The twenty-eighth annual black Elks’ convention culminated in a parade that marched up Fifth Avenue from Sixty-first Street to 110th Street, where it crossed west and headed up Lenox. It was 1927. Braving a downpour, the Marchers “trud[ged] sloshily” through the white areas of town, their “multicoloured raiment bedraggled,” their “expensive regalia ruined.” “Vast silent crowds” looked on, with thousands of spectators leaning out of their windows overlooking the streets, yet it seemed that this long-planned spectacle must be a failure. Only a miracle, a white reporter for the New York Herald Tribune speculated, could save it.

And like a miracle it happened. The 40,000 spectators, drenched into unwilling lethargy, saw Drum Major King Saul Chisolm, leading his Manhattan Lodge No. 45 sixty-piece band, swing the corner into Seventh Avenue.[ ... ] They saw his huge baton twirl valiantly, his lean old frame straighten up to its full six feet four, his white eyes roll in his ebony face, his wet white plume flirt in the air, and his huge Russian boots twitch in an old fashioned cake walk pigeon step too quick for the eye.

For yet a moment the pall of silence clung. Then there was a shout. Then a cheer. And then a wave of sound grew like an explosion in a munitions factory.

King Saul’s individual moves were too quick to appreciate visually. Instead, the reporter expressed the overall effect in aural terms. As the marchers reached Harlem, they were carried along on a “wave of sound.” Thirty black policemen were greeted with “loud cheers and applause” and although there were “[r]ules against singing, talking, chewing gum and dancing while in marching-order [ ... ] the spirit of good-will which prevailed found many dancing to the music of the bands and shouting to friends at the sides.” While the reporter had a keen eye for the vignette, it was the sound, not the sight, of the parade that indicated to her its success.

The sound of street life in Harlem was ascribed a particular quality in the white press. To be sure, other areas in New York City were also represented frequently as “noisy,” notably Chinatown, the Lower East Side, Tin Pan Alley and, at night at least, Broadway. There was a certain something, though, to the sound of Harlem. In a less sympathetic account of the 1927 march that paid just as much attention to the sounds made, another white reporter concluded that “[t]he jungle is creeping up among the skyscrapers.” On another occasion, an Easter parade, a New York Times reporter stated that it was “north of 125th street ... that one saw the most expansive smiles and heard the throaty laughter of thousands of contented negroes, glad in the sun and the brightness of the costumes ... There wasn’t a spot in the city that seemed happier.” It was in Harlem, according to another New York Times piece, that the best itinerant musicians still plied their trade. The reporter was especially impressed with
Snapshots of the Elks' Big Parade

From the Archives of the *New York Amsterdam News*. 

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“a one-man show that is principally composed of two pairs of clappers, a shrill whistle that fits under the black player’s tongue, and a pair of cymbals strapped to the knees. When worked up to fortissimo pitch, Africa could produce nothing to excel this ensemble of primitive cacophony.”

African Americans heard the noise, or sound, of Harlem, rather differently. To them, it indicated a distinctive and valuable culture. When J. A. Rogers, a writer and historian, described the sounds he heard around him, they came together like jazz. Rather than a regression to the jungle, jazz was an entirely American-made, modern expression of primitivism. It was “faster and more complex than African music. With its cowbells, auto horns, calliopes, rattles, dinner gongs, kitchen utensils, cymbals, screams, crashes, clankings and monotonous rhythm it bears all the marks of a nerve-strung, strident, mechanized civilization. It is a thing of the jungles—modern man-made jungles.” Rogers reinscribed the sound of Harlem to deem it a jungle of a different type, much as in the iconic imagery adorning the covers of the journals Crisis and Opportunity, where the skyscrapers pointed every which way to suggest a natural chaos. These were the potent signifiers of modernity—an urban jungle of enormous sights and deafening noise.

Historian Emily Ann Thompson has argued that the ability to manage noise was fundamental to modernity, leading ultimately to the utter dissociation of sound from space through new building materials and “electroacoustic devices” that transformed sound into nothing more than signals. In Harlem, however, modernity was something else again. Harlem did not have the concert halls or office buildings on which Thompson’s argument rests. Rather, there, modernity was created in public spaces, notably the streets, including noises that came through open windows from the “private” dwellings. It was also shaped in semi-private, semi-public places. These included apartments whose tenants supplemented their own rent with that supplied by a regular rotation of boarders; the “rent parties” thrown by cash-strapped lessees; and bars in private dwellings known as “buffet flats.”

If white elites wanted to curb sound, as Thompson’s evidence suggests, and heard “noise” as a marker of racial primitiveness, their black uptown neighbors found in their prejudices a space in which to define themselves individually and collectively. Black elites described themselves as beings who oriented themselves around sound rather than sight. In doing so they drew deliberately on the vernacular culture all around them. Rather than primitive, this aural identity was profoundly modern, linked, as Steven Connor has shown, to the new technologies of telephones, radios and phonographs.

The sound and noise that white New Yorkers heard as cacophonous and atavistic were to Harlem’s black residents a way to claim that space as their own. Contrary to popular perceptions of the neighborhood as exclusively black, it was mostly non-blacks who owned the stores, controlled the gambling and black market, and who did most of the policing. Photographs from the period very often include at least one white face, often that of a policeman. Where other minority groups in the city consumed, or at least window-shopped, African Americans made noise. Possessing the soundscape through everyday noise, as well as parades and other special occasions, they thereby lay claim to the physical
space that they did not literally own, and carved out their own corner of that
great modern city.

While the emphasis African Americans placed on sound during the interwar
years was not new, its grounding in the space of Harlem itself gave it a particu-
lar resonance. While Harlem allowed a freedom, for example, something as simple as
making noise on the street, which was not possible in the rural Jim Crow South.
There, as writer Zora Neale Hurston observed and fictionalized so effectively,
African Americans spent their days laboring as “tongueless, earless, eyeless con-
veniences all day long.” It was only in the evening that sounds could be made
freely, and even then only when away from whites, “sitting on porches beside
the road.” By making noise in Harlem, by contrast, its dwellers deliberately
created a public space that they thought of as uniquely black. There were other
urban places that may have sounded similar—Beale Street in Memphis comes to
mind—however Harlem’s residents regarded themselves as the makers of a spe-
cial place, in the words of one of their elite, the “mecca of the New Negro.”

Making noise was a way to build community through collective action that
always had the potential to offend the sensibilities of white listeners. The sounds
on Harlem’s streets penetrated the ears of reluctant hearers, who could not close
down their sense of hearing as they might curtail sight by simply shutting their
eyes. Through sound, Harlem’s residents created a counterpublic sphere that was
a spatialization of black self-expression commonly understood to be an inher-
ently political act. The assertion of oneself, through sound, resisted the “social
death” required of nonwhites in American society.

Self-consciousness about the political utility of sound did not preclude the
enjoyment that noises could bring. When one local, Richard Bruce Nugent, re-
called the Black Elks’ parade, he too described it sonically but focused on the
pleasure it brought residents. He concluded that “[n]o rain could wash away the
... laughter.” As Eric Lott has argued, drawing on Ralph Ellison, “[r]esistance
is the foundation but not fully the substance” of black style.

Nor was black style, defined through sound, homogenous. Through the use
of sound itself, African Americans distinguished themselves from one another,
and distanced themselves from those whose views or behaviors they disdained.
Debate erupted frequently as to what was appropriate sound or noise, on the
streets and especially in political and social agitation. Sound provides a mem-
brane through which to explore divisions in interwar Harlem. The proliferation
of voices and especially of competing approaches to defining and achieving free-
dom, were themselves characteristic of Harlem and of the black modernity that
its residents made there.

Moreover, public spaces were not open to everyone equally. There is far less
evidence of the sounds women made on the street, for example. Of course, and
as always, the problem is one of evidence itself. Accessing sound through the
written word means privileging those accounts left by the literate. These tend
to be an elite, of sorts, in Harlem, though newspaper reports also enable us to
glean something of the intentions of the less wealthy, but equally noisy, men
and women.

The community they created, at least until the Harlem riot of 1935, was not
the Harlem slum of the 1940s described so eloquently by Claude Brown. Nor
was it place where migrants found themselves endlessly alienated and dislocated.
Rather, Harlem was the heart of a black modernity in which blackness became, in the words of Paul Gilroy, “an open signifier,” at once particular and unifying but also “internally divided: by class, sexuality, gender, age, ethnicity, economics, and political consciousness.” In interwar Harlem, African Americans defined themselves as sonic beings and in so doing created a community that was both united and divided.

