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West Harlem on Their Minds: Mapping Power, Identity and Inclusion in a Changing Neighborhood

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*West Harlem on Their Minds:
Mapping Power, Identity and Inclusion in a
Changing Neighborhood*

By

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Introduction

In junior high school, the Upper West Side was miles away from Harlem. Armed with our bright green and white Metrocards, the subway would whisk my best friend and me far away from gourmet supermarkets carrying cheeses with names we could not pronounce and the private school where we donned sky blue knee-length skirts and navy blue pullovers that set our parents back every year. Far from the keep out-tall iron gates of Columbia University, police officers that scolded us for jaywalking and gleaming, well-kept white sidewalks and away from towering buildings with elegant glass doors and uniformed doormen. The #3 train was our exit from this world and a “magic act” always accompanied our trip home; our fellow white straphangers would unfailingly disappear by the 110th Street stop. We continued toward 145th Street station, exit onto Lenox Avenue and head west, where the sights, smells and sounds of the Harlem we knew enveloped us. Up hilly sidewalks scarred with blackened gum, we passed African hair braiding shops and tiny bodegas blasting *bachata* music. Passing multiple storefront churches with weathered signs and the orange neon signs of massive Laundromats. Beyond five-story walk-ups with deteriorated facades that signal past grandeur, next to meticulously maintained 19th century brownstone row homes.

Now, boundaries have blurred. Trends in the real estate market and new development opportunities have reached “uptown”, rapidly transforming a neighborhood formerly marked by retail and residential disinvestment. Gentrification in Harlem has been on the minds and lips of everyone, from residents to politicians, university administrators to New York Times reporters, activists to developers, and business owners

to the blogosphere. The controversial nature and social relevance of this neighborhood change lies in the renewal of community outrage and subsequent action on the issue.

My interest in this topic stems from my unique position as a Harlem resident. Over the past two decades, I have witnessed neighborhood characteristics of the Upper West Side have making their way further uptown. Harlem is the new frontier for residential and commercial retail development; suburban-style mainstream brands such as Old Navy, Starbucks and Staples are juxtaposed against local and culturally specific establishments such as M&G Soul Food Diner, Lenox Lounge and African Paradise, an import shop. After years of palpable absence, banks and chain drugstores sit on the ground floor of newly built luxury condominiums. Residents can now sip mocha lattes at a new Starbucks, now opening the corner of 145th and 8th avenue. Between 2003 and 2006, housing prices in West Harlem rose by more than 100%, and refurbished town homes boasting fireplaces, pocket doors and hardwood floors regularly sell for millions. The self-described “destination for the discerning” gourmet supermarket, Citarella recently opened its doors on 125th Street and Amsterdam, complete with an extensive *foie gras* and truffle selection. “For sale” signs are ubiquitous and dumpsters brimming with the waste of restoration projects dot tree-lined blocks. These changes have heralded, as some say, a ‘nouveau renaissance’ in the neighborhood or, as highlighted by a recent New York Times article, a great way to spend a weekend ‘uptown’:

Today's Harlem simmers with -ations: gentrification, commercialization and real estate speculation -- causing tension and political battles. But all that change makes this a fascinating time for a Harlem weekend of early morning church services, midday chicken and waffles, afternoon shopping, evening bar-hopping and late-night jazz. You can even take the A Train to get there.

However, through my ethnographic research with native residents and my own experiences, the vastly changing landscape has ushered in more mixed reviews. On one end, I directly benefit from the building of restaurants, new shopping options, supermarkets and entertainment venues resulting from recent redevelopment measures. At the other end, my family's standard of living signals the opposite. Due to the real estate market explosion, West Harlem property values have risen tremendously, as have rents and the cost of living. Such change makes it difficult for residents to occupy or even feel comfortable in their neighborhoods. Examining my role in this situation has motivated me to critically analyze my surrounding environment, but also learn about the ways in which my neighbors feel emotionally and culturally challenged by neighborhood change.

This research explores the dynamic relationship between race, place and power in an urban community in flux; examining the ways in which community members frame and define neighborhood change in West Harlem, and paying close attention to issues of power, identity and inclusion. Several theoretical queries guided my research, as I sought to gauge the issues at hand through a humanistic and interpretive model. To determine the attitudes, perceptions and behaviors the native residents held toward their transforming neighborhood, I examined how their observations related to themes of place attachment, inclusion and power. In light of a swift reversal of years of disinvestment and relative isolation, suspicions and distrust simmer among long-time residents. Class and race tensions fuel fears of out-pricing and displacement, giving rise to power struggles and debates over ownership of space and authenticity. Further, new interests and expectations often compete with established values and norms. These concerns and

conflicts, exacerbated by a housing crisis and Columbia University's plan to expand into West Harlem, can potentially have a volatile effect. Through contentious community meetings, conversations over meals and interviews with individuals in their homes and workplaces, I listened to the range of emotions expressed by residents. Feelings of anger, frustration, and resignation but also, indignation, resolve and resistance characterized these exchanges. Further insight into how these feelings and concerns construct residents' reaction (and action) toward neighborhood change will be discussed later on.

I also questioned how neighborhood change affected one's place-identity, assessing how native residents see themselves in light of a series of physical and social transformations within their community. Essentially, if our identity is shaped by our physical environment and the social relationships within those physical spaces, what happens to our sense of self and community when that physical environment changes? Lastly, I challenged my own assumptions on the cultural effects of neighborhood change. Through my fieldwork and participant observation, I began to wonder whether it was responsible and relevant to frame the complexity of gentrification solely along racial lines and within the binary construction of "insider vs. "outsider". Although recent literature frames the process of gentrification in Harlem as a "black vs. white" issue, this model, while appropriate for Central Harlem, is not entirely adequate for West Harlem. The community is self-described by residents as a "neighborhood of neighborhoods" with a diverse native-born and immigrant population. Remaining cognizant of this significant difference, I hypothesized that this fixed binary ignores complexities in which diverse groups experience neighborhood change in different ways. Although I do not wish to ignore the social history of a neighborhood delineated as an isolated, "racialized" space,

and specifically a Black space, I intend to problematize popular racial presumptions when issues of class and the experiences of neglected minority groups are increasingly central to the discussion of gentrification in Harlem.

