate regeneration, Jacqueline Leavitt and Susan Saegert interviewed residents old and young. One of these was 89-year old Mrs Hill, who had moved to New York from New Orleans seventy years

earlier to an apartment on 126<sup>th</sup> Street, in the first building created especially for black people in Harlem.

Having travelled north in the employ of an actress, Mrs Hill had continued to work as a personal maid to the wealthy and well-known until one of them left her some money, and she settled down to 'helping at parties, sewing, being, as she said, a personal maid to all those she helped out once in a while' (ibid: 38). After all this time, her apartment is essential to her sense of herself:

Mrs Hill's apartment, full of cast-off expensive rugs and furniture and photographs of nieces and nephews, provided a comfortable setting as we talked. But more than that, *she used it almost as another person* in the interview, to remind her of her life, to tell us about her accomplishments and relationships and to convey the preparation she had made for old age. (ibid; my emphasis)

In reaching the conclusion that '[h]ome and the roots that lie there are at the core of our personal identity, even if we are separated from them in time and space', Elizabeth Kenworthy Teather in *Embodied Geographies* provides us with a useful definition of this space (1999: 5):

a material, bounded place where our own activity spaces and those of people closest to us overlap. It is, ideally, where we are most comfortable with our positionality and our relationships with others; a place where we are accepted and affirmed as who we want to be. Home is a discursive space with values that overlap ... with the values of those who share it with us. We, and they, often share *collective memories*, that are strongly linked with specific places. (1999: 4)

Madan Sarup believes that there is a link between home and identity as 'the story we tell of ourselves and which is also the story others tell of us'. (in Robertson, 1994: 95) Gaston Bachelard's discussion of the house – meaning home – in *The Poetics of Space* includes this pertinent observation:

the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind. ... In the life of a man, the house thrusts aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man would be a dispersed being. (Bachelard, 1994: 6)

As 'dispersed beings', African Americans' desire for a home is particularly acute – it is there in the Promised Land, in the agitation over Ethiopia, in the 'back to Africa' slogan, in a novel's name (*Home to Harlem*). bell hooks writes of the importance for African Americans of building a 'homeplace':

Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist ... a safe place where black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination. (hooks, 1990: 42)

hooks' theoretical recuperation of the black *domus* as a space of resistance to white oppression again draws on the notion of the heterotopia, a space of freedom carved out from a repressive world.

In this chapter, I explore the complexities of home(place) in three ways. First to be considered are photographs that depict an ideal home, or at least the ideal forged in Victorian America that lingered well into the 1920s of the parlour as a site of both domesticity and cosmopolitanism. Next are pictures of the home beleaguered - threatened and foreclosed by poverty, unemployment and overcrowding. Finally, I examine photographs that seem to shift between 'Gothic' and 'felicitous' space in their representation of life in the Harlem kitchenette. The notion of homeplace is, in this analysis, a more compromised and ambiguous version than the celebratory reading suggested by bell hooks. Against the sense of continuity evident in Mrs Hill's relationship to her apartment is set the constant threat of rupture and dispossession; instead of permanent homeplace, *ghosts of homes* appear.

## 1 The ideal home

James VanDerZee made his studio available as a kind of 'homeplace' where black sitters could try on personae, pose, adopt masks, make something of themselves. Positive self-representation was vital, for posterity and the gallery wall of the family home, but welcomed, too, in the context of a culture where racism was - and arguably remains - hegemonic.

- **Fig. 165 James VanDerZee/Two soldiers (1920)**

VanDerZee often went out to photograph people in their own homes, too, treating these spaces like ad hoc studios. (In fact, the gap between the fictionalising of home in the studio and the construction of home itself may not be that great.) Many people, however, came to the studio to borrow the accoutrements of a stylish or more comfortable home, including on occasion smarter clothes. In this safe space of the studio, VanDerZee put out the usual props and used painted settings for whatever the occasion called. This photograph, taken in 1920, features an unusual backdrop - a painted fireplace. It appears in several photographs of VanDerZee's. In one, it casts a warm glow over the bare skin of a young girl pensively staring into the flames. In another, it provides the domestic heat for a family-to-be: a couple pose in front of it in full wedding gear, while VanDerZee montages in a future daughter for them, sitting vaporously on the hearth-rug, cradling a black doll. From the home of erotic warmth to that of family life, we move in this photograph to the home fires burning: to two soldiers, returning home to Harlem.

Henry Johnson of Albany, New York, on the left here, and Needham Roberts of Trenton, New Jersey are members of the

'Hellfighters'; Roberts received the Croix de Guerre for bravery in battle. The photograph the two friends have commissioned situates them in a fictional home, where they seem to have arrived fresh from duty, in uniform with their gas masks and kit bags tucked tidily under their chairs. Their expressions are not joyful or even relieved, however, but direct, solemn, tinged with sadness. Since their return, the Red Summer of 1919 has passed, with over twenty race riots and hundreds of black ex-servicemen lynched and beaten, horrors that have soured the euphoria and dashed any immediate hopes that white America might at last be prepared to recognise blacks as equal citizens. In other pictures of returned soldiers, VanDerZee used the American flag or other appropriate symbols; here he constructs a welcome home for these two dignified warriors, but they do not seem to gain much warmth from the flames.

- **Fig. 166 James VanDerZee/Looking Backwards (1932)**

Twelve years later, Roberts now on the left, the two soldiers are reunited, this time in a Victorian parlour, again a set constructed by VanDerZee in his studio. Rather than the direct gaze out of the earlier photograph, both men now look into the middle distance, in a kind of reverie. Using montage, VanDerZee has fabricated a scene from an African American war film, where a soldier (possibly Johnson himself) is being tended by a black nurse, while a comrade shoots back at the enemy; in the background figures are flung back by enemy fire. Instead of gas masks, the men wear their medals; standing, Johnson's display of ribbons catches the light.

The humble home that offered them the primitive comfort of fire has been replaced by the kind of room that we can find in the real Harlem apartments that VanDerZee visits, with its

piano and a pile of sheet music, its smart, ornate furniture and Edwardian drapes and tapestries. It is perhaps a symbolic move up the social scale, bringing the two men into an atmosphere of cosmopolitan ease and confidence. What remains in the air, however, and occupying actual photographic space, is a memory of past suffering.

Memories, Gaston Bachelard remarks in his book *The Poetics of Space*, 'are motionless, and the more fixed in space, the sounder they are'. He writes that:

In the theater of the past that is constituted by memory, the stage setting maintains the characters in their dominant roles. At times we think we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being's stability – a being who does not want to melt away, and who, even in the past, wants time to "suspend" its flight. In its countless alveoli space contains compressed time. That is what space is for. (Bachelard, 1994: 8)

In some curious way, VanDerZee has brought this Bachelardian space into being.

- **Fig. 167 James VanDerZee/Susan Porter (1915)**

The following photographs of genuine domestic interiors were also taken by VanDerZee, the earliest in 1915 and the last in 1938. This photograph - of Susan Porter, VanDerZee's cousin - was taken, in 1915, at her home on West 134<sup>th</sup> Street.

Susan Porter appears to be reading, not a book certainly, but perhaps a song sheet. With her eyes cast down, not visible and therefore not demanding our immediate attention, we are free to consider her environment as if she were but one

element in it. Also set against the dark, embossed wallpaper are two decoratively framed oil paintings, landscapes that take us out into an idealised nature. Further natural forms can be seen on the occasional table to Porter's right, where a potted ivy sits, also echoing the organic, wreath-like decorations on the wall. She is dressed in Edwardian lady's finery, possibly white muslin and lace, set off with a locket bearing a cross and a flower decoration that secures her elegant hairstyle. Her pose is poised and elegant, making her figure and presence static, even iconic, rather than active, her passivity reinforced by not returning the gaze of the photographer. Having the photograph taken is clearly an occasion, as indeed it was for many of VanDerZee's sitters, and she is dressed for it as if for receiving guests into her parlour.

The overall impression, strengthened by the relative lack of perspective and shadow, is of a flat, two-dimensional space, not that far from a Whistlerian portrait, rather than of the illusory three-dimensional effect of the next photograph.

- **Fig. 168 James VanDerZee/Society Ladies (1927)**

This photograph of 'Society Ladies' was taken twelve years later in a home on West 138<sup>th</sup> Street, in one of the two leafy blocks that earned the mocking sobriquet of Striver's Row. Here, according to novelist Wallace Thurman, 'the leading Babbits of Harlem lived'. These four might be the dowagers described a decade later by Adam Clayton Powell, Jr: 'These queenly, sometimes portly, and nearly always light-skinned Czarinas presided over the Harlem upper class' (in Anderson, 1982: 340).

Describing a similar group in Chicago in their book *Black Metropolis*, published in 1945, St Clair Drake and Horace

Clayton wrote that these 'upper-class people took "respectability" for granted. They were concerned with "refinement," "culture," and graceful living as a class-ideal' (1993: 531). 'Interview-observation studies', they claimed, '[...] revealed extreme emphasis on maintaining "a good home," with fine furniture, linen, glassware, china, and silver much in evidence' (ibid: 530).

More savage in his critique of the 'black bourgeoisie', E. Franklin Frazier, another black sociologist, wrote as late as 1957 that the 'the struggle for status' had been its dominant obsession (1957: 236), expressed 'mainly in the emphasis upon "social life" or "society" - what Clayton Powell had mocked as 'sassiety', people who 'cavort and disport themselves in the best *ofay* [i.e. white] manner'. This 'society', Frazier argues, is an escapist 'world of make-believe', reflecting the values of American culture but lacking its secure economic base and founded instead on the delusion that the white world would eventually accept them. In his coup-de-grace, Frazier writes: 'The black bourgeoisie suffers from "nothingness" because when Negroes attain middle-class status, their lives generally lose both content and significance' (1965: 238).

Content and significance of a kind are, however, crammed into this space and this photograph. Much of it is antique - the vases, including the enormous example on the right, are the most obvious, though the polished cupboard displays silverware or other precious items. The furniture is ornate and beautifully crafted. On the walls hang a framed painting and a large tapestry hanging. The women's clothing and jewellery, and their frozen graceful gestures, too, speak of wealth and Thorstein Veblen's 'leisure class', and of the 'practice of the genteel performance', as described by Willard B. Gatewood in *Aristocrats of Color*. The tableau is skilfully

composed, with the light appearing to fall across the women from a stained glass window, giving rich depth to the image as we view them from a respectful distance as if we were in some kind of church.

'In the inhabited space,' writes Henri Lefebvre of the bourgeois apartment, 'a moralizing solemnity is the order of the day.' If all this is for show and all the rest - 'eating and drinking, sleeping and making love', as Lefebvre puts it (not to mention washing) '[...] are thrust out of sight' (as they were then in New York apartments, where most of the effort, space, and money was spent on the reception rooms), then the only thing that matter is 'what one sees and what is seen'. Nevertheless, Lefebvre notes, the interior is:

also invested with value - albeit in a mystifying and mystified way. Heavy curtains allow inside to be isolated from outside ... this picture is completed by the addition of things called *objets d'art*; sometimes these are painted or sculpted nudes which will add the cachet of a touch of nature or of libertinage - in order, precisely, to keep all such ideas at arm's length. (Lefebvre, 1991: 315)

As an inhabitant, however, this darkened intimate space could provide something more positive, closer to our conventional concept of home. African American actor Jane White reminisces about similar apartments on Sugar Hill:

They had a great, dark apartment with massive mahogany furniture and heavy draperies. I loved to sit back in an enormous armchair and just hear them droning on. It gave me a great feeling of security. It was an enormously safe and comfortable kind of existence. (Anderson, 198: 344)

Both these photographs share an iconography of respectability and gentility, as well as of worldliness and cosmopolitanism. In 'The Decline of the Memory Palace', her essay on the development of the parlour after 1890, Katherine C. Grier traces how this setting 'dedicated to the secular rituals of social life' with its proliferation of significant objects lingered on well in into the 1920s (Grier, 1992).

- **Fig. 169 VanDerZee/Just Before the Battle (1920s)**

Even in this very different photograph, we can find some of the same elements or props. Here, too, there are reproductions of oil paintings - another landscape, an Impressionist scene, a Thomas Eakins-like nude study - which are there to signify a link with the world of great art as well as with the romanticised, and thus distanced, world of nature.

According to Grier, furnishings of this kind 'make rhetorical statements', each item 'tied to chains of associative thought, both highly personal and conventional' (Grier, 1992: 55,56). These generally relate to the two very different roles of the Victorian parlour: comfort and culture. Objects such as pianos, prints and books signify 'being at home in the world', in being familiar with its highest cultural expressions. Other objects, such as the rocking chair and the sampler here, can speak of a domesticity centred around women's work. As we will see later, in considering the relationship of objects to people, these material things are deeply implicated in the construction of identity and the self. They tell a story about their owners and how they see themselves.

While 'Susan Porter, 1915' might be read as a painting, a stilled life like the landscapes behind her, this 'angel of the house', taken in the 1920s, seems poised for action. Entitled

'Just Before the Battle', it depicts a neighbour of VanDerZee's on West 135<sup>th</sup> Street, apparently waiting up for an errant husband, who has not yet come back from the Elks Convention (as the photographer tells us and as the stuffed animal's head might have implied). Composed like a still from a contemporary Mack Sennett comedy, this photograph was set up by VanDerZee for use in a humorous calendar.

Unlike the examples of racist postcards circulating more widely in American society, which found mirth in their construction of blacks' simplicity, gullibility or emotionalism, this seems a joke largely uninflected by race. Instead, it could be seen as an illustration of how people of all kinds and classes living in apartment buildings had to negotiate between the spheres of home and work, of private and public space, and debate the role and place of women (and men) in both.

Clearly, the woman writing in 1879 who declared that the home is not a woman's 'retreat but her battleground, her arena, her boundary, her sphere' would have gathered from this picture the popular persistence of the idea that woman has 'no other sphere for her activities' and therefore 'must have a different idea of home than what a man has' (Sennett, 1990: 29). Nevertheless, the concept of 'home' was itself undergoing change now that it was located, as here, in an apartment building. In *Apartment Stories*, Sharon Marcus points out that, when these buildings emerged in nineteenth-century Paris, observers soon 'registered the connections and coincidences between urban and domestic spaces, values and activities'. These emerged out of the combination of private spaces - individual apartment units - with 'shared entrances, staircases and party walls' (Marcus, 1999: 2).

As Elizabeth Collins Cromley observes in *Alone Together*, her history of New York's early apartments, the accepted boundaries and meanings of public and private had, therefore, been put into question:

apartments made it possible for women both to run a household and to participate in city life; for a home to be both a public building and a private dwelling...  
(Cromley, 1990: 4-5)

- **Fig. 170 James VanDerZee/At Home (1934)**

One of the women who did participate in city life was Josephine Becton, who became a philanthropist after her husband, the Reverend Dr Becton, was kidnapped and murdered by gangsters in Philadelphia in 1933, the year before this picture was taken - 'At home'. She is surrounded by bouquets of flowers and a box of chocolates is open on the stool in front of her. These may be gifts from her late husband's many followers - as a grassroots evangelist, noted for his all-singing, all-dancing performances, he was second only to Father Divine in popularity, and had been able to build up a fortune from his 'dime a day' fundraising scheme, much of which he sank into real estate.

Although this corner of her parlour looks relatively modest, it is notable that, according to Anderson, there 'may not have been a more brilliantly furnished apartment' in Harlem than George Becton's. When VanDerZee took this picture, the Depression was well underway, but there is no sign here of the economic hardships facing the majority of Harlem residents. The three bouquets and the silver tea or coffee service seem to orbit around Mrs Becton, placing her at the centre of a circle, producing a convincing image of someone

'at home'. There is one other small point of interest: the raised pinky, a gesture of gentility.

• **Fig. 171 James VanDerZee/*The Heiress* (1938)**

Seemingly much less at ease is this woman, who stands at the edge of the room as if afraid to approach any further. The room appears vast at this angle (and high - we can only see the shadow of the central light). The furniture also looks immense, and rather solid. As our eyes return to the figure at the door, we notice perhaps with something of a surprise how dwarfed the woman is by the size of the door frame, like Alice shrunk in Wonderland. The fact that she is dressed in a full-length fur coat with her hands thrust into a fur stole suggests that the room's temperature matches its furnishing: cold and somewhat hard and uncomfortable. She seems out of place, but in fact, as we learn from the caption, she is about to come *into* her place.

'After working for a white family for many years,' runs the editorial gloss, 'this woman inherited their home and furnishings' (Willis-Braithwaite and Birt, 1993: 171). VanDerZee apparently did not name this woman, titling the photograph simply *The Heiress*. Although now comparatively rich, given that this is now 1938 and hunger is growing outside, she is not yet, as Josephine Becton is, 'at home'. The reverend's widow is surrounded by flowers and creature comforts, secure in her community, occupying the centre of her world. The print hanging above her of a Native American warrior seems to echo her confidence with his heroic gesture. The fur-coated woman, however, has not yet (I suspect) changed the prints to her liking. The whole room seems full of frames and mirrors and immovability. Everything in the room seems to be circulating around the roundel design on the carpet, around what is in reality an empty space. From

this one picture we might not know why she was portrayed in this way, whether in fact she has deliberately stood back and dressed up in her inherited luxury simply to display her new-found (and hard-earned) wealth.

The poignancy of this image of someone both lost and found, however, is not dissipated in discovering her mysterious reappearance in a history of Harlem, with the caption 'interior of a middle-class apartment'. Here, her tiny figure is an easy-to-miss detail in a sumptuous apartment; she is curled up on an armchair in the far corner, her dress and shawl merging into the fabrics and cushions. She seems to lie wanly at the feet of a glamorous white woman painted in the art nouveau style. The first monograph on VanDerZee also includes another, uncaptioned portrait of the heiress. This time dressed in a fur coat and stole and standing at the bottom of a stairwell, she again hesitates before taking the final step into the hall, like someone in a Gothic tale about to enter the *ghost of a home*.

## 2 ***Slum shocked***

In no better way can one see the effects of color prejudice on the mass of the Negroes than by studying their homes.

W.E.B. Du Bois, 'The Black North in 1901' (Green and Driver, 1978: 148)

\*

Although the apartment that the heiress wanders through is, like many other of VanDerZee's domestic interiors, a bourgeois construction, replete with middle-class comforts and status symbols, the desire of all African Americans to have an 'ideal' and respectable home should not be overlooked here simply because few photographers seem to have ventured into more modest living accommodations.

- **Fig. 172 Brown Brothers/Harlem family (c. 1915)**
- **Fig. 173 Brown Brothers/Interior (c. 1915)**

In fact, the Brown Brothers did take photographs of humbler homes in the early days of black Harlem. Two, taken in around 1915, show typical domestic spaces, evidence if it were needed of Jacob Riis's observation in *How the Other Half Lives* that there was 'no more clean and orderly community in New York than the new settlement of colored people that is growing up on the East Side from Yorkville to Harlem' (Riis, 1971: 116). The first photograph depicts a room almost as full of furnishings and decorations as that of the 'society ladies'. Although there is already a hint of the overcrowding to come in the insertion of a bed into what is otherwise a parlour, perhaps for one of the four children posed in the picture, the bed itself is a fine art nouveau-style brass bed with a clean, thick mattress. The picture rail is well used and

smaller pictures, including photographs, are propped on the mantelpiece. The flash has caught the mirror (or picture) which hangs between the windows, drawing our attention to the fact that it is oddly askew, a small touch of disorder in a neat family home.

The second photograph shows another family having dinner, posed as if advertising their wholesome American respectability. Father carves, while his wife looks on and three well-dressed children await their portions. The woman to the right, poised with a coffee jug, wears an apron, suggesting that she may have found employment with the family. The dining room itself is simply furnished but, thanks to the large window, light and airy.

- **Fig. 174 Lewis/Police officer victualling a needy family (n.d.)**

Another photographer, only identified as Lewis, took picture of such homes, but over a decade later and, it appears, in order to document relief efforts. The black population had expanded vastly since 1915 (it would quadruple to around 250,000 by 1940) but an already dismal employment record among African Americans, who were excluded from most white-collar and most semi-skilled jobs, was worsened by the Depression. By 1933, half the families in Harlem were on relief (they accounted for 20 per cent of New York's total of such families, although only 6 per cent of population were African American). This photograph, which shows a 'Police officer victualling a needy family', was included in Claude McKay's *Negro Metropolis*. The contrast with the earlier pictures is marked. Like the family dinner, this photograph is carefully posed, this time in order to capture the head of the family in a new role, as the recipient of charity. The parcel of food is changing hands, while two womenfolk watch, holding

young children on their hips. Like the man, they are not about to smile for the camera. Two boys appear to tend a sick relative, one holding a lamp Florence Nightingale-style, and the other stroking her head. She is laid on what looks like a makeshift pallet, covered in a heap of clothes and blankets. From what can be seen, the rest of the room is just as disorderly, its bleakness written on the father's face as this moment is captured by another stranger in the room.