The special occasion

When the WPA production of Macbeth, directed by a young Orson Welles, opened in Harlem in 1936, the eighty-five members of the Monarch Negro Elks band marched in spectacular uniforms behind banners reading “Macbeth by William Shakespeare.” They brought 10,000 people out onto the street and led them to the theatre. Out the front of the playhouse, the Elks’ band played an

Figure 2

open-air concert. Northbound traffic stood still for an hour while police battled to clear a path through to the theater's foyer (Fig. 2). This spectacular—and noisy—night was by no means the first time that Harlem's residents had filled the streets for a special occasion. In September 1935, when boxer Joe Louis beat Max Baer, "the natives" of Harlem as one newspaper reported in a quasi-anthropological tone, sang and danced "in rhythmic movements whose weirdness suggested the tribal dances of natives in far away Africa and Ethiopia."

Cowbells, horns of all descriptions, rattles and the pounding of pots and pans added to the din. And all along the streets ran the chant:

Joe Louis has a left,
Joe Louis has a right.
He gave 'em both to Maxie Baer
And closed his eyes up tight.

The "weird" sounds that this reporter disdained were deployed by African Americans as part of their seizing of public space. This was an act of civil disobedience, broadly defined, that took place not only in Harlem but around the country, in cities such as Chicago, Detroit and even Memphis. In Memphis, celebrations continued until dawn. The "auditory landscape," to use historian Alain Corbin's term, was made up of "[t]in-panny pianos, blazing radios and wheezing phonographs ... accompanied by the shouting and laughing of a throng that crowded the street's night spots." Contrast these urban celebrations to Stamps, Arkansas, where, as Maya Angelou recalled, the crowd huddled around a radio in her grandmother's store to listen to the fight. Jubilation followed the silence with which they listened, but it was confined to indoors.

Contemporaries recognized the importance of sound in claiming ownership of public spaces, and its concomitant cultural significance. Writer Richard Wright wrote of Harlem's response to Louis's victory:

... a hundred thousand black people surged out of taprooms, flats, restaurants, and filled the streets and sidewalks, like the Mississippi River overflowing in flood-time. With their faces to the night sky, they filled their lungs with air and let out a scream of joy that it seemed would never end, and a scream that seemed to come from untold reserves of strength.

Noise, Wright suggested, indicated the collective character. "They wanted to make a noise comparable to the happiness bubbling in their hearts," he continued,

but they were poor and had nothing. So they went to the garbage pails and got tin cans; they went into their kitchens and got tin pots, pans, washboards, wooden boxes, and took possession of the streets. They shouted, sang, laughed, yelled, blew paper horns, clasped hands, and formed weaving snake-lines, whistled, sounded sirens, and honked auto horns ... With the reiteration that evoked a hypnotic atmosphere, they chanted with eyes half-closed, heads lilting in unison, legs and shoulders moving and touching:

'Ain't you glad? Ain't you glad.'
Wright focused on the pleasure that sound, noise and music brought to the residents of Harlem. Implicit here, however, was a critique of a society in which the success of a boxer could have so much meaning for a group of people. The noise they created was not just an effort to express the happiness inside; it was intended to communicate to those beyond Harlem's boundaries that they would tap those “untold reserves of strength” and that Louis's triumph was just the beginning.

In the center of this storm Louis was, as ever, taciturn. Gerald Early has argued that the “miracle that Louis wrought was that he was the only boxer in history who had ever been described as possessing dignity.” The dignity that Early identified came not only from Louis's successes in fights or enlisting for armed service during wartime but also from his legendary silence. After the fight, he had to be coaxed into even posing for a photograph, let alone allowing himself to be interviewed. Likewise, Louis's mother in “Harlem town,” Detroit, was soundless and “untouched by the ill-concealed excitement about her.” The dignity that Early commented upon existed in a context in which black people were denigrated as noisy. As historians Shane White and Graham White have demonstrated, the brokers of an ethos of black middle-class respectability expended a deal of energy telling Southern migrants and young people to pipe down in public.

Silence was a strategy of racial “uplift” that responded to the stereotype that blacks were noisy. That prejudice in part explains the ban on talking during parades such as that of the Black Elks in 1927, and explains why it was only when the marchers reached Harlem that they began to make such a lot of noise. Silence could also be threatening, however, in a racial economy in which whites expected blacks to be noisy. Joe Louis, strong and powerful, also kept himself unfathomable by refusing to speak. Organizers of the Silent Protest Parade of 1917, intending to draw attention to lynching in the South, had hoped that the wordless marching would effectively convey their sentiments to a recalcitrant white public. James Weldon Johnson was convinced that they had succeeded; he called the Silent Protest Parade “one of the strangest and most impressive sights New York has witnessed . . . some of those who watched turned away with their eyes filled.” Ann Douglas has argued that the parade “turned protest into something like organized and conspicuous theater, [which] advertised [its] precarious psychological location between justified rage and creative restraint.” Of course it was precisely the silence that provoked onlookers to locate the aural, as it were, and they found it in the bodies of the marchers, holding placards aloft.

Johnson regarded the solemnity of the black 369th Infantry's march in 1919 as similarly appropriate for soldiers who “had looked straight at death.” He noted that “[t]he newspapers had intimated that a good part of the celebration would be hearing the now famous Fifteenth band play jazz and seeing the Negro soldiers step to it. Those who looked for that sort of entertainment were disappointed.” Johnson's insistence that this march was a grave and deeply serious affair was odd given that James Reese Europe's band accompanied the 1300 marchers, breaking into “Here Comes My Daddy Now” as the cortege reached Harlem. But then Johnson focused only on that part of the march that went through the “white” part of town. As the soldiers crossed 110th Street (the usual direction of such marches was reversed in order to head north) they loosened ranks, were joined
by onlookers, and finished the march “singing and laughing.” Breaking ranks is a good metaphor for the deliberate fashioning of Harlem as a place of freedom. When wives and girlfriends had tried to approach the soldiers earlier, somewhere south of Harlem, the march had to pause while the police restricted civilians to the pavement. Only in Harlem were they free to behave in ways that asserted their individual and collective identities.

Residents marked this freedom on several big occasions. Among the most famous were the parachute jumps of one scarlet-tight-wearing Hubert Fauntleroy Julian, the “black eagle,” or “Lieutenant Hubert Julian, M.D., World’s Champion Daredevil Parachute Jumper” as his business cards read. On one memorable occasion in 1924, Julian leapt from an airplane, in the first instance to advertise a five-and-ten-cent-store. The newspaper report of the event read as follows:

Half of Washington Heights saw the soaring airplanes, but to make certain that none should miss the five-and-ten-cent-store advertising stunt, one of the airplanes released two bombs, which exploded far above the house tops. At once motorists on St. Nicholas Avenue began a hideous din of squalling horns. Men, women and children poured from tiered apartment houses of the Heights. From the Negro district to the east, where the event had been widely advertised by word of mouth, surged a horde intent upon seeing the exploit undertaken by one of their race.

To this reporter’s mind the sound on the street was the “hideous din” of “hysterical admirers.” Yet Julian’s feat was indelibly marked on the consciousness of Harlem residents, and no wonder. Their response took little notice of what he was advertising. According to the Negro World, over ten thousand people jammed the streets, with janitors charging entry to stand on rooftops. Until the parachute opened, “everybody was dumbfounded.” Once the spectators began breathing again, “horns tooted and people shouted ‘Save the hero! Three cheers for Julian!’ This was really a Negroes’ day in New York.”

Julian’s jumps were exceptional, yet it does not seem to have taken much coaxing to bring Harlem's residents out onto the street on other occasions, so long as the weather was not too brisk. Any occasion or event involving a well-known person, whether admired or not, prompted noisy crowds to gather. In 1924, thousands of people filled the length of the block between Seventh and Eighth Avenues on 134th Street to see Mae Robinson, A'Lelia Walker’s daughter, marry. The wedding cost $46,000 and 9,000 invitations were issued. The marriage lasted two-and-a-half years, longer at least than the unfortunate match between Countée Cullen and Yolande Du Bois (three months), who wed in front of 1500 guests, as another thousand Harlemites crowded around the church outside.