The intricacies and challenges presented by neighborhood change is an impediment to illustrating a complete portrait of West Harlem. Through the eyes and words of my neighbors, I attempt to provide a brief snapshot of community responses and reactions with the hope that future anthropological study can build upon these findings.

From ‘Genteel’, to ‘Ghettoization’ to Gentrification: A Brief Look through History

“Harlem always remained a strange combination of the old and new.”

-Osofsky, 1971

“West Harlem is a neighborhood of neighborhoods...this community has always been a transitory accumulation of many different communities which has made it, in the words of [15th Congressional District representative] Charles B. Rangel, a "no man's land".

I am sitting in the office of Jordi Reyes-Montblanc, a Cuban-born, 40-year resident of West Harlem and the Chairman of Community Board 9 Manhattan (CB9M). CB9M is a city-sanctioned advisory group in charge of assessing and ensuring the quality life of the neighborhood. Chairman Reyes-Montblanc’s office is really a corner cubicle with gray wall enclosures, complete with stacks of papers and manila folders precariously perched upon a wooden desk. He swivels in his office chair from his desktop computer and turns to me; over his shoulder, I catch a glimpse of his very full email inbox and take note that Chairman Reyes-Montblanc is a very busy man. Although I try to distinguish myself from Columbia Spectator reporters, I sense a bit of interview fatigue and decide to that the general board meeting in twenty minutes is a good networking opportunity to find other neighborhood informants. After a brief pause, he continues.

“In the last few years there has been many avenues of communications open between the different communities co-existing within our borders. However, no single identity, culture, or attachment exists; it varies within each of the many communities, whether English-speaking or Spanish-speaking. This is what makes this area [one] of interest to study. As a neighborhood [however], we are extremely diverse, but we have no integration compared to Central Harlem, which has cultural, racial and spiritual cohesion.”

The Chairman’s comments pique my interest, as the two neighborhoods (Central and West Harlem) “within a neighborhood” (Harlem) maintain a seemingly divergent present, but share a rich social history. Between Harlem’s past as a haven for landed gentry and feared future as a haven for gentrifiers, emerges an interesting saga that shapes present-day race and class relations.

In 1658, Dutch Governor Peter Stuyvesant established “Nieuw Haarlem” on the banks of the East River at present day, East 125th Street. The year 1664 brought English victory over the Dutch for Manhattan, and the newcomers anglicized the rural area with a new name: "Harlem". During the colonial period, several of America’s wealthiest families, such as the Delanceys, Beekmans, Bleekers, Rikers, Coldens and Hamiltons, enjoyed abundant crop yields with expansive country estates in Harlem (Osofsky, 72). For two hundred years, the area remained the country retreat of a self-governing genteel community, as a growing metropolis below its borders exploded with the onset of an urban revolution. However, by the 1830’s, property values dropped as the once fecund soil gave out due to centuries of farming. The exodus of wealthy estate-owners brought an influx of impoverished Irish immigrants into Harlem’s marshlands and infertile lands. After years of isolation, in 1837, the New York and Harlem Railroad connected the deteriorating suburb to the rest of the city. Over the next 40 years, New York City’s growing population influenced Harlem’s expansion, as older residents sought uptown

living to avoid new immigrants. The arrival of elevated subways to the neighborhood complemented the rampant development of blocks of tenements, as well as luxurious brownstones and fashionable apartment complexes. The real estate boom brought the assumption that Harlem “would develop into an exclusive, stable, upper- and upper-middle-class community: a neighborhood very genteel” (Osofsky 77), intended for wealthier white New Yorkers. Those who migrated from downtown at this time included recent immigrants from Great Britain and Germany. Speculators anticipating the pending Lenox and Lexington Avenue routes and subsequent increases in property values bought undeveloped lands; these ventures led to a sizeable escalation in the cost of housing and land, specifically in West Harlem (Osofsky 90). However, widespread high hopes ultimately came crashing down in 1904.

The speculative boom led to a speculative burst for the first part of the twentieth century, as expectant entrepreneurs overestimated the demand for housing and the completion date of the subway lines. The drop in real estate prices briefly attracted a large population of Eastern European Jews to the west and the arrival of Italians immigrants to the east, in present day Spanish Harlem. Moreover, rather than face bankruptcy, landlords began to rent properties to blacks, collecting a lucrative return on higher rents that African Americans were often forced to pay. The crumbling real estate market offered a money-making window of opportunity for African-American realty companies and individuals such as Philip A. Payton, Jr.. Seizing the opportunity, Payton acquired five-year leases on white-owned properties, managed them, and rented them to blacks at ten percent above the deflated market price (Osofsky 93). These profitable initiatives facilitated the migration of middle-class families, newly arrived black

southerners and immigrants from the West Indies to Harlem. The real estate climate also attracted native New Yorkers facing displacement from the building of Pennsylvania Station from 1906 to 1910, mainly from segregated sections of the city; these residents inhabited the area west of Herald and Time Squares, from the West 20s to the 60s, comprising the overcrowded areas known as Hell's Kitchen, the Tenderloin, and San Juan Hill. Consequently, the refusal of realtors elsewhere to rent to blacks, the fear of rioting in segregated, overcrowded neighborhoods in Lower Manhattan, and the lure of available housing options brought a significant increase of blacks to the neighborhood. Fortunately, this change in the housing market offered, for the first time, decent, attractive housing in large quantities to a segment of New York's population, which had never had such an opportunity (Taylor 5). The demographic shift quickly swept the neighborhood, much to the chagrin and fear of white residents. At first, these tenants resisted the "Negro invasion". Yet, the shrewd practices of white property owners and the Afro-American Realty Company played upon the fears and prejudices of white tenants, ultimately allowing for the white exodus of the early 1900s (Taylor 5). By 1920, 73,000 blacks, two-thirds of Manhattan's population at that time, occupied Harlem (Vietorisz and Harrison 5).