In his book, *Inside Black America*, published in 1948, African American journalist Roi Ottley devotes a chapter to the 'slum-shocked', providing a graphic description of how the previous three decades have taken their toll on black living conditions:

Those who came to Harlem lived in unheated railroad flats... with dank, rat-infested toilets, foot-worn nondescript linoleum, dirty walls ripped and unpainted, and cockroaches creeping about the floors and woodwork. From dark unlit hallways came musty odours mingling with the smell of cooking. Ever present was the cacophony of grinding jukeboxes, squalling infants, and angry argument. For all this, white landlords had the effrontery to hang signs on the buildings specifying, "FOR SELECTED COLORED TENANTS ONLY." (Ottley, 1948: 120)

- **Fig. 175 Jack Manning/Violet Greene of West 127<sup>th</sup> Street Cleaning House, New York (c. 1939)**

The practice of charging African Americans higher rents for poorer accommodation than other migrants, scathingly criticised by Riis at the beginning of the century, continued right through this period – and well beyond, as Kenneth Clark in his seminal study, *The Dark Ghetto*, published in 1965, pointed out:

The condition of all but the newest buildings is poor. Eleven percent are classified as dilapidated by the 1960 census; that is, they do "not provide safe and adequate shelter," and thirty-three percent are deteriorating (i.e., "need more repair than would be provided in the course of regular maintenance"). There are more people in fewer rooms than elsewhere in the city. Yet the rents and profits from Harlem are often high, as many landlords deliberately crowd more people into buildings in slum areas, knowing that the poor have few alternatives. (Clark, 1965: 30)

Jack Manning's portrait of Violet Greene, of West 127<sup>th</sup> Street, busy cleaning a corner of her family's apartment shows both the dilapidation of such accommodation and, by choosing to focus in on this corner, its cramped spaces. In one reading, this is a relatively simple documentary photograph depicting the effort, however hopeless, to maintain a clean and hygienic home, an effort in which the child is expected to play her role. In another reading, however, the figure of the child is more troubling. She is turned away from the (white) photographer, presenting to our gaze not her face but the back of her head with its matted hair. She seems to balance on one leg, the other mysteriously absent. She is a ragged creature in the corner of a rundown kitchenette, scrubbing at the dirt, as if scrabbling to escape. There is more than a hint of the gothic in this photograph.

- **Fig. 176 Jack Manning/Elks parade (1938)**

Richard Wright was among numerous writers who condemned the widespread practice of carving up apartments into 'kitchenettes' in order to cram more tenants in:

What they do is this: they take, say, a seven-room apartment, which rents for \$50 a month to whites, and cut it up into seven small apartments, of one room each; they install one small gas stove and one small sink in each room. The Bosses of the Buildings rent these kitchenettes to us at the rate of, say, \$6 a week. Hence, the same apartment for which white people – who can get jobs anywhere and who receive higher wages than we – pay \$50 a month is rented to us for \$42 a week! (Wright, 1988: 104)

By most accounts, the worst example of this practice was the block in 'the Valley', between 142<sup>nd</sup> and 143<sup>rd</sup> Street and between Lenox and Seventh Avenues, which by 1940 housed 4,700 people, 671 per acre, a population so dense that, one journalist from *Look* magazine claimed, it would be the equivalent of getting 'the entire American population on to half of Manhattan Island' (Tucker, Cass and Daiter, 2001: 39). Of the 202 blocks of 'Negro' Harlem, this was declared by The Mayor's Commission on City Planning 'the city's most crowded tenement block'. This was to provide the inspiration for *The Most Crowded Block (in the World)* portfolio.

One of the few photographs from the *Harlem Document* to be published to a wide contemporary readership, Manning's picture of an Elks parade in 1938 was used to illustrate the *Look* article ('244,000 Native Sons', published on 21 May 1940), along with others by him and Siskind. The article related the image to the issues of overcrowding, stating that the parade 'brought these hundreds of Negroes from their packed apartments to dramatize the worst housing problems in New York'.

- **Fig. 177 Brown Brothers/Apartment of a Harlem working-class family (1910)**
- **Fig. 178 Aaron Siskind/Mother and daughter at dinner (c. 1938)**

As Manning's photograph shows, the PhotoLeague team sometimes took their camera into the interiors of such blocks to depict the impact of crowding on domestic life. Some interesting points of comparison may be made between Siskind's portrait of a mother and daughter having dinner, in around 1938, with a Brown Brothers' picture of a working-class family apartment, taken in 1910.

The earlier picture has a tableau-like quality to it, like a Victorian narrative painting of racial uplift, the evening meal finished and the two figures snug in their own private thoughts and space. The mother pensively finishes the dishes, the 'angel of the house' in her white dress, while her son is adrift in his book, a picture of diligence and aspiration. It is easy to imagine the father entering this space, pleased with its neat cleanliness – the crockery stowed into the dresser, the white starched tablecloth: everything in its place, everyone happily doing their duty. While this photograph manages to include the whole width of the room, Siskind's photograph includes only part of a similar dining area, which we seem to be glimpsing through what might be a door, on the left. This indistinct dark vertical form casts an odd, unreadable shadow against the far wall, and this, combined with the cloud of washing hanging from the ceiling, the line stretching out, presumably, into another, hidden space, breaks up any potential unity of space of the kind that can be instantly read in the Brown Brothers photograph. This composition is already signalling Siskind's frequent visual reference to cramped and incoherent spaces – the fragmentation, in other words, of domestic space – within

such apartments. Although there is no way of knowing, the missing father here may not be coming back, given the statistics about broken families at this time and remembering Richard Wright's bleak image of 'thousands of one-room homes where our black mothers sit, deserted, with their children about their knees' (Wright, 1988: 109).

What makes this photograph relatively unusual among those photographs of Siskind's collected in *Harlem: Photographs 1932-1940* is that, although the mother has lowered her eyes, neither she nor her daughter react unduly to the white photographer's presence; many other subjects clearly feel he has intruded into their space. The bond between mother and child seems as close, if not closer than in the earlier photograph. If the earlier photograph places mother and child into a defining setting, this photograph seems rather to find its focus in what mother and child create between them, despite their denuded, somewhat makeshift environment, signalled by the milk-churn seat. The camera has caught the 'filled' space between them, the child talking to her mother, her hand gesturing. This is still home - the mother still provides, still strives to keep things clean and tidy - but not entirely sweet home.

- **Fig. 179 Weegee/Portrait of Harlem mother and child (c.1943)**
- **Fig. 180 Gordon Parks/Red Jackson (1948)**

Siskind's restraint here bears dividends in producing a subtle picture of deprivation, where social concern over the 'victims', distancing and potentially patronising, is balanced by an acknowledgement of their humanity: these are embattled people with dignity. What might have been an intrusion looks here like a privileged glimpse into a private and sustaining space against the odds.

Such photographs seem more likely to be effective now than the more expressionistic or tendentious school of ghetto reportage by the work of African American photographer Gordon Parks, although his first photo spread for *Life* magazine in 1948, from which this photograph is taken, must have shaken a few readers - as did, on a regular basis, Weegee's hard-bitten, hard-hitting work for New York's tabloids. When he put some of his pictures together with a brief text for *The Naked City*, Weegee included a section on Harlem. The text for the first photograph, considered here, includes an explanatory comment that 'the ones that get pushed around themselves [i.e. the poor whites] now started pushing the others around by throwing rocks into the windows of the colored occupants' (Weegee, 1985: 190).

A young mother and child stand, framed within the doorway of their home, looking directly at the camera and the viewer. Similar figures appear in many other documentary photographs, where they seem to resist an unseen but powerful threat to home and family. Here, the safe domestic space, signified by the lock and the gentility of the lace curtain, has been transgressed. The smashed window is a broken boundary but also a smashed image, the edge of the jagged glass fracturing the mother's face - and, as the text suggests, the black community itself.

In Parks' picture, too, broken shards of glass provide an apt symbol for a shattered domestic space. Red Jackson, pictured here, is a gang member. While African American women attempt to resist oppression and to nurture community within the space of the home, black men locate their site of resistance in the culture of the street. 'Homeplace', for Red, is stifling, something to break out of.

Wright finds the ultimate cause not in gender but in the spatial:

The kitchenette fills our black boys with longing and restlessness, urging them to run off from home, to join together with other restless boys in gangs, that brutal form of courage. (Wright, 1988: 111)

- **Fig. 181 M & M Smith/Dispossess (n.d.)**
- **Fig. 001 Brown Brothers/A sidestreet between Lenox and Seventh Avenue (c. 1915)**

The kitchenette is, however, a spatial expression of social relations, in this case between the absentee (white) landlord – Wright's 'Bosses of the buildings' - and the suffering (black) tenant. As the Depression deepened, that relationship also made itself spatially evident in the uncanny event of eviction, when home was turned inside out, apparently by invisible forces.

This photograph of such an eviction, for non-payment of rent, was just one of the many M & M Smith took for the black press. As the crowds attest, in this case kept in order by mounted (white) policemen, this was inevitably a public event. Possessions are piled up on the sidewalk as people look on with mingled fascination and sympathy.

The old woman sobbed, point to the stuff piled along the kerb. 'Just look what they doing to us. Just look,' looking straight at me. And I realized that what I'd taken for junk was actually worn household furnishings. (Ellison, 1965: 216/7)

The disturbing eviction scene in *Invisible Man* seems to clarify the peculiar horror of being ejected from the private and

cherished space of home. What appears to be items of junk on the public space of the sidewalk are in fact the treasured tokens of private space, those objects that helped to fashion it, that are invested with a meaning no one else can appreciate, like the 'cast offs' that Mrs Hill uses to tell the story of herself. The narrator is aware of a sense of taboo in the scene:

Now I recognised a self-consciousness about them, as through they, we, were ashamed to witness the eviction, as though we were all unwilling intruders upon some shameful event; and thus we were careful not to touch or start too hard at the effects that lined the kerb; for we were witnesses of what we did not wish to see... (ibid: 219)

The photograph by the Brown Brothers appears to be a picture of arrival and of optimism, but next to the picture of eviction, it is striking how tentative this bold 'invasion' appears. There are no looks of triumph or happiness, only a polite pausing for the photographer. The occupation of the 'choice locality' is indeed only conditional, as the sign over the door indicates: 'Apartments to Let: 3 or 4 Rooms with Improvements for Respectable Colored Families Only'. Inquiries are to be addressed to the janitor, based downtown, in Chelsea.

These household effects on the sidewalk and the junk piled up by the steps seem but a caption away from a scene of eviction.

- **Fig. 182 Roy DeCarava/Man sitting on stoop with baby (1952)**
- **Fig. 183 Austin Hansen/Woman and baby evicted from their Harlem apartment (1950s)**

These two pietàs from the 1950s are by Roy DeCarava and Austin Hansen. In a brief reference to this photograph in his monograph on DeCarava, Peter Galassi writes:

Here we are sometimes able to read the expression of the face, but the psychology of these pictures is expressed as much through the posture of the body. Notice... how firmly the man holding his infant child has planted his feet on the sidewalk. (Galassi, 1995: 18)

This rootedness is, however, problematised when set against Hansen's photograph, taken at around the same time. Here, a mother and child sit in a very similar spot by a stoop, but this is an eviction. Where DeCarava's figures are central in the picture, set into the embrace of the stoop as if permanent, Hansen's subjects are parked to one side while the furniture is unceremoniously pushed down the steps to rest on the sidewalk with a suitcase. As in the Brown Brothers' photograph, our eye travels up the sidewalk, this time meeting a group of onlookers, who are perhaps discussing the woman's situation. She is faced towards the photographer but does not look towards the lens. She stares instead into the middle distance, her baby's empathic crying standing in for the mother's anguish.

### **3     *Diminishing into shadow***

Looking eastward from the towers of Riverside Church, perched among the university buildings on the high banks of the Hudson River, in a valley far below, waves of gray rooftops distort the perspective like the surface of a sea. Below the surface, in the murky waters of fetid tenements, a city of black people who are convulsed in desperate living, like the voracious churning of millions of hungry cannibal fish. ...That is Harlem. ... The fat black men in their black garments in the creeping black hearse were part of the eerie night. The old Cadillac motor, in excellent repair, purred softly as a kitten.

...Goldy alighted to the sidewalk noiselessly. Jackson took a deep breath and followed. They went across the sidewalk, entered a long, narrow hall lit by a dim fly-specked bulb.

...It was a long hall, diminishing into shadow.

Chester Himes (1985: 93)

This long hall, from Chester Himes' 1957 novel *A Rage in Harlem*, reproduces the larger landscape outside - dark and shadowy, squalid and degraded - and it illustrates a peculiarly modern urban gothic. The violence and menace of the classical Gothic landscape of castles and forests, Fred Botting suggests, are translated into the city's sinister and labyrinthine streets, the city becoming 'a site of nocturnal corruption and violence, a locus of real horror' (Botting, 1996: 11). The clarity and visibility of the rational city, founded on the grid of the Enlightenment, has its counter-narrative in this other city, hidden and distorted as if under water. The mysterious gloom that characterises the

atmosphere of classical Gothic is overdetermined here not just by the gray murkiness of the decaying landscape but by the blackness of the black-clothed figures in their black Cadillac moving through shadows into deeper shadow. The hallway is also linked to a Gothic trope: the ruined castle or haunted house with its hidden passageways and buried cellars (the hall here 'climbed steeply into pitch darkness', suggesting that it is, in some sense, underground).

- **Fig. 184 Roy DeCarava/Hallway (1953)**

This hallway, too, seems to be buried away deep inside the building - 'the dark entity of the house', as Gaston Bachelard describes the cellar in *The Poetics of Space* (1994: 18). This is one of Roy DeCarava's most famous photographs, the one he once said he would choose out of all his work to be marooned with (Galassi, 1996: 28). Captioned simply *Hallway*, it was taken in 1953 and is formally very simple. It depicts an impossibly narrow, dimly lit passage. To some, perhaps most viewers, it is an oppressive and claustrophobic image, with the walls pressing in and the eye drawn inexorably along a severe perspective into a vaporous darkness that the one visible bright bulb does nothing to dispel. Our position as the viewer is also quite odd. Judging by the amount of floor visible in the foreground, we do not seem to be standing in the hall but hovering in the air.

Hughes did not select *Hallway* for use in *The Sweet Flypaper*. Whether or not he felt that this particular photograph was too dark, in all senses, to include, there is no way of knowing. DeCarava himself believes that it contains light as well as dark, comfort as well as fear. In 1981 he told Sherry Turner DeCarava that:

It's about a hallway that I know I must have experienced as a child. Not just one hallway; it was all the hallways that I grew up in. They were poor, poor tenements, badly lit, narrow and confining; hallways that had something to do with the economics of building for poor people. ...It just brought back all those things that I had experienced as a child in those hallways. It was frightening, it was scary, it was spooky, as we would say when we were kids. And it was depressing. And yet, here I am an adult, years and ages and ages later looking at the same hallway and finding it beautiful. ...As beautiful as the photograph is, the subject is not beautiful in the sense of living in it. But beauty is in being alive – strange that I should use that word *living*! But it is alive. (Galassi, 1996: 28)

DeCarava is particularly fond of the photograph because it was, he says:

one of my first photographs to break through a kind of literalness. It didn't break through, actually, because the literalness is still there, but I found something else that is very strong and I linked it up with a certain psychological aspect of my own. It's something that I had experienced and is, in a way, personal, autobiographical. (ibid)

The photograph can be read on a 'literal' level: the 'scary' and 'depressing' hallway providing evidence of the 'economics of building for poor people'; and on a psychological or autobiographical level: 'all those things I had experienced as a child in those hallways'. Either way, this particular hallway can be read as a synecdoche for Harlem's deleterious physical condition and for DeCarava's childhood. It works as a

'penetrating insight' of the sociological kind that DeCarava and the Photo League both sought in their different ways, but it has another dimension: time - the past which returns, not as something dead but, to DeCarava's surprise, *living*.

This past which returns is profoundly spatial. The hallway moves DeCarava because, however confined and however compromised the space depicted by the camera, it is also the *lived* space of his earliest memories: home, in other words. As Bachelard remarks, 'the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us' – we never forget it and could still find our way around it without a problem: 'house images are in us as much as we are in them' (1994: 14). Looking at this image, DeCarava is in Bachelard's 'land of Motionless Childhood', his memory fixed in a spatial image (ibid: 4).

Shadows were to become more and more important in DeCarava's work, which he claims as evidence and celebration of light rather than some simplistic reference to blackness as a cultural marker. However, the shadows may be related to those that bell hooks, the African American theorist, speaks of to her sister, when she recalls their own childhood home.

Drawing on 'In Praise of Shadows', an essay by Tanizaki, hooks counters her sister's memory of 'an ugly place, crowded with objects' with her own fascination for the play of dark and light in the old house. The essayist's remark that 'our ancestors, forced to live in dark rooms, presently came to discover beauty in shadows' leads hooks to speculate that these shadows are actually within: 'We think about our skin as a dark room, a place of shadows ... we talk about the need to see darkness differently, to talk about it in a new way.' Out of this comes a longing for 'an aesthetic of blackness – strange and oppositional', which seems, incidentally or not, to

be a fair description of DeCarava's oeuvre and of this photograph, which is simultaneously ugly and beautiful (hooks, 1990: 113).

'All great, simple images reveal a psychic state', writes Bachelard. 'The house, even more than the landscape, is a "psychic state," and... it bespeaks intimacy.' It seems from DeCarava's rather stumbling attempts to get at the roots of the intimacy of this image for him – 'I linked it up with a certain psychological aspect of my own' – that he is unaware or unwilling to recognise the strong resemblance, immediately obvious to many viewers, of this long, dark, narrow passage with its almost curving walls to the birth canal or to the thighs and hidden sex of the mother, a location in Freudian terms that is both *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, the source of life and a source of terror, burial, castration (Freud, 1990 [1919]).

The hallway, then, is both uncanny *and* (to adopt Bachelard's term) felicitous. It is haunted, but for DeCarava at least the return of the past is no threat. This play between Gothic and felicitous space is explored through this chapter.

Finally, as in DeCarava's photograph of the hallway, the space of the home is not unthreatening, just as the modern city is not flooded with light but contains darkened spaces, like those in Himes' Harlem Valley. Anthony Vidler argues in *The Architectural Uncanny* that urban space is now 'assumed to hide, in its darkest recesses and forgotten margins, all the objects of fear and phobia that have returned with such insistency to haunt the imaginations of those who have tried to stake out spaces to protect their health and happiness. ... In every case, "light space" is invaded by the figure of "dark space"' (Vidler, 1992: 167/8).

The fear and the phobia of 'dark space' clearly impinge on the home as well as the built landscape. For the author of *The Dark Ghetto*, Kenneth B. Clark, the house is 'an extension of a man's personality', so if 'the Negro has to identify with a rat-infested tenement, his sense of personal inadequacy and inferiority ... is reinforced by the physical reality around him' (Clark, 1965: 27).

Richard Wright's description of the kitchenette in 'Death on the City Pavements', the urban chapter from *12 Million Black Voices*, is a key example of this. Wright's polemic is accompanied by a selection of grim documentary photographs, most taken by Russell Lee for the FSA.

- **Fig. 185 Russell Lee: Toilet in "kitchenette" apartment house, Chicago (n.d.)**

Wright describes the kitchenette as 'our prison, our death sentence without a trial, the new form of mob violence that assaults not only the lone individual, but all of us, in its ceaseless attacks' (Wright, 1988: 106). As Farah Griffin observes in *Who set you flowin'*, such texts present the kitchenette as a Foucauldian institution, where the tenant struggles with a hidden oppressor (Griffin, 1995). In that absence, Wright animates the kitchenette itself as the uncanny agent of rampant disease, family break-up and infant mortality. This urban domestic space itself is alive and malevolent. Lee's photographs focus on the filth and decay of the tenements. One simply shows a smashed up toilet, the floor littered with plaster and old timbers. In others, the occupants are pictured silent, still and abject against patched and peeling walls or amongst domestic detritus where they sit or sleep.

