Cities are exciting, ever changing places that are inherently restless and perpetually in motion. They thrive from being, as Lewis Mumford observed, in a constant "state of dynamic tension and interaction." Urban dynamism promotes the opportunity, diversity, growth and prosperity that define the American Dream. It is precisely because cities are not static that they are places of possibility, none more so than New York, the city that never sleeps. As the poet Langston Hughes understood, "New York is truly the dream city, city of towers near God, city of hopes and visions."

The African American experience in New York from 1919 to 1945 provides perspective on the "dynamic tensions" of the American city and the hopes so central to the American Dream. It encompasses various forms of movement including the physical movement uptown, the cultural movement of the Harlem Renaissance, the social protest movement of Marcus Garvey and the jobs protest movement led by Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Finally, the violence of the 1935 and 1943 riots expose the paradoxes of movement—of progress contrasted with stagnation, of dreams dashed by frustration.

Together, these developments reflect the complexity of urban life—the inherent conflict between the politicians and the people, majorities and minorities, dreams and realities. They demonstrate the power of art, activism and anger to shape and
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reshape the city. They expose the core of what jazz musicians of this period labeled the Big Apple—a city that was shiny on the outside but could be quite rotten on the inside. Most importantly, they capture the creativity, persistence and resilience of urbanites determined to be, in the words of W. E. B. Du Bois, “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.”

Since being brought to New Amsterdam as slaves by the Dutch West India Company in the 1620s, African Americans were central to the development of the colony and the state. They were farmers and artisans, builders and cooks, soldiers and journalists, politicians and reformers, teachers and preachers. Against great odds, they strived, struggled and survived, forever seeking what Du Bois called, “a mountain path to Canaan.” Before and after New York State emancipation in 1827, African Americans met adversity by promoting community on the one hand and protesting against discrimination on the other hand.

Protest was necessitated by prejudice, a legacy of New York’s deep involvement in slavery and the slave trade. The violent recriminations of the Negro Conspiracy of 1741 followed by the vicious attacks of whites against blacks in the anti-abolition riots of 1834, the Draft Riots of 1863, the race riots of 1900, 1905 and 1910 framed a long, sorry history of abuse. As African Americans were pushed out of jobs and neighborhoods by successive waves of European immigrants, they moved up Manhattan Island from the Battery to Greenwich Village to the overcrowded, tension filled West Side neighborhoods of Hell’s Kitchen, the Tenderloin and San Juan Hill.

At the same time, African Americans mobilized to address and articulate their grievances. Black New Yorkers played a significant role in the Underground Railroad and the abolition movement. While challenging discrimination in the courts, they established Freedom’s Journal, the first early nineteenth century African American newspaper, and the New York Age, the
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foremost late nineteenth century African American newspaper. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was formed in 1910 followed by the National Urban League in 1911. Together with the work of smaller organizations and local churches, these efforts helped build community, develop leaders, and nurture activism.\(^5\)

In the early twentieth century, migration further uptown signaled a new phase of African American history in Gotham. The realities of slum housing and racial conflict combined with the promise of a new start made moving to Harlem particularly attractive. Dream became reality once the subway rendered uptown accessible in 1904 and a black realtor, Philip A. Payton, Jr., broke through the color barrier in housing. By 1914, fully two-thirds of Manhattan’s African American population lived in Harlem, soon to be bolstered by Southern migrants and Caribbean immigrants.\(^6\)

For the first time in Gotham’s history, blacks dominated an entire neighborhood and had access to good housing, albeit at exorbitant rents. This physical movement strengthened their position as a community and facilitated the development of other movements to dismantle discrimination. In addition, the experience of serving in a segregated U.S. army to “make the world safe for democracy” highlighted the need for change. As Du Bois declared in 1919, “We return. We return from fighting. We return fighting.”\(^7\)

Harlem became the focus of African American life and protest. It was a Negro Mecca or, Hughes explained, “a great magnet for the Negro intellectual, pulling him from everywhere.” To Harlem flocked black professionals, scholars and artists. They included, among others, the poet Claude McKay, the historian Arthur Schomburg, the actress Florence Mills, the actor Charles Gilpin, the painter Aaron Douglas, the blues singer Bessie Smith, the jazz pianist James P. Johnson, the writer Zora Neale Hurston, the band leader Duke Ellington, the actor, singer and political activist, Paul Robeson. This
concentrated creative flowering made New York the center of African American culture and reflected the spirit of what Howard University professor, Alain Locke, labeled "The New Negro."  

