

Designing Their Own Promised Land

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During the early years of the Great Depression, the high unemployment rate of writers was of great concern to the Roosevelt Administration. In order to support those writers, president Roosevelt created the Federal Writers' Project in the Works Progress Administration, which was part of his New Deal Program. The most of the written work in the project was rural and urban folklore, representing people coping with life during the Depression. The project was very successful in a way that it vividly described social customs of different ethnic groups. It was also a good source to have a better understanding of life of ex-slaves during the period of slavery.<sup>1</sup> The primary source for this paper is a document written by WPA writer Frank Boyd. It is an interview titled "Harlem Rent Parties,"<sup>2</sup> dated August 23, 1938. Covering the era between the Great Migration and the Repeal, his interview reveals that the abundant jobs in the northern war industries during World War I and the apartheid actions against the Blacks in the South led to the "greatest migration of Negroes in the history of the United States,"<sup>3</sup> and the black community was established within large and

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<sup>1</sup> Aberjhani West, *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance*, (New York: Facts On File. 2003), 55-57.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Boyd, "House Rent Parties," Library of Congress, Available from [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/wpa:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(wpa221011010\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/wpa:@field(DOCID+@lit(wpa221011010))); accessed 1 May 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Boyd, "Harlem Rent Parties," 3.

solid geographical areas, especially in New York City, considered to be “the modern promised land”<sup>4</sup> for Blacks. Although discrimination in housing and employment was the major problem, Blacks tried to overcome it by sticking to their social customs and method, such as having house rent parties, taking lodgers and forming organized protests against employers. Both political and civic management intervened in the community for creating more promising environment by building housings and health centers, but it was generally not successful, mainly due to the failure to meet the genuine needs of the community.

First of all, the fundamental force to motivate the migration of southern Blacks from to the North was economic; increasing employment opportunities in the northern war industries. After the minor depression between 1913 and 1914, the United States began to prosper due to huge demands for war products in Europe and war needs of the United States itself. Likewise, there was a great demand for labor in industries such as steel, meat packing, automobile manufacture, munitions, shipyards and many others that contributed to the war. However, the war stopped the steady flow of immigrants from Europe who had provided labor in the industrial North. Moreover, European immigrants in the U.S. left for Europe to serve in the armed forces of their countries. Also, American males went into the armed forces. Consequently, the acute need for workers to fill the void in the expanding war industries forced northern industrialists and their recruiters to turn to the South for black laborers. They promised the southern Blacks higher wages, decent housing, and family transportation to the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

North.<sup>5</sup> More than the simple availability of work was the opportunity to earn enough to actually live. Workers in the South typically made 40 cents to \$1.75 on a daily basis, earning for a full week's labor what most workers in the North earned in a single day. So the Great Migration was "the great war-time migratory influx of colored people"<sup>6</sup> in response to the expanding war industries in the North. However, there were other factors in the South that also led to the Great Migration of black people.

Along with the expanding war-related demand in the northern labor pool which "pulled" the black labor, the collapse of sharecropping system and apartheid practices against Blacks in the South "pushed" the southern Blacks to the North. The general causes of the first Great Migration of Blacks were black political and social subordination, economic peonage, and Jim Crow segregation in education and housing. However, what also played a significant role in the Great Migration was decline of the black sharecropping system and overt racism in the form of lynching. In the southern states, the majority of rural Blacks were sharecroppers who lived in shanties or shacks that did not belong to them. However, the sharecropping system collapsed due to the low rate of reinvestment by southern landlords and foreign competition.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the bulk of African Americans leaving the South were "restless,

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<sup>5</sup> Cecilia A. Conrad, et al., *African Americans in the U.S. Economy*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 38-40.

<sup>6</sup> Boyd, "Harlem Rent Parties," 1.

<sup>7</sup> Conrad, et al., *African Americans in the U.S. Economy*, 35-36.

over-worked sharecroppers and farmhands”<sup>8</sup> who lost their means of subsistence in the “cotton fields and cane brakes of the Deep South”<sup>9</sup> such as the rural areas of Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, and Louisiana, taking trains up the East Coast. Also, the atrocious practice of murdering African Americans by lynching was a frequent event that usually went without the arrest of the murderers.<sup>10</sup> So, the lure of a living wage in the North where jobs were fairly plentiful and racism less dominant became irresistible to thousands of sharecroppers. Therefore, the decline of sharecropping system and the racist practices, such as the murder of African Americans in the form of lynching also contributed to the Great Migration of millions of southern Blacks. They settled primarily in the larger cities such as Chicago and New York City.

Black communities within large and solid geographical areas were created in New York City. Letters from Blacks who had already moved to the North were influential in describing the North as the “promised land.” Many migrants wrote home of their growing successes in the North. Some returned to their birthplaces dressed in the latest fashion, pockets full of cash, to tell the rural folk of their exploits. But for those who remained permanently, the city was a strange and often hostile place.

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<sup>8</sup> Boyd, “Harlem Rent Parties,” 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>10</sup> Nathan I. Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 14.