The uncanny aspect of these photographs lies in the return of the Delta cabin of slavery days, which the migrants thought they had left in the past; 'a Harlem tenement is a hundred Delta cabins, plus tuberculosis', commented Thomas Sancton (Greenberg, 1991: 185). It was these social and economic realities that the Feature Group aimed to reform and Roy DeCarava to resist. However, their photographs are rather more subtle than Lee's and, arguably, allow their human subjects greater agency.

In his foreword to Siskind's *Harlem*, Gordon Parks describes Siskind's document as 'a mirror of my own past' as well as the collective past:

It is an ongoing memory of Black people living in crowded kitchenettes; suffering the loneliness of rented bedrooms ... and grasping a patch of happiness whenever and wherever they could find it. It is a nostalgic look at a kind of past that threatens to hang around Harlem for a long time to come... (Siskind, 1991: 1)

In juxtaposing 'nostalgia' with 'threat' in viewing photographs of Harlem's past, perhaps expressing a real *home-sickness* for Harlem, Parks hints at both felicitous and Gothic space (an atmosphere that 'hangs around Harlem') and thus offers a fitting introduction to photographs that are evidently taken to 'mirror social problems' but that may also reveal unexpected and uncanny elements as well as signs of 'homeplace'.

- **Fig. 186 Aaron Siskind/A hallway (c. 1936-39)**

The kitchenette, with its crowded rooms and incessant bedlam, provides an enticing place for crimes of all sorts – crimes against women and children or any

stranger who happens to stray into its dark hallways.  
(Wright, 1988: 108)

The apartment building's blurring of the distinction between public and private space through its shared entrances and staircases had begun to look less liberating and more risky as living conditions deteriorated. Siskind's photograph of a hallway is very different from DeCarava's in its composition and in the inclusion of a human figure, but its mood is similarly uneasy. Much of the photograph represents the space we, as viewers, inhabit; its dense shadow dominates the image, its blackness framing the more informative space of the hall. Light in the picture does not come from the bare bulb over the doorframe but enters into the hall from outside.

The decorative tiled floor signifies the building's origins as an elegant apartment house, while the two doors ahead are pitted and scratched by time and neglect. The light, which seems to emanate obscurely from below, catches the young man's face, his profile mysteriously turned away from the photographer, and his hat which casts a deep shadow over the back of his head. He does not appear to be moving or about to move. An odd-looking shadow on the floor in front of him may indicate another figure is present, out of frame. The photograph seems to combine the documentary (a man waiting silently in a hallway, framed by shadows) with the Gothic (a lost soul in a shabby apartment house, hemmed in by ominous darkness). That combination can be discerned in other photographs taken by Siskind in the late 1930s.

- **Fig. 187 Aaron Siskind/Two boys in bedroom (c. 1936-9)**

This photograph shows two young men, one dressed in a coat and cap, interacting in the doorway of what may be a

bedroom. Beyond and between them we can see light from a window in the next room. Part of a bed is visible in the foreground, but its mattress seems to have been pulled back or removed. The wall is bare, apart from what may be a light cord hanging down it and the linoleum does not seem to reach the skirting board.

The more one looks at this photograph, the more disturbing it becomes and the murkier its expressive or sociological intentions, although poverty is certainly indicated. The bed has been rendered useless, no longer an item of domestic comfort but something for the junk heap. It and the roughly plastered wall occupy roughly half the photograph, but the composition seems to offer the two figures less space, pushed into the corner of the room and the frame. What drama is being played out here? Is the well-dressed visitor a friend paying a call or an official come for the rent? Are we witnessing a stage in an eviction? Smiling, with hands folded over his bulk, the visitor seems to have the advantage over the other young man, who solemnly stands, not speaking but pointing, it seems ineffectually. An electric wire snakes along the floor between the pair, with the visitor's shoe calmly resting on it. Equally strange is the out-of-focus object that seems to hover between us and the visitor. This apparition may well be a cloth draped over a dresser but the way it has been allowed to intrude into the otherwise sharply focused realism of the photograph is puzzling.

- **Fig. 188 Aaron Siskind/Young girl and dress dummy (c. 1936-39)**

This photograph is equally, if not more mysterious. The young woman or girl in the black shift seems to be emerging from a hiding place. Perhaps unwilling to face the white stranger with the camera, she seems to be heading off

somewhere, the brushed back strands of her hair suggesting an unnatural speed. The sociological purpose of the photograph is hard to discern. The untidy piles of blankets and cloths seem to be linked in some way with the dressmaker's dummy, perhaps indicating that a modest business is being carried on in this apartment. However, the documentary record is overwhelmed by distracting and uncanny details.

The headless dummy in its Edwardian-style clothing seems joined to the girl's figure and, in facing the other way, creates of them both a strange Janus-like creature of past and present. Among the mundane heaps of cloth, a small primitive stone figure is lying, as if placed there like an ancient talisman. And as the eye travels down to the floor, the enormous deteriorating shoe the young girl wears comes into view.

- **Fig. 189 Aaron Siskind/Woman climbing stairs (c. 1936-39)**

This seems a more straightforward photograph, with a clear social point to make about the condition of the Harlem tenement. Structural decay and disintegration is visible, the lathe revealed beneath the plaster, the banisters badly scuffed and the woodwork in need of repainting. The old woman climbing the stairs, their steepness emphasised by how she is placed in the frame, adds another vivid element to this social document. Wearing a kind of mob cap, she may be a cleaner. However, this reading is complicated by odd details. Already made mysterious by averting her face, the woman's purpose and identity are rendered indecipherable by the misshaped garments she is wearing, in particular the poncho-like sacking around her shoulders, which seems to contain a bulky object hanging down behind her.

In all these photographs, there are gothic intrusions – inexplicable shapes and unreadable shadows – that sit oddly with Siskind's avowed documentary purpose. Yet he is equally sensitive to felicitous space.

- **Fig. 190 Aaron Siskind/Man asleep with white pin-ups (c. 1940)**

The catalogue to the 1939 exhibition of the *Harlem Document* claimed that:

[the photographer's] world of physical objects has become animate with relationships: chair, house, shoe, the kitchen table, informed with the life of the people who know and use them (Tucker, Cass and Daister, 2001: 36)

This tender image of a black man sleeping amongst his pin-ups of white film stars (Edward G. Robinson among them) is, as Natanson observes, an ironic statement rather than an indictment (Natanson, 1992: 46). The photographs on his walls hover over him, as if illustrating his dreams. The bed seems to float on black shadows. The mirror catches the whiteness of his T-shirt but dissolves into a misty obscurity rather than offering a sharp reflection. The simply furnished room has been transformed into felicitous, dreamy space.

- **Figs. 191-193 Aaron Siskind/Three domestic interiors (c. 1936-1940)**

These three photographs may denote cramped and shabby spaces, but their details reveal poignant signs of 'homeplace'. Beginning from the left, the first photograph shows a kitchen space tucked into the corner of the apartment. The utensils

and work areas may be basic but they seem clean and carefully tidied. The woman of the house is looking into a cupboard, but this may just be a pose. She looks as if she has dressed up for the photograph, her hair up and wearing a smart outfit with strappy shoes. Framed by lace curtains, she is in a kind of ideal home.

The second photograph shows a woman silhouetted in the doorway, as if telling stories to the small boy, her fingers like a shadow puppet. The child is alert, surrounded by his toys - train set, bear, brick and ball - in a warmly lit space. The lack of carpet might hint at privation but this is above all felicitous space. The final photograph shows a classic seamstress image, hemmed in but at the centre of her world.

- **Fig. 194 Roy DeCarava/*Ketchup bottles, table and coat* (1952)**

The understated style of DeCarava's photographs seems far removed from such extremes. In this table-top still-life, captioned *Ketchup bottles, table and coat*, taken in 1952, he depicts ordinary objects but composes them as if they were animate and lights them as if they are to be exalted. Human presence is written into this space, the coat standing in for the woman who has just finished her humble meal. Light falls on a simple table, around which, in photographs used later in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, family members gather to eat and talk. Although not apparently radical or political, to use hooks' terminology, this picture nevertheless seems to 'confront the issue of humanization', creating through photographic mood a portrait of 'homeplace'.

The long, fictionalised 'family' sequence in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, which runs over nine spreads and includes thirty photographs, is drawn from two genuine Harlem

families, with whom DeCarava spent a lot of time before taking his pictures. Almost all of them are set in the kitchen of the apartment where Joe and Julia James ('Melinda' and 'Jerry' in the book) live with their five children. Half the photographs are candid close-ups of family members, singly or in pairs or groups and, although these photographs contain little if any surrounding domestic detail, the lighting and the pose - usually an embrace of some kind: child with adult, husband with wife - confirm they are taking place within the safe space of home.

- **Fig. 195 Roy DeCarava/Two couples dancing, group at table (1953)**

The party held in the kitchen for friends demonstrates the way in which the space of the home is transformed into a place not only of the family, but of cultural continuity as well, recalling Bachelard's 'councils of continuity'. Two women are pictured singing and narrator 'Sister Mary' confesses that, still awake in the early hours along with the youngest members of the family, she can be persuaded into singing the blues. This takes her back to her youth and 'Melinda's daddy' back in South Carolina, and forges a link between the past and present generations. The kitchen becomes a theatre for black memory and art, where the performers and the audience are members of the same ongoing community. In this respect, DeCarava's photographs record the complexity of home space that Teather describes: 'a place where we are accepted and affirmed as who we want to be'.

However, at the same time as they evoke the closeness of family and community ties, the photographs depict another kind of closeness. The space of the kitchen is barely adequate to contain the lives that are celebrated by DeCarava and Hughes in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. The frame is

crowded with figures, dancing right up against the fridge, squeezed behind small tables, almost forced into intimacy. Removed from Hughes' reassuring text, some of the photographs used in *Sweet Flypaper* lose their status as representations of 'felicitous' space and move into something darker, that Hughes has repressed.

- **Fig 196 Roy DeCarava/Window and Stove (1951)**

In his text for this photograph, entitled *Window and Stove* in DeCarava's recent monograph (Galassi, 1996), Hughes' narrator, the Harlem grandmother, claims it as 'homeplace': 'When I get through with my pots and pans, ever so once in a while, I put on my best clothes.'

Another narrator might note the bleak analogies between the industrial landscape of the stove and of the world outside, the looming grayness of a Harlem tenement with its water tower. Another might, like Johnny Grimes in James Baldwin's 1954 novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, observe how a patina of dirt compromises the light that enters the dark interior of the kitchen:

The room was narrow and dirty; nothing could alter its dimensions, no labour could ever make it clean. Dirt was in the walls and the floorboards, and triumphed beneath the sink where cockroaches spawned; was in the fine ridges of the pots and pans, scoured daily ... The windows gleamed like beaten gold or silver, but now John saw, in the yellow light, how fine dust veiled their doubtful glory. (Baldwin, 1991: 24)

The brutal clarity with which this adolescent narrator seems to be seeing this familiar space as if for the first time seems due to the 'pale end-of-winter sunlight that filled the room

and yellowed all their faces', intensifying an illusion that his mother and brother are 'figures on a screen'. At the end of his litany of dirt, when he finally identifies the filth with his mother, he sees her care-worn face and is struck with shame:

Through a storm of tears that did not reach his eyes, he stared at the yellow room; and the room shifted, the light of the sun darkened, and his mother's face changed. Her face became the face he gave her in his dreams, the face that had been hers in a photograph he had seen once, long ago, a photograph taken before he was born. This face was young and proud, uplifted, with a smile that made the wide mouth beautiful and glowed in the enormous eyes. It was the face of a girl who knew that no evil could undo her, and who could laugh, surely, as his mother did not laugh now. Between the two faces there stretched a darkness and a mystery that John feared, and that sometimes caused him to hate her. (ibid: 24-25)

It is as if the sunlight that exposes the true condition of his home in such startling photographic detail has now suddenly developed a repressed image from the past. The existential panic these conflicting yet connected visions inspire in young Johnny gives him 'a need to touch things, the tables and chairs and the walls of the room, to make certain that the room existed and that he was in the room.' He needs to be 'at home' again, not realising that home, the room of the past, the place of his birth, is within him and always ready to haunt the tawdry present with its uncanny beauty.

## **Chapter Five**

### ***The submerged self: Portraiture and performance***

The photographic image for African Americans is constantly examined for evidence of the submerged self that speaks and performs.

Robert A. Hill (1994: 202)

This chapter examines photographic portraits and self-portraits of individuals. In terms of my overall thesis, the following analyses are once again concerned with the visible results of a struggle over space, the effects of invisible white power and evidence of black resistance to that power. In this case, the space represented by the photograph is that of the 'geography closest in': the body and its relationship to its immediate environment. Henri Lefebvre's notion of 'rhythm analysis' – the spatio-temporal rhythms of the body – also seems pertinent here, especially his observation that '[t]he whole of (social) space proceeds from the body' and that the 'passive body (the senses) and the active body (labour) converge in space' (Lefebvre, 1991: 405).

As the focus will be on portraiture, defined here as a contract of some sort between the photographer and the 'sitter' or subject, the setting or backdrop, whether created in a photographic studio or given in the built environment of the home or the street, will be as carefully considered as the bodily signs of the subject. The body exists in relation to its physical circumstances, which also include the presence of the photographer. That relationship may also be considered a literal (legal) and metaphorical (symbolic) space of potential struggle, as can be seen in these photographs:

- **Fig. 197 Aaron Siskind/Young woman (c.1940)**
- **Fig. 198 Roy DeCarava/Couple, Fifth Avenue (1951)**

In Aaron Siskind's photograph, the young woman frowns at the photographer, refusing to offer a conventional pose. Although she does not physically disrupt the photographic act of portraiture, for example by turning away, her unsmiling face suggests that she feels it as an intrusion, indicating that, in this case, the contract between photographer and subject is unequal. The intrusion is, on one level, spatial; her dignified scowl might be read as a territorial sign that her personal space has been invaded. This resistance can be found in many other examples of documentary photography, where an outsider, often, though not always, a representative of the dominant culture, has had the temerity to take pictures of people, usually poorer or less advantaged, with whom they may not have negotiated a full and equal contract before taking their picture. Similar resistance can also be detected in the photograph of a white couple on Fifth Avenue, taken by Roy DeCarava. These two monumental visages, set flush against the wall as if carved from its white stone, again seem to betray a sense of intrusion, even fear; the camera points up at them, emphasising both a certain arrogance and a heightened awareness of their spatial vulnerability. They do not quite meet the camera's gaze as directly as the young woman's in Siskind's portrait, suggesting that here the contract is even more one-sided, closer to the hit-and-run approach of William Klein's street photography than to DeCarava's usual warm and consensual portrayal of black subjects.

In both cases, the territory in question is racially inscribed and doubly so: white pedestrians in midtown are not used to black photographers, still less to have them snatch their pictures, and not only is Siskind a photographer operating in the overdetermined black space of Harlem, but he is a white

photographer. The resistance of his black subjects, especially when singled out for portraits, is frequently evident in their direct but unsmiling response to his gaze - a woman marcher, a landlord. In all these cases, personal space is also racially inscribed; the question of proximity between white bodies and black bodies, so well evoked by Invisible Man's discomfiture on his first subway ride up to Harlem, crushed up against a large woman and transfixed by 'a large mole that arose out of the oily whiteness of her skin', is also uncomfortably posed here (Ellison, 1965: 131).

- **Fig. 199 Carl Van Vechten/Self-portrait with Ethel Waters (n.d.)**

Carl Van Vechten's self-portrait with the celebrated performer Ethel Waters is intriguing in this respect. Arguably the single most important white patron of African American culture, both the high culture of the Renaissance and that of the theatre world, the flamboyant Van Vechten took pictures of almost every significant artist and performer active in the 1930s and 1940s. Here, for once, he has included himself in the picture. Although the demeanour of his sitters is generally friendly and relaxed in the portraits he makes of them (or, at the worst, neutral and polite), the situation depicted here is more complicated. Although still relaxed, her fingers spread and with a smile in place, Waters does not look entirely comfortable with the proximity of Van Vechten, dressed it seems in a dressing-gown over his sports shirt. Their eyes engage, his looking down into hers; his right arm is either supporting his weight or around her waist. It is hard to know whether they are both in on a personal joke here or whether he presumes too much on his power, both as patron and as photographer and image-maker.

Although most of the portraits considered in this chapter are based on carefully negotiated contracts between photographer

and subject, the relationship still contains potential tensions and conflicts – as anyone who has had their photograph taken will know. The act of photography inevitably implies a (literal) *self*-consciousness; the subject is aware that he or she is being looked at and will respond to that gaze somewhere along a spectrum from deliberate, even exhibitionistic performance for the lens to shy withdrawal and aversion, even refusal of the contract itself. This situation represents a heightened form of everyday social interaction, which Erving Goffman calls 'the presentation of self' (Goffman, 1971).

One definition of consciousness is that it includes both the awareness of knowing oneself and of oneself being known, enabling one to see oneself as others might: *I am aware of how you might see me*. The self, for Goffman, is socially produced, a kind of mask created through a dramatic performance that individuals themselves may or may not believe in but which nevertheless determines their behaviour as persons. According to Charles Lemert and Ann Branaman, Goffman's central idea of the self as a social product is twofold: 'even though individuals play an active role in fashioning these self-indicating performances, they are generally constrained to present images of themselves that can be socially supported in the context of a given status hierarchy' (1997: xlv).

This seems closely related to the notion of 'double-consciousness', as famously defined by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, at least in his reference to the 'sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others'. The negotiation of an acceptable self with others is, in the case of African American persons, however, far more unequal than among white Americans, given the 'status hierarchy' of racist culture. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, first published in 1952, Frantz Fanon spells out how black skin is *taken for* performance.

I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance. ...I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am fixed. (Fanon, 1986: 116)

Implied in this fixedness is the way in which dominant white looks forbid an active role for blacks in fashioning a self and, indeed, how the white gaze *objectifies* blacks. Rather than being able to negotiate individual 'masks', blacks have been masked by white culture, rendered either invisible or absorbed into one of a very limited repertoire of racist caricatures, reflected and sustained in visual culture, including, as Nicholas Natanson suggests, photographic representations up to at least the 1940s:

Photographic depictions of African Americans during this [New Deal] period tended to fall into distinct genres. Prominent was the Colorful Black, seen frequently in the white-edited mass media, in forms varying from watermelon-eaters and cotton-patch snoozers to high-spirited military enlistees. There was the Noble Primitive. ... On the other extreme lay the Black Victim, sufficiently pathetic ... to invite associations with the old colourful stereotypes. There was the Transformed Black, with a dehumanised "before" giving way to an artificial "after." (in Willis and Lusaka, 1996: 99)

Blacks, Gerald Early remarks, 'have not only been pervasively caricatured across the entire range of the culture', from academic treatises to strip cartoons, but these caricatures have also been 'passionately defended as anthropologically accurate' (Early, 1994: 160). The vehemence with which these racist masks have been imposed suggests how fundamental the issue of representation is, both to whites, who define their own selves in part through the 'othering' of blacks, and to blacks themselves, who have had to struggle against an imposed sense

of *self-alienation* – defined as ‘the state of awareness in which the self becomes foreign, or strange to itself’ or as, in Du Bois’s stronger terms, ‘measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity’ (Du Bois, 1989: 3).

Du Bois claims that there is a fundamental problem for African Americans: that they are split between being a Negro and being American. This relates particularly to looking and being looked at. Self-image is, by dictionary definition, one’s own idea or picture of oneself, especially in relation to others. David Goldberg sums up the predicament for those who would be American *and* Negro in a racist society: ‘The social formation of the subject involves in large part thinking (of) oneself in terms of – literally *as* – the image projected in prevailing concepts of the prevailing discursive order’ (Goldberg, 1993: 2).

One critical question, which much of this chapter will be exploring, is whether the vast body of photographic portraits commissioned, accumulated and cherished by African Americans since the very beginnings of the technology represents a decisive intervention into the space of representation, wresting a black self – or, connectedly, a black identity – from the prevailing conceptual order. Goldberg offers a hint that this might be possible when he allows that the subject, although mediated by, is not ‘quite *cemented* by the set of discursive practices and the values embedded in them’. (ibid; my italics) – thus opening up the possibility of creating a self behind the imposed mask, as suggested in the old blues lyric: ‘Got one mind for white folks to see/ ‘nother for what I know is me’ (Huggins, 1995: 261). This relates to James C. Scott’s notion of the hidden transcript and his questioning of early studies of black personality based on ‘the “face-grows-to-fit-the mask” approach, positing instead that the individual has some control over the roles imposed by powerful others (Scott, 1990: 76).