Few things brought Harlem’s residents out onto the streets with more certainty than the appearance of a celebrity. When Florence Mills, star of the stage show Blackbirds, returned from Europe late in 1927, “the masses of Harlem turned out and gave her a rousing ovation.” This noisy reception was not organized in advance, in fact, according to one report, the “impressive feature of her welcome home was its spontaneity. It was not a formal demonstration inspired by a reception committee working overtime to stir up artificial enth-
siasm. It was a sincere and natural tribute to the woman all of us regard as a national (race) heroine.\textsuperscript{44}

In mourning, too, black New Yorkers expressed themselves out loud. Just one month after her triumphant return, Mills succumbed unexpectedly to appendicitis. James Weldon Johnson recalled that 5000 people piled into the Mother AME Zion Church for her funeral service and “[t]he air quivered with emotion. Hall Johnson’s choir sang Spirituals, and the whole throng wept and sobbed.”\textsuperscript{45}

The procession—eleven or twelve cars mounted with flowers, an escort of thirty women from the stage, dressed in grey, and a band—made its slow way through a crowd of up to 150,000 people.\textsuperscript{46} As the funeral procession approached 145th Street, “an airplane circled low and released a flock of blackbirds.”\textsuperscript{47}

Accolades for Mills did not arrive by post; rather, Harlem residents took possession of the streets in order to express their sentiments. The crowd jammed the streets and “its murmurings, rising now to what seemed to those within [the church] a great wall of lamentation—or disappointment—pierced by an occasional shriek, now breaking into cheers and laughter. For more than two hours it played a weird symphonic accompaniment to the solemn Methodist service.”\textsuperscript{48}

It was not all grief, however. The crowd let out “a medley of ‘ohs’ and ‘ahs’ ” at the sight of the dozen cars and the light-skinned girls, while ticket-holders to the service let their disappointment at not getting into the church be known widely. Inside, those seated on the balcony pointed out the famous to one another, “[a]n odor of chicken spread over the room, and there was an occasional suspicious crackling of oiled paper.” Once the procession had passed by on its way to the cemetery, the noise of those in the crowd moved up a notch from “murmuring” to “chattering and gay laughter. It had been a great show.”\textsuperscript{49}

Death, especially a violent one, also often brought shocked Harlemites onto the streets. When Barron Wilkins was shot outside his club on West 134th Street, “his place was surrounded by more than 500 Negro men and women, weeping and wailing over the loss.” As the news spread, hundreds stood for hours in doorways or under umbrellas, “wail[ing] … and recounting Wilkins’s good deeds.”\textsuperscript{50} Disappointed crowds also lingered outside the funeral parlor for the 1931 memorial service for one of Harlem’s wealthiest residents, A’Lelia Walker. On this occasion, their milling around did not demonstrate quite so clearly the esteem in which they held the deceased; according to Langston Hughes, simply too many people had been invited, as with all her parties, to fit into the funeral parlor.\textsuperscript{51} Hubert Julian took to the skies again, and dropped flowers over the cemetery.

The freedom that Harlem’s residents marked out by taking possession of the soundscape was never complete; street behavior was never totally autonomous. Visitors to Harlem often remarked that police were present whenever there was a large gathering of people.\textsuperscript{52} Police officers, usually white, also patrolled the streets on a more routine basis. George Schuyler suggested that visitors to Harlem could not help but notice “our stalwart patrolmen, traffic police and detectives.”\textsuperscript{53} Nancy Cunard commented on the constant presence of bailiffs conducting evictions as well as “[p]olice and riot squads [who] come with bludgeons and tear-bombs, fights and imprisonments, and deaths too, occur.”\textsuperscript{54} Police in the 1930s, urged on by advocates of a middle-class ideology of respectability, monitored with increasing vigor the crowds who gathered around street corner
Their presence served as a constant reminder of the boundaries of acceptable conduct, and also of the bribes and graft that kept Harlem ticking over. Harlem’s black residents constantly challenged that presence with the noise they made. If surveillance was effected by sight and presence, it was resisted through sound.

The most explicit examples of the challenge that “noisy” residents made against white authorities were when police attempted to arrest black Harlemites. In the spring of 1920, a crowd gathered around a man arrested after he attempted to retrieve from a white pawnbroker a watch on which the police had put a stop. After an exhortation: “Come on boys, get out your knives and don’t let those white livered motherfuckers take our friend in,” someone cut the police officer with a razor. One of those arrested was shot in the hand. All the way to the station house, according to the police officer, those in the crowd “made threatening remarks to me and threatened to take the prisoner away from me.” In a similar instance in 1928, a New York Age story rebuked “reports in the daily papers telling of thousands of Negroes rioting.” By contrast, the paper insisted that “[t]he usual crowds, that are drawn by any excitement naturally put in an appearance, and some of the hot-headed made to assist the prisoner from what they evidently thought was another case of unwarranted police brutality.”

In a 1935 poem, the incomparable Langston Hughes put into verse both the ubiquity of the police presence and the noisy responses to officers by Harlem’s residents. In “Air Raid Over Harlem,” Hughes drew a parallel between the presence of police on the neighborhood’s streets and the recent Italian invasion of Ethiopia:

The Ethiopian war broke out last night:  
BOMBS OVER HARLEM  
Cops on every corner  
Most of ’em white  
COPS IN HARLEM  
Guns and billy-clubs  
Double duty in Harlem  
Walking in pairs  
Under every light  
Their faces  
WHITE  
In Harlem  
And mixed in with ’em  
A black cop or two  
For the sake of the vote in Harlem[.] Hughes concluded the poem with a dream of a day when the workers, black and white, unite and “a big black giant ... picks up a cop and lets him fly,” sending him to hell. His fury was matched by that of a group of Harlem’s residents who took to the streets and expressed their dismay at international events. “With shouts of warning to Italian merchants and jeers at the police,” one newspaper reporter wrote, “the crowd marched to the W. 123d St. station.”

If taking possession of public space was limited by the constant presence of police, women were additionally constrained in this endeavor. Historian Irma Watkins-Owens has found evidence for the existence of several female public
speakers, but only one of them who spoke on the streets: socialist Helen Holman, who campaigned for suffrage in the years leading up to 1917. As White and White have argued, in Chicago as in other cities, “the most important public space in the black section of the city [became] the preserve of African American males.” Harlem was no exception. One of the key advantages to life there, George Schuyler proposed, was that “[t]he person with an eye to beauty never tires of watching the parade of comely girls and women; girls and women, in the main, who have learned the secret of how to array themselves attractively.” There may have been ways for women to exploit this gaze, but their presence on the streets was nonetheless constantly subject to the appraisal of men.

Nor were women very often described as making much noise on Harlem’s streets. Generally, according to these reports, they were looked at, and commented upon, rather than heard. In his short story, “Ringtail,” Rudolph Fisher depicted a group of men who milled about making “loud comments” upon passersby, “the slightest quip provoking shouts of laughter.” Most of all they would whoop with joy at the sight of a well-dressed young woman, and a “really pretty girl usually won a surprised ‘Well, hush my mouth!’” Evidently they were not silent for long.

Reading against the grain, however, reveals some evidence of noisy women on the street. There were, for example, women vendors spruiking their wares, including the famed Lillian Harris, also known as Pig Foot Mary, who began amassing her wealth selling trotters from a pram on the street. Likewise women were often prominent in parades. The 1927 Elks’ march featured women as both marchers and drum majors; the “Phylis Wheatley Temple from Boston made a fine showing with their ladies outfitted in silk riding habits,” while “[t]he James Liberty Female Band of Philadelphia showed excellent professional skill as they marched along at the head of the Quaker City Temple.” The female drum major of this section “came in also for a good hand as she strutted by with a tremendous big drum major’s hat on her head.” Close behind, “[l]ed by a daughter Elk attired in silk bloomers, the band of King Tut Lodge of Cleveland followed along.” Despite the crowd’s warm applause for these female characters, the Amsterdam News conveyed a sense of just how unusual their role was, running this cartoon with the caption “No! All of the Bands Do Not Have Male Drum Majors—” (Fig. 3). The two other images of women presented here were more familiar, of “Girls And Girls And More Girls,” whose presence and appearance were commented upon in the song: “Ain’t She Sweet.”

