

Harlem: the Unmaking of a Ghetto

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Harlem and the photograph share a long, closely entangled history. Photographic images of the riots that erupted in the neighbourhood in 1935 and 1943 helped to puncture the image of Harlem as a playground for white urban adventurers, and to raise in its place the spectre of a 'no-go' area, a district of Manhattan sealed off from direct encounter by whites. As Sara Blair has argued, the photographs of these riots that appeared in the pages of newspapers and magazines were also amongst the first images that signalled the ascendancy of documentary photography within American culture. The newly portable cameras of the 1930s further propelled photography from the studio to the street, and from the carefully orchestrated memento of self or family to the capture of community life.⁽¹⁾

Though Harlem seemed walled-off to white Americans, a sequence of black and white photographers continued to send black-and-white missives from the neighbourhood to a periodically interested world outside. Aaron Siskind's and Helen Levitt's images offered glimpses of life continuing amid Harlem's streets and tenements through the ravages of the Depression. Roy DeCarava's documentary photographs joined with Langston Hughes' fictional narrative to create an affectionate portrait of a Harlem family's joys and sorrows in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955), while Gordon Parks' harrowing 1968 photo-essay depicting the Fontenelle family in *Life* magazine presented a stark view of lives crumbling like the plaster walls of the family's apartment in the depths of the New York winter.

When, in 1970, Camilo José Vergara began the work that has culminated in *Harlem: The Unmaking of a Ghetto*, he was venturing into a neighbourhood still perceived by most Americans as off-limits. The riot of July 1964 – breaking out just days after President Lyndon Johnson had signed the Civil Rights Act – submerged images of nonviolent protest from the South beneath new photographs that re-asserted the combustible fury which had once again led Harlemites to attack white-owned property in the neighbourhood and fight street battles with the police. 'I saw my mission as compiling a record of the destruction and violence done to New York City and to other cities at the height of America's urban crisis,' he writes, 'a period when "planned shrinkage" was being implemented and when schools, fire stations, and hospitals were closing in Harlem and its vacant buildings were left to decay' (p. 16).

As Vergara walked, and walked again, down the neighbourhood's avenues and cross-streets during the 1970s and 1980s, the narrative of Harlem's descent from the fabled 'Black Mecca' of the early 20th century

to the nation's archetypal black 'ghetto' only hardened. Heroin and crack addiction worked their devastation, while the violence of the drug trade made Harlem more dangerous than ever. Two arresting images on opposite pages (pp. 10–11) of the book, both dated 1970, speak poignantly of Harlem's false promises and betrayals. In the first, a man transporting scavenged metal with a horse and cart affords a rustic-looking spectacle jarringly at odds with the cars and buildings lining the broad avenue that tapers behind him, and evokes the earlier, expectant arrival of many thousands of migrants from the rural South. In the second photograph, a teenage boy in spattered trousers and once-white shoes sits at the roadside atop a car bonnet, lips and eyelids drooping, slumped forward in a daze and clutching what looks like a small, copper-coloured drug pipe. Not long after these photographs were taken, Vergara, watching from a train platform at East 125th Street and Park Avenue, witnessed another young man being stabbed.

But while Vergara might initially have imagined his project as a kind of visual epilogue to the historian Gilbert Osofsky's 1966 book *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto*, he has ended up producing a very different chronicle that traces the emergence of a very different Harlem.⁽²⁾ By the turn of the 21st century, after decades of depopulation during which many residents with the means to leave the neighbourhood had seized their chance to do so, Harlem was growing again. New and restored buildings were attracting not only more affluent African Americans and Latinos, but also, in some parts of Harlem, significant numbers of whites. Spurred by 'zero tolerance' policing and the critical shortage of affordable housing elsewhere in New York City (especially in Manhattan), what Vergara calls the 'unmaking of a ghetto' has seen Harlem radically transformed as a physical, commercial and social environment. Unexpectedly, his project was itself transformed into an extraordinary documentation of, and meditation on, these changes.

Among the methods Vergara has used to explore Harlem's transformation is that of revisiting and re-imagining particular sites, and some of the most striking sections of the book present time-lapse sequences derived from this practice. One long sequence (pp. 91–105) comprises seventeen frontal shots of a single building, 65 East 125th Street, taken over a period of 34 years. The first two photographs, from 1977 and 1978, show the premises occupied by a well-established bar and music venue, the Purple Manor. Intricately moulded columns and cornices surround its doors and its row of stained-glass windows, while colourful panels featuring hand-painted designs made the building a festive presence in the midst of much decay. By 1980 the Purple Manor is gone. Having long been a showcase for noted jazz musicians and other performers, the club's demise is one in a long line of injuries to Harlem's vibrant live music scene. From 1980 into the 2000s, as the building hosts a succession of small local businesses including a beauty salon, a fish and chip shop and the 'Grocery Candy Smoke Shop,' its fine features are gradually covered over or removed until its facade has lost all traces of distinction. By 2007, the decorative building which had once provided a stage for musicians like Herbie Hancock and Ted Curson is an anonymous-looking branch of a national mattress retailer, Sleepy's.