Robert A. Hill's notion of the 'submerged self', noted above, is clearly relevant to the examination of photographic portraits here, as are these observations on Marcus Garvey's skill as 'a master manipulator of the visual image':

The martial image of Garvey is the perfect metaphor of this subversive language in which the visual doubles as a voice. ...What is alive in Garvey's portrait ... is, ultimately, not so much the vision as it is the performance of that vision.' (Hill, 1994: 202)

The notion of the visual as a voice recalls a fundamental assumption made throughout this thesis: that the portrayed can speak back to us, through space and time.

\*

Personal portraits are probably the commonest photographic genres within the archive, so I have selected and organised these photographs into six brief albums, each a case study of a particular kind of portrait and a particular set of related issues. The first album is the biggest, as it focuses on the photographic studio and its operation as a factory of images. In particular, I consider the ways in which what might be called 'Edwardian' photographic practice provided Harlemites with an affirmative theatre of 'Negro' aspiration and 'American' assimilation. I argue that the studio offered a safe space, where the self (or what was thought of as the self) could be presented, even invented. Just as David Goldberg (in *Racist Culture*) and others see the possibility of organising affirmative resistance on the margins, in the 'periphrastic space' allowed the black community, so the 'fictional' space of the photographic studio and of the directed photograph itself can also be identified as a safe space, where the subjects have the option of exercising power – in this case, over their own representations.

At the beginning of this period only the relatively prosperous could afford to commission studio portraits, certainly from such artists as VanDerZee and James Latimer Allen. Camera Dia Holloway writes that Allen and other black photographers from the 1920s and 1930s responded to the need among the African American elite to lay claim to bourgeois status, by creating 'an honorific portraiture that would situate their clients within this expanded social sphere' (Holloway, 1999: 13). This is undoubtedly accurate as far as it goes, but it does not convey the sense of theatre and play that one can detect in many studio portraits. From the later 1930s, M & M Smiths' studio, became, by one account, a kind of black 'Hollywood' for Depression-era Harlem.

The rebirth of black culture – or, in Alain Locke's own terms, the birth of the New Negro - was principally about 'self-portraiture'. The studio was the place where such vital 'self-portraits' of high culture could be manufactured. The second album concentrates first on how the black artist of the Harlem Renaissance is portrayed and then on the performers in a later 'jazz age', early 1950s period bebop. In both instances, the relationship of the body to performance is explored.

Moving literally on stage, the third album focuses particularly on the final year in the life of one of Harlem's earliest and best-loved stars, Florence Mills, and examines glamour and the question of colour in the much photographed world of the theatre.

In the fourth album, political image-making is considered, through the way in which W.E.B. Du Bois presents himself to the public gaze. It is worth noting here that many African American leaders were well aware, from very early on, of the potency of photography, both in creating an effective image and in putting

their messages across. Booker T. Washington commissioned portraits, such as that by Cornelius M. Battey, whom he persuaded to join him at Tuskegee, where the leader also paid Frances Benjamin Johnston to photograph his diligent students at class and at work. Marcus Garvey also saw the need to promote his image and the UNIA itself, particularly in the face of a black press often quite as hostile to his message as the white, so he hired James VanDerZee.

The fifth album considers the promotion of exemplary individuals, from 'race leaders' to culture heroes like Joe Louis and to 'Negro firsts', as the idea of the role model was gradually extended to working people. The final album turns to ordinary black folk, pictured within their families and neighbourhoods, and the chapter ends by drawing some conclusions about the way in which blacks negotiated with the American paradox of individualism and conformity to create a space for a battered but 'beloved community' to emerge.

## 1 **Masquerading: Studio portraits**

For black Americans the portrait studio which sustained the legend of the Wild West and documented the elegance of modern living was crucial to legitimizing our claim to full citizenship.

Jewelle Gomez (1986: 15)

- **Fig. 200 James VanDerZee/Beau of the Ball (1926)**
- **Fig. 201 James VanDerZee/Bookkeeper (1926)**

In making her claim that there has been a 'constant struggle on the part of black folks to create a counter-hegemonic world of images' - a 'visual resistance', no less - the first example of such an empowering image bell hooks selects is a snapshot of herself dressed up as a cowgirl. This 'proof that there was a "me" of "me"' shows hooks 'in costume, masquerading', as if only through a mask could the true self be discerned (hooks, 1994: 45).

The photograph, taken by James VanDerZee in 1926, and captioned *Beau of the Ball*, is a similar masked performance. The cross-dresser does not face the camera but strikes a pose, seeming to bear out Rodger Birt's description of the photographer's studio as 'an environment where various social personae and masks could be presented', allowing the client to 'construct alternative realities to the social roles determined by the exigencies of class and race' (Willis-Braithwaite and Birt, 1993: 44-45). Harlem's transvestite balls, however, with their mixture of white and black participants, were celebrated and popular affairs, and even reported in the black press, so neither class nor race seemed to have much to do with it. Nevertheless, such a photograph is, to my knowledge, unimaginable outside Harlem; it is an image of urban sophistication and of the

tolerance of difference made more possible by the anonymity granted by city life.

As in modern 'drag queen' events, a huge amount of effort has gone into this (re)presentation of vampish femininity; perhaps the motivation behind the commissioned photograph is that all this effort should be properly commemorated. If compared to VanDerZee's portrait of a bookkeeper, taken that same year, this man's performance for the camera seems rather convincing. Like his dowdier sister, he has curved his left arm with its limp wrist, a feminine pose in terms of formal portraiture, and crosses his legs demurely: indeed, the two poses seem very similar.

In her own way, the bookkeeper, in her plain dress and much more sensible shoes, (re)presents an equally positive image of the new opportunities opened up by the city, having secured such respectable employment. In the context of a marked lack of employment prospects for such qualified African American women – 70 percent of all such women employed in New York were in domestic or personal service - this is a portrait of achievement. 'One would have to wait many days,' commented one study a few years earlier, 'to hear of even one request for a Colored bookkeeper or stenographer' (Greenberg, 1991: 24). Although the photograph has been taken outside the studio, at her place of work, where props and settings of the kind used for the cross-dresser's portrait are unavailable, VanDerZee has greatly strengthened the image by the arrangement of significant objects and the effective use of natural light. Her work is lit up and the lamp is positioned over her virtuous head like a halo, just as the cross-dresser's romantic sensibilities are signalled by the flowers on the table and the painted background of a pastoral scene. One woman is poised with a pen over a thick ledger, a picture of diligence; the other 'woman' in mid-social whirl, with a phone about to ring.

The studio was a theatre in which director and subject (or actor) collaborated on a representation which was then represented photographically: a picture of a picture. The directorial mode, first theorized by A.D. Coleman, refers to the role of photographer as director, working – often in collaboration with their subjects – to realise a preconceived image. Rather than ‘taking’ a photograph from a scene, the photographer makes an image, creates a scene. A studio like VanDerZee’s (and, by extension, the spaces outside studios where images are manufactured) becomes a fictional space in which subjects present themselves or ‘actors’ ‘perform’. A spectrum of such experimentation can be seen in the photographs selected here, extending from straightforward-seeming portraits of upright (or uplifted) black citizens to fantastic scenarios, where long-dead or yet-to-be-born figures appear translucently on the studio set to accompany the living.

These photographs were almost always collaborations between the photographer and his client. The technical skill, however, lay in one area and what follows is a brief consideration of the ways in which the photographer helped to create the right effect(s) by organising the space in the studio, working with the sitter to achieve an appropriate pose and then shaping the final product.

Early twentieth-century photographers drew on the experience of over fifty years of studio photography. An early daguerreotypist, Marcus Aurelius Root, gave this advice on how to create a perceptive portrait, revealing of character:

The sitter, before a transcript of him is taken, should be put into a *mood*, which shall make his face *diaphanous* with the expression of his highest and his best, i.e. his *genius, essential self*. (Linkmann, 1993: 41)

Inspired by this tradition perhaps, James VanDerZee would take his time to assess his sitters and to select the right pose, lighting, props and setting, a practice that sometimes limited him to only three sessions a day. The relationship can also be charted through the variant photographs taken at the same session, as Van Vechten's portraits of writers such as Countee Cullen and Nella Larsen exemplify. In these, the photographer has each writer look full into the lens in one frame and then look down and to the side, producing a less direct and more ruminative flavour to the portrait.

Inherited traditions that continued well into the twentieth century included a set of assumptions about how sitters should pose. Smiling was for a long time only acceptable in portraits of entertainers. The three-quarter turn of the body, with eyes looking in the same direction as the head, to convey both solidity and a certain grace, was widely popular. Holloway argues that Allen, by photographing his subjects this way, rather than face on, as in scientific or criminal portraiture, was able to 'generate a dynamism that was associated with the bourgeois, i.e. respectable, subject' (Holloway, 1999:15).

This 'dramatic realization' of a bourgeois subject recalls Goffman's discussion of this aspect of the presentation of self:

...if the individual's activity is to become significant to others, he must mobilize his activity so that it will express *during the interaction* what he wishes to convey. ...in the case of some statuses dramatization presents no problem.... The roles of prizefighters, surgeons, violinists, and policemen are cases in point. (Goffman, 1971: 40)

The emphasis here is the author's but it does also make my point clear, that the sitter needs to convey their status in

presenting themselves to the camera in the 'interactive' and collaborative process of making a portrait.

- **Fig. 202 James VanDerZee/Dancer (1925 )**
- **Fig. 203 Eddie Elcha/Man holding a cigar and cane (c. 1922)**

The wine-flushed, bold-eyed boys, and even the girls,  
Devoured her shape with eager, passionate gaze;  
But looking at her falsely-smiling face,  
I knew her self was not in that strange place.

Claude McKay's poem of 1917, 'The Harlem Dancer' (in Lewis, 1995: 296), could describe so many young women in the chorus lines of the 1920s, presenting themselves – and absenting their selves – before the (mainly white) male gaze. However, the young dancer in this portrait made by VanDerZee in 1925 presents not just her exotic costume and her informal pose to the camera but a quietly impressive confidence and pride in her direct look. She has chosen this role and wants to be commemorated in it.

As other commentators have pointed out, roles and poses adopted in the studio were often inspired by popular urban culture, particularly the world of show business, movies, magazines and commercial advertising. Each photograph produced a space in which African Americans could expand and dream. Eddie Elcha's portraits move seamlessly from his images of chorus lines and dancers to stylish young men and women adopting theatrical props and poses in their presentation of the modern African American. The man with a cigar and a cane in a portrait by Elcha, taken in around 1922, reveals the self-consciousness of his pose by his sideways look, forcing us to engage not with his eyes but with his signifying props, held with careful panache, his hat and kerchief neatly in place.

This space for dreaming, as these photographs suggest, was literal as well as metaphoric, and there to be filled by the accoutrements of what Goffman calls the 'performance of self'. In his discussion about 'front' – 'that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance' - Goffman explores the role of objects in presenting the self: 'furniture, décor, physical layout, and other background items [...] supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it' (Goffman, 1971: 32). This could equally well be a description of a traditional studio setting, composed of such actual objects or painted versions of them.

Most pictorial backgrounds depicted either the bourgeois interior or the landowner's pastoral. As Rodger C. Birt indicates in his description of VanDerZee's studio, each type of background indicated a different mood, each suited to a particular type of sitter: the 'villa garden' set implied wealth and breeding; the 'moon over water' set provide the right mood for courting couples; the 'Gothic window' set was appropriate for family groups; and the 'fireplace' set, noted earlier, signified domesticity (Willis-Braithwaite and Birt, 1993: 45-46).

- **Fig. 204 Winifred Hall Allen/Untitled (n.d.)**
- **Fig. 205 Winifred Hall Allen/Two men looking over papers (n.d.)**
- **Fig. 206 Winifred Hall Allen/Sister Gertrude (n.d.)**

In looking through a number of portraits by the same photographer, the same setting and props begin to appear in picture after picture. Winifred Hall Allen's use of one 'villa garden' set can be tracked through three photographs here (and well beyond). In the first picture, a young woman is posing for a

personal portrait. Perched on a low table, she obeys the usual discretion (for women) of keeping her arms close to her body and her knees together. The wrought-iron gates into the garden – a painted *trompe l'oeil* – seem to swing open behind her; her fiancé waits perhaps just beyond the frame. In the second picture, two colleagues have come out into the fresh air to mull over some important business documents. Their obliviousness to the beauties of nature is echoed by the way the photographer has moved her camera in to make their bodies fill most of the frame, excluding all that is not essential to the decision they are making. In the third picture, a devout young nun, Sister Gertrude, clutching a bible, stares out at us. The pastoral has become sacred territory; the gateway behind her begins to look metaphorical.

Although such repetitions of settings and props in the work of studio photographers suggest that the studio operates as a kind of factory of images, the individuality of these portraits suggests that the given and static space of the studio setting is reshaped by others factors, including dress, pose and body language, brought to this space by active participants.

- **Fig. 207 Roy DeCarava/Self portrait (1956)**
- **Fig. 208 James Latimer Allen/Brown Madonna (c.1930 [1941?])**
- **Fig. 209 James VanDerZee /Police Officer (1924)**
- **Fig. 210 M & M Smith/Setting up for a photo session with model Sara Lou Harris Carter (1942)**

As Richard Dyer has pointed out in his book, *White*, lighting people with dark pigmentation is difficult by virtue of the technology of photography itself (Dyer, 1997). It is a point driven home by Roy DeCarava, whose self portrait challenges the viewer to make out his face in the shadows. This is harking back to hooks' 'aesthetic of blackness – strange and oppositional'. It

was certainly a factor photographers and their sitters were aware of.

Through the medium of the camera, and with Negro subjects, he is seeking to achieve beauty. So few photographers know how to capture with the lens the shades and tones of Negro skin colors, and none make of it an art, since the death of the late Mr. Battey. ...So few of the young Negro artists in any line care about bringing to light the beauties that are peculiarly racial. ...Mr. Allen does desire to do this, to capture beauty and to glorify the race.' (Langston Hughes in Willis, 2000: 44)

Although Marcus Garvey had already proposed a black Madonna and a white Satan, Allen's dazzling image for the cover of the December 1941 issue of *Opportunity* magazine, *Brown Madonna*, remains both reverent and challenging to a culture brought up on a white Holy Family (Holloway: 30). With a combination of diffuse lighting and the reflection from the brilliant white cloak around mother and child, Allen has both emphasised the sign of the Holy Mother's blackness and made it radiant.

A similar radiance is achieved in VanDerZee's portrait of a police officer, taken in 1924. Lighting and soft focus are again used to glamorise the subject. His gloves and the badges on his cap and jacket shimmer, as if invested with energy and power. The white dazzle might recall the dazed wonder of Solomon Gillis before the traffic policeman - 'Black might be white, but it couldn't be that white!' - and some of the grandeur of the figure at Lenox and 135<sup>th</sup> Street is thereby restored.

The studios were also vital to promoting black entertainers and artists, and the need for portraits for portfolios continued through this period. The careful arrangement of flattering lighting depicted in the photograph of the Smiths, getting ready

for a photo session with model Sara Lou Harris Carter in 1942, is all the setting that this portrait will need.

- **Fig. 211 James VanDerZee/Woman with a goldfish bowl (1923)**
- **Fig. 212 James VanDerZee/Daydreams (1925)**

If it wasn't beautiful, why I took out the unbeautiffulness, put them in the position that they looked beautiful, took out the defects, pulled out all those sagging muscles. Some of them looked like they were worried a lot. I'd pencil them up, take out some of those wrinkles and lines, soften the eyes if they were hard. If they had cross-eyes, I'd straighten them out. (in Haskins, 1991: 157-8)

Sometimes the use of lighting or other techniques during the taking of the picture would not be enough to produce the desired image, whereupon VanDerZee – undoubtedly the Harlem master of such processes – would take up his retouching tools to the negative

The example of such reworking in *Woman with a goldfish bowl*, 1923 shows how these techniques could be extended to adding to the mood or content of the image. While the face of this woman might well have been retouched, what catches the eye (as intended) is the etched-in butterfly which she seems to be smiling at. Without this admittedly sentimental touch, the woman would seem to be awkwardly staring down, as if too shy to face the camera.

VanDerZee would also often add to the meaning of a picture by montaging in another image or double-exposing with another negative. The photograph, *Daydreams*, made in 1925, is the final result of a long session of trying out different poses, possibly for a calendar image. Whilst the picture is conventional

in its 'moon on water' setting, the way that the phantom lover's hands become flesh as they touch the woman's body is strikingly well achieved. The space created here is painterly in the manner of Victorian narrative painting.

With the development of a modern, impersonal market had come a new emphasis, evident from the mid-nineteenth century, on artifice over authenticity, and in terms of the city the loss of a sense of an authentic self in the anonymity of the metropolis and the need to create one out of props and masks. In his essay, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', Georg Simmel observes that encounters in the modern city do not allow the individual the 'frequent and prolonged' association [which] assures the personality of an unambiguous image of himself in the eyes of the other'.

This relates to the notion of having to present a self through such means as 'front' and dramatic realization. In Suven Lalvani's terms, the 'normative production of identity [is] to be constantly projected onto and textualized in relation to the surface of the body':

Photography then becomes a performative practice of such 'interiors' as respectability, character, sex, and so on, conveyed via bodily significations where meanings are guaranteed by the discourse of physiognomy, phrenology, and gender. (Lalvani, 1996: 60)

Many of these studio portraits reveal a commitment to an idealised, middle-class, patriarchal, Victorian family dream. As Birt notes, VanDerZee's clients wanted 'a testimony to their successes and achievements, a sign of their fully realized humanity'. (Willis-Braithwaite and Birt, 1993: 73). In some, there are signs of what W.E.B. Du Bois called the 'received ideals of gracious manners, of swaggering self-assertion, of

conspicuous consumption' gained from 'intimate contact with the master class' (Du Bois, 1975: 184). Other portraits show African Americans adopting the props and masks of popular American culture, cultivating a current 'look' or posing like a movie star.

- **Fig. 018 James VanDerZee/Family Portrait (1926)**

This photograph was famously considered in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes' phenomenological study of photography. Where he finds in it sad evidence of the desire to assimilate with white culture, coupled with a poignancy located initially in the seated woman's 'strapped pumps', Deborah Willis, more concerned with 'black looks' than 'strapped pumps', would see it as an example of how VanDerZee was able to 'transform the visual self-image' of 'the people who made the journey' from the South and the West Indies, so that they are 'metamorphised into suave and aware big city dwellers', freed from the 'degradations of the past'.

Lalvani would take a sterner view, closer to Barthes' reading of the *studium*, arguing that the family portrait as a genre is a normative representation, a 'tableau' achieved through photographic conventions and typologies:

While the portrait 'appears' to be denotational – pointing, stating, announcing – beneath the coded expressions of its subjects lurks the discursive regime of the dominant culture they inhabit... (Lalvani, 1996: 63)

Technically, the portrait is a good example of 'that ideal stasis ... to which most Victorian photographs accustoms us' (Westerbeck and Meyerowitz, 1994: 80), achieved by the pose. Bourdieu comments that 'frontality' in such portraits is a trope for eternity. Linked to this illusion of timelessness is the notion of stability and fixture, a crucial psychic need for recently uprooted migrants

just encountering the fragmentation and anonymity of the modern city (Bourdieu, 1990: 76). 'Is it not natural', Bourdieu asks, 'that the photograph should, in the absence of other supports, be given the function of compiling the family heritage?' The link between historical continuity and social identity provided by the photographic talisman is all the more crucial where people have been 'deprived of any traces of their past'.

Those pictorial genealogies [of her grandmother's] ... were essential to our sense of self and identity as a family. ... The images were crucial documentation, there to sustain and affirm oral memory.' (hooks, 1994: 52)

This photograph may also serve as one of those 'markers' in bourgeois ideology, described by Paul A. Rogers, that inscribe 'the family and its individual members in some meaningful way in the grand narratives of History, Culture, and Society' (Rogers, 1994: 163).

- **Fig. 168 James VanDerZee/Society Ladies (1927)**
- **Fig. 213 James VanDerZee/My Corsage (1931)**

Willard Gatewood points out that, despite its relatively modest wealth, the new economic elite that emerged in the 1930s 'did not escape the spirit of acquisitiveness that characterized the age' (Gatewood, 1990: 333). Booker T. Washington's was a black gospel of wealth, and it led, according to critics like E. Franklin Frazier, to an emphasis on achieving status through a form of (to use Thorstein Veblen's term) 'conspicuous consumption'.