Not all women in public were sweet. Author Zora Neale Hurston, who made her name paying attention to the seamier side of life in all districts, depicted in “Story in Harlem Slang” a pretty woman who responded to the come-ons from a pair of dimeless “pimps” with a lot of backtalk and “a great blow of laughter.” When one of the hungry men made a desperate grab for her pocketbook, she threatened him: “If your feets don’t hurry up and take you ‘way from here, you’ll ride away. I’ll spread my lungs all over New York and call the law. Go ahead, Beadbug! Touch me! And I’ll holler like a pretty white woman!” Having stunned her would-be assailants, she moved away “with her ear-rings snapping and her heels popping.” Women’s shouts also resulted from more menacing threats and assaults. In his description of Lenox Avenue, writer Rudolph Fisher asserted that there was “nothing unusual in . . . the quick succession of pistol
From the Archives of the *New York Amsterdam News*.

shots, the scream of a police-whistle or a woman. In all likelihood, women were present on the streets in large numbers and were perhaps just as noisy as men. If many of those who recorded life in Harlem failed to note their presence, it is perhaps because they did not feel threatened by women.

**Noise of the everyday**

Funerals, parades and parachute-jumps were only the most well recorded occasions on which black New Yorkers took to the streets. These events were
extensions of much more frequent and ritualized performances of deportment and style, notably "the stroll," which involved parading up and down Seventh Avenue. The stroll was not all movement, either. Arthur Davis has described spending summer afternoons meeting friends on street corners, "chewing the fat" and celebrity spotting. There is a danger of romanticizing all this; street life, after all, was something of a necessity, with housing becoming more and more cramped in the segregated blocks of Harlem. The lack of public facilities, too, meant that children were forced to play on the streets (Fig. 4). Nevertheless the gusto with which Harlem's dwellers occupied public places, everyday, and not merely for special occasions, is noteworthy.

As subjects, or citizens, of a black public sphere, Harlemites defined themselves, as well as the space, as oriented by an aural sensibility. As Paul Robeson put it,

[my ancestors in Africa reckoned sound of major importance; they were all great talkers, great orators, and where writing was unknown, folk tales and an oral tradition kept the ears rather than the eyes sharpened. I am the same. I always hear, I seldom see. I hear my way through the world. I always judge by sound.]

Figure 4

To hear, rather than see, was at once to pose a separate mode of existence, connected to a separate public sphere and a different history. Black Americans quite simply defined themselves using a different sensual tradition than that commonly associated with whites, that is, sound rather than sight. For many, the arena of sound offered more room for self-definition than did the field of vision, with its close relationship to the determination of a person's race. Robeson, and others, laid claim to a culture distinct from that derived from the European Enlightenment. In doing so, African Americans made a virtue of their supposed racial connection to a primitive, and aurally oriented, culture.

The use of sound to define oneself as a modern citizen in a modern city also enabled African Americans such as Robeson to rehabilitate their maligned African heritage. He was not alone. Contemporary philosopher Alain Locke assured readers that "[a] Bojangles performance is excellent vaudeville, but listen with closed eyes, and it becomes an almost symphonic composition of sounds. What the eye sees is the tawdry American convention; what the ear hears is the priceless African heritage." In making a link to an ancient culture, these African Americans participated in one of the distinguishing features of interwar modernity. Part and parcel of that modernity, as Michael Kammen and others have shown, was an interest in the past that often crossed over into nostalgia. In defining themselves in this way, African Americans in the interwar years took part in, and in fact led, one of the defining characteristics of modernism: a yearning for a lost past. In black modernity, however, looking back was a means mostly to look forward to a revised future in which African Americans would no longer have to put up with "second-class citizenship."

It was important to stake a place from which to launch these claims that African Americans genuinely belonged to the American nation. In making Harlem that place, contemporary commentators were as interested in the everyday sounds of the street as they were on the big events. Eunice Hunton Carter began her description of Harlem life with "the boy on the corner who for clapping companions in front of the drug store was doing a dance that was a bit of Buck and Wing, a bit of 'Charleston' and many other things." For Carter, such performances made Harlem black. She contrasted the noise of the clapping with the ignorant and careless whoosh of the whites in a big car, on their way to a tacky nightclub, missing, she argued, the "real" life of Harlem. "Slumming" whites for the most part wanted their Harlem packaged in primitive garb and accompanied by the beat of a tom-tom that they could enjoy for an evening. Few relished encountering real men and women on the street, speaking in a slang that they could not understand and that they found confronting.

White visitors to Harlem, as well as some black, also found the street vendors difficult to handle. By contrast, Clarence Cameron White, violinist, composer and teacher, explained to his students at Hampton Institute that "Street Cries" were a category of folk music. White taught this course, "The History of Negro Music," between 1933 and 1935. In the notes he prepared for the forty-nine lessons, the thirteenth, on "Street Cries," was the only one White annotated—"a most important contribution"—perhaps revealing some anxiety on his part as to the legitimacy such cries had as a subject for study and analysis. Such caution is not surprising in the context of black protest politics in which the appropriateness of jazz was often questioned, let alone street cries. Clarence White's anx-
society was fair enough, given the kudos accorded tenor Roland Hayes, who sang classical music and spirituals. Hayes was lauded as an exemplary member of the “Talented Tenth,” whose members worked to uplift the race. White’s classes were being offered at a time when Maud Cuney-Hare’s attitude to street sounds was far more typical. “A story of Negro music cannot be complete without a mention of a class of fragmentary tunes which, while not musically important, are decidedly amusing,” she wrote. “These are the street-cries of the hucksters and vendors who sell both raw and cooked food on the streets.”

Whether one regarded them as a serious contribution to folk music or an amusing aside, the sounds of the streets were inescapable. Taking a walk down Seventh Avenue, one’s ears were likely to be assailed by the arguments and pleas of street-corner speakers, punctuated by the responses of audience members. If passersby were lucky, the Barefoot Prophet (Elder Clayhorn Martin) would reveal to them the day’s number, which might enable them to win on the gambling game so popular in Harlem at the time. In addition, he would impart “the word of God for whatever pittance one might give him.” Further up the street, political commentary flew from the lips of Hubert Harrison, a renowned “soapboxer.” Bruce Nugent indiscreetly suggested that Harrison “deserted his superlative collection of erotic literature, second to none in New York, to translate his ideas about culture and the superiority of the black man into the Harlem idiom through which to harangue the man in the street from a soap box on any convenient corner.” Another resident recalled that Harrison was attached to the 135th Street branch of the public library, “as a kind of unofficial lecturer-in-residence” and dubbed him the “Dean of the Harlem Street Orators.” When A. Philip Randolph arrived in Harlem in 1911, it was Harrison who honed his skills. Decades later, it was Randolph’s vision that transformed this sonic possession of space into the iconic 1963 March on Washington. In those earlier years, Randolph delivered the word from the corner of Lenox Avenue and 135th Street, and his “delivery was ... impeccable,” a young admirer later remembered. Instead of rabble rousing, he just talked.

While Harrison and Randolph had reputations as spellbinding speakers, soap-boxers were such a staple of the soundscape that those in the audience could afford to be fickle. Eunice Hunton Carter mentioned as quintessentially Harlem-esque the street speaker “making a political speech in which he was putting race first and country after and the crowd around him was eager and interested—until a pair of detectives passed leading a troupe of gypsies toward the police station.” Into the 1930s, advocates of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) battled with foes at the Oriental and Occidental Scientific Philosophical Society and International Negro Cooperative Association “almost nightly” for the allegiance of their listeners. Rather than walking off, audiences might express their displeasure more directly. Heckling was frequent and anyone not up to scratch was booted off the box. For this reason, street speakers cut their oratorical teeth on Lenox Avenue, only later graduating to Seventh Avenue.

The practice of lecturing and listening on the streets was a means of bringing into public discourse topics and opinions that had little currency in the wider public sphere. It was also a means to highlight how black Americans were excluded from those institutions, like universities, that were so vital to the dominant public sphere. In its heyday, the northeast corner of 135th Street and Sev-
enth Avenue was known as "The Campus." Speakers and their interlocutors conjured up with their words a world in which black people past and present were central to any concept of "civilization" and any concept of an "America" that held true to its principles of freedom and fairness. If the ancient Africa they imagined was idealized, it was so only in order to refute assertions of black inferiority and in order to look forward anew. These speakers used the imagination in the way described by Arjun Appadurai, as a "social practice" that was neither fantasy nor escape, nor mere contemplation. Rather, they imagined a better world in which their experiences would not be shaped by racism and prejudice.