Although the lure of Harlem brought blacks readily to the neighborhood, low wages and de facto segregation constrained the new residents to the area. Moreover, it was often difficult to cover the high cost of living and find suitable employment to meet one's needs; according estimations of a 1927 report by the Urban League, Vietorisz and Harrison note that blacks in Harlem paid as much as half their income in rent. Not all fared badly, however. Elite Harlemites had a taste of the "sweet life" on Sugar Hill,

located between 145th Street to 155th Street, between Amsterdam and Edgecombe Avenues. Here, wealthy blacks enjoyed amenities in “high style” with broad tree-lined streets, elevators, telephone service and spacious homes.

Eventually, the high cost of living in the community, increased demands on brought by an ever-rising population and sheer density of the neighborhood led to physical deterioration and unsanitary health conditions. Landlords often left buildings in deep disrepair and neglected to provide services to tenants, but continued to charge increasingly high rents. This practice continued well into mid-century, giving rise to periods of civil conflicts and myriad health problems. In light of these difficulties for residents, churches began to play an increasingly important role in the institutional development of Harlem; traditionally, churches have been the most stable and wealthy institutions within the black community and many began to invest in land in Harlem to cater to their congregations (Osofsky 113). Churches, such as the Abyssinian Baptist Church, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Zion and St. Philip’s Protestant Episcopal Church provided a platform for black political and cultural life and facilitated the delivery of social services. This sentiment still holds true today as black churches, such as the Abyssinian Development Corporation, are involved in financing affordable housing options and encouraging the growth of small businesses. Other important black institutions also relocated to Harlem, opening their doors uptown to better serve their community. These organizations included black chapters of the YMCA and YWCA, the NAACP, the Urban League, and black newspapers, The *Amsterdam News* and the *New York Age*.

The post-World War I period heralded “The Harlem Renaissance”, a literary phenomenon that solidified Harlem’s place as the black cultural capital of the world. Romanticized as Harlem’s ‘golden age’, the period spurred an unprecedented explosion of art, music and literature, as well as the development of black political thought. However, beyond the glitz and glamour of famed jazz clubs, theaters and dance halls, several major urban developments spurred the neighborhood’s emergence as a slum. As neighboring districts below Harlem’s borders effectively excluded the growing Black population through discriminatory practices, Harlemites could not escape inflated rental prices. For instance, during this time, a typical white working class family in New York paid \$6.67 per month per room, while black families in Harlem paid \$9.50 for the same room (Osofsky 136). A combination of low wages, exorbitant housing prices and residential overcrowding led to the neighborhood’s ‘ghettoization’. The deteriorating dwellings in Harlem continued to receive only negligible maintenance and repairs. This malicious cycle began during the Depression and continued for decades as the housing stock in the neighborhood rapidly worsened; property owners abandoned many buildings when the price of rehabilitation and city housing codes compliance became costly. Subsequently, the 1950’s and 1960’s saw an exodus of the black middle class and an increase in the mass concentration of black urban poor. Harlem was not exempt from the slum clearance and urban renewal projects spearheaded by Robert Moses, as other low-income communities in New York City at that time. With the exception of local non-profit development corporations seeking to spur revitalization through the building low-income housing with government loans, retail and residential investment was few and far in between. Although the rhetoric of the black power movement spoke to the urban poor

in Harlem during this time, the destabilization of the neighborhood due to unemployment, crumbling social networks, and inadequate resources and public services ultimately left those who remained behind, disempowered and left to fend for themselves.

The ‘black middle-class flight’ trend persisted in the 1970’s, supplemented by continued widespread disinvestment by landlords (Gothelf 2004) and worsened by New York’s financial crisis in general. The economic recession of the late 1980’s and early 1990s hit the community even harder, exacerbated by a crack epidemic that gripped New York’s poorest, minority neighborhoods. By the late 1980s, the City of New York owned 65% of the buildings in Harlem (Gothelf 2004). These vacant units often harbored illegal drug activity, and many buildings succumbed to abandonment or arson. By the early 1990s, the community, subjected to depopulation, devalorization of land, a weakened tax base and the visual scarring of abandoned, burned out homes, had truly seen the worst.

Prompted by external and internal pressures over the past fifteen years, Harlem has undergone major economic restructuring. Several mechanisms served as the catalyst for neighborhood change in Harlem. In a national context, the growing prominence of urban living prompted by artists, the highly educated and the upwardly mobile spurred a “back-to-the-city” movement. By the early 1990s, a reverse migration into metropolitan areas, while stimulating of revival of America’s urban centers, placed immense strains on the cost of living in low-income neighborhoods with highly desirable qualities such proximity to city center and attractive architecture (Smith 67). Secondly, on a local level, aggressive police tactics, increased police presence and the introduction of a federal, city-funded empowerment zone¹ to spur revitalization and private investment through public

¹ The mission of the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone(UMEZ), established in 1996, “is to sustain the economic revitalization of all communities in Upper Manhattan through job creation, corporate alliances,

funds and tax incentives are both significant factors. Additionally, the availability of architecturally distinctive “fixer uppers”, buildings that developers can buy, rehabilitate cheaply and sell profitably, as well as pressures from real estate markets and lack of affordable housing below Harlem’s borders contributed to community’s transformation. It is significant to note that these forces in tandem did not occur by chance or by “natural” market forces. In his seminal book, The New Urban Frontier, Neil Smith provides a more plausible explanation:

Here we come back to the relationship between production and consumption, for the empirical evidence suggest that more often than not, the process is initiated not by the exercise of those individual consumer preference much beloved of neoclassical economists, but by some form of *collective social action* at the neighborhood level. The state, for example, initiated much of the early gentrification in the US as a continuation of urban renewal projects, and though it plays a lesser role today, state subsidies and sponsorship of gentrification remain important. More commonly today, with private market-gentrification, one or more financial institutions will reverse a long-standing redlining policy and actively target a neighborhood as a potential market for construction loans and mortgages. (Smith, 68)

Smith’s theory certainly holds true for Harlem as financial institutions that previously redlined the neighborhood now provided conventional mortgages to incoming homebuyers. For instance, between 1991 and 2001, data from Home Mortgage Disclosure Act demonstrates that number of conventional mortgage loans underwritten in Harlem increased by 1,400 percent (Freeman, 30). Such rapid development within a community with a specific socio-political history informed by years of relative disinvestment and strong sense of racial identity stirs native residents’ concerns as to what type of new change or development the next month, year or decade will bring.

strategic investments and small business assistance” through the help of \$85 million of direct capital and \$212 million of tax-exempt empowerment zone facility bonds.