Returning to that iconic photograph of the black bourgeoisie, *Society Ladies*, we might agree with Wallace Thurman, who felt that such women were 'good illustrations, mentally, sartorially, and socially, of what the American standardizing machine can do

to susceptible persons'. Indeed, the photograph seems to imagine its own destiny, as yet another product to be placed in the kind of home that Frazier compares to a museum 'for the display of American manufactures'. Deborah Willis argues that such images show the integrationist ideals of the period, but we might read the clothing, jewellery, hairstyles and furnishings in this photograph and *My Corsage* (taken in 1931) as evidence of a struggle for higher status *within* the black community as much as one for recognition from the white society they mirror.

The poignancy of these photographs may lie in the fact that, by representing themselves in this way, they have, as W.E.B. Du Bois famously remarks in *The Souls of Black Folk*, the 'sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity' (Du Bois, 1989: 3). Indeed, the symbols of status that they wear do not, in fact, reflect the real nature of the 'black bourgeoisie', which was a 'middle class' far poorer and with much lower status than the white, though of great importance and influence *within* the black community.

- **Fig. 214 James VanDerZee/Portrait of a man (c. 1925)**
- **Fig. 215 James VanDerZee/Woman in a beaded dress (1925)**
- **Fig. 216 James VanDerZee/Portrait of a man (c. 1931)**
- **Fig. 217 James VanDerZee/Portrait of a woman (1930)**

Many sitters, however, simply wanted to present themselves as respectable, civilised, urbane, and modern people. These four photographs are typical of such presentations.

...respectability was not necessarily a strategy for individual advancement with the middle class. It could be a part of a worldview that emphasized church, home, family, ethnic community, group solidarity, and a stable

working-class identity. (Roy Rosenzweig, 'Eight Hours for What We Did' in Goings and Mohl, 1996: 102)

The fact that these are African Americans introduces a further element of aspiration: in the words of W.E.B. Du Bois, 'to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face' (Du Bois, 1989: 3).

- **Figs. 218-219 James VanDerZee/Graduation portraits (1939)**

In these two portraits of graduates, both garlanded and holding their degrees, we can see the construction not just of status but of hope. If this can be termed assimilationist (re)presentation, not all subjects sought to fit in, unnoticed, and VanDerZee and other studio photographers worked hard to help clients who took pride in a more militant, even separatist or black nationalist pose.

- **Fig. 220 James VanDerZee/Frank Mason, WWI (n.d)**
- **Fig. 221 James VanDerZee/A member of Garvey's African Legion with his family (1924)**

We return. We return from fighting. We return fighting.

W.E.B. Du Bois's militant cry in the May 1919 edition of *The Crisis*, found an echo across the African American world. Although the idea of the 'New Negro' was not new, the sight, circulated through photographs in the press, of a disciplined parade of armed black soldiers, marching through white Manhattan and home to Harlem, had been a critical moment in the construction of the New Negro as a courageous fighter for democracy and a proud black man.

Mathew Pratt Guterl argues that 'the retributive, barely repressed anger expressed in New Negro radicalism was part of a broader reconstruction of masculinity in postwar America' (Guterl, 2001: 93). Du Bois's triumphant assertion in 1919 that African Americans would bring the fight for democracy home was followed by the reality of that fight later that year, when the lynching parties of the 'Red Summer' made a particular target of black men in uniform. Partly as a result of these outrages, widely reported and condemned in the black press, membership of both Garvey's black nationalist UNIA, and Cyril Briggs's African Blood Brotherhood swelled over the year; in this climate, Guterl writes, 'race and manhood were all that mattered' to New Negro radicals (ibid).

When the victorious 369<sup>th</sup> Regiment marched up Fifth Avenue, VanDerZee was there to photograph it. The call to arms had given his business the start it needed, with soldiers and their families commissioning pictures of each other. His relationship with the soldier continued as this portrait of a veteran, Frank Mason, attests. VanDerZee's studio was a site where the military struggle was celebrated and commemorated for many years to come, through portraits of soldiers that returned and remembered. This reflective space contains a manly heroism but also something more. To look now at the photographs of members of the Hellfighters, coming to VanDerZee's studio to be photographed as if on active service, is to be reminded that the uniform they wear is symbolic of something rather more than simple patriotism.

The new black militancy is evident in the number of men who came to this studio and to others, including Winifred Hall Allen's, dressed in the full uniform of the UNIA's African Legion. This portrait from 1924, by VanDerZee, includes the officer's family, its bulldog spirit crouched by the son's foot. That militancy is made visible, too, in the uniforms of the Masons and other

fraternities who came to be photographed in their full regalia, presenting themselves as members of a proud community, prepared to defend themselves.

- **Fig. 222 James VanDerZee/Self Portrait (1922)**
- **Fig. 223 James VanDerZee/Self Portrait (1918)**

Finally, the photographer appears as his own subject, and in the process VanDerZee manufactures and presents two selves. These are not 'Negro' or 'American' selves warring together, but two complementary roles – one the professional photographer, the other swapping that enigmatic Edwardian for a man of the (contemporary) world. In the first guise, his clothes, expression, pose and props exude a timeless elegance; in the second, all these elements are informalised. The painted background disappears entirely, replaced by another text, this time a written one which places him and the photograph in a precise historical moment in 1918 in the 'colored' community. The newspaper cannot run to halftones to illustrate its lead story – 'Colored Troops Capture Many ... Fierce Hand to Hand Fighting' – so VanDerZee goes one better and incorporates the story into his own illustrative photograph. The studio photographer thus boldly claims his citizenship, pointing out to the contested territory beyond the safe space of his studio.

## 2 ***Body and soul: The black artist***

- **Fig. 224 James Latimer Allen/Portrait of Langston Hughes (1927)**
- **Fig. 225 Winold Reiss/Langston Hughes (1925)**

The relationship between sitter and photographer was close in the case of James Latimer Allen and the members of the Harlem Renaissance. When Allen made this portrait of his sponsor in 1927, he created what Camera Dia Holloway calls the 'quintessential image' of the younger generation of writers and artists (Holloway, 1999: 21).

In a detailed analysis of the photograph, Holloway notes its homage to Rodin's *The Thinker*, a figure she discovers in other forms across the culture, including a drawing of the sculpture using Negroid features published as a cover to *The Messenger*, a magazine that promoted Allen's work. What she does not mention, however, is the portrait of Hughes painted by Winold Reiss in 1925, which is remarkably similar to the photograph in pose, dress and mood. The connection between the two is not clear; my guess would have been that the painter based his work on the photograph but the dates given do not support this. The salient point here, however, is that whilst Reiss feels it important to place within a detailed context – an open manuscript book in front of him and a kind of wallpaper depicting Harlem and art deco imagery behind him – Allen places the writer entirely in his own self-explanatory space.

While his expression evokes 'a moody romanticism' and the lighting and pose bring him, iconographically, into 'the lineage of Western philosophers and poets', Holloway notes that his bohemian temperament breaks through his smart appearance by way of his 'slightly dishevelled' tie. This is one small gesture in a pose that, in terms of body language, is highly restrained: Allen's

sitters, Holloway writes, were 'invariably posed and self-contained', partly because they wanted to present a civilised figure in contrast to white culture's image of the minstrel (ibid: 13). Interestingly, what she doesn't mention about this portrait, or about others, such as that of Alain Locke, which shares this feature, is the use of soft focus.

While Holloway is probably correct to note that Allen's decision to use a neutral background and avoid props in these portraits came from his 'belief that the body was legible and could reveal the character of the sitter' (ibid: 7), she fails to note his deliberate intervention in using what Robert Taft calls 'the diffuse effect', where the photographer would use a number of techniques to achieve a soft focus (Taft, 1964: 330). As noted elsewhere in this chapter, lighting was still to some extent gendered, with strongly defined shadows often used to signify male vigour. The softer shadows and the diffused, delicate lighting of this portrait of Hughes feminise him. In considering the portrait of Carl Van Vechten, taken in the same year and even more radically softened, it is tempting to detect a homoerotic subtext at work here, especially given that most of the male writers of the Renaissance, married or not, were apparently gay or bisexual. Leaving this possibility to one side, one indubitable effect of portraits like that of Hughes is to imbue sitters with an ineffable spiritual quality thought appropriate at that time to artistic activity.

- **Fig. 226 Schomburg Collection/Langston Hughes (c. 1927)**
- **Fig. 009 Roy DeCarava/Langston Hughes (1955)**

Another, uncredited photograph of Hughes taken that same year could hardly provide more of a contrast. Apparently a snapshot taken outside in a backyard, this photograph reveals a very different Hughes. Gone is the smart suit, replaced by a much

more bohemian outfit of floppy hat, pullover, duffel coat, baggy trousers, Argyll socks and shoes whose laces need attention; the tie is decidedly more rumpled. This time Hughes is engaging the lens with a direct and open smile; his posture is relaxed, one hand resting on the other on his leg, as he slouches on a wooden bar. Suddenly, Allen's portrait is revealed in all its tendentiousness, as a promotional confection on behalf of the cultural programme launched by Locke in 1925 with *The New Negro*. The more informal photograph looks forward thirty years to DeCarava's affectionate portrait of Hughes, taken in 1955. Dressed in jacket, shirt and undervest, his head cocked to one side, half-smoked cigarette stuck in the corner of his mouth, Hughes seems to have been sharing a joke with the photographer. His eyes do not meet the lens but look upwards as he gently laughs. One of the few veterans of the Renaissance to remain in Harlem – another DeCarava photograph, taken the previous year, pictures him 'with friends', a gaggle of laughing children – Hughes is clearly at ease with himself and physically present in a way far removed from his pose in the Allen portrait.

- **Fig. 227 Carl Van Vechten/Langston Hughes (June 1942)**

The other leading portraitist of the young black artists and writers of the Renaissance was Carl Van Vechten, a white author and socialite who was arguably the most important patron of the Harlem Renaissance. Allen's career as a photographer began in the year he photographed Hughes; at roughly the same time Van Vechten turned to the camera after the mixed reception his novel, *Nigger Heaven*, provoked in Harlem on its publication in 1926. Unlike Allen, Van Vechten used painted or textile backdrops for many of his portraits, though this was fairly understated in his own version of Hughes, taken in June 1942. This photograph provides an interesting link between the substantial proletarian hero of DeCarava's portrait and the

ethereal and beautiful young aristocrat of Allen's. The attire here is simple, a casual white shirt opened at the neck, the soft warmth of the cotton set against the satin finish of the backcloth. Yet Hughes' face has the serious rapt expression of Allen's poet, the down-sweeping moustache emphasising his full-lipped sensitive mouth.

Van Vechten's gallery of black artists, which extends to the early 1960s and photographs such Black Arts Movement luminaries as LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), demonstrates how well connected he was with Harlem's cultural scene, most of whom, it seems, trusted him enough to relax and perform for his camera. He took an apparently more direct approach than Allen, less concerned with turning his sitters into thinkers or philosophers, and put them all into sharp focus; he also set them into a context, often against a flat wallpaper design.

- **Fig. 228 Carl Van Vechten/Aaron Douglas (April 1933)**
- **Fig. 229 Carl Van Vechten/ W.C. Handy (May 1932)**

Some sitters are more formally posed than others – painter Aaron Douglas, for example, photographed in April 1933, stands rather stiffly in front of one of his own canvases, giving little away but pride in his work. Other figures are somewhat diminished by the over-literal clues that Van Vechten includes to point to their particular contribution to black culture; William Christopher Handy, for example, not only holds open a volume whose cover is emblazoned 'Blues - Edited by W.C. Handy' but behind him is a large poster published by the Pace & Handy Music Company, promoting 'The Jogo Blues' by none other than W.C. Handy. All this mutes the impact of the portrait, even the potentially jazzy effect of one of Van Vechten's signature backdrops, a curious wallpaper design, in this case stars crossed through with diagonal bars. In fact, the more telling portraits

are those where such backdrops serve as framing devices for a more psychoanalytic approach.

- **Fig. 230 Carl Van Vechten/Nella Larsen (March 1932)**
- **Fig. 231 Carl Van Vechten/Nella Larsen (November 1934)**

Van Vechten's close relationship with novelist Nella Larsen seems to inform his photographic portraits of her, particular those taken at their first session in 1932 and in their last in 1934. He had recommended Larsen for a Harmon Award and defended her against the damaging charge of plagiarism; for her part, she had sided with him in the controversy over *Nigger Heaven*. The photograph of Larsen, taken on March 26, 1932 and reproduced in Thadious M. Davis's biography of her, shows a gently smiling woman, looking up and out of the frame (Davis, 1994). She is positioned off-centre so that her right arm is out of frame and the background pattern of leaf silhouettes continues down past her left side. This and the uptilted head and hat pushed back presents a portrait of a liberated, rather unconventional young woman, too mild perhaps to be described as jaunty but strongly posed and seeming a little impatient to be off and out of the picture.

The portrait of November 23, 1934 presents a very different image. Even if one didn't know the troubles of the intervening years, including a painful divorce, the signs are engraved into the face and into the picture. Van Vechten went to some trouble to get the right representation; there are at least three variants in print. The one selected to represent this author in the monograph, *Generations in Black and White*, is the most direct and revealing (Byrd, 1993: 39). The other frames have Larsen looking out of frame in a pose that looks more like evasion than the hopeful look of the earlier portrait. Here she faces the camera directly, making her sadness plain. She looks

considerably more than two years older. The flowers she clutches to her breast are a favourite device of Van Vechten's in portraying women with soul; their appearance here is almost funereal, perhaps appropriately as this is the last picture of Larsen as an author. She disappeared from her Harlem circle shortly after and never resumed her writing career. The most striking effect, however, is the choice of background pattern here. The foliage of the earlier portrait has been replaced by an abstract design of radiating lines that seem to emanate from the sitter's body, an effect faintly reminiscent of Munch's *The Scream*. The acuity of this portrait of anguish seems to foreshadow Larsen's subsequent elusiveness and silence.

To return to Marcus Aurelius Root's comments, cited earlier, Larsen's 'essential self' seems to be expressing itself bodily through a 'mood' created by the photographer and his close relationship with and understanding of the sitter. Certainly, the other portraits by Van Vechten noted here do not evoke the same insightful mood; hence, the props are necessary. That apparent ability of the photographer to read the body for signs of inner feeling and character – the soul – can be found again in Roy DeCarava's powerful portraits of jazz musicians, taken through the 1950s.

- **Fig. 232 Roy DeCarava/Edna Smith, bassist (1950)**
- **Fig. 233 Roy DeCarava/Jimmy Scott, singer (1955)**
- **Fig. 234 Roy DeCarava/Elvin Jones, drummer (1961)**

DeCarava's pictures are not taken in the studio but often in clubs and concert halls, during performance. Unlike earlier photography of jazz bands, DeCarava does not emphasise the community of players but focuses tight in on individual players in personal communion with their instrument. The portrait of Edna Smith, bassist, taken in 1950 is a good example of this. In one of DeCarava's characteristically shadowy spaces, we can just

make out the bassist's face, her eyes closed in soulful concentration, her left hand slightly blurred as it goes up the fret, her wristwatch catching a tiny spark of brilliant light. The dark is such that we can hardly make out the setting, and the composition cuts out the lower half of Smith's body and her instrument, so that our attention is drawn not to the mechanics of the music but to its expression, readable on her softly lit face and articulated in her fingers. A more radical example of feeling expressed through the body is the 1956 portrait of Jimmy Scott, the singer. The head is thrown back into the spotlight but kept out of focus. This is where the voice is coming from but what it sings is represented in the clearly delineated, prayerful clasp of hands. These rise up like a high note, held.

Finally, in DeCarava's portrait of drummer Elvin Jones, taken in 1961, the instrument has virtually disappeared; only a slightly paler, hardly visible curved shadow indicates a cymbal. The strain of the physical effort necessary to produce the right sound and beat is written instead in the gleaming sweat that cascades down the musician's face, a sign of the dark body that W.E.B. Du Bois writes of, 'whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder' (1989: 3). Dressed in jacket, shirt and tie, like Langston Hughes in Allen's portrait, Jones also exists without props or background. In his case, however, this space is of his own making, shaped by the flexing of his own body, rather than the presentation of a constructed and posed identity.

### 3 **"What a pity she isn't white": Florence Mills and the representation of women and colour**

"What a pity she isn't white." This was the remark made by a woman as I left the stage door the other evening. It was not the first time such a comment has been passed.

- **Fig. 235 New York Amsterdam News , Wednesday November 24, 1926**

In an article entitled 'The Soul of the Negro' published in the *New York Amsterdam News* (reprinted from *The Sun-Chronicle* in London, England) on Wednesday November 24 in 1926, Florence Mills wrote of 'the eternal burden of the colored people, the penalization for an accident of birth, to be made to feel out of focus with the rest of humanity'. Her choice of the word 'focus' is suggestive of photographic seeing and, as if to place her *in focus*, the designer has positioned a glowing photograph of 'Miss Florence Mills' in the middle of the piece, so that her text flows around it. Mills is sat posed in an interior space, possibly on stage (a white picket fence set is in the background). Taken slightly from below, the star's body is a quarter turned away to our right, her palms together on her lap, but she engages the photographer's gaze (and, she must know, that of her large black audience) with bright eyes and her mouth slightly parted in a warm smile. Although also she is lit frontally, stronger light has been directed from the left side, illuminating the bare skin of her shoulder, the side of her neck and of her face, and it leaves a scintillating line across the wave of her bobbed hair.

Mills' article goes on to make links between her own career – ever dogged, she writes, by 'the boggy of my color' – and the plight of her race. She laments the absurdity and unfairness of white prejudice that overlooks the (for her) fundamental fact that, although not as 'sophisticated or developed as the white

man', 'the Negro instincts, all his feelings are white to the core'. She illustrates the 'tinge of melancholy which is always present in the Negro soul' by quoting lines from what she modestly describes as 'a little song I sing on stage' – in fact, the title song from the hugely successful stage show *Blackbirds*, then on a year-long tour to London and Paris after its triumphant run on Broadway (including a brief showing in Harlem):

If the sun forgets no one  
Why don't it shine on me?  
I'm a little black bird  
Looking for a bluebird, too.

- **Fig. 236 James VanDerZee/Florence Mills (1927)**

In the few weeks between her return to New York in September the following year, when she was welcomed back by thousands of her fans at Pier 57, and her death from peritonitis that November, Mills sat for James VanDerZee. This portrait, which is more formal than that in the *Amsterdam News*, is a head and shoulders shot of the petite singer and dancer. Again, the photograph is shot from a slightly low angle, so one seems to look up at Mills' luminous face. Light is directed on her face, slightly turned away from us, with her eyes looking up and off to her left, in line with her shoulder. Again, she is smiling with parted lips, lipsticked into a cupid's bow. The slender straps of her shimmering dress emphasise her bare shoulder, which is cropped, so that it bleeds off the side of the frame. The focus is on her face, especially the brilliant whiteness of her eyes and her teeth, leaving her right shoulder (and possibly a corsage pinned there to her dress) completely out of focus. Her cheekbones are faintly evident but the overall impression of her face is of a perfect oval (perhaps touched up by the photographer to make a smoother line of her left cheek), with hair pulled back this time. The skin is light-complexioned, a fact emphasised by the

darkness of the lipstick, and her face seems to glow, as if confirming poet Countee Cullen's comment about 'the bright and vivacious flame of her being' (Anderson, 1982: 181).

Although widely acclaimed for her stage shows, beginning in 1921 with her breakthrough performance in the hit show, *Shuffle Along*, the first black musical to run on Broadway since 1910 (and which also featured a young Josephine Baker), Mills' popularity among Harlemites was also due to her modesty and apparent refusal to behave like a successful star, using the subway in preference to owning a car or taking a cab. Nevertheless, her star status, already indicated two months earlier in the spontaneous provision of a motorcade to whisk her home to Harlem, was demonstrated by an extraordinary outpouring of grief at her funeral, the biggest yet held in Harlem. Hundred of thousands attended and the church was so crowded that VanDerZee had to bribe an usher to let him in through a back entrance.