Much of the new literature, art and poetry was disseminated by the black press that flourished in New York in the Twenties. Besides *The Crisis*, edited by Du Bois for the NAACP, there were several more radical African American magazines with revealing names like *Opportunity, Challenge, The Crusader* and *The Emancipator*. In addition, the labor leader, A. Philip Randolph edited a monthly called *The Messenger*, which Assistant Attorney General J. Edgar Hoover considered "the most able and dangerous of all the Negro publications."

The Savoy ballroom was an icon of the Harlem Renaissance. Capable of hosting four thousand people in a block-long club on Lenox Avenue between 140th and 141st Streets, the Savoy was the biggest, most exciting haven in what was now the "nightclub capital of the world." Unlike the expensive Cotton Club, where blacks were performers but not patrons, the Savoy's moderate prices and open door policy drew black and white, rich and poor together in America's first truly integrated major nightclub. The fast, free, seductive movements of the Charleston and the Lindy Hop took America by storm. "Stompin' at the Savoy" became legendary and the club was nicknamed "Home of the Happy feet." Above all, the Savoy meant stirring music in the Jazz Age when New York was the nation's music capital. According to historian Nathan Huggins, jazz provided a form of "soft rebellion" against cultural conventions and social constraints.

The Harlem Renaissance marked a rare moment of acceptance and admiration for a people accustomed to rejection and disdain. Among whites, it forced a reassessment of black stereotypes, a recognition of black artistry. Among African Americans, it strengthened black pride and fostered the hope that creativity could conquer prejudice and change the American
mind. Hughes later recalled that “Harlemites thought the race problem had at last been solved through Art.”

During this same period, another non-violent movement with a different message directed towards a different audience emerged from Harlem. While the Harlem Renaissance sought equality within an integrated American context, Marcus Garvey’s racial renaissance assumed that the white mind could never be moved and that blacks would never be treated equally in the United States. Consequently, he preached self-sufficiency in America and resistance to racial oppression worldwide. Eloquent and charismatic, Garvey upset mainstream society by challenging white supremacy, urging his followers to rise “up, you mighty race” and advocating “Africa for Africans.”

Born in Jamaica, W. I., Garvey came to the United States in 1916 and two years later established the New York chapter of the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Soon there were seven hundred UNIA branches in the United States plus two hundred more worldwide. Garvey’s magazine celebrated African history, African American rebellions and black resistance to European domination. As an ardent advocate of race pride, he rejected advertisements for any products that connoted black inferiority, such as chemicals for straightening hair or lightening skin. Insisting that blacks should worship a black god, he supported an African Orthodox Church that was replicated in other states and countries.

Garvey promoted economic independence through black-owned businesses and started the Black Star Steamship Line to transport blacks back to Africa. However, his own mismanagement, compounded by the deception of others, doomed this project and his career. Criticized by Du Bois and Randolph as a pompous demagogue, feared by colonial powers in Africa and demonized by the U.S. government, Garvey was arrested, convicted on a technicality, jailed and deported to Jamaica in 1927. Nonetheless, his impact was immense. Garvey’s audacious grassroots movement shocked America with
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its conventions and parades, its “Declaration of the Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World” and its overall assertion that “The New Negro HAS NO FEAR.” His was the nation’s first African American mass movement to promote black nationalism and emphasize racial pride.14

The Harlem Renaissance and Garveyism demonstrated how effectively non-violent protest could expose inequity and affirm dignity. Different as they were, both movements reflected Hughes’ hope that someday it would not matter “whatever race you be” because all would “share the bounties of the earth/ And every man is free....” To others, however, these movements were disturbing reminders of problems denied and even more disturbing evidence of the potential power of people considered powerless. The Harlem Renaissance and Garveyism were important because they so boldly and so effectively advanced what cultural analyst Ann Douglas calls “undoing dispossession.”15

By the same token, the quest for equality could “explode” into violence when, as Hughes observed, the “dream” was perpetually “deferred.” How right he was. Two major riots rocked New York City in 1935 and 1943, both on Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia’s watch. They were turning points in American history because they marked a new form of urban violence. Instead of the classic race riot in which whites attacked blacks on contested turf, these ghetto riots occurred within the black community and expressed anger towards white society. They resembled racial rebellions. To his credit, after the first riot, La Guardia did more to promote racial equality than any previous mayor, but he also faltered and failed to forestall the second riot. At the same time, the riots fed upon a long tradition of discrimination against and protest by African Americans. They were the direct result of dreams long deferred.16

The 1929 Depression deepened the dilemmas of Harlem. With the city’s unemployment rate reaching thirty percent, white
workers pushed black workers out of the few jobs they had. The suffering was unparalleled. Churches, traditionally the anchors of the black community, tried to meet the crisis. Seventeen religious groups cooperated to provide emergency rent money and to feed over 2,400 people a day. The charismatic evangelist, Father Divine, fed 3,000 people a day at his fifteen controversial “heavens” where blacks and whites lived communally. In addition, the Abyssinian Baptist Church provided a thousand meals a day plus clothing and coal. It sought jobs for the unemployed and offered shelter to the homeless.\textsuperscript{17}