How that better world would come about and what were to be its characteristics were hotly debated. For many of the street speakers, politics were related closely to religion. Marcus Garvey began his North American career on street corners melding his black nationalist vision into a secular religion, before moving into Liberty Hall on 138th Street. Randolph Wilson, a.k.a. Ras DeKiller, articulated fiercely an apocalyptic vision captured later by Ralph Ellison in the figure of Ras the Destroyer in Invisible Man (1952). Sufi Abdul Hamid, orig-
inally from Lowell, Massachusetts, adopted the moniker "Bishop Conshankin, mystic and Oriental philosopher." Enormously popular for a brief spell, Hamid made labor and black ownership of local business central to his lecturing, championed black separatism, and called himself a "Black Hitler." Novelist Claude McKay captured Hamid's appeal in *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*, written some time in the late 1930s. The fictional soapboxer, Sharpage, mixed his advocacy of black workers' rights and of black-owned business with a faux African mysticism. He "appeared on the streets of Harlem wearing a turban, a belted leather coat, boots and spurs and announcing himself as Omar, The African, founder of a new religion and a new idea of labor for the colored masses." As the historian Wilson Moses has argued, the combination of politics, religion and messianical leadership proved irresistible. "Haranguing Harlem from a step ladder on the street corners," wrote McKay, Sharpage/Omar "more than any other soap boxer, drew the crowds. Young men, high school kids among them, stopped to listen and decided to follow him."

These firebrands courted increasing disdain from some in the Harlem community. As political agitation increased into the 1930s, a group calling themselves "The Committee of Twenty-five Native-Born Colored Americans" banded together to rid Harlem of soapboxers. Its members considered these "foreign-born agitators" a menace to Harlem's social integrity, and blamed them expressly for the riot that ripped through Harlem in 1935. In 1939 the sociologist Ira De A. Reid sympathized with those on the committee, though he did point out that the migrants were an easy target for blame; animosity between foreign-born and native black residents tended to flare up at moments of national or international unrest. He claimed that the "Sino-Japanese conflict, Garvey's program, the Scottsboro case and the Italian-Ethiopian war, have been their chief plaints." In Reid's opinion, "street-corner speaking has been a symbol of Harlem's social disorganization ever since the World War.

Reid's comments notwithstanding, it was the very debate between these various individuals and groups that reflected the freedom Harlem allowed its residents. While some wanted to see the ideals of the American nation extended to all of its citizens, others were less interested in amalgamating a hard-won black public sphere with a mainstream public, even if it were reconceived along more inclusive and just lines. Of the latter group, there were those for whom the American nation held no promise. There were others, however, whose ultimate aim was to make white Americans irrelevant to the discussion of citizenship and the question of who belonged to the nation. For this group, "African American nationalism" provided "a model of dignity and justice that white American citizens [would] be obliged to follow."

In the black public sphere, separatism existed alongside calls for, as Michael Dawson puts it, "African American inclusion in official discourses." African American vernacular practices enabled the formation of this counterpublic sphere. In Harlem, they brought out into the open from what historians have identified as the double-speak of the slaves' oral culture and the "hidden transcript" of black working class resistance in the South. In doing so, the debate that flowered on the streets mirrored one of those central to the New Negro Renaissance itself: to use black arts to demonstrate worthiness of citizenship, or to focus on black folk culture for its own sake.
Garvey's vowels

The soapboxer whose later fame eclipsed all others was Marcus Garvey. Appropriating the street and public space generally was crucial to his campaign and to his claim that he was the first person to lead a mass black movement. As William Ferris recalled nostalgically as early as 1925, Garvey's conventions were "characterized by spectacular parades and pageants and mammoth mass meetings, drawing larger audiences, organizing more Negroes, receiving more publicity in the press, and attaining greater world fame than any one Negro living or dead." Almost as quickly as Garvey himself was forced out of American politics (imprisoned in 1925 and deported in 1927), the memorialization of his movement began. An exceptional amount of this commemoration revolved around, or at least mentioned, the sound of Garvey's voice. Detractors thought of his campaign as overly noisy but his followers recalled him as the membrane through which their own hopes and dreams were played out at a volume that was barely loud enough.

Garvey's parades, like those of the Black Elks and others, relied at least partially on sound for their success. The tenor of Garvey's parades was captured in a short story published in the New York Amsterdam News in 1923. The story used an admittedly contrived device of a sleepy elevator operator, Toussaint Washington, dreaming of various popular movements of the time. It opened with a description of a parade that made Toussaint late for work:

To the martial strains of "Mammy" the Black Cross brass band swung into Seventh Avenue from One Hundred and thirty-fifth Street. Behind it marched thousands of followers of Prince Nebocus, led by the Prince himself and a few companies of Black Cross soldiers in black uniforms trimmed in the lively color of red. From the roofs to the curbs, one saw nothing but heads—heads of all Harlem's colored population; for when a band plays "Mammy" anywhere north of One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street, between the East River and Morningside Park, heads like frogs after a thunderstorm, show up and out of everything. Windows, doors, offices, cellars, trees, lamp-posts, nothing but heads!

The popularity of the parades is beyond question, and part of the appeal, these fictionalized narratives imply, was sonic. Zora Neale Hurston wrote an ironic account of these events:

Eight modest, unassuming brass bands blared away down Lenox Avenue. It was August 1, 1924, and the Emperor Marcus Garvey was sneaking down the Avenue in terrible dread lest he attract attention to himself. He succeeded nobly, for scarcely fifty thousand persons saw his parade file past trying to hide itself behind numerous banners of red, black and green.

This self-effacement was typical of Mr. Garvey and his organization. He would have no fuss nor bluster—a few thousand pennants strung across the street overhead, eight or nine bands, a regiment or two, a few floats, a dozen or so of titled officials and he was ready for his annual parade.

The noises of the parade—the band, the shouting, the clapping—were crucial to its success. It begs a word other than "spectacle" to describe it, a word that also encompasses the sonic component of the participation of both marchers and onlookers (or onhearers).
When Garvey spoke, according to Randolph, “you could hear him from 135th Street to 125th Street. He had a tremendous voice.” Garvey even managed to capture his declarative style in his written words and advertising. To read the front page of the newspaper, the *Negro World*, and later *The Blackman*, was to hear Garvey’s voice. So too with his poetry. Consider “The Tragedy of White Injustice,” written while he was imprisoned:

‘And now valiant Black men of the west  
Must ably rise to lead and save the rest:  
This is the ringing call Africa sounds,  
As throughout the Godly world it resounds . . .”

Likewise, the handbills that advertised meetings, conferences and marches used audacious hyperbole. One proclaimed: “If you fail to be at the Armory on this night of nights then you might as well be dead.” Its author remediated spoken language in order to assert a right to possess public space. If space could be seized by noise, so too could political participation be achieved by resisting exclusion in bold ways.

The same flyer proclaimed Garvey to be “the World’s Greatest Orator,” and without doubt one aspect of his appeal was his frequent speeches, chronicled in detail in the *Negro World*. The one-time vice-president of the UNIA, George Weston, later recalled that Garvey “was a small shy man but on the rostrum in speaking engagements, he was a roaring lion.” Author Eric Walrond wrote that “[t]he bands of black peasant folk flock to Garvey. They worship him. They feel he is saying the things which they would utter were they articulate. They swarm to hear his fiery rhetoric . . . They idolize him as if he were a black Demosthenes.” The same point was made in the recent documentary *Look for Me in the Whirlwind* with one Garveyite, Virginia Collins, recalling that Garvey spoke from his soul, and, ah, you had this, ah, feeling that you were there, that you are he, too, that you felt the same thing that he was speaking of, you felt that you just want to go on and do what he was talking about . . . And, ah, Garvey spoke the words that you thought you were speaking yourself. In other words, if you had been in the position that Garvey was in, you would have been speaking the same thing. They were in your thoughts, in your mind, in your brains, but still you did not speak them the way Garvey spoke them. And it . . . ah, it was in one accord. It was just like, ah, everybody had one mind.

For Collins, Garvey was an effective leader because his speech galvanized the audience into one mind, partly by reflecting that which they already felt. His voice amplified the political desires of his listeners. When Claudius Barnes remembered the halcyon days of Garvey’s leadership of the UNIA, he emphasized that “[t]hey say that the pen is mightier than the sword, but the tongue is mightier than them both put together.”