- **Fig. 237 James VanDerZee/Mortuary portrait of Florence Mills (1927)**
- **Fig. 238 James VanDerZee/Unfinished mortuary portrait of Florence Mills (1927)**

In fact, VanDerZee had been able to see Mills again a few days before the funeral, as her body was lying 'in state' at a mortuary (a chapel of the Howell Undertaking Parlors based at 137<sup>th</sup> Street and Seventh Avenue); here, he took a photograph of the open casket, surrounded by flowers. Taking his picture from the foot of the coffin, VanDerZee was able to include an arched window, whose light fell on the visible form of the deceased. In one print that exists, he has allowed the window to remain overexposed to intensify the appearance of light flooding over the casket; not content with this effect, he has then etched in 'rays' of sunlight reaching towards her face. In a further, unfinished version he

has experimented with vignetting, printing his September portrait of Mills into the window, whose diamond shaped panes are now clearly visible as a result of 'knocking back' the strength of the daylight. Less obviously, another 'apparition' has been introduced into the top right-hand corner of the print, which VanDerZee presumably thought better of, covering up the face with a black disc. Judging from what is still visible of this image, it is almost certainly the photograph of Mills that had been used in the *Amsterdam News* a year earlier. In a further looping around of these texts, VanDerZee, who took many such 'funeral pictures', inserted a newspaper into the hands of an old man who had died for *his* funeral picture. As a tribute to Florence Mills, the photographer made sure that the headline announcing her death was visible: 'And it looked like he was lying there reading the paper and fell asleep' (Haskins, 1991:179).

Looking again at that earlier newspaper (one, it says, of the 'Best Amusement Papers in Greater New York'), there are a range of other entertainment stories and a number of advertisements, some of which lead off into a more general exploration of the context for the photograph of Florence Mills. The main story concerns the success of the Utopia Club Cabaret, a matinee event held at the Cotton Club to raise funds for Utopia Neighborhood House for Child Welfare on West 130<sup>th</sup> Street. Apart from a report on the event itself, when even the Cotton Club manager 'appeared to take unusual delight' in the occasion, the paper describes a speech made to the Club by Mary McLeod Bethune, whose visit 'served to focus attention on this little band of women' who had run the charitable organisation for ten years. Speaking to this audience of 'highly intelligent and cultured Negroes', Bethune commended their remaining 'among their own', '[i]nstead of walking along the beaten path which has always seen us securing help from the opposite sex'.

A second celebrated venue, the Savoy Ballroom, featured in another article, describing another charitable event, this time a circus week planned for December to raise funds for Christmas baskets for poor families in Harlem – a glimpse of poverty alongside a column of notices for theatre revues and films: *Stopping the Traffic*, a 'rip-roaring revue' at the Lafayette Theatre, featuring a 'cyclonic octoroon chorus', to follow the final week of *Shuffle Along*, 'The Greatest of All Colored Musical Comedies'; Drake and Walker's *Stepping Babies* at the Lincoln Theatre; and a song recital by Lula Robinson-Jones at the New Manhattan Casino on 155<sup>th</sup> and Eighth.

Among the other advertisements is a large one for Chancellor Panatela cigars, illustrated by a line drawing, and one for Admirola Bleach Cream. Headed – literally, with a photograph of a woman's stylishly coiffed head (the only other photograph on this page) – this ad trumpets that this 'Wonderful New Discovery whitens and clears your skin after a few treatments', after which 'your complexion takes on that clear velvety smooth beauty that makes you admired and envied by all'. The photograph stands as 'proof' of its efficacy.

- **Fig. 239 Brown Brothers/Florence Mills in *Dixie to Broadway* (1924)**
- **Fig. 240 M & M Smith/Comedians Tim Moore and Johnny Lee at the Apollo (late 1930s)**

Skin colour and the gradation, enumerated by many contemporary black writers, from 'high yaller' to coal-black was of particular importance to women's public image. As the 'octoroon' reference in the Lafayette advertisement suggests, most female performers in those musicals aimed partly at a white audience were light-complexioned. Another photograph of Mills, this time taken by the Brown Brothers in a scene from another hit show, *Dixie to Broadway*, in 1924, shows her

'conducting' a tableau of such light-skinned chorines seated on and below a huge white 'piano'. The slightly unfocused reproduction of this photograph (shown in *Harlem on My Mind*) turns most of these faces into pale masks, punctuated by dark lipstick and eyes. It takes a moment longer to make out the only male figure in the picture, a pianist sat in front of Mills on the giant piano stool, whose face seems a negative reversal of the young women's. He is almost certainly an African American wearing black-face, an appropriated minstrel tradition that lingered on among black comedians until as late as the 1950s.

Over twenty years earlier, at the age of four, Mills was making her first appearance on stage, along with the white comedian who had discovered her (and who had taught her her first song, 'Don't cry, my little pickaninny'), when she saw her first such comedian: 'His make-up was so startling that I broke off in terror and had to be led off the stage weeping bitterly.' The potential fearsomeness of this theatrical tradition is captured, if inadvertently, by M & M Smith's photograph, taken in the late 1930s, of comedians Tim Moore and Johnny Lee at the Apollo. At this distance, the exaggerated gestures of the shorter man coupled with the grotesque white-lipped stare of his partner appear quite surrealistic set against a scenic backdrop of (probably) Brooklyn Bridge, as if the repressed plantation past, celebrated in the minstrel tradition, has returned to haunt this most urban of places.

- **Fig. 241 Berenice Abbott/Buddy Gilmore, drummer (n.d.)**
- **Fig. 242 M & M Smith/Fats Waller (1939)**

The grin of the minstrel, so strenuously avoided in portraits of the 'New Negro', continued to appear in the world of popular entertainment, though it is often difficult to distinguish between the promotional smile of the performer and the deferential

stereotype of the smiling 'darky'. Perhaps this is a faint echo of the bind of 'double consciousness': is Berenice Abbott's portrait of Buddy Gilmore a picture of an American or a Negro? Is this wide grin part of a presentation of an 'acceptable' self, made to ingratiate himself with a white photographer, or simply of a musician delighted to show off with the drumsticks? If there is less ambiguity about M & M Smith's almost definitive portrayal of Fats Waller made in 1939, perhaps that is because Waller, the composer of 'Ain't Misbehavin'" and 500 other records, is a celebrated performer across the colour line and thus already rendered acceptable (or colourless) through his contribution to American music. He certainly seems to be in control of his representation here, judging by his direct eye-contact and relaxed posture. His collaboration with the photographer has resulted in an iconic image.

- **Fig. 243 James VanDerZee/Mamie Smith (c. 1923)**
- **Fig. 244 Carl Van Vechten/Pearl Bailey (July 1946)**
- **Fig. 245 James VanDerZee/Nude (1923)**
- **Fig. 246 Edgar Eugene Phipps/Nude study (n.d.)**

In *The Female Black Body: A Photographic History* (2002), Deborah Willis and Carla Williams encounter the same difficulty in distinguishing between different images of women in show business, a difficulty they seem to solve simply by identifying whether the person behind the lens is white or black. VanDerZee's portrait of Mamie Smith, for example, 'with her shoulders seductively bared' was intended for a black audience; her 'sexy, knowing smile' suggesting that she was 'an active participant in the image-making'. This image then created 'a decidedly different picture of black women in the United States' (Willis and Williams, 2002: 102). Van Vechten's portraits of eroticised black women's bodies get shorter shrift.

Whilst wanting to resist such a generalised view, there *is* something questionable about his picture of singer and entertainer (and President Nixon's future 'Ambassador of Love') Pearl Bailey, which depicts her bare-breasted, a cloth tucked around her waist, and appearing to commune with a sculpted African head. Nevertheless, this is a consensual picture; like Josephine Baker, Bailey may take pleasure in her own erotic power. It is but one 'self' among the many that these women choose to present to their public; Baker particularly took pleasure in sending up her usual stage persona, alternating sensual poses with a comic turn.

The increasing use of pictures of attractive women in magazines and newspapers during the 1920s was very much part of the New Negro movement. As White and White observe of the popularity of black beauty contests during the same period, even if white standards of beauty did prevail, this was 'less significant than the fact that for the first time blacks were being presented... in what was, by contemporary standards, an unambiguously positive way' (White and White, 1998: 218). The portraits of bathing beauties and nudes by VanDerZee, the series of *Dark Beauty* portraits by James Latimer Allen, and the nude study by Edgar Eugene Phipps here all attest to the desire not so much to objectify the female black body, as in the Jezebel stereotype of racist culture, but to uncover and celebrate the 'long-veiled beauty' of the race.

#### 4      **W.E.B. Du Bois: The political image**

- **Fig. 247 C.M. Battey/Portrait of W.E.B. Du Bois (1918)**

'Race leaders' were not slow to realise the importance of visual image and the part that photography could play in promoting their particular cause. Cornelius M. Battey was the portraitist of choice for men like Frederick Douglass and the young Du Bois. The latter's portrait, made in 1918 when Du Bois was 50 presents him as a formidable, if faintly dandyish statesman, an effect which Du Bois is already performing through his choice of formal clothing and the way he has trimmed his moustache and goatee beard, in the style he developed during his time in Berlin.

The photograph is the result of deliberate choices agreed between Battey and Du Bois. The photographer has, for example, selected a plain but textured background, and this places Du Bois in a space of his own making, defining his meaning through expression, pose and clothing rather than extraneous props. By not selecting a full- or half-length portrait, the emphasis is on the head. This is a deliberate choice, inscribing what Lalvani calls 'the discursive power of physiognomy' in bourgeois portraiture to indicate the belief that 'the world may be civilized by the domestication of the hand by the head' (Lalvani, 1996: 52).

Du Bois's expression is unsmiling, a feature of most formal portraits at that time, other than those of actors or other performers, but the eyes are sharply in focus and communicative. Rather than adopting a full frontal pose, or sitting in profile, Du Bois has turned his head to look at the lens from a three-quarter turned position; as Linkmann indicates, this variation between head and body, with eyes following the direction of the head, suggests a certain grace and animation in the sitter. To these qualities are added energy and decisiveness,

created largely through the strong lighting used to illuminate the right side of Du Bois's head, leaving the other half his face in shadow. As Linkmann points out, this is a gendered use of lighting, as a softer light without harsh shadows was generally preferred in women's portraits (Linkmann, 1993: 55).

- **Fig. 248 Schomburg Collection/W.E.B. Du Bois in his office at *The Crisis***

The other photographs of Du Bois that circulate through publications seem to confirm the contained seriousness of his character. His performance for the camera and for his audience and readership is not playful but studied – literally so in the much reproduced photographs of him in his book-lined or paper-strewn offices at *The Crisis* magazine. The uncredited portrait of him at his desk reproduced in *Harlem: The Great Black Way*, shows him in a typical pose (Anderson, 1982). Probably taken around the same time as Battey's portrait, he is shown this time in a complex setting, surrounded by numerous 'props'. This time he is looking off to his left, to the source of light (possibly strong natural light from a window). Still dressed formally, with the high collar and bow-tie firmly in place, more of his upper body is visible, most importantly his arms, right hand grasping one arm of the chair, his left forearm resting on the other, with fingers slightly unfurled as if about to make a point. As no infill lighting appears to have been used to bring out the details of the back of his head, attention is drawn to the communicative features: mouth, eyes and ear. Yet he does not look at the lens - his gaze is inward, directed at thought rather than the view through the window or the photographer. The fact that he is caught virtually in profile lends Du Bois an air of isolation as well as dignity, and the slightly stiff way he grasps the chair arm is both decisive and awkward. Like the Battey portrait, this picture, in its way as planned and orchestrated, shows Du Bois as a serious thinking man, the illuminated dome of his forehead in both photographs a

traditional (phrenological) sign of intelligence. Yet this Du Bois is sitting in a sea of activity.

What lies before him in the foreground of our vision is the evidence of Du Bois's seminal significance as a spokesman for the race; as editor of the NAACP journal from its launch in 1910 until 1934 (and returning from 1944 to 1948), Du Bois participated in and more often led a vast national dialogue with black and white America. At the time of the First World War, Du Bois had taken a controversial stand on the need for African Americans to fight, a position he felt vindicated in when the 369<sup>th</sup> Regiment returned in triumph up Fifth Avenue. Across his desk lies a mass of material: a pile of newspapers; a page of handwritten script, perhaps a draft of an article; a book entitled *Economic Co-operation [among?] Negro Americans*; typescript pages. Du Bois's tidy pose of meditation is in contrast to the controlled chaos of his desk, turning this into a dialectical drama of reflection and action, albeit (it appears) a necessarily solitary one. Some kind of synthesis is going on here, no doubt leading ultimately to publication.

- **Fig. 249 Uncredited/W.E.B. Du Bois with employees in the editorial office of *The Crisis***

In other photographs, Du Bois is shown in more active stance, even standing, though it seems he is always engaged in a one-to-one relationship with texts of one kind or another. Even a photograph taken amongst colleagues at the editorial office shows him standing in profile, again focused on the page he has in his hand, which he might be dictating to an assistant out of frame. Behind him a male and female colleague engage in conversation; a typist is preparing her work. There is no doubt in this tableau who the editor is.

- **Fig. 250 M & M Smith/W.E.B. Du Bois in the M. Smith recording studio (1954)**

The final photograph here was taken by M & M Smith in 1954 at the M. Smith recording studio. Once again, Du Bois is focusing on his script. His dandyish air is intact, a stylish if less formal bow-tie still in place and his characteristic moustache and beard now salt-and-peppered. His eyes are cast down but the round spectacles he wears stand in for his intelligent gaze. Surrounded by new technology, Du Bois retains his unfazed and dignified interiority. The recording engineer and assistant behind the glass are readying themselves for the broadcast, for Du Bois to look up and direct his voice to the microphone that stands waiting for his words.

## **5      'Know your own people': exemplary individuals**

On page 3 of the first edition of *Our World: A Picture Magazine for the Negro Family*, published in April 1946, is a column entitled 'Photo History: Know Your Own People'. Eight multiple choice questions are set by quizmaster L.D. Reddick, PhD, from the New York Public Library and City College. Each question is illustrated by a photograph, which indicates the correct answer, so, for example, above the question - 'Who wrote two "Best Sellers"? (a) "Rochester" (b) W.E.B. Du Bois (c) Richard Wright (d) E. Franklin Frazier' – is a portrait of Wright. Other questions ask readers to identify the boxer who held three ring titles at the same time, the only Negro full term U.S. Senator, the highest Negro Officer in the U.S. Army and a 'blood bank expert'.

This modest gallery of exemplary African Americans has a faint echo in it of the beginnings of formal American portraiture, when Matthew Brady assembled his *Illustrious Americans*. As in the *Our World* 'exhibition', the aim was broadly educational, to offer ordinary citizens models of moral authority which they could try to emulate. In its project of racial uplift, metamorphosing over the years into campaigns for civil rights, the black press also made great use of what we might call 'exemplary individuals' – and of photographs of them – to encourage, exhort and inspire their readers to raise their game.

In its final edition of 1926 (published December 29), *The New York Amsterdam News* indulged in that perennial media favourite practice of rounding-up the highlights of the past year. Its 'Chronology of 1926 in Words and Pictures' was heavily illustrated. On the first double spread fourteen out of nineteen photographs are portraits of significant individuals. (A twentieth photograph, used in an advertisement for bread, is also a portrait, in this case a fur-coated and be-hatted Mrs Mary Lane

of 112 West 133<sup>rd</sup> Street, 'a popular church and clubwoman, who conducts one of the foremost undertaking establishments in Harlem' whose signature underlines her 'hearty approval' of Bond Bread). The written text is overwhelmingly linked to individuals, from Walter White, who published a new novel, *Flight*, in March to Miss Carmen V. Shepperd, selected in June 'to compete in the vocal group for the gold medal to be awarded by the New York Music Association'.

Eight of the individual photographic portraits are of women, including Bessie Coleman, an aviatrix who died in flight over Florida in April; E. Jessie Covington, a pianist awarded a third Williard scholarship in August; and heiress A'Lelia Walker, who married Dr Kennedy of Chicago on May 1. The men include the Rev. Father Hutchens C. Bishop, who celebrated his fortieth year as pastor of St Philip's (an event also celebrated with two more photographs, depicting interior and exterior views of his church); Mordecai Johnson, the first Negro President of Howard University; and patrolman William Dudley, given an award for bravery in February.

Only two of these photographs are credited and then only because their names have been etched on them by the photographers. Addison Scurlock, who ran the premier black studio in Washington, provided the picture of Miss Clarissa M. Scott (who married Attorney Hubert T. Delany in October), while Walter Baker, a studio photographer based in Harlem, was responsible for the portrait of Miss Maude Rumford, who 'sailed in September for two years' study in France'.

All these stories of 1926 are of achievement or, in the case of the deceased, of commemoration of an achieved life. With the exception of the patrolman, shot full frontal as if in a class photograph, these people are portrayed with some flair – almost all in the photographic studio. Those deserving most gravitas,

such as Mordecai Johnson, are given the most formal treatment, in his case by turning him into virtual profile. Dr R.R. Moton, principal of Tuskegee Institute off on a world tour, is less stiff, his head tilted and forehead supported by a finger that seems to point, like the studio lighting, to his intelligence. The singer Julius Bledsoe is less formal still, with folded arms and a faint trace of a smile. More soulful expressions are evident on the women's faces, though both Walker and Coleman, in her pilot's cap, evince something rather more formidable.

In the same edition of the *Amsterdam News* is an illustrated feature not dissimilar in layout to that of *Our World*, showing twelve winners of the Harmon Awards. The photographs (one illustration, of Countee Cullen, is a line drawing almost certainly based on a photographic print) are placed under the various headings, each briefly captioned with name, award and place of residence. The categories are: artist, bibliophile, poet, author, business man, educator, humanist, capitalist, missionary, scientist, prelate and (again) artist. Some names will be familiar to those interested in the Harlem Renaissance – Cullen, Palmer Hayden, Arthur Schomburg, James Weldon Johnson and Hale Woodruff – but those outside the artistic milieu are less frequently mentioned, if at all, in the literature about African American culture. However, the salient point here is that specific individuals achieving specific things amounts to a photographic genre in African American photography, distinctive even within the admittedly 'colourless' context of a national culture of heroic individualism, shaped historically as it is by the pressing need for African Americans to 'know your own people'.

Nicholas Natanson is critical of the way in which such individuals were both reduced, ironically enough, to 'types' and that those types were, at root, determined by white norms:

If personalities were often submerged in the process, so was any questioning of an essentially conservative value system underlying the definition of success. With some exception made for 'special' black musical and artistic talents, blacks were to be... better whites than whites. (Natanson, 1992: 32)

- **Fig. 251 M & M Smith/Dr. Louis T. Wright (1942)**

An example of a later version of the kind of photograph that appeared as thumbnail portraits in the Harmon Awards feature is the portrait of Dr Louis T. Wright, taken in the M & M Smith studio in 1942. By this time director of surgery and president of the medical board at Harlem Hospital, Dr Wright had been the first black physician to be appointed to a New York City hospital, in 1919. This is in most ways a typical example of the Smiths' unpretentious approach to photographing pillars of the community - other examples include historian Dr Carter G. Woodson and journalist Dr Joel A. Rogers – all treated to a conventional head-and-shoulders portrait taken at a conventional angle, with the soberly dressed sitter presenting himself as a serious professional man. What makes this portrait a potential 'second-looker' is the lighting. Whilst lit conventionally from the front to emphasise the intellect of the sitter, another source of light, possibly diffused through an opaque screen behind Dr Wright, encircles his head like a medieval halo. This effect does appear in other portraits but not so clearly evoking the visual trope of the icon. Just possibly, the strength of this bright roundel is also meant to evoke the lamp of the operating table. In any case, this portrait seems to put into visual language the educative logic of the 'race model', raised up for worship and emulation, as Nicholas Natanson points out:

... especially in the black press, there appeared the glittering Role Model, the polished professional whose

visual authority was designed to counter the effect of many of the aforementioned representational modes. (in Willis and Lusaka, 1996: 89)

- **Fig. 252 M & M Smith/Joe Louis (1945)**

As the *Amsterdam News* round-up of 1926 demonstrates, however, the notion of racial progress was never limited simply to an elite corps of men and women like Dr Wright, but extended to significant achievements by individuals in any walk of life and, to some extent, from any background. This included celebrities from the world of entertainment and sport, culture heroes amongst whom none seemed more heroic or was more loved than the champion boxer Joe Louis.

Louis's achievement, of course, was to stand up and fight – and to defeat his opponents, many of whom were white. He defended his world heavyweight title twenty-five times and scored sixty-nine victories – forty-nine of them by knockout. The lowest moment came in 1936 when he lost to German boxer Max Schmeling, but two years later Louis knocked him out in the first round, a victory widely seen as a defeat of Nazism and a blow for democracy. According to James A. Miller, Louis was able to open up opportunities for black photographers to gain press credentials to such fights as these (Smith, 1998: 131); his informal relationship with Morgan and Marvin Smith produced a range of relaxed and intimate pictures. The 1945 portrait here is particularly warm and conveys something of Louis's unassuming and friendly manner. Gone is the stiff pose of the race model and in its place is a figure whose charisma lies less in his dress and deportment than in his confident engagement with the lens. He is clearly comfortable in his body.