Though residents and visitors populate many of the book's images, Harlem's tenement blocks, public housing projects, row houses, shop fronts, churches, empty lots and pavements often appear as subjects in their own right. The prominence Vergara affords them is entirely fitting. One reason for Harlem's exceptional status among African-American urban neighbourhoods, and a major factor in its one-time reputation as the vanguard of black progress, was its unique architectural profile. While black populations elsewhere tended to be consigned to the most ramshackle and polluted urban districts, Harlem had been an elegant and architecturally distinguished neighbourhood dominated by a prosperous community of German Jews before speculative overbuilding and a crash in the local property market opened the area to black incomers, beginning in the 1900s. Wide commercial avenues and residential cross-streets of stately brownstone townhouses came to be mirrored by the dignified, status-conscious air of the black bourgeoisie, who celebrated Harlem in the 1920s as a solid refutation of ideas of black inferiority. Yet, as Osofsky argued with brutal clarity, no amount of literary refinement and no frequency of soirees in Sugar Hill apartments could conceal the overcrowding, poverty and physical deterioration that, even then, took root in Harlem as a result of residential segregation and economic marginalisation.

In a painful section of the book titled 'Ruins and semi-ruins', Vergara shows unsparingly how far a great

deal of Harlem's fabric deteriorated and, all too often, vanished. Four storeys of a Victorian apartment building on Bradhurst Avenue are pictured in 1996 with every window and doorway filled in with concrete breezeblocks or boarded over with wood (pp. 112–13). A photograph taken from a high rooftop in 1988, looking down on rows of abandoned tenement buildings, is followed by another, shot from an identical position in 2001, in which the entire block has been razed to the ground (pp. 124–5).

But it is in charting Harlem's physical renewal that Vergara's book makes perhaps its most powerful contribution. Harlem's widely discussed 'gentrification' emerges from these pages as a complex mixture of architectural and social transformations, some of which reverse the appalling course of physical decline and some of which continue it in new forms. The building on Bradhurst Avenue, we learn from a caption, has since been rehabilitated, and countless brownstones that had languished in disrepair have been renovated over the last 20 years as hugely expensive family homes. Structures that were at one time virtually reclaimed by nature are now reclaimed for human habitation, their splendour restored. Simultaneously, however, some of the same forces that have recapitalized and repopulated Harlem have further eroded its distinctive visual presence.

Where blocks of once-handsome brick residences have been felled, bland, bulky and expensive condominium buildings now bear down over older architecture and price existing residents out of the neighbourhood they grew up in. Chain stores now occupy much of the length of Harlem's main commercial artery, West 125th Street, and many other locations besides. Where once there were Caribbean cafes, specialist record shops, family-run grocery stores and other local businesses, national and multinational corporate retailers such as Disney and Starbucks now stand, often housed in functional, identikit buildings that have replaced those which withstood 100 years of small-scale commercial comings and goings. Vergara comments acutely – in his photographs and accompanying text – on the synchronicity of globalisation and gentrification. Harlem, he remarks, 'is largely another of New York City's globalized districts, joining Williamsburg, Wall Street, and Times Square' (p. 90). Tourists feel comforted by the presence of Disney, GAP, and other outlets where they can buy the same merchandise that is available back at home.

Though a sense of loss often permeates Vergara's words and images, his book is no nostalgic lament for the 'ghetto' he has seen unmade. The photographs of physical and human destruction that he has chosen to include from the earlier period of his project stave off any such romanticization. Nor does he hanker for Harlem as an exclusive site of 'authentic' blackness: 'Living side-by-side in a historically black neighbourhood allows everyone – blacks, whites, Latinos, and Asians – to live richer lives than if they stay in their own segregated communities'. Harlem need not be 'overwhelmingly African American', he argues, to retain its significance as a site of black social and cultural vitality (p. 339). Moreover, for all of the change to which he has borne witness, gentrification does not emerge from his photographs as either ubiquitous or unidirectional. If, by 2007, it was a branch of Sleepy's that stood on the site of the former Purple Manor, by 2009 the chain retailer had itself given way to a very different globalizing phenomenon: a branch of an evangelical church with origins in Brazil, catering to some of Harlem's burgeoning population of immigrants (p. 105).