Abyssinian’s efforts were organized by Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. A recent graduate of Colgate College, Powell was moved by Harlem’s problems. Accordingly, in 1930 at age 22 he led 6000 people to City Hall demanding that African American doctors and nurses be hired at Harlem hospital. He also joined the fight against job discrimination by white store owners who sought black shoppers but refused to hire black workers beyond a token few in the most menial jobs. Previous efforts to expand employment opportunities for African Americans in Harlem had failed. Then, in 1934, a “Jobs for Negroes” campaign targeted Blumstein’s Department Store on 125\textsuperscript{th} Street and, after six weeks of demonstrations, won employment concessions. Although a court injunction stopped the picketing, an important corner had been turned. Now activism, rather than art, held the key to change and, as Hughes put it, “poems became placards.”\textsuperscript{18}

In 1935, the increased aggressiveness of the black community complicated by the increased misery of the Depression resulted in riot. On a March afternoon, a guard at the S. H. Kress variety store on 125th Street saw a Puerto Rican boy stealing a ten-cent pocketknife. After a struggle, the boy was apprehended, questioned and released through a back door. Rumors that the boy had been beaten were given credence when an ambulance arrived. Then, when a hearse driver stopped to make a purchase, people deduced that the boy had been killed.
By the time the store manager located the boy again to prove that he was alive, a riot was in full swing and that particular boy no longer mattered. Word quickly spread that a non-white child had been brutalized by white law enforcers in a white-owned store. Radicals riled the crowds, but it took little effort to unleash decades of repressed anger. As Alain Locke observed, the cause of the riot was less the specific events than “the state of mind on which they fell.”

After vandalizing the Kress store, thousands rampaged across 125th Street from Fifth to Eighth Avenues. The police were pummeled with bricks and bottles; windows were smashed and goods were seized; fires were set and shots rang out from rooftops. Order was not restored until the next afternoon. Three African Americans were killed, sixty-four people were injured and 125 people were arrested. The press and the District Attorney blamed the whole affair on Communists and aliens. Powell disagreed. The riot “was not caused by Communists,” he declared. Instead, it was a “protest against empty stomachs, overcrowded tenements, filthy sanitation, rotten foodstuffs, chiseling landlords and merchants, discrimination on relief, disfranchisement, and against a disinterested administration.” Emphasizing the point, an Amsterdam News cartoon depicted death, draped in a cloak of economic evils, carrying the flame of riot while trampling over the masses.

Following the riot, Mayor La Guardia tried to be responsive. He asked Howard University sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier, to chair a Commission on Conditions in Harlem which blamed the riot on lack of jobs, low wages, high rents, bad schools, poor health care and systemic police brutality. La Guardia did not release the scathing report, but he did steer substantial resources towards Harlem for public housing, schools and medical facilities. Moreover, he implemented integrated hiring in the civil service, appointed several blacks to upper level city jobs and named the city’s first African American judges. Although he failed to reform the police department, he felt that
he was doing as much as he could and more than most others would.  

It was not enough. The depression had worsened conditions in Harlem, making it, as author Richard Wright said, "a poor man's land." Significant as it was, the New Deal did not solve Harlem's problems or eliminate discrimination. Accordingly, in 1938, a cross-section of African Americans, West Indians, church leaders, Garveyites and communists mounted a second jobs protest movement led by Powell. Although comprised of groups "who dreamed different dreams," said Powell, "we all had but one objective: the full emancipation and equality of all peoples."  

Emboldened by a 1938 U.S. Supreme Court decision that legalized picketing against discrimination, Powell's group carried signs saying "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" and targeted all the stores on 125th Street, one by one. Soon enough, merchants began desegregating their workforces. Powell then moved on to Consolidated Edison Lighting and the New York Telephone Company, both of which quickly capitulated. In 1939, his group won six hundred World's Fair jobs for blacks. In 1941, the effort spread to the Silvercup Bread Company, Macy's, Gimbels, newspapers, movie theaters and two bus companies. In 1942, when Powell became New York's first African American City Councilman, he got a resolution passed to halt discrimination in faculty hiring at the municipal colleges (now CUNY) where not one of the two thousand tenured professors was black.  