In a PBS online documentary on gentrification entitled “Flag Wars”, author and urbanist Benjamin Grant explains that change is a constant feature of urban living. However, Grant also notes that change (i.e. gentrification) in urban environments always involves winners and losers and that “low-income people are rarely the winners”. While the process of gentrification varies by city and neighborhood, Grant calls on residents, community development corporations, and city governments struggling with inevitable change “to create a win-win situation for everyone involved”. Thus, while neighborhood change in Harlem is inescapable, all parties involved must ensure that the trend of social and economic restructuring does not come at the expense and exclusion of low-income and native residents. As Dorothy Pitman Hughes, Harlem businesswoman and activist declares in her autobiography and critique of UMEZ:

The Empowerment Zone’s admitted philosophy of “empowering” our people is to bring in large corporations to create jobs, while our philosophy is support ownership in the community to create wealth, security and a strong social culture. As jobs are very much needed, you can see how their philosophy may be attractive to people, but at what price? Gentrification so often looks attractive. It promises clean, well-lit, well-kept streets. It promises a daily visage of people walking to and from work and people shopping, etc.,--- instead of hanging out on corners with no place to go. Can we conceive of a Harlem which looks and feels as I have described without gentrification? Without the creation of a permanent underclass of poor workers, criminal and homeless, hopeless souls? (Hughes, 51)

West Harlem, Demographics and Dimensions: An Overview

According to data for 2000, West Harlem is home to approximately 111,700 people; its population is steadily increasing over the past two decades. Although the

neighborhood has wealthier subsections, according to CB9M estimations, the average income is \$32,918 and the unemployment rate is about 18%; the former is lower than that of the NYC income average and the latter is one of higher rates of unemployment in the city. About 40% of the population has received some form of public assistance. The area is very diverse, about 43 percent Latino, 31 percent black, 18 percent non-Latino white and 5 percent Asian Pacific Islander. The neighborhood has a large Latino presence, and unlike East Harlem, residents are of mostly of Dominican, Ecuadorian or Mexican descent.

This research focuses primarily on native residents living within the jurisdiction of Community Board 9 (CBM9), an area in northern Manhattan that spans 1.5 miles and encompasses the distinctive neighborhoods of Hamilton Heights, Morningside Heights and Manhattanville. The Hudson River serves as West Harlem's western boundary while the avenues of Morningside, St. Nicholas, Edgecombe and Bradhurst border the eastside of the neighborhood. To the north, 155th Street separates West Harlem from Washington Heights/Inwood, and in the south, 110th Street and Cathedral Parkway separates the area from the Upper Westside. The northern section of West Harlem (between 155th and 135th), consists of historic Hamilton Heights and Sugar Hill district, known for its early 20th century brownstones, built in styles such as Beaux Arts, Queen Anne, Dutch and Romanesque Revival. The neighborhood of Manhattanville stretches from 135th Street to 125th; the area is home to City College, the newly built performing arts space Harlem Stage and is the future site of the West Harlem Waterfront Park. Morningside Heights is home to many academic and religious institutions such as Columbia University, Bank Street College, Barnard College, The Jewish Theological

Seminary, The Cathedral of Saint John the Divine and the Riverside Church, from 125th Street to 110th Street. Throughout my interactions with residents, I increasingly became aware of individuals who specifically noted their community affiliation to a specific neighborhood (i.e. Morningside Heights) rather than to 'West Harlem'. Remaining cognizant of an individual's decision to self-identify in this context was useful in gathering understanding of one's place attachment and connection to the community in general.

Research Scope and Methodology

Over the course of five months, from January to April of 2007, I spoke with approximately twenty native residents, ranging from white, African-American, and Latino and of varying class backgrounds. I engaged seven of these individuals in in-depth semi-structured interviews, informal interactions and electronic exchanges. All of these men and women either work or live in West Harlem; the majority were involved in community work through local non-profits, arts and cultural organizations or the local community board. Time constraints, financial difficulties and academic obligations in Philadelphia severely limited my exchanges with my informants as well as my ability to perform exceptionally extensive participant observation and fieldwork often required of anthropological study. Despite these obstacles, my conversations with residents were rich and insightful; I appreciated the openness, honesty and graciousness exhibited by those who were available to interview. As a native of West Harlem and anthropology student, upon embarking on this project I instantly became particularly sensitive to my inherent bias and the plausibility of performing "me-search" in my own neighborhood. While subjectivity in this case was inevitable and my status as a resident allowed for a

degree of comfort and amity with my informants, I consciously avoided assuming residents' "neighborhood reality" which is often influenced by the lens of age, race, class, gender, and citizenship status. Avoiding popular generalizations of native resident experiences in light of gentrification motivates this research; such work cannot be performed without the voices and input of community members. Prior to this study, I was not familiar with my local Community Board or its members; I chose Community Board 9 Manhattan as a research site with the hope of meeting as diverse a group of residents as possible, who possessed an interest in neighborhood affairs. It is significant to note that this research study does not attempt to be comprehensive in nature; I am well aware that even with additional time and resources, as one informant remarked, I would "barely scratch the surface" of the intricacies involved in unpacking gentrification. The merit in tackling the issue from an anthropological perspective allows the "people" to be put back in the "picture". Beyond housing statistics, population studies and economic projections, I hope to re-humanize the experience of gentrification; making the fears, frustrations, and feelings of the residents palpable to a wider audience. Lastly, in exposing residents' community work and activism, I aim to dismiss assumptions of passivity on behalf of my neighbors, recognizing the agency and power of a community often viewed as politically powerless and poor.