Harlem, Vergara rightly emphasizes, 'continues to be a poor community', and amid the images of new shops and condos are others picturing Harlemites wheeling shopping trolleys loaded with salvaged plastic bottles to be redeemed for small change (pp. 322–3). Moreover, interspersed among the signs of gentrification and homogenization are plenty of recent scenes that speak of the persistence of the neighbourhood's extravagant street life, its cultural heterogeneity and its unpredictability. A photograph of the First Haitian Baptist Church (p. 245) conveys Harlem's continuing appeal to black peoples from beyond the United States, while a vivid shot of an African woman balancing a woven basket on her head as she walks along West 125th Street in 2010 suggests a counterpoint to narratives of homogenization (p. 297). Outside the tiny storefront chapel of the Christ Temple, House of Prayer Deliverance Church Inc. on Malcolm X Boulevard in 2007, worshippers of all ages stand in bright scarlet suits and dresses (p. 239) at a safe remove from the tourists who flock to Sunday services at the giant Abyssinian Baptist Church, an organisation that is now a major force in Harlem's real estate market. If, as Vergara fears, Harlem is 'in danger of becoming a "museum

city” (p. 339), these residents seem intent on sustaining the neighbourhood as a living community – so long as they can afford to live there. Vergara perceptively notes the irony that the same public housing projects which damaged Harlem’s architectural heritage during the second half of the 20th century have in fact provided Harlem with a core of social and cultural continuity, by serving as buffers against the complete displacement of lower-class African Americans from the community.

One aspect of Harlem’s recent history that might have elicited more of a response from Vergara is the neighbourhood’s political life, protests, and resistance to gentrification. The Harlem Tenants Council has, since 1994, been campaigning against evictions of long-term residents of the neighbourhood, and against the progressive exclusion of the black poor from Harlem. Vergara describes a gradual shift, during the time-span of his project, from a streetscape in which political posters and graffiti were prominent to one dominated by advertising and images of celebrity culture, but this perhaps implies too neat a trajectory from ‘political activism to commercialism’ (p. 206).

In creating his images, Vergara often took photographs using concealed camera equipment, wishing to react instantly to the real-time occurrences surrounding him, and keen to avoid the posing and staging which the open display of his practice would likely encourage. ‘I became an eavesdropper and a voyeur’, he relates, ‘because I believed that the spirit of Harlem would reveal itself through random bits of overheard conversation. I situated myself near public phones, listening intently to what people said and writing it down’ (p. 4). Though this element of voyeurism may prompt some to charge deception and exploitation – indeed, Vergara recalls threats and insults from some of the Harlemites who saw him openly taking photographs – such charges are, and can only be, answered by the sensitive and anti-sensationalist purpose to which Vergara has put his remarkable body of work.

One moment of unease arises from his text early on, when Vergara recalls the ‘delight’ he felt when confronted by scenes similar to those captured by earlier generations of Harlem photographers whom he admired: ‘black children playing with white dolls, jumping on discarded mattresses, and opening fire hydrants to spray friends and passersby’ (p. 3). Delight would seem a strange response to the spectacle of six young black girls sitting on the stoop of an East Harlem building in 1970, with six of their white dolls arranged in a row beside them on one of the steps (p. 12). Only 16 years earlier, psychological test results concerning black children’s relative responses to black and white dolls had helped convince the United States Supreme Court to outlaw segregated schooling as a cause of emotional harm. What does it mean to experience ‘delight’ at such a scene, or at the sight of children forced to seek their enjoyment amid ‘discarded mattresses’ – part of a sea of uncollected refuse that long typified Harlem’s neglect by the city authorities?

Such a statement might be taken to signify a cold aestheticism, the photographer’s human subjects seemingly reduced to visual elements in a feat of playful intertextuality. Yet despite this rare, discordant note, Vergara is not that kind of voyeur. His is an abidingly human and humane lens, and both his photographs and his prose bear out the empathetic standpoint from which he has trained it. *Harlem: The Unmaking of a Ghetto* is a monumental, invaluable achievement, no mere mechanical record but the product of an intensely felt and passionately described relationship with a neighbourhood and its people.

Notes

1. Sara Blair, *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ, 2007), pp. 5–7. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto: Negro New York, 1890-1930* (New York, NY, 1966). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/apr/03/real-harlem/> [2]

New York Times

<http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/10/11/in-harlem-the-unmaking-of-a-ghetto/> [3]

Boston Globe

<http://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/books/2014/01/11/discovery-harlem-the-unmaking-ghetto-camilo-jose-vergara/7GfOTNFJVdXTZIXqShAb2L/story.html> [4]

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