Conversely, Walrond also argued that Garvey’s appeal rested on his appropriation of an English class system. “Aping the English royalty,” said Walrond, “he manufactures out of black peasants of the lower domestic class dukes and duchesses, princes and princesses,” which enabled him to “create . . . a fairy dream world for them which spiritedly makes up for the beauty and grandeur
that are lacking in their drab, unorderly lives.” These two points were juxtaposed in Walrond’s piece; however he did not make a specific link between Garvey’s “fiery rhetoric” and his creation of order. This was precisely the point at which the sound of his voice—his Jamaican accent with its English inflections, and most of all, its clear tone—and not just the content of his speeches, was significant in accounting for his appeal.17

There was no doubt that his tonal inflections appealed to many. Even some members of the so-called Talented Tenth were prepared to concede that however much they disagreed with Garvey’s policies, they too could be carried along when listening to him. In 1921, Herbert J. Seligmann, a white member of the NAACP executive, captured something of the tone of Garvey’s appeal. “One feels,” he wrote, that “the orator if not the actor not far beneath the surface. His manner is easy, and his voice agreeable, with a slightly English intonation that falls strangely upon the ears of Americans unaccustomed to natives of the British West Indies.”118 Writer Arna Bontemps recalled that Garvey’s “spell-binding West Indian cadence” and “oddly lyrical style,” “transported” and “blew the minds” of his followers.119

On occasion Garvey’s listeners mistook his accent for English.120 While the content of Garvey’s speeches was crucial to his success, some measure of anglophilia on the part of Americans generally and in this case, African Americans, influenced the reception to Garvey.121 Frances Albrier, a resident of Oakland, California, recalled that “Marcus Garvey spoke most eloquently in his Jamaican accent about self-esteem, and pride in color and features.”122 Sister Samad, interviewed on a recent PBS documentary about Garvey, recalled that “all of a sudden this golden voice from the Caribbean came and stood on the corners in Harlem and began to talk about self-esteem, holding up your back bone, you know, no wish bones.”123 It is just possible that Garvey’s immense popularity as an orator was partly due to an American fascination with English and Caribbean accents.

Of course many of Garvey’s followers were, like him, migrants from the West Indies.124 The foreign-born black population in the United States grew from 20,000 in 1900 to over 100,000 in 1930, and between 1913 and 1924, when their arrival was at its highest, New York was the second most popular state in which to settle, with Manhattan and Brooklyn the most popular destinations. By 1930, almost a quarter of Harlem’s population was Caribbean-born.125 Many may well have been thrilled to hear an accent like theirs on the streets and the Liberty Hall stage. Garvey’s charm reached beyond West Indian immigrants, however. He found plenty of support in the South and in cities across the United States that did not have significant numbers of West Indian immigrants.126 T. Thomas Fortune claimed that of all the race leaders he had known, only Garvey “had a world-embracing slogan that appealed to the Negro people everywhere.”127

Garvey’s accent, like those of the West Indians around him, was ridiculed as well as admired. W. E. B. Du Bois once denounced Garvey as an “illiterate foreigner,” putting his finger on the point of Garvey’s appeal at the same time as distancing himself from it. Once again, sound was the means by which those in Harlem distinguished themselves from one another. In this case, accents signalled the more general antagonism that existed between many native-born black Americans and those who had recently arrived.128 Writer Wallace
Thurman identified the “cockney English inflections” of West Indian speech as one reason for the “intraracial prejudice” in Harlem. Nancy Cunard observed that “[t]he American Negro regards the Jamaican or British West Indian as ‘less civilised’ than himself; jokes about his accent and deportment are constantly made on the Harlem stage.”

Garvey’s critics were usually less concerned about his accent as by what he said. Even this dismay, though, was expressed in sonic terms. His detractors repeatedly damned “Brother ‘Bark-Much-Garvey’” as noisy, “a bull in a china shop.” When Garvey appeared in Tacoma, Washington, an editorial found his “flamboyant, spread-eagle, verbal pyrotechnics” disappointing. It warned sternly that “[h]e talked volubly of redeeming Africa, but did not specify how it was to be done…. he dealt in a mirage of glittering abstract nouns and pronunciations, garnished with a conglomeration of adjectives that would tend not only to beguile the unwary but confuse those easily influenced.” More concisely, Du Bois blamed the Libetian government’s reneging on the UNIA colonization agreement on Garvey having “yelled and shouted and telegraphed it all over the world.” The racially uplifting politics of the Talented Tenth relied, its members argued, on cogent argument and on proving that they were the equal of whites. A correspondent to the Crisis, the journal that Du Bois edited, requested that West Indians be judged on the basis of their individual contributions, not by association with Garvey. “Many of us are giving our best for the solution of our common problem.” Moreover, the letter writer claimed in a telling phrase, “We are doing so without knighthood or noise.”

The portrayal of Garvey as a noisy buffoon culminated in the long “extracts” of the court proceedings that ran in the Amsterdam News in 1923. “To see the Provisional Ruler of the Continent of Africa at bay, shouting his defiant objections, is a sight worth seeing. […] When he warms up to his subject his voice may be heard in the other courtrooms.” The reporter mocked Garvey through both a depiction of his voice and the noisy reaction to it. The paper gleefully reported that “[p]eal after peal of laughter rocks the court at frequent intervals, and […] even the judge himself—grave, serious and patient as he appears to be—cannot help laughing at times.” Following the proceedings closely, George Schuyler commented in his usual acerbic fashion—and with no small schadenfreude—that Garvey “is in jail again and his mouth put him there.”

Garvey’s voice continued to dominate reports, even long after he was deported. (The sheer number of satirical portraits suggests an at least grudging recognition of the grandness of Garvey’s vision.) A 1930 stage production featured Frank Wilson as Marius Harvey, a “slick, smooth-talking, honey-worded real estate salesman” who, according to one reviewer, “could have gone out into the audience, that was sitting on the edge of its seats, and sold them a couple of shares in the Black Star Line.” Similarly, in Wallace Thurman and William Jourdan Rapp’s “Jeremiah, the Magnificent,” when Jeremiah’s duplicitous assistant Melissa caught him rehearsing in front of a mirror, “as if he is addressing a great gathering, striking what he considers grand and royal poses,” she listened for a moment then exclaimed sardonically, “Speechifying!”

For all of their claims to be pursuing change through reasoned speech, rather than noisy verbal pyrotechnics, those in the “Talented Tenth” found themselves sometimes moved by Garvey. In his reminiscences, NAACP executive member
Seligmann admitted: "Nor is there anything bizarre in Marcus Garvey's talk. It is fluent, even compelling, if one does not stop to check him up. And this one is tempted sometimes not to do. For Marcus Garvey knows something of what is going on in the world." More often, however, they identified Garvey's "torrential eloquence" as the magnet that attracted followers, and in doing so distanced themselves from both Garvey and his supporters.

William Sherrill, later a significant figure in the executive of the UNIA and among its delegation to the League of Nations Assembly at Geneva in 1922, wrote of his first experience of Garvey in similar terms. Sherrill, however, was even more moved by what he heard:

One night on my way to a Show, I saw a huge crowd outside a Church. I went up and said, 'what's going on in there?' A lady turned to me and said, 'man alive, don't you know that Marcus Garvey is in there talking, yes, indeed, Garvey in person.' 'Shucks,' I said, 'I may as well see what he looks like.' ... I squeezed in, until I could get a good look at him; then suddenly he turned in my direction, and in a voice like thunder from Heaven he said, 'men and women, what are you here for? To live unto yourself, until your body manures the earth, or to live God's Purpose to the fullest?' He continued to complete his thought in that compelling, yet pleading voice for nearly an hour. I stood there like one in a trance, every sentence ringing in my ears, and finding an echo in my heart. When I walked out of that Church, I was a different man—I knew my sacred obligations to my Creator, and my responsibilities to my fellow men, and so help me! I am still on the Garvey train.

As Randall Burkett has pointed out, Sherrill described a conversion experience. What is of particular note, however, is that his conversion was described as one from sight to sound. From wandering in to take the opportunity to "see" Garvey, Sherrill was moved by what he heard, and was thus converted.

Rudolph Fisher fictionalized an experience similar to Sherrill's in "The South Lingers On," a short story in which two men, Pete and Lucky, wandering the streets too early for the cabs, entered "the so-called Garvey tabernacle" to fill in their time. Inside, "a man's voice rose, leading a spiritual. Other voices chimed eagerly in, some high, clear, sweet; some low, mellow, full,—all swelling, rounding out the refrain till it filled the place, so that it seemed the flimsy walls and roof must soon be torn from their moorings and swept aloft with the song." At the close of the song was "a moment of abysmal silence, into which the thousand blasphemies filtering in from outside dropped unheeded" followed by the sermon. The preacher used "deep, impressive tones," and began to sing rather than talk. The responses of his congregation "were quick, spontaneous, escaping the lips of their own accord; they were frequent and loud ... The old men cried, 'Help him, Lord!' 'Preach the word!' 'Glory!' ... and the old women continuously moaned aloud, nodding their bonneted heads, or swaying rhythmically forward and back in their seats." Fisher's story ended with the two knockabout characters, like Sherrill, being profoundly moved by the preacher, in spite of themselves and to their mutual embarrassment. "'It just sorter—gets me" Lucky says to Pete, whose response is to put an arm across his friend's shoulders while muttering a defensive put-down.