SECTION II

Capturing the “Other” and Deciphering Differences

As in much of New York, West Harlem is currently experiencing an affordable housing crisis. According to the 2005 New York Housing and Vacancy Survey, the 2005 rental vacancy rate is significantly lower than 5.0 percent, meeting the legal definition of a housing emergency in the City¹. This problem, however, is more acute in the West Harlem community due to the socio-economic demographic and the dramatic increase of housing prices. About 90 percent of the housing units in the neighborhood are renter-occupied. Thus, a large majority of the community is susceptible to social and economic marginalization through rent inflation, evictions and skyrocketing living costs. Data shows that gentrification is alive and well in the neighborhood. According to the NYC Dept of City Planning Community District 9 Profile, building permits issued for new residential construction increased exponentially between 2001-2003 by 252 percent²; this luxury “condo-mania” is especially troubling as throughout West Harlem as one in four residents spend more than half of their modest incomes on rent.

One instance of this frenzy is the Langston, a 10-story, 180-unit condominium building at 68 Bradhurst Ave. between West 145th and West 146th streets near Hamilton Heights. The Langston is part of the Cornerstone Program, a NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development initiative aimed to provide middle income and market rate housing on vacant city land. A total of 120 units are reserved for families

¹ US Census Bureau. New York Housing and Vacancy Survey 2005.
<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/housing/nyc/vs/nyc/vs.html>

² New York City Department of City Planning. Manhattan Community Board 9 District Profile. Accessed: May 2007. <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/pdf/lucds/mn9profile.pdf>

with household incomes from \$40,140 to \$103,620. The remaining 59 units are being offered to the public at market rates. The condominium boasts nine-foot ceilings, doorman-attended lobby, 24-hour concierge service, on-site valet, an 80-car garage, a Starbucks, a New York Sports Club, and a valet for dry cleaning and tailoring services. However, with the income limit required to gain residency higher than the median income for the neighborhood, one questions the affordability of the new development. Through conversations with my neighbors and family members, I learned that skepticism and distrust abound against the Langston, which towers above my family's apartment in a six-story tenement walk-up. Community members question the lack of effective advertising of these apartments and fear the fates of low to moderate-income families once '421a' 10-year tax abatements³ expire.

"Check this out!" Philip shoves a photocopied sheet of paper across our tiny table. We are sitting in the brand new Starbucks on the ground level of the Langston; apparently the lure of an espresso brownie proved too much to bear. Naturally, my anthropological antennae twitched on as I needed to find out who from the neighborhood would frequent the ubiquitous coffee shop. On a dare, Philip wandered inside the expansive, polished lobby of the condo and asked the security desk for sales and rental information. Although Philip is white, he made sure to don my Penn sweatshirt to prove that he was "legit" as an inquiring "future" resident.

³ The Cooperative and Condominium Abatement Program provides partial tax relief for condo owners and co-op tenant-shareholders to reduce the disparity in property tax paid between residential Class 2 properties (i.e., condominiums and cooperatives) and Class 1 properties (i.e., one-, two-, and three-family homes), which are assessed at a lower percentage of market value. The tax abatement is used as an incentive to spur development and keep housing costs reasonable. When the tax abatement expires and the actual assessed real estate taxes kick in owners are hit with very high monthly property taxes and usually have a hard time reselling the property.

“Unbelievable!” he exclaims, causing our nearby neighbor, a middle-aged African American man with a wireless Bluetooth headset in his ear, to peer at us above his laptop. Glancing down, I automatically see what triggered his outburst. The price for an apartment ranged from \$630,000 for a two-bedroom to about a million for a penthouse. No wonder darkened, curtain-less windows spotted the façade of the Langston. “This all seems so...deliberate,” I sigh, tracing the condensation rings of my watery blueberry shaken iced tea. “Who can afford to live here? Who is living here?”

“Of course this is deliberate! Think about it. The median income of this neighborhood is a little over \$30,000. Say someone living here wants to purchase a home, right? The maximum amount for home loan given by Chase Bank would probably not exceed \$40,000, and that’s *if* they have decent credit. That would not even cover the down payment to purchase an apartment here! So, the developers purposely set the income limit and price high enough that would only attract people who are making six figures or more, which is, unfortunately, no one around here. Not to mention, Starbucks probably had a discussion with the developers about the income requirements of the Langston residents and scanned the neighborhood before deciding to open here. They just don’t put Starbucks *anywhere*.”

Shaking my head, I glance toward the counter. A young white couple strolls toward the cashier and places their order with the barista. The girl, with shoulder length blond hair, pink t-shirt and denim skirt, slightly nudges and laughs with her male companion, also blond, with strategically ripped jeans. Armed with their green tea frappachinos, they stroll out into seasonably warm evening. I strain my neck to see the direction in which they were headed; around the corner toward the entrance of the

building. Turning toward Philip, the irony in the game of “detect the gentrifier” is blatantly obvious.

Philip, a sixth grade science teacher and graduate of Vassar College, moved to West Harlem two years ago, after a short stint in Brooklyn proved unaffordable. He shares a four bedroom apartment with three other teachers, who are also white. The area allows him to live relatively comfortably on his teacher’s salary. Yet, he too, carries a sense of indignation at the sight of the glass and steel colossi that increasingly dot the neighborhood and refuses to pay \$10 for a burrito from the new and upscale Mexican kitchen on his block, *Tres Pasos*. Although to many native residents his skin color might signal otherwise, Philip’s class status has mediated many of his experiences within the neighborhood: from washing clothes in coin washers and dryers at the Laundromat to filling prescriptions at the local Dominican pharmacy (chain drug stores are too far away) to working out at a local gym that provides more affordable membership rates than the downtown-friendly New York Sports Club. Philip feels his experiences grant him a kind of credibility that cannot be attained by those who take retreat in the penthouses above us, with chain stores an elevator ride away.