- **Fig. 253 M & M Smith/A trolley car operator on her first trip (c. 1940)**
- **Fig. 254 M & M Smith/ Harlem's first three postal telegram messengers (1939)**

The Smiths also specialised in meeting a demand in the black press for pictures of more prosaic but important achievements, such as being employed as the first black trooper in New York. One example from a series of portraits of such 'Negro firsts' is this picture of a trolley car operator on her first trip in 1940. This, like the Dr Wright image, stands out from other such photographs, such as that taken of Harlem's first three postal telegram messengers in 1939. While the latter image shows an improvised pose of three smiling and uniformed men, sitting behind one another up a set of steps, a simple shot that would tell the news story visually, the photograph of the female trolley operator moves into similar territory to that of Dr Wright.

While other such photographs simply record the historic and novel conjunction of individual and function, this photograph shows a 'Negro first' who appears not to be focused on the activity of operating the vehicle but in a kind of reverie. This may be the beginning of the journey; a company official stands behind her, possibly protectively (another photograph of a trolley operator in Chicago shows an armed guard ready to defend this, the first black man to take control of the car). The white man's eyes are fixed ahead and his expression exudes authority and competence; her gaze on the other hand is almost heavenwards, her enigmatic, thoughtful expression seemingly at odds with her hands posed on the handle. This photographic romanticisation of her maiden voyage can be found in other portraits of ordinary people who have broken into the segregated world of white employment.

- **Fig. 255 James Latimer Allen/Harlem nurse (n.d.)**

James L. Allen made a similar image of a Harlem nurse, reproduced in Claude McKay's book, *Negro Metropolis*. She is pictured by a hospital window, weighing a bundled up baby in the scales. Using only available light, which shines on her smiling profile and on her breast, Allen has turned what might in itself be a mundane representation into something that, again, can be read as iconic. Taking the picture from below to give the nurse an elevated status, Allen has also tilted his camera to turn the lines of the window and the shape of the scales into a dynamic pattern, as if everything, including the baby is moving towards this caring figure.

Just as the earlier race model might be criticised for its (white) 'typecasting', so the 'Negro first' might also be questioned as a strategy for image-making. Jewelle Gomez argues that the white press of the 1940s and 1950s only noticed black people if they were 'firsts', citing the cases of Jackie Robinson, widely celebrated because he was the first African American to play modern major league baseball, and of Dorothy Dandridge, the first black woman to be nominated for an Academy Award as best actress. She spells out the consequences of this for the rest of the black community:

...being 'firsts' inevitably deprived us of any individualized image within our own communities or within ourselves. We continued to appear as reflections of someone else's needs. (Gomez, 1986: 16)

The final album examines the emergence of such individualised images.

## **6     *The unknown and the unnamed: Representing black folk***

I imagined, as I saw this photograph [*Raccoon Couple in Car*] on the walls of the Met, that life during the Harlem Renaissance must have been vibrant, supportive, and prideful, but where were the newly arrived migrants from the Deep South? Were they invisible to VanDerZee? (Willis, 1994: 9)

Deborah Willis' comment on the apparent bias towards the established and well-to-do in VanDerZee's work could be applied to the other photographers active in Harlem during the 1910s and 1920s. A living had to be made and those who could afford to commission studio portraits were in the minority. However, by the late 1930s, photojournalism and street photography had really taken off.

- **Fig. 256 M & M Smith/ Robert Day playing Hi-Lo (1937)**
- **Fig. 257 M & M Smith/ Robert Day on skates, 126<sup>th</sup> Street (1939)**

Morgan Smith's portrait of Robert Day playing the popular game of Hi-Lo, taken in 1937, won him honourable mention in the New York *Herald-Tribune*/Kodak amateur photography contest and launched him into a serious photographic career via the first staff photographer post on the *Amsterdam News*. His series of the same boy – 'A Day in the Life of Robert Day', commissioned the following year by the *Herald-Tribune* – depict a smartly, even stylishly, dressed urban child with a lively personality, able to pose naturally and present a strong alternative image to the 'piccaninny' stereotype.

- **Fig. 258 Aaron Siskind/Boy's head (c. 1936-39)**
- **Fig. 259 Roy DeCarava/David (1952)**

Aaron Siskind's portrait of a boy of around the same age is more problematic. He has clearly been asked to hold still for this picture by Siskind, who took a few photographs of him and his friends playing around a pile of timber. Evidently uncomfortable and unsmiling, the boy presents a side-profile to the camera's scrutiny as if for the anthropologist's measuring grid. Siskind seems fascinated more by the shape of the boy's skull than by his personality. Roy DeCarava's portrait of a boy, again of much the same age, is as uncompromising in form and pose yet the direct look that the child gives engages us with his seriousness. He seems as if bound to the post, his choices limited but still able to return stare for stare.

Toni Cade Bambara, in her contribution to *Lure and Loathing*, essays re-evaluating Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness, calls for an end to 'victim portraits' as they send 'a dispiriting message to one's own constituency' (Early, 1994: 316). Just as the image-conscious intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance emphasised positive achievements, so current critics and historians from the black constituency want, to a greater or lesser degree, to counter the *miscegenated* gaze with positive images of family, community, power and creativity. This also goes some way to explaining the thinking behind the proposal that secured a Guggenheim Fellowship for DeCarava:

I want to photograph Harlem through the Negro people. Morning, noon, night, at work, going to work, coming home from work, at play, in the streets, talking, kidding, laughing, in the home, in the playgrounds, in the schools, bars, stores, libraries, beauty parlors, churches, etc. ... I want to show the strength, the wisdom, the dignity of the Negro people. Not the famous and the well known, but the unknown and the unnamed, thus revealing the roots

from which spring the greatness of all human beings.  
(Galassi, 1996: 19)

- **Fig. 260 Roy DeCarava/Mrs. Morton sewing (1951)**
- **Fig. 261 Roy DeCarava/Elfreda (1953)**
- **Fig. 262 Roy DeCarava/Sam laughing (1952)**

According to Sherry Turner DeCarava, her husband has always rejected typecasting. Rather than portraying people as victims or role models, he shows that social conditions do not destroy their sense of self: his portraits are therefore neither 'stereotypes meant to please, disarm, or assuage' nor 'noble archetypes to admire'. Like Langston Hughes, he finds in their 'ordinary pursuits and plans ... an extraordinary quality of humanity' (Galassi, 1996: 80). His is the *empathic* gaze. His focus on the family, the 'space' in which most of his individual portraits are taken, is particularly significant in this respect, given the sociological and concerned journalism of the time and its obsession with the pathology of the ghetto and the consequent breakdown of family life.

DeCarava almost always uses only natural light in his portraits. This means that often faces and figures are in shadow. For Colin Westerbeck and Joel Meyerowitz, this choice reveals the photographer's humanist impulse:

That he photographs his black subjects in a dark space compels the viewer to adjust his vision, to make subtle distinctions, to see shades of meaning and emotion as well as light. The effect is to humanize subjects who are frequently viewed only as stereotypes in our society.'  
(Westerbeck and Meyerowitz, 1994: 342)

The portrait of Mrs Morton sewing (1951) is such a picture, where shadow has been used to create a warm and domestic

intimacy. There is no trace of self-consciousness in the woman's expression and, as in the portrait of Elfreda (1953), no hint that a photographer is present. Although we are therefore not invited to engage with these women through direct eye contact, neither are they presented as an object to be examined. This is partly because DeCarava has not asked them to pose or to dramatise themselves in any way, but used instead a 'candid' approach, allowing the women to continue what they are doing while he simply stands by. The fact that he *is* standing by, in their space, and that they are easy with this situation is testament to the trust he has won from them. The portrait of Sam laughing (1952) is similarly relaxed and unguarded. DeCarava has pointed his camera slightly up at each of the figures, but this is most pronounced in the portrait of Sam, where it has the effect of subtly monumentalising his body. His arm at this angle looks unflexed but powerful thrown across his wide chest and there is an almost tangible sense of a laugh welling up through his body. All three figures seem to achieve an iconic status whilst remaining individual characters, lending themselves to the 'perceptual innuendo' of our storytelling.

- **Fig. 189 Aaron Siskind/Woman climbing stairs (c. 1936-39)**
- **Fig. 263 Roy DeCarava/Woman resting, subway entrance (1952)**
- **Fig. 264 DeCarava/Man coming up subway stairs (1952)**

The 'everyday' black body was also of interest to documentary photographers, like Siskind and Levitt, although they lacked the kind of access that DeCarava managed to achieve. Siskind's picture of a woman climbing stairs, considered in Chapter Four, does come close, however, to leading the viewer towards the metaphor that DeCarava explores in several of his subway portraits. The trope of climbing is common in African American

writing and song, as a metaphor for struggle and, in Langston Hughes's poem *Mother to Son*, for endurance:

Well, son, I'll tell you:  
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.  
It's had tacks in it,  
And splinters,  
And boards torn up,  
And places with no carpet on the floor –  
Bare.  
But all the time  
I've been a-climbin' on... (in Lewis, 1995: 261-262)

In Siskind's photograph, endurance seems enfolded in the strong grip this woman has on the banister, lending her a kind of admirable stoicism as she starts up the stairs for what one senses is not the first or last time. In DeCarava's picture of a woman resting by a subway entrance, the result of the hard climb is clear. Leaning forward to ease the muscles in her back, the woman stares into space, smoking – again a stoical pose, adopted naturally. In one of DeCarava's most celebrated images, of a man coming up subway stairs, on his way home from work, taken perhaps on the same day in 1952, he creates another iconic image free of condescension towards the individual. Peter Galassi singles this picture out as an example of DeCarava's ability to combine symbolic force with concrete particularity: 'For DeCarava... muscle and bone, and sunlight upon the folds of clothing are enough to tell the story of a life' (Galassi, 1996: 30).

As the final chapter demonstrates, with these portraits and his photographs of the built environment of Harlem, DeCarava was, with help from Langston Hughes, able to tell a story not just of individual lives but a story of Harlem itself, fulfilling his desire to 'photograph Harlem through the Negro people'.

## Chapter Six

### ***A Tale of Two Cities: Harlem as a narrative***

... it was the first book I had ever seen with "colored" people in it - people that I recognised, people that reminded me of my own family. ...the photographs spoke to me in a manner that I will never forget, and they led me to ask questions about the photographs we had in our house. (Willis, 1994: 3-4)

\*

Having completed his Guggenheim project by 1953, DeCarava soon discovered how difficult it was to get his work out to the public. Finally, he called on Langston Hughes, hoping that he might have an idea how they might get published. Inspired by the quality of the photographs, Hughes quickly realised how well the images might lend themselves to a folksy narrative of the kind he had perfected in his humorous 'Simple' stories.

The book that resulted was *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, a story - or faux-documentary - of the city, with 140 of DeCarava's photographs selected, sequenced and stitched together with a continuous written text over a hundred pages. Published by Simon and Schuster in 1955 in an inexpensive pocket-sized format, the book was a great success, going swiftly into a second edition, winning two awards and, most significantly, selling out its first edition (3,000 clothbound; 22,000 paperbound); the second printing was 10,000. Gilbert Millstein in *NYT Book Review* immediately saw its potential for reaching across the colour line:

A book like 'The Sweet Flypaper of Life' should be bought by a great many people and read by a good many more. It is probably hortatory to say so, but the chances are it could accomplish a lot more about race relations than many pounds of committee reports.' (Galassi, 1996: 22))

What appealed to Willis and presumably to so many black readers about this photo-story was that it depicted African Americans at last occupying their own space - both the space of the photographs themselves and the Harlem represented in them. Indeed, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* was the first major photographic book to feature African American photography and the first to examine Harlem life from the inside.

## 1 Storyboarding

*The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is set in Harlem but takes as its subject broader issues and concerns about black urban life in general. Although there are references to the particular cultural heritage of Harlem, including portraits of anonymous arts workers and jazz players, the book does not set out to memorialise or celebrate the obvious landmarks, such as the Apollo Theater or the Hotel Theresa. Rather, it takes the plain streets and ordinary interiors of Harlem as the primary site of black city existence and, directed by the written text, sets out to record and celebrate the everyday life and common heritage of urbanised African Americans. As such, it tends not to focus on specific events and there are no 'newsworthy' images. Instead, using the still images as a kind of storyboard or filmstrip, Langston Hughes creates a flow of life - a flypaper to which he sticks his observations.

Hughes structures the book around and through the family of 'Sister Mary Bradley' and its relationship to black history and to contemporary socio-cultural trends, selecting a range of images to portray both the members of this fictional family and the wider black community. Significantly, he 'bookends' the narrative with two single images; it opens with a close-up of 'Ronnie Belle', one of Sister Mary's younger grandsons, and ends with a portrait of Sister Mary herself, in her Sunday best - the first and only glimpse we are offered of the narrator through whom Hughes addresses us. What we get in the intervening pages is a kind of family album, which Sister Mary talks us through. The link between the grandson and the grandmother, however, points to a wider historical frame.

Sister Mary is triggered into telling this narrative by the recent landmark decision of *Brown vs. The Board of Education*, outlawing segregation in schools, which persuades her not to

sign for St Peter's telegram calling her to heaven but 'to stay here and see what this integration the Supreme Court has done decreed is going to be like'. Born in the closing years of the previous century, Sister Mary bridges the history of black struggle for civil rights from the low point of Jim Crowism to this hopeful moment of 1954. Her concern for Ronnie Belle and indeed her whole narrative, which is more a reflective essay on the current issues affecting black people than a conventionally plotted story, seem to stem from a prophetic sense that African Americans are standing on the brink of great change.

The narrative can be separated into ten sections or sequences that alternate between Sister Mary's pithy comments on various members of her family and the broader observations and opinions on black urban life that they inspire. The photographs serve to illustrate this inner/outer pulse in the narrative, with most of the family pictures taken inside apartments and those relating to the wider community taken outside, on the streets. This division between interior and exterior space enables Hughes to explore, through Sister Mary's plain speech, a whole range of issues to do with identity, physical and social mobility, and the exercise of power.

The narrative flows back and forth from the personal to the social. Sister Mary's loving puzzlement about her grandson Rodney in the first section (DeCarava & Hughes, 1967 [1955]: 7-13; *please note that all page numbers refer to this edition*) leads out into broader commentary on 'young folks in Harlem', the generation gap and the impact of a new consumer society, epitomised by the Cadillac (14-19). We are next introduced to Mae, who plans to buy a car, and her husband, 'my most up-and-coming grandchild' and a marked contrast to Rodney (20-21). This produces a longer sequence (22-34) where Sister Mary muses on the hard struggle for respectability and responsibility and on the temptations of rebellion and fecklessness. We meet

members of her family who are doing their best to get on (35-38), including a daughter who has successfully survived a divorce. 'I got some fine people in my family,' Sister Mary says, 'just like we got some fine people in our race.' This launches another general sequence (39-40), this time illustrating some of the trades and professions followed by black people in Harlem. Rodney's skill, on the other hand, seems to be his ability to 'say things that makes everybody set up and take notice'.

In one of the longer sequences (up to page 61), we are introduced first to elderly neighbours, who, childless and house-proud, are compared unfavourably to her daughter Melinda's family who are 'all tangled up in life - which ain't always so sanitary as we might like it to be'. We are taken into the home of Melinda and Jerry and their five children, and see them interacting with each other and with friends who come round for a party in their kitchen. We leave them as Melinda waits for Jerry to come home, ready to 'populate the colored race again'.

As if to illustrate the 'colored race' in all its variety, the next sequence (62-84) exits into the streets, via the window where people sit and watch the world go by. The following spreads are about life on the streets - people meeting and greeting, celebrating, working, parading, picketing, holding political meetings. This sequence ends as it begins, with a figure silhouetted in a window. We thus return to family concerns, with Rodney and Sister Mary herself in focus. Here the affinity between the two that has been hinted at is made plain in the grandmother's clear identification with her errant grandchild, who is more 'like a son'. She believes that he would 'do better to marry Mazie ... who don't give a parlor damn about paying Con Edison' and who 'works just hard enough to get along' than the more conventional Ada - a 'decent girl' but not as 'beat up by life' as Mazie and Sister Mary herself have been. As she contemplates the possibility of a new relationship herself, with

the widowed janitor, the redoubtable matriarch admits, 'I done got my feet caught in the sweet flypaper of life - and I'll be dogged if I want to get loose.'

## **2 Street, home, underground: representational spaces**

Hughes's portrait of black urban life, by having to refer (directly or indirectly) to the photographs on the page, is dependent on and shaped by DeCarava's representation of physical space. This space is both the three-dimensional space depicted (for example, an apartment interior or a street scene) and the two-dimensional space that is filled with the printed image. The same spatial categories emerge in both written and photographic text: the space of the home, the space of the street, and underground space. The treatment of these three types of space by writer and photographer reveals ways in which the text as a whole ascribes meaning to urban experience, specifically the ways in which African Americans at this precise historical moment define themselves, practise everyday life and resist the conformity and corporatism of white culture.

Home space has been explored earlier, drawing on some of the photographs used here. One further point relates back to the earlier discussion about the 'open' spaces that also form part of 'nearly autonomous territory': parties, kitchens, families, and friendships. All of these are depicted in the 'home' sequences of this book. DeCarava's camera pulls back to reveal the kitchen as a site of family and friends interacting. As well as expressions of familial love, this sequence contains a range of social incidents: friends and family singing and even dancing in the kitchen, children tussling, Melinda sewing or reading the paper, the family sitting down to eat, a daughter having her hair braided, the washing up being done. These informal and intimate pictures of a somewhat chaotic but loving family space support Sister Mary's preference for being 'tangled up in life' and they contrast with the two earlier images of Sister Jenkins and her husband. These elderly neighbours have no children and are able, as the photographs show, to keep a neat and tidy apartment, with

antimacassars on the chairs, embroidered tablecloth, and an ordered kitchen area.

The second spatial category is the street, the attractions of which are clear to Sister Mary:

Every so often, every so once in a while, someday a women gets a chance to set in her window for a minute and look out: New York is not like back down South with not much happening outside. In Harlem something is happening all the time, people are going every which-a-way ... (62-63)

The two images that this text accompanies are, first, the silhouette of a seated woman looking out of a window and, second, a view of a sidewalk presumably taken from such a window, where half a dozen figures walk up and down. The window presents the spectacle of the streets from the safe space of the home. After a long excursion into the outside world, which has encompassed hints of poverty and manifestations of political unrest, the sequence closes with another figure - a young boy - in a window, seen from the street: 'Yes, you can sit in your window anywhere in Harlem and see plenty.' (84) The boy is reading, just as we are reading this text, discovering the variety of life in Harlem.

The street is what distinguishes the city from the rural birthplace of the South. Things here are happening; people are going places or just hanging out. There is a sense of liberation and of anonymity, which feeds into the notion of the city as a place of opportunity. However, the streets of Harlem present as much a threat as an opportunity to its children.

Before we see any street scenes at all, Sister Mary captions a close-up of Rodney with the cry, 'That Rodney! The street's done

got Rodney!’ (10) This metaphor runs through the written text and expresses Sister Mary’s fear of influences other than the family. Even as she celebrates the richness of urban life and its spectacle, she worries over the risk and temptation it represents: ‘What do you reckon’s out there in them streets for that boy?’ (85)

On the one hand, the street is a site of conspicuous consumption; the first photographs of the street are used to demonstrate that they are ‘just full of cars’ (19) and the car is the ultimate consumer item of the period, a potent symbol of having made it. Rodney’s drinking companion Joe ‘ties a rope of dreams with Cadillac headlights, and bebop horns and girls saying, “Gimmie a ride”’ around his neck. (12) Chickasaw, Rodney’s polar opposite, and his partner may be considering actually buying a car, but for Rodney, as for many other black Americans, it remains a seductive and paralysing dream.