It is significant that New Negro Renaissance writers such as Fisher paid attention to the tendency among African Americans to define themselves in ways
linked expressly to the sounds that they made. Historian David Levering Lewis argued that the Harlem Renaissance failed on its own terms because it did not affect race relations.\textsuperscript{145} Lewis conceived of this outpouring of arts and letters as an exercise in interracialism presaging the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. But if we focus instead on the deliberate development of a counterpublic sphere, we can see that the poetry, novels, artwork, stage shows and magazines of the era complemented, and drew from, the activities of less literary New Yorkers. Even if most of their buyers were white, the symbolic power of literary statement, like that of the public speech act, should not be underestimated. At the very least, it had the effect of creating a black public sphere in which, as Langston Hughes boldly proclaimed, whites’ responses were irrelevant.\textsuperscript{146}

Harlem was the perfect location for this process. As James de Jongh has argued, Harlem “offered something else that was virtually unprecedented in the African diaspora: a place for blacks to be themselves, as they saw fit.”\textsuperscript{147} Simultaneously, this was a mirage. Harlem was intimately connected to the rest of New York City: most of its residents worked elsewhere and its businesses were owned by outsiders. Moreover, Harlem was monitored constantly by white policemen; and its residents were not all African-American.

Something of the tension between the making of Harlem as a black space in which men, women and children could live their lives with pleasure and relative freedom, and the restrictions upon that activity, was captured by Nancy Cunard. She wrote first of the racy novels about Harlem by Carl Van Vechten and Claude McKay, then observed:

This is not the Harlem one sees. You don’t see the Harlem of the romanticists; it is romantic in its own right. And it is hard and strong: its noise, heat, cold, cries and colours are so. And the nostalgia is violent too; the eternal radio seeping everything day and night, indoors and out, becomes somehow the personification of restlessness, desire, brooding. And then the gorgeous roughness, the gargle of Louis Armstrong’s voice breaks through.\textsuperscript{148}

Cunard, a relatively sympathetic observer of black life and culture, noted the important transition from sight to sound as one entered Harlem. She offered a glancing attack on those white tourists who went to Harlem nightclubs, going on immediately to assert that “[a]s everywhere, the real people are in the street. I mean those young men on the corner, and the people all sitting on the steps throughout the breathless, leaden summer. I mean the young men in Pelham Park; the sports groups (and one sees many in their bright sweaters), the strength of a race, its beauty.”\textsuperscript{149}

The lack of quiet, the constant noise, indicated to Cunard a desire to move forward, to get beyond an endless nostalgia, though for what she didn’t specify. It was in Harlem alone that Cunard, like its residents, could see—and hear—hope for the future. Cunard concluded her article by marvelling at the schoolchildren, who, after school finished for the day, raced up and down the streets, “shouting and free.”\textsuperscript{150} Cunard’s hopefulness about the future, embodied in the children, echoed Alain Locke’s foretelling, ten years earlier. “Youth speaks,” wrote Locke, “and the voice of the New Negro is heard. What stirs inarticulately in the masses is already vocal on the lips of the talented few, and the future listens, however the present may shut its ears. Here we have Negro youth, with arresting visions
and vibrant prophecies; forecasting in the mirror of art what we must see and recognize in the streets of reality tomorrow, foretelling in new notes and accents the maturing speech of full racial utterance.\textsuperscript{151}

Those new notes and accents were varied, competitive, and sometimes fiercely at odds. To be sure, sound provided a way to unite disparate individuals, to define themselves as black moderns. African Americans of all stripes used sound to distinguish themselves from white Americans, and to make Harlem theirs, in contrast to the stifling South from which so many of them had escaped. "Harlem," to quote Louis Armstrong himself, "saved my life."\textsuperscript{152} It was through sound, however, that so many were able to enter and contest the black political and social spheres, in which there was no unity of aims or desires. The very proliferation of voices, ideas and desires itself constituted black modernity.

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ENDNOTES

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11. Note, for instance, in the photograph below of the crowd on the street outside the theater in which Macbeth was playing, the face of the capped white policeman. For an account of relations between policemen and residents see Marcy S. Sacks, "To Show Who Was In Charge": Police Repression of New York City's Black Population at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," Journal of Urban History 31, no. 6 (Sept. 2005): 799–819.

12. The possession claimed by black Harlem residents differed from that of some other minority groups in the city, namely white middle-class women and gay men, who justified their presence on the streets through consumption, specifically, in wandering the streets looking at shop windows. See George Chauncey, Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940 (New York, 1994), 189–90; Chauncey cites Susan Porter Benson, Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890–1940 (Urbana, 1986), 18.


15. The phrase was the subheading of a special edition of the Survey Graphic in March 1925, published in altered form as Alain Locke, ed., The New Negro (1925; New York, 1992).


17. Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study (Cambridge, MA, 1992).


25. The study of public space, as Robin Kelley has argued, is crucial to a history of black working-class resistance, since so much of that activity was "unorganized, clandestine, and evasive." As he has argued, this research destabilizes accounts of the civil rights movement that are overly focused on desegregation and the 1950s. See Robin D. G. Kelley, Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class (New York, 1994), 56.


30. A 1935 photograph of Joe and Marva Trotter Louis wife captured Louis staring hard at the camera. His wife, by contrast, did not look at the camera, and was smiling, laughing even. See Harlem On My Mind, ed. Schoener, 164.

31. “Harlem Hilarious . . .”


33. This was true too during antebellum slavery. See Smith, Listening to Nineteenth-Century America, 88–91; and White and White, The Sounds of Slavery, 181–182.


36. Johnson, Black Manhattan, 235–236.


39. “‘Champion Daredevil’ Parachutes to Tenement,” 60.

40. Ibid., 60–61.


47. Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 201. This description was repeated by Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (1940; New York, 1986), 274.

48. "Florence Mills, Famed Artiste."

49. Ibid.


56. District Attorney’s Closed Case File 129713 (1920) (Municipal Archives, New York City). Thanks to Stephen Robertson for sharing this story, and those in the following footnote, with me.


59. Dillon, “Harlem Drive Upon Italians Stirs Disorder.”

60. Watkins-Owens, Blood Relations, 93. On Grace Campbell, a public speaker, see p. 103.

61. White and White, Stylin’, 233.

62. Schuyler, “The Soap Box.”


70. At the first annual Harlem Health Conference in 1929, participants were told that the death rate as a result of congestion was 40 percent higher than the rate for New York City as a whole, “Congestion Causes High Mortality,” New York Times (24 Oct. 1929), rpt. in Harlem On My Mind, ed. Schoener, 81.


72. This is not to say that race and racism do not take other forms, for example, the assumptions made by radio listeners about the race to the person speaking, singing or playing. As Ann Stoler has argued, “racism is not really a visual ideology at all; physiological attributes only signal the nonvisual and more salient distinctions of exclusion on which racism rests.” Ann Laura Stoler, “Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusion in Colonial Southeast Asia,” in Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley, 1997), 203.


76. Carter G. Woodson wrote in the opening sentence to a 1921 article, “[t]he citizenship of the Negro in this country is a fiction.” Carter G. Woodson, “Fifty Years of Negro Citizenship as Qualified by the United States Supreme Court,” Journal of Negro History 6, no. 1 (Jan. 1921): 1–53, p. 1. Kelley notes that the essay “was reprinted and widely circulated three years later as a small booklet,” “‘But a Local Phase of a World Problem,’” 1049.


78. The existence of this slang is evident from the fiction of the era but also from the inclusion of glossaries in books by two of Harlem’s most distinguished white visitors: Carl Van Vechten and Nancy Cunard. See Carl Van Vechten, Nigger Heaven (1926; Urbana, 2000), 285–286; and Nancy Cunard, “Some Negro Slang,” Negro: Anthology, 75–78. It is no accident that it was these two who published such aids; they considered the translation of black culture to white audiences of great importance, see Jane Marcus, “Suptionpremises,” Modernism/Modernity 9, no. 3 (Sept. 2002): 491–502.


83. Ibid. 149.


86. See Frank Crosswaitth’s account of Harrison and Randolph in Watkins-Owens, Blood Relations, 94; Anderson, A. Philip Randolph, 78.