I listened quietly as he continued his rant, realizing the unfairness in generalizing an entire population of newcomers, but unable to shake the feeling that the espresso brownie was not meant for me. For instance, in “There Goes the ‘Hood: Views of Gentrification from the Ground Up”, Lance Freeman illustrates similar notions held by blacks in Harlem, in response to the changing landscape and perceived influx of white newcomers. Freeman asserts that while statistics on real demographic changes in Harlem may not be significant, both perceptions and secondary changes might be impacted

disproportionately.⁴ A prevalent sentiment among his respondents was that a small increase in the white population was correlated with a substantial boost in new services and amenities (such as banks, commercial pharmacies, big chain supermarkets and new restaurants). From my own ethnographic work, this mistrust is amplified by a conspicuous lack of improvements in areas in dire need of development such as affordable housing, health services delivery, and quality schools. Although most agree that the economic redevelopment has benefited some but not all, the change was seen as a mixed blessing among Freeman's interviewees. Freeman relays the experience of one Harlemitte who was suspicious of the "sudden" presence of these improvements but welcomed the new opportunities to shop:

"Ms. Johnson is an African American who clearly subscribes to the notion that the improvements taking place in Harlem were not for "us," meaning blacks, but for "them," meaning whites... Although improvement in services in her mind reflects the discriminatory treatment black neighborhoods receive, she is more than happy to take advantage of these improvements. That residents would appreciate improved amenities, in hindsight, seems like common sense. Who wouldn't appreciate better stores in which to shop?" (pp. 67)⁵

Likewise, the "us" versus "them" paradigm was echoed in many of my conversations family members during weekly trips to the grocery store. "Who do you think is going to live in *there*?" says my aunt, rolling her eyes, as we slowly lug our shopping cart up a familiarly steep hill toward Edgecombe Ave. My mother, shaking her head, dryly adds, "I can take a wild guess". These comments usually complement our weekly shopping trips to Pathmark, a 42,000 square foot supermarket that opened two years ago. Incidentally, the grocery store sits below 125 high-rise apartments in another

⁴ Freeman, Lance. There Goes the 'Hood: Views of Gentrification From the Ground Up. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006

⁵ Freeman, Lance. There Goes the 'Hood: Views of Gentrification From the Ground Up. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006

mixed-use development across the street from the Langston, aptly named the Hamilton (as in Hamilton Heights). Although the convenience of a 24-hour supermarket is a welcome addition to the neighborhood, sometimes a short run for a gallon of milk or loaf of bread is bittersweet. “It’s going to be the same type of people who live in there,” Auntie Lisa sighs, dismissively motioning a bulky plastic grocery bag toward the Hamilton. “No one around here can afford to live in that building...you see the type of people that come in and out of there, and it’s no one that looks like us.”

No one like *us*. Similar sentiments echoed throughout my interviews and field experiences. The concept of “us” inherently infers a contra but non-descriptive idea of “them” or “the other”; deciphering these ambiguous binary constructs within the already complex issues presented by gentrification proved challenging. In a cautious attempt to curb my own subjectivity, I was careful to separate my own conceptions of the “other” from those of my informants. Although it is quite easy to label a young white professional entering a luxury apartment building as a ‘gentrifier’, doing so undermines the ways in which other groups, organizations and institutions motivated by socio-political and economic forces construct and influence neighborhood change as well. Additionally, these judgments are based on explicit visual representations (Starbucks frappachinos, towering glass and steel high rises, upscale restaurants) and traditional images (young, upwardly-mobile whites) of gentrification. Moreover, such assumptions do not adequately reflect the diverse opinions of native residents from varying social, economic and cultural backgrounds. In a 2001 New York Times interview, author and

sociologist Monique Taylor, sums up the difficulties in setting up the “insider” vs.

“outsider” paradigm strictly along racial fault lines:

“The mistake that people make sometimes in these gentrification battles is to simplify who are the insiders and the outsiders and who are the good guys and the bad guys. In the case of Harlem, I think everybody wanted to see whites as being outsiders and as bad guys. Once you get there and realize there are white and black outsiders and white and black insiders, it's a more complicated thing.”⁶

A review of my conversations with residents on the topic demonstrates that residents often hold differing views about neighborhood change, recognizing its nuanced nature as well as its advantages and its disadvantages. Michael Palma, a second generation resident of Hamilton Heights, provides a viewpoint often missing from the literature on gentrification in Harlem: a Latino perspective. Michael is a financial management and fundraising consultant to small and mid-sized non-profits, ranging from Latino theatre companies to reproductive choice organizations. He also serves as the Chair of the newly-formed Arts and Cultural Committee for Community Board 9 and is currently completing a photography project on Manhattanville. Over the past few decades, his family has worked hard to make their neighborhood a decent place to live; most notably through their neighborhood association, with efforts to clean-up drug infested areas and fights for decent, affordable housing. One brisk Friday evening in February we discussed his view toward his neighborhood and the current changes taking place. From the outset of our interview, Michael’s past experiences provide a challenge to the perceived racial landscape of West Harlem as an anchored, minority community:

⁶ Scott, Janny. “White Flight, This Time Toward Harlem; Newcomers and Good Times Bring Hope, and Fears of Displacement”. The New York Times. February 25, 2001

“What you call West Harlem, mainly Manhattanville, Hamilton Heights and Washington Heights has always been a neighborhood in flux, always been a neighborhood that changes a lot...very different than Central Harlem, very, very different. It’s very different and it changes, with many different groups of people. And the people that live there, they move in and they move out, and another set of people move in. When I was growing up, I only knew one black person in my neighborhood...he was the super of a building nearby, Mr. Louie. Everyone else was Irish, Italian or Puerto Rican or Cuban. There weren’t even any Dominicans in my neighborhood growing up...there were none, and there were no blacks when my father grew up. The only blacks my father knew of were the bourgeoisie black people who lived on Sugar Hill.”