Several other developments intensified racial tension in Gotham. La Guardia refused to investigate when, in 1942, a court closed the Savoy ballroom for harboring prostitutes. Considering that no downtown dance halls with far worse reputations were closed, most people believed that the real issue was racial mixing in Harlem. Even more distressing was a 1943 agreement, condoned by La Guardia, that the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company could build a segregated semi-public
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housing development called Stuyvesant Town. Powell called for the mayor's impeachment. He also led a "Double V" campaign which posited that the war against prejudice abroad should spur a war against prejudice at home.25

Matters were worsened by race riots in Alabama, New Jersey, California and Texas during the spring of 1943. A three-day riot in June ravaged Detroit resulting in thirty-four fatalities, twenty-five of them blacks. Many people feared a national race war. Immediately, La Guardia appealed for calm, pushed for the hiring of more African American policemen, and planned two more housing projects for Harlem. He urged New Yorkers to sign a "unity pledge" and sponsored a "No Detroit Here" rally that was attended by five thousand people. As summer wore on, he mistakenly concluded that the crisis had passed.26

On August 1, 1943 a black soldier helping a black woman involved in a disturbance at the Braddock Hotel on 126th Street was shot and superficially wounded by a white policeman. Rumors spread that a black soldier defending his mother had been killed by a white cop. Again, the rumors were readily believed because they confirmed pre-existing indignation over historic discrimination, police brutality, and the victimization of black women. All of these factors, wrote Hughes, gave Harlemites "the urge to raise hell."27

That they did. Groups of angry people of all classes gathered at the hotel while three thousand protested at the police precinct. In short order, tempers flared, windows were broken, fires were set, stores were looted. The riot continued for almost eleven hours encompassing over thirty blocks across 125th Street from Lenox to Eighth Avenues and along the avenues from 110th to 145th Streets. Chaos reigned and Harlem looked like a war zone. Six blacks were killed, 185 people (mainly black) were wounded, over five hundred blacks were arrested and over 1,400 stores were damaged.28

La Guardia initially blamed the 1943 riot on "hoodlums" and denied that it was racially based, but his post-riot strategies

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showed how well he understood the causes of the riot. He attended a “Double V” rally, reopened the Savoy and officially opposed discriminatory rental policies like those used at Stuyvesant Town. Addressing slum conditions, he planned several new public housing projects and moved to control rents and food prices. He urged that public schools develop racially sensitive teaching materials and formed a biracial committee on race relations. Metropolitan mayhem had moved the Mayor.

Reflecting on the significance of Harlem in 1945, Langston Hughes celebrated its intellectuals and artists, its politicians and preachers, the Savoy ballroom and the Schomburg library. He knew that Harlem was a blend of “half-soled shoes...dancing shoes...a tear...a smile...the blues.” He saw in its people “the strength to make our dreams come true.” Indeed, movement after movement, protest after protest, riot after riot promoted self-determination among African Americans. Most importantly, they raised fundamental questions about the lack of movement towards equal opportunity. As the New York Times observed, “Harlem doesn’t want special favors. It wants fair play.” Gotham, the paper admitted, should be “everybody’s city.”

The sheer scope of African American activism in this period is stunning. Together, the Harlem Renaissance, Garveyism, the jobs protests and the riots cried out for change. They were important expressions of communal pain and affirmations of human agency in a democracy. Exposing problems in order to solve them, Harlemites tried to move not just a city, but a nation. In the process, they reminded us that progress is neither automatic nor universal, that history is rarely nice and neat.

Nonetheless, by challenging the American Dream, Harlemites enriched it. Their actions demonstrated the potential for change emanating from a variety of people in a variety of ways—violent and non-violent, economic and political, social and cultural, high-brow and low-brow, idealistic and pragmatic, organized and spontaneous. Their sense of purpose highlights how much we have lost in our national surrender to narcissism,
materialism and political passivity. Finally, African American activism in between the wars illuminates a central characteristic of New York City's history—its unique blend of volatility and vitality. Because it is a place that is never satisfied, never stagnant, never silent, never still, Gotham has played a particularly provocative role in American history. New York's perpetual movement, its chronic restlessness, has always been its greatest asset. 31

Joanne Reitano is Professor of History at La Guardia Community College (CUNY).


3 Ibid, 49.


6 Anderson, This Was Harlem, 49-56; Osofsky, Harlem, The Making of a Ghetto, 17-52, 87-123; Johnson, Black Manhattan, 145-159

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14 Cronon, Black Moses, 60-63, 73-137; Levine, "Marcus Garvey," 120-125, 132-137; Frazier, "Garvey," 236-241; Johnson, Black Manhattan, 251-259; Lewis, When Harlem Was in Vogue, 34-44; Anderson, This Was Harlem, 123-127; Aptheker, A Documentary History, 1910-1932, 366-411; Katz, Black Legacy, 131-138; Lincoln, "Political Nationalism," 254-261; Huggins, Harlem Renaissance, 41-
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31 Reitano, *Restless City*, 221.