On the other hand, the street is a site of transgression. Although the nature of lawlessness shown and written about here is mild enough, there are clear references to the growth of a street-based culture that replaces the bonds of family with those of peer-group gangs. Rodney, the black sheep of the family, was ‘always the first to turn on the hydrant in the street in the summer’ and ‘always the one who got caught’. The photograph here shows children running around under the hydrant showers in semi-clad abandon, while the following spread of candid portraits purports to be some of the boys involved, with a group of girls egging them on, until ‘the cops come - and they have to grab their clothes quick’. (23-26 *passim*)

Again, a comparison is drawn between Rodney and Chickasaw, this time emphasised by Hughes’s deliberate pairing of two images: the hydrant scene and an elevated view, looking down on a single, elegant figure walking along an expanse of a well-

paved avenue. This figure is identified in Hughes's text with Chick's girlfriend: 'Well, where she lives they got an elevator. Pretty streets, clean, it's on the hill.' (22) The hill is presumably Sugar Hill and home to the black bourgeoisie. The contrast between the two streets could not be more pointed, one calm and exclusive, elevated literally and in socio-economic terms, and the other very much at 'street-level' and, judging from the jets of spray, explosive. There is only one 'Hill' but many streets like this one.

However, Hughes's annotation of the photographs of streets, car lots and urban wasteland in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is, by and large, determinedly optimistic. One of the most striking examples of this is his 'caption' to what has become one of DeCarava's most celebrated images.(69) A young woman in a glamorous full-length white gown is standing on the sidewalk beside what appears to be an abandoned lot. She is in a trapezium of sunlight surrounded by the shadow of apartment buildings. In the foreground, rubbish has been swept up into a pile in gutter; behind and to the other side of the figure is rough grass and rubble. The woman is standing left of centre; to the right is a dark wall on which a billboard has been pasted, advertising Chevrolet cars with a picture of a family saloon and the slogan 'Style Star of an All-Star Line'.

The deliberate choice to include the advertisement with its white middle-class in their family car in a picture that already contains a stark, black and white contrast between an ugly environment and a beautiful and enigmatic lone figure suggests that an ironic social comment is being made. This complex image by Roy DeCarava is, however, reduced in the written text to a fond comment from Sister Mary: 'But it's nice to see young folks all dressed up going somewhere - maybe to a party.'

For the next image, showing a shabbily dressed man looking into the closed doorway of a shuttered brownstone, Hughes writes, 'But it's sad if you ain't invited'. (70) Whether intentionally or not, Hughes thus undercuts the optimistic note struck against the previous image. The 'party' now seems to stand for the idea of success, even for the American dream.

As if disturbed by this brief moment of gloom, Sister Mary goes on to comment over the next two spreads about the challenge of the physical environment of the city for a people raised in the rural South:

It's too bad there's no front porches in Harlem: Almost nothing except stoops to set on... or steps... or doorways to lean in: And in the summertime, maybe a vacant lot: But almost everywhere where there's something to set on or lean on, somebody is setting or leaning. In what few parks there is, some just set on a park bench... and hold their hands: (70-74)

In this brief passage, commenting on half a dozen images, Sister Mary both mourns the loss of a communal life based around the front porch and celebrates the way in which black people adapt to and even reshape an unsympathetic urban architecture, turning it into public space.

The way that African Americans occupy the street as a site of power is depicted in a series of photographs of political action (79-83): a picket line and street corner meetings, with crowds of attentive listeners and a portrait of an impassioned orator, arm raised against the night sky.

The street is also a place of display. Sister Mary refers to the desire of Harlemites to dress well and put on a show, even when ground down by drudgery and work. Accompanying the picture

of a woman resting with her bag at the top of the steps from the subway, the text tells us that sometimes 'a woman goes to work all dressed up carrying her work clothes in a bundle'. (33) Sister Mary herself tries to change before coming home, so that 'my grandchildren would see me looking fresh'. (34) The subway and its steps here act as a concrete metaphor for the struggle to maintain dignity and a sense of self-worth. Above a picture of a woman descending the steps, glimpsed through the metal bars, Hughes writes: 'And I done climbed up and down a million subway steps: I done rid a million subway cars, and went back and forth to work a million days for that Rodney ...'. (31)

The street is a place of work, too. In a generic echo of Edwardian street types or more recent images of street traders taken by Aaron Siskind, DeCarava's photographs include informal portraits of a construction worker, a coalman and an iceman, as well as indoor shots of a jazz musician, an actor, an artist, a subway builder, and a sign painter. By selecting these images, Hughes hopes to celebrate the diversity and economic health of black life in the city, suggesting in the process that to survive there, you need a defined role, as a worker.

Two sets of images are paired up by Hughes to demonstrate the way the street is less hospitable than the family. In one pair, a sad boy leaning against a lamppost is associated in the text with Rodney's child (born out of wedlock and neglected by his father) and this image (printed in full and in detail, isolating him further) is placed opposite one of another child whispering in a father's ear in an intimate close-up. (28-29) The next page juxtaposes another lonely boy glumly sat in a patch of wasteland ('some children, maybe they don't have nobody') with a son of the same age, tended to by his mother. (30) Without a job and without a role in the family, either as a son or a father, you become a Rodney and must find your space underground: the third spatial category considered here.

Rodney's failure to fit in with the conventional aspirations of the dominant culture is given a spatial metaphor that assigns him to a literal and metaphorical underground existence. Rodney is never seen outside but in gloomy bars and dark interiors and, at points in the text when Sister Mary is most critical, in the basement drinking with his men friends.

As observed earlier, Rodney is compared unfavourably with Chickasaw, who is 'as different from Rodney as day from night' - a telling distinction, associating Chick with whiteness and Rodney with blackness. Unlike Rodney, who 'says daylight hurts his eyes', Chick takes the bus rather than the subway and heads off to work downtown, that is, in the white section of Manhattan. According to Sister Mary, Chick 'could dress himself when he was three years old', gets up early, works hard, has a girlfriend 'on the hill', and is growing up 'all reet, all right'. In these habits and in his evident belief in integration, Chick is a man in the Booker T. Washington mode. Rodney, on the other hand, does not work and 'Never will be integrated with neither white nor colored, nor work, just won't' (20-23 *passim*).

Rodney's refusal to work or to conform is illustrated by two images of his drinking and rapping sessions down in the basement and in his general lack of movement - or mobility: 'he never moves fast - not even to reach out his hand for a dollar - except when he's dancing'. The places he dances and hangs out with a string of different girlfriends are bars and places with jukeboxes. No windows are visible in the photographs used to illustrate this behaviour, and precious little light.

When Sister Mary exclaims metaphorically that 'The street's done got Rodney!', she goes on to identify a precise place where he may be reached: '... do you reckon my prayers will reach down in all them king-kong basements, and sing with the juke boxes,

and walk in the midnight streets with that Rodney?’ (11) The midnight streets are, in effect, underground, too.

At several points in the narrative, Sister Mary comments on Rodney’s lack of mobility, upward or actual. There is, however, one exceptional circumstance: ‘he only moves fast when he’s dancing’, being ‘crazy about music’. This was, of course, a period when a distinctive youth culture had emerged, exemplified in this text by jukeboxes, ‘cool’ jazz and cars. A range of attitudes and poses had also developed, linked to the rebellious writings of the Beat literary movement, itself partly shaped by the new forms of improvisational jazz and a ‘black’ hipster sensibility. ‘When there’s music playing,’ says Sister Mary, adopting the current lingo, ‘girls have to just keep looking to see where’s he at. *Where’s he at? Where’s he at?*’ (11)

The answer to this existential question is that Rodney is, in effect, in a space of his own creation, shaped not only in his dancing but by his other main activity, talk: ‘They say in the neighborhood sometimes Rodney can say things that makes everybody set up and take notice ...’ (41) This comment captions an image of four men in serious discussion down in what appears to be a basement, and it follows the series of work portraits of ‘some fine people in our race’, noted earlier. Rodney’s occupation has no immediate, tangible product; his voice starts underground and circulates mysteriously but powerfully around the neighbourhood. It is, in other words, a prophetic voice, like that of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*:

Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me: Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you? (Ellison, 1965: 468-469)

### 3 The storyteller

Sister Mary Bradley is the 'grandmother' of this extended Harlem family, some members in work, some unemployed; some looking for love and some raising families; some keen to make it in the white world, others less hopeful. In her move beyond the familial history and its private spaces to the streets and subways, the basement bars and parks of the city, we are able to see and imagine family, friends, and strangers - all black, all at home in Harlem. Only at the very end, on the last page, do we finally get to meet Sister Mary herself, where the fiction seems to be revealed as a photographic fact.

'Here I am,' she says, her final words to us. She has already told us that she has left her pots and pans behind and put on her best clothes - something she does 'ever so once in a while'. She is carefully posed against a brownstone, near the steps up to the front door. She rests her arm on the railings that curve round a small front garden, not it seems for support but perhaps because it looks more elegant that way. The bush behind her softens the stone background, this tiny urban garden faintly echoing her rural past.

Her statement - *Here I am* - is suggestive as well as explanatory, provoking ideas about identity and location, as well as supplying narrative closure. By appearing at the end of the narrative, her body and its rooted, concrete position in space - the space framed by the limits of the photograph as well as by the built environment that the image re-presents - seem to contain more than such a portrait would if it were placed alone on a gallery wall. In this case, the whole illustrated tour of the public and private spaces of Harlem contained in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* acts as a meta-caption for this first and last look at the storyteller.

The effect of this is to produce a reading that establishes an equivalence between Harlem and Sister Mary, between the 'here' and the 'I am'. One identifies the other. She constructs Harlem and Harlem finds its expression through her eyes - eyes which directly engage the eye of the photographer, and thus our own. Although she is elderly and relatively poor, she still takes an evident pride in her appearance, decorating her sombre dress with jewellery and setting off her hat with hoop earrings. It is her face, however, that will probably hold most interest for the reader, her dignified gaze softened by a Giaconda smile.

Her whole pose confirms Bourdieu's comment on all portraits taken in a society that values 'honour, dignity and respectability': 'it is important to give others the most honourable, the most dignified image of oneself.' In this context, Sister Mary's dignity encodes a Harlem that can still hold its head up, still put on its Sunday best, still live in hope. Hughes's narrative argues through his captioning of DeCarava's photographs that Sister Mary and Harlem - living organisms with roots in time and space - endure.

Without Hughes's voice, of course, 'Sister Mary Bradley' disappears. What we then see is an anonymous subject: an elderly black woman in an urban setting about whom we are now free, like Hughes, to *imagine* - to make up stories of our own, based on our own knowledge of black life and culture and about the origins of this photograph, what it depicts and what we can detect from it.

#### **4      Ambiguities**

*The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is a text that annotates and interprets the way in which African Americans live in an almost filmic manner. The flow of Sister Mary's words seems to match the flow of images in Hughes' seamless narrative. However, the fact that we know the photographs were taken, not to his commission but to satisfy DeCarava's own agenda, should remind us of the separate range of meanings that the images may have, once removed from the captioning effect of Hughes's text. It should also alert us to instances where word and image can undermine as well as reinforce each other, particularly in the depiction of the decaying physical fabric of Harlem and the evident poverty of many of its inhabitants.

Throughout the text, Hughes struggles to tame the numerous potential readings of DeCarava's photographs and to produce the most optimistic meaning from images that sometimes resist or even contradict the words he puts in Sister Mary's mouth. He has a clear ideological agenda in structuring the text around the twin worlds of the family and the wider community it shapes. Through Sister Mary, Hughes talks into existence a coherent, loving framework where even the most non-conformist member of the group is cherished and absorbed, like a prodigal son. Where this scheme breaks down, however, is in its uncertain and ambiguous attitude towards aspiration and assimilation, on the one hand, and towards unconventionality and refusal on the other. This has its spatial equivalent in the fluctuating interpretation of the street, as both threat and opportunity. Although the space of the home is privileged in the written text, Sister Mary's partial identification with the wilder lifestyle of her grandson Rodney qualifies her disapproval of the underground existence he leads - as if the basements and jazz clubs he frequents recall for her the glamorous days of the Harlem Renaissance.

Once removed from Hughes's narrative, DeCarava's photographs are open to wide interpretation and appropriation but, in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, Hughes sees through these pictures to a city of potential. In the spaces that conventional documentary photography has stereotyped as the ghetto, he finds, like Italo Calvino, a community struggling to be seen.

Was the oracle mistaken? Not necessarily. I interpret it in this way: Marozia consists of two cities, the rat's and the swallow's; both change with time, but their relationship does not change; the second is about to free itself from the first. (Calvino, 1979: 120)

## Conclusions

### *The picture works*

As the analysis of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* illustrates, judicious selection and captioning can harness photographs (and, indeed, photographers) to a closed ideological enterprise. However, critical readings of the kind attempted in this thesis can, I believe, question and resist such closure, proposing instead that the resulting *photographic ambiguity* can serve as a powerful tool - in this case, to perceive, imagine and make manifest the complexities of Harlem and everyday life in urban African America during the first half of the twentieth century.

The two cities that emerge from my reading of not just *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* but of the photographic archive as a whole are not the separate halves of a binary but, as Italo Calvino's fable suggests and as the ambiguity of photographs themselves confirm, flicker back and forth in the lived space of Harlem.

- **Fig. 265 Gordon Parks/Street with garbage cans (n.d.)**

This photograph of a Harlem streetscape was taken by Gordon Parks, probably in the late 1940s, and later included in a monograph, where he added the following poetic caption: 'There in my marked-off area of life/I tended each day the garbage gardens' (Parks, 1975: 60). The way the photograph has been taken, the ground-level viewpoint and the *foregrounding* of garbage cans and litter, combined with the disappearing, forlorn-looking figure all seem to proclaim a single meaning of abject decay and squalor, mapped onto the Harlem streetscape.

*Positioned thus in the gutter* of existence, we are here inhabiting space that has been turned into a 'sink', space *transformed into* trash cans. As Michel de Certeau suggests, this is evidence of the other side of the rational schema: *the production of excess*. In the shadow cast by the colour line of 110<sup>th</sup> Street, the black population and its 'city' has been transformed into darkness and dirt. James Baldwin describes the resulting landscape:

The wide windows [of the projects] look out on Harlem's invincible and indescribable squalor: the Park Avenue railroad tracks, around which, about forty years ago, the present dark community began; the unrehabilitated houses, bowed down, it would seem, under the great weight of frustration and bitterness they contain; the dark, the ominous schoolhouses from which the child may emerge maimed, blinded, hooked, or enraged for like; and the churches, churches, block upon block of churches, niched in the walls like cannon in the walls of a fortress. (Baldwin, 1991: 61)

This is a gothic landscape shaped by the invisible white hand. Baldwin's heartfelt desire is to sweep it all away - a ghetto, he writes, 'can be improved in one way only: out of existence' (ibid: 63).

- **Fig. 266 Roy DeCarava/Graduation (1949)**

However much Harlem is a place of such desired erasure, dreamed escapes and real evictions, the other city is still struggling to be seen.

Roy DeCarava's photograph of the woman in a ball gown in a vacant lot was actually taken in 1949. In the recent MOMA monograph, it is captioned simply *Graduation*. In one reading, this picture, too, represents a gothic space, at least in Anthony

Vidler's contemporary version of the urban uncanny, which can 'erupt in empty parking lots around abandoned or run-down shopping malls, in... the wasted margins'. The favourite motif of the gothic from the eighteenth century on, as Vidler reminds us, was a secure home invaded by something alien (Vidler, 1992: 3).

Harlem – as Chris Mulvey puts it, 'the true home of the black, the place where he was most at home, the place where he came into his own' - appears to have been laid waste here by some invisible being (1990: 155). Where VanDerZee's 'raccoon couple' once turned the Harlem street into a natural setting for their glamorous pose, environment and actor now seem at odds. Instead of home, there is a garbage garden. The young woman seems, literally, out of place here.

Yet DeCarava's photograph seems to achieve an ambiguous and puzzling visual synthesis that combines and then ultimately goes beyond the glamour of VanDerZee's photograph and the squalor of Parks' ground zero shot. In begging more questions than answers, *Graduation* provides unique concrete and visual expression to the enduring paradox about Harlem: that it is at one and the same time a place of despair – the vacant lot an enactment of the invisibility of Harlem and of the wider culture's denial of African American achievement – *and* a community of hope, where the aspirations of the 'race capital' seem embodied in the proud young black woman posing in her graduation ball-gown.

In *Graduation*, the reading is constantly flickering between apparently contradictory messages. Thus, the black city provides a true counter-narrative to the story of the white city by embodying in its spaces and practices the doubling effects of racism: the urban grid that attempts to universalise but divides along the 'color-line'; the collective demonstrations of a desire

for full citizenship that fail to wrest the streets from powerful white hands; the public space where African Americans can become 'true New Yorkers' yet are set at a distance by segregation; the private sphere where an urban black 'homeplace' can be constructed but only in the shape-shifting shadow of a ruthless and absent white power structure; the desire to forge a new urban identity that is ever thwarted by the 'lure and loathing' of double-consciousness.

Harlem is a complex and ambiguous place: both a 'culture capital' and a ghetto in the popular imagination of the twentieth century. As bell hooks observes, 'these margins have been both sites of repression and sites of resistance' (hooks, 1990: 151). This repression and this resistance are expressed in spatial terms, marking and shaping Harlem's landscape, its streets, its homes and its inhabitants. These spaces, as hooks again reminds us, can 'tell stories and unfold histories' because they are, simultaneously, 'real and imagined' (ibid: 152).

In (re)presenting these spaces, photographers, too, tell stories and unfold histories. And, in making Harlem visible, they give us powerful means to conceive it.

## Postscript

### Levitt's button

*In his description of the mythical Zaira in *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino comments that compiling statistics and materials about the city's physical appearance 'would be the same as telling you nothing. The city does not consist of this, but of relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past.' Paradoxically, the storyteller must read (and thus produce) this past from the marks made on the physical fabric of the city, 'like the lines of a hand' (Calvino, 1979: 13).*

\*

#### • Fig. 267 Helen Levitt/Graffiti (c. 1945)

The idea of the *photographic*, or the marking of surfaces in Patrick Maynard's terms, is made vivid in this photograph of graffiti, taken by Helen Levitt in the mid-1940s. I first saw a reproduction of this picture squeezed into the bottom right-hand corner of a page in the reprinted catalogue to *Harlem on My Mind*. It also caught critic A.D. Coleman's eye at the actual exhibition, where he had this to say about it:

Schoener's omnipresent lack of real imagination permits him to hide in a dim corner a Helen Levitt photograph which should have been the opening shot – a chalk drawn picture of a push-button scrawled on a Harlem wall, with these words beside it: "Button to Secret Passage – Press." (1979, 11).

It is a very simple picture and yet it offers a potentially rich field of enquiry. Levitt saw Harlem as both a theatre and a

playground and presumably for that reason was drawn to the exuberant graffiti as well as the children on the sidewalk. In this case, she depicts an actual written text that provides its own imagining power. On the one hand, it imagines a way of penetrating the wall and, by extension, gaining entry into another Harlem (which could even be the 'real' Harlem). For some readers, the whole notion of a 'secret passage' might recall the 'underground railroad' of slavery days, when escapees from the South sought a passage to freedom to the North – a journey, in a sense, mimicked by the Great Migration to northern cities, above all to this one.

On the other hand, the photograph also records an actual scene: a child's chalk mark on the all-too-solid boundary of a Harlem wall. The unauthorised marking of public space provides a mild suggestion of a street culture at odds with the given order, which shifts the reading of the photograph to a depiction of a thwarted desire to escape the street. The text can then express Harlem as a ghetto, from which people are longing to escape.

This suggests a deeper binary: the dream of Harlem, with its promise of fresh opportunities, is located in the 'invisible' (what can be detected in the photograph); while the reality of Harlem, with its insistent demographic of race and poverty, is located in the visible (what the photograph actually depicts). Chris Mulvey puts it thus, in his account of the 'New Negro':

There was a tension ... between the mythologically enhancing reading of the city of New York as a place which spoke of opportunity, freedom, democracy and the demographically reductive reading of the city as a place which spoke of statistics, politics and economics. (Mulvey & Simons, 1990: 150-151)

So, this simple image's very ambiguity is, I believe, its strength as a way of thinking about Harlem, both in the real and concrete sense and as a metaphor. If we look at it closely enough, perception and imagination may merge and shift into a new and vivid sense that we are, momentarily, *present*.

Coleman was right to suggest this photograph as an ideal opening shot for an exhibition about Harlem. By pressing the button – and releasing the shutter – a way may be found into Harlem, that celebrated *terra incognita*.

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Research materials gathered from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYPL; the Museum of the City of New York; and a personal interview with Marvin Smith, nonagenarian Harlem photographer.

Research also gathered from a number of websites, notably primary material on Byron, Sid Grossman and Berenice Abbott accessed from the Museum of the City of New York website at [www.mcny.org](http://www.mcny.org)