Although a longtime resident, in viewing almost 40 years of demographic shifts and neighborhood change, Michael constructs his community as one undergoing frequent transformation. Although, the present state of rapid transformation is somewhat expected, it is no less surprising or jarring. In light of his efforts to reform his community, Michael remarks that one neighborhood feature that resisted change over the past 30 years is 3333 Broadway, a massive public housing project, sometimes negatively referred to as the “albatross and anchor” of the up and coming neighborhood. The complex consists of 5 large high-rise block towers, rising to 35 stories and comprises 1,100 apartments; 90 percent of these apartments house low-income families. Yet, with increasing pressures facilitated by Columbia University’s expansion into West Harlem and the real estate market speculation frenzy, even 3333 Broadway is not immune to the proverbial winds of change. Here, the intersection of middle class and working class tensions, layered by mixed feelings toward displacement, discomfort toward new neighbors and anger at the rapid loss of affordable housing is discovered. The duality of “otherness” is illustrated along class (toward the low-income Latinos and Blacks living in 3333 Broadway) and racial (toward white college-aged residents moving into the building) lines, making the “new” change occurring, disconcerting:

Shakirah: Well...have you seen people being displaced by what's happening?

Michael (nodding): Oh yeah, yeah...I park my car in a garage underneath 3333 Broadway, and the only way you get into it is from the viaduct... you know, that bridge between Grant's Tomb[Memorial] and 135th? I park my car there at the back entrance...and that's where the moving trucks are. And they're always there moving people out. And I saw something there for the first time, that I had never seen before; what looked like to be college students, walking out of the building with dogs on leashes. Which signals to me that they're not visitors leaving a building...they live there. Like, college students...white kids...teenagers from about maybe your age or maybe just out of college. And I've never *never* seen anything like that at 3333 Broadway. Never. And I saw that building being built, from when they tore down that gasoline station and car dealership that used to be there? And never since that, have I seen white people in that building, as much as I do now. Every time I go to pick up my car...I see a moving van, moving people out and then moving people in.

Shakirah: And how does that stark reality...every time you go and park up your car...make you feel about what's going on in the neighborhood?

Michael: It makes me realize how this neighborhood is going to change. I always said to myself our neighborhood is never going to change...as long as that building 333 Broadway...that is a really bad example of really bad city planning, you can't put that many people in that small of a space. And as this area (the Upper West Side) got better, this area used to be Puerto Rican by the way, and became gentrified; the development [growing uptown] would always stop at that building, right at 3333 Broadway. And when I live there [West Harlem] in the 70's and early 80s, I wanted it to change, I wanted it to change badly because it was so bad everywhere. Every time I wanted to enjoy myself I had to hop on a train and go downtown. I used to hang out around 96th street a lot. But what happens when I got home? I could *not* do that. Absolutely could not. To a certain degree I *almost* wanted there to be gentrification, I wanted everyone in 3333 out, because in my mind, they were all bad. They were a lot of drug dealers there. And they used to, they don't do this anymore, hang out in the streets and have barbeques and have food out and it would stink...and I would be embarrassed. My friends from Columbia would come over to my house or to my neighborhood and I would be embarrassed. There was really a welfare mentality back then, and maybe they changed or public policy changed, because there was no incentive rather to just collect a check and just live there."

Thus, the marked difference in demographics in West Harlem present alternative experiences in light of neighborhood change is may be shaped by class status *and* connection to a racial or ethnic group. As a member of Community Board 9, Michael experiences firsthand the racial and class politics involved in community revitalization and development. For instance, the branding of Harlem as primarily a "black" space and

solely an enclave for black culture by local leadership downplays the presence of a large Dominican, Mexican, and Puerto Rican population in the neighborhood.

- Michael: “I think the people who call [the neighborhood] West Harlem have an economic interest in calling it West Harlem...like the politicians...the funny thing is that the politicians especially the African American politicians, want to call everything “Harlem”. But, if I go to them and say let’s put a Latino theater right in the middle of 125th Street...forget that...they would balk at it, saying ‘Oh no no no, that’s not African American, that’s not African American.’ The River to River Plan [along 125th street]? It goes from Broadway to 2nd Ave, that’s not river to river. Now, what does that leave out? It leaves out the Latinos on the east side and it leaves out the Latinos on the west side. If you want to call West Harlem, West Harlem, then include the Latinos. You can’t call it West Harlem and then ignore them. That River to River plan is more about arts and culture by way of economic development, not arts and culture through the people that actually live there or the culture that actually exists there.
- Shakirah: My question to you would be then...whose culture or whose art?
- Michael: Well, art is artifacts, or works of art. Culture is people, their food, their language, the way they dress, the way they talk, the way they perceive things...that’s culture. It’s not necessarily the Harlem Renaissance, it’s not necessarily jazz, Louie Armstrong, Cab Calloway or the Cotton Club. It’s not only Muhammad Ali, it’s not only Malcolm X. It’s not only Charlie Rangel or Adam Clayton Powell Sr. or Jr. It’s a lot more than that, especially, *especially* in West Harlem.

In illustrating the conspicuous (and seemingly deliberate) lack of Latino influence or inclusion on Harlem’s main thoroughfare mediated by high-powered African-Americans and institutions, Michael demonstrates the problematic existence of the “us” versus “them” dynamic beyond a white and black construct in Harlem. This paradigm of ‘otherness’ or ‘foreignness’ amongst Blacks and Latinos is exacerbated by spatial boundaries, language barriers and fueled by aggressive economic policies and development bent on preserving, packaging and promoting a specific part of Harlem’s history, specifically it’s black history. While there are no apparent consequences of an “us” versus “them” construct between blacks and whites beyond palpable tensions, this

concept between blacks and Latinos is acutely damaging, as political leadership in Harlem on every level (which is exclusively African American), Community Boards 9 and 10 (made up of primarily black residents) and federally-sponsored initiatives like the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone have mainly the interests of African-Americans in mind.

Similar sentiments were echoed in a conversation with Tom DeMott, a white middle-aged, 35-year resident of Manhattanville. Tom is a retired postal worker, an activist with the anti-Columbia expansion community group, Coalition to Preserve Community (CPC) and a member of Community Board 9. Over tuna sandwiches at a conference on gentrification in March, hosted by the Fordham School of Social Work, Tom and I discussed his political activities and how he has seen similar tensions between the community and Harlem leadership:

“This is a definite contention with Central Harlem leadership and its politicians...it simply does not represent the needs and concerns of the large Latino community that lives here...they [politicians] seem to think that someone else represents them [the Latino community].”