88. “Race-Uplift” Groups Stage Early Morning Battle.”


90. “The black public sphere—as a critical social imaginary—does not centrally rely on the world of magazines and coffee shops, salons and highbrow tracts,” as did the bourgeois public sphere as Jürgen Habermas described it. Rather, it “draws energy from the vernacular practices of street talk and new musics, radio shows and church voices, entrepreneurship and circulation.” The Black Public Sphere Collective, “Preface,” in The Black Public Sphere, ed. The Black Public Sphere Collective, 2–3. See also Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, (Cambridge, MA, 1989), 31–43.

91. Davis, "Growing Up in the New Negro Renaissance," 54. G. James Fleming remembered that Domingo et al were taken very seriously and that “[t]his was the time when the soap box orators in Harlem sounded like Harvard professors.” Notes from an interview with David Levering Lewis (June 1976), Voices of the Harlem Renaissance, box 1, folder 1, Rare Books and Manuscript Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York City. William Pickens likened Hubert H. Harrison to Socrates and lamented that racism prevented Harrison’s joining the faculty at Columbia, some of whom, Pickens asserted, often cribbed from Harrison’s speeches for their own lectures. William Pickens, “Hubert H. Harrison: Philosopher of Harlem,” New York Amsterdam News (7 Feb. 1923), rpt. in Speech and Power, ed. Early, 41–43.


98. McKay, “Harlem Glory,” mss., p. 95, Claude McKay letters and manuscripts 1915–1952, part 4, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York City. The manuscript was written in the late 1930s, see Cooper, Claude McKay, 347–348.


100. Reid, The Negro Immigrant, 159.

101. Ibid.

102. Berlant was discussing Frances Harper’s novel, Lola Leroy (1892), but her analysis is relevant here. Lauren Berlant, The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship (Durham, N.C., 1997), 235.

103. Michael C. Dawson, “A Black Counterpublic?: Economic Earthquakes, Racial Agenda(s), and Black Politics,” in The Black Public Sphere, ed. The Black Public Sphere Collective, 204.


105. The figures most often used to illustrate this tension were, and are, W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke. As George Hutchinson has pointed out, many critics of the Harlem Renaissance, starting with Du Bois, have missed the “subtle social and political charge” of Locke’s aestheticism, The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White (Cambridge, MA, 1995), 48–50.


120. Rupert Lewis, Marcus Garvey: Anti-Colonial Champion (Trenton, NJ, 1988), 77; Tony Martin, Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (Dover, MA, 1976), 101. Garvey was not the only West Indian whose accent was heard as English, see “When Rural Negro Reaches Crucible,” New York Times (17 April 1927), rpt. in Harlem on my Mind, ed. Schoener, 71.

121. Anglophilia is perhaps suggested by jazz musicians’ choice of clothing. Willie the Lion Smith preferred a derby hat, “in part at least because it was a hat favored by the
English." Al Rose and Jelly Roll Morton were each taken in by a tailor's claim that he had some English cloth, enough for just one three-piece suit, and turned up at a venue wearing identical outfits. White & White, Stylin', 242, 243–244. Du Bois identified an American inferiority complex, to London, Paris and Berlin, that led to the widespread accolades for singer Roland Hayes. It was America's "imitative snobbery," he wrote, that meant that "[w]e approved Hayes because London, Paris, and Berlin approved him." "Criteria of Negro Art," (1926) rpt. in The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York, 1994), 102.


124. Clarence E. Walker has argued that Garvey's supporters were majority West Indian, "The Virtuoso Illusionist: Marcus Garvey," in Deromanticizing Black History: Critical Essays and Reappraisals (Knoxville, 1991), 40–43, 48–49. Ira De A. Reid agreed, stating that "The core of his organization was the West Indian group in the United States and Jamaica," in The Negro Immigrant, 148. An editorial in the Chicago Defender claimed that Garvey's "organization too, is composed mostly of foreigners ..." Cited by Watkins-Owens, Blood Relations, 115–6.


127. From the Negro World (3 Sept. 1927), cited in Martin, Race First, 56.

128. See Reid, The Negro Immigrant, 26n.3, 107–124; and Watkins-Owens, Blood Relations, 51–2, 112–5. Examples of tension include writer Claude McKay's observation that "[a] goodly number of these foreign colored people posed as native Americans, because of a certain antagonism existing between the native born colored people and the foreign." "Harlem Glory," ms., p. 95, Claude McKay letters and manuscripts, 1915–1952. In a newspaper article on Harlem speakeasies, Frank Dolan included a glossary of local terms for his white readers including "Monkey-hugger [which] is used by American colored folk
to describe the colored people from the West Indies." See "‘Speaks’ Whoop After Clubs Pipe Down," Sunday News (3 Nov. 1929), rpt. in Harlem On My Mind, ed. Schoener, 84-5. Carter G. Woodson, argued that “[b]ecause of prejudice ... we have been accustomed to refer to these citizens with epithets [sic] which are more indicative of the ignorance of those who utter them than an evaluation of the worth of people who is several respects are far in advance of the native Negroes of the United States.” See “The Contribution of the West Indian To America; A Topic of the Historical Meeting in New York City,” New York Age (31 Oct. 1931). On more general antagonism, see Edgar M. Grey, “The Tropics in New York,” New York Amsterdam News (23 March 1927): 16; “Prejudice Between Native and Alien Born Causes Dissension In Ranks Of Several Of The Harlem Fraternities: McDonald Ifill Protests Being ‘Blackballed’ By Manhattan Lodge, K. of P., Because He Is Not a Native-Born U.S. Citizen,” New York Age (14 Jan. 1928).


130. Cunard, “Harlem Reviewed,” 68

131. A. Philip Randolph, “The Only Way to Redeem Africa,” The Messenger 4, no. 11 (Oct. 1922): 522-24; “Best Editorials of the Month: Marcus Garvey,” (reprinted from Ryan’s Weekly [Tacoma, Wash.]), The Messenger 4, no. 8 (Aug. 1922): 471. Garvey’s failings, as depicted, were not only that he was noisy but also that he failed to listen. One newspaper was almost gleeful in reporting that Garvey’s first wife, Amy Ashwood Garvey, allegedly said “I warned him five years ago, but he would not listen to me. He preferred the flatteries of those who later became his bitterest enemies.” See “Potentate of U.N.I.A. Ordered Arrested and Sent to Atlanta,” New York Amsterdam News (4 Feb. 1925). According to her daughter, Ida B. Wells regretted that “if Marcus Garvey had just listened to her, he would not have launched the Black Star Line; therefore would not have gotten into trouble with the authorities; therefore would not have been put in jail and deported.” See Alfreda Duster, interview with Marcia Greenlee (8 & 9 March, 1978), in The Black Women Oral History Project, vol. 3, ed. Hill, 149-50.

132. “Best Editorials of the Month: Marcus Garvey.”


135. “Wife of Garvey Goes on Stand in His Defence,” New York Amsterdam News (13 Jun. 1923). In James Weldon Johnson’s view, “the temptation to strut and pose before a crowded court and on the front pages of the New York newspapers was too great for Garvey to resist; so he brushed his lawyers aside and handled his own case. He himself examined and cross-examined the witnesses; he himself harangued the judge and jury; and he was convicted.” Johnson, Black Manhattan, 259.

136. “Calls Garvey Good Orator, Poor Business Man and Robber; Captain Adrian Richardson, Skipper of Kanawha, Tells in Very Definite Words His Opinion of Black Star Line Head,” New York Amsterdam News (30 May 1923).

137. Quoted in a letter from Arthur S. Gray to the Editor, Pittsburgh Courier (20 Oct. 1929), NAACP Papers, part 1, reel 23, frame 122. The whole exchange took place on the level of speech. Gray wrote: “Assailing an editorial which appeared in the Chicago
Defender, lauding the achievements of the greatest Negro leader of the age, Mr. Schuyler opens his barrage with the statement: 'It seems to me it's about time Negroes who claim to be intelligent stopped spouting asininity about Marcus Garvey.' To which the readers of this column might appropriately reply: 'It seems to us about time Schuyler, who claims to be intelligent, stopped spouting asininity about Marcus Garvey.'


140. "Seligman Interviews Garvey and Writes His Impressions."

141. Johnson, Black Manhattan, 253.


145. Lewis, When Harlem Was in Vogue, xxiv–xxv.


149. Ibid.

150. Ibid., 75.