In all, these actions perpetuate a racial, cultural and economic isolation of Latinos amplified by gentrification that ironically, plagued the black community in the decades prior to the surge in reinvestment and development. Such isolation and a continued lack of cross-cultural and cross-class interaction create figurative boundaries and multiple schemas of the “other”: Black vs. Latino, immigrant vs. citizen, English-speaking vs. Spanish-speaking, voter vs. non-voter, Harlemiter vs. outsider. In “Harlemworld: Doing Race and Class in Contemporary Black America”, anthropologist John Jackson speaks directly to this issue:

To create a black Harlem of the past or the present always entails examining trajectories of difference besides racial ones. Many residents employ class and ethnicity as constitutive elements in the creation of a racialized space to which, they claim only some can rightfully belong. Some residents can highlight distinctions between African Americans and other residents who are not necessarily granted a legitimate place in the community. Sometimes, Africans, Latinos, and West Indians can be placed well outside the boundaries of valid citizenship, other times safely within it. Class specific differences --- often translated through obvious extremes of poverty and wealth, membership in the proverbial underclass or middle class --- can also be mobilized to determine degrees of community belonging (pp 54).

Conclusions

The idea of the “other” carries many different constructions for the residents of West Harlem, from **people** (the black politician, the young white professional, the black middle class, Latino occupants in housing projects to black young men), **places or structures** (Starbucks, condominiums, upscale restaurants, grocery stores, and massive public housing projects), **activities** (walking small dogs at night, frequenting local small businesses, hanging outside on porch steps or street corners) to even **food** (wheat bread and soy milk in bodegas, espresso brownies and overpriced chicken burritos). This variance demonstrates that the construction of the other in West Harlem is not merely facilitated by one homogenous experience through just class or race or gender; it is influenced by one’s relation to all three, in addition to immigrant status, education, and political power. These multiple statuses subsequently inform one’s response to neighborhood change. Residents see their neighborhood change through multiple lenses, which breeds conflicting feelings not only among groups, but within individuals as well. The view of poor, black people being kicked out by wealthy white professionals (while it

does and has happened) oversimplifies the issue, negating and excluding the varied experiences of a diverse community. The political undertones of this exclusion demonstrate struggles among internal forces within the community; struggles that undermine the assumption of inclusive and equitable development on behalf of the *entire* neighborhood.

Perceived (and feared) demographic changes, accompanying economic development and neighborhood improvements also shape residents' view of the "other"; again, these perspectives vary among race, class, ethnicity and gender, providing a gradation of responses to gentrification. Several of my respondents asserted that Harlem is at a crossroads, and while there is no one way to conceptualize its transformation, the economic development occurring is welcomed as it is suspiciously regarded. The impact of economic forces such as increased costs of living, a lack of decent affordable housing, and availability of only low-wage jobs will eventually force class connections and disparities to play an increasingly large part in residents' response to neighborhood change. It is significant to note that race-wise, the area's strong Latino presence and involved native white residents challenge the assumption of a homogenous experience mediated by black values and culture; yet class disparities are seemingly more salient to today's discussion on neighborhood change.

Final Conclusions

The examination of gentrification within diverse, urban neighborhoods like West Harlem requires researchers to look beyond the binary concept of black versus white presented by the literature. This example has boded well over the past 25 years with ample, and tried and true evidence from multiple cities; however, the relevance of

~~studying similar economic forces and trends waged upon multi-ethnic and multi-racial~~
communities is increasingly important. While unpacking the complexities that compose neighborhood change presents daunting challenges to the lone researcher; new study that is multi-disciplinary and comprehensive in nature with special attention to the intricacies of diverse populations is needed. Within my own research, I developed enhanced sensitivities toward these complexities through my exchanges with community residents. My informants provided valuable insights that allowed me to maintain multiple perspectives, while challenging my subjectivity on an issue I previously believed, as a native as well, to be straightforward. Several factors were culturally and socially specific to neighborhood change in West Harlem. First, population patterns over the past 90 years show a neighborhood that has always experienced fluctuations in demographics. This is a significant distinction from Central Harlem (which has been historically culturally anchored by African-Americans and West Indians), as the community shows an interesting mix of the old (descendents of Irish, Italian or Jewish families), the constant (several generations of Cubans and Puerto Ricans) and the new (immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Mexico and Ecuador). The existence of and diversity within a large Latino community in West Harlem also crafts a multitude of experiences with gentrification. Although the literature on gentrification has explored Latino communities in East Harlem, Los Angeles and San Francisco, the research is often presented within a “brown vs. white” paradigm; downplaying the significance of class disparities among established residents and the newly arrived and their respective experiences with neighborhood change. In regards to class differences, the arrival of upwardly mobile minorities as property owners adds another layer of complexity. Although race and

ethnicity grants the influx of these individuals, what Monique Taylor calls, a chance toward “racial solidarity and fellowship”⁷ with existing residents, race does not grant immunity from the inevitable class clash. Lastly, the diversity of West Harlem is clearly defined by spatial boundaries. Avenues and intersections act as borders for different ethnic groups that co-exist but rarely interact, as residents choose to create and maintain smaller communities based on identity within the larger neighborhood. Thus, understanding the concept of a “neighborhood of neighborhoods” within West Harlem is significant in deciphering how gentrification threatens to disrupt community structure and organization. In all, these features of West Harlem offer new challenges to the presumed homogenous experience of existing resident in the face of neighborhood change. Knowledge of these findings should spur further and more exhaustive research on this topic, bringing fresh debate to the discussion of gentrification in urban communities.

The research process is always a continuing one, and several questions surrounding the cultural aftershocks of gentrification were raised in hindsight of this research experience. In future anthropological examinations of this or similar topics, researchers should ask: what are the daily activities, informal and formal exchanges, physical places and behaviors that mold neighborhood into a community? Secondly, what defines an individual’s belonging to that community? Answers to such queries may allow for the discussion of neighborhood change beyond the “market” lens; broaching the issue of how gentrification not only changes the economic fabric of a community but threatens to disrupt one’s membership within and connection to their neighborhood.

⁷ Taylor, Monique M. Harlem: Between heaven and hell. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

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