There was racial segregation in the job market in the North too, and Blacks were the major victim. There were two types of employers in New York City in terms of hiring policy: Those that employed Blacks in menial positions and those that did not employ Blacks at all. Most Northern businesses refused to hire Blacks. About seventy-five percent of hotels did not hire African American employees at all.<sup>11</sup> Even if some businesses hired them, the only jobs given to them were dangerous, low paying jobs, normally regarded as Black jobs. Macys, for example, hired Blacks as elevator operators, escalator attendants and cafeteria workers. Most employers claimed that they were not willing hire colored people because of high expectations that there would be very serious objections from their white employees.<sup>12</sup>

Due to such pervasive racism, the black Harlemites, relocated from the South to the North as part of the Great Migration in the 1920s held some menial or unskilled position which paid low wage. African American males, “the Boys” worked as “truck drivers, cooks, Pullman porters, longshoremen, and street peddlers using pushcarts or horse carts.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, black women, “the Girls,” held largely the same jobs they had held in the rural South and during slavery. Most of them were “cooks, laundresses, maids or hair dressers.”<sup>14</sup> In 1939, eighty percent of all black women workers were domestics. To pay rent and other expenses, domestics labored up to ten hours per day without the benefits of Social Security or

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<sup>11</sup> T.H. Watkins, *The Great Depression*, (Boston : Brown, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> "Information to Die For," *The New York Age*, (1930), 27-32.

<sup>13</sup> Boyd, “Harlem Rent Parties” 8.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

other forms of job security.<sup>15</sup> Black women suffered more than black men due to gender discrimination in the labor market. In New York City, Pullman porters earned \$89.50 to \$112.50 a month, while Harlem domestics earned \$6 to \$8 dollars a week.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, Blacks with menial labor made up the general community of Harlem.

In order to protest against such discrimination and to gain equal access to work, Blacks organized campaigns which were greatly successful in achieving their goals. During 1930s, Blumstein's Department store served as a perfect example revealing that racial segregation in the United States was not limited to the South. Just as many other stores in the area, Blumstein's Department store did not hire black people for anything other than menial and low-paying jobs. In 1934, the Citizen's League for Fair Play began to organize an economic boycott against the store with the theme, "Don't buy where you can't work." This was, however, such a great success that the store agreed to more integrate its staff. Moreover, Blumstein's was the first urban store to use black mannequins and a black Santa Claus during the Christmas holiday season.<sup>17</sup> At the beginning, the boycotts were organized against Blumstein's Department Store only. But the Harlem residents, who were empowered by this great success continued to protest. The protest, under Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. who was not

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<sup>15</sup> Bruce Kellner, *The Harlem Renaissance: A historical Dictionary for the Era*. (Westport : Conn.L Greenwood Press, 1984), 322.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s*, (Boston: Twayne, 1982).

<sup>17</sup> David L. Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 96.

only a preacher but also a congressman, was organized to change discriminatory hiring policies at other stores too. Their goal was to make employers to hire more black workers and members of particular protesting groups.

Among the Harlem Blacks, West Indian Blacks, about twenty-five percent of Harlem's population were particularly active in seeking a firm position in society. They came from societies in which class differences were more important than the color-line in determining one's life, although the latter was certainly significant. Therefore, they strongly believed that they should be judged upon their talents, not by their skin color. Most of them were forced to accept menial jobs initially but they were strongly motivated by their traditions to create a meaningful economic position for themselves within American society, because they considered menial labor as a sign of social humiliation. The West Indian Blacks often refused to accept American racial slurs without protest. The Pullman Company, for example, was unwilling to hire them because they refused to accept insults from passengers quietly.<sup>18</sup> As the Harlem population became diverse, some of the socially active Blacks influenced others with the ideas that they were worthy, had a rich culture and could make contributions to the society.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto*, (New York: Harper&Row, 1968), 132-133.

<sup>19</sup> Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 59.

Although Blacks had a partial success in employment, another obstacle that faced Harlem Blacks was the hostility of the white property owners who resisted the neighborhood's change. The Whites did not want the most exclusive sections in the entire city to become the center of New York's most economically depressed with the worst-housed people. Some owners banded together in associations to repulse what they referred to as "the dark invasion."<sup>20</sup> The language used to describe the movement of Blacks into Harlem -black hordes, invaders, enemy- appeared repeatedly in denunciations of Blacks. Furthermore, the Harlem Property Owners' Improvement Corporation, one of the most forceful organizations, found active support in the local press and described Blacks with abusive epithets such as darkey, nigger, and black plague. Some landlords suggested that Whites who lived on streets bordering Negro blocks build twenty-four-foot fences to separate themselves from Negro neighbors.<sup>21</sup>

However, all organized efforts to exclude Blacks from Harlem failed because of the inability of any group to gain total and unified support of all white property owners in the neighborhood. The individuals and companies caught in Harlem's rapidly deflating real estate market were threatened with ruin. Rather than face financial destruction, some landlords and corporations opened their houses to Blacks and collected the traditionally high rents that colored people paid. Others used the threat of renting to Blacks to frighten neighbors into

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<sup>20</sup> Boyd, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Osofsky, *Harlem*, 105-106.

buying their property at higher than market prices.<sup>22</sup> “The majority of landlords were delighted but those white property owners who made their homes in Harlem were panic-stricken.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the minority of Harlem landlords who adhered to their original restrictive covenants suffered serious economic consequences. Many were unable to find white people willing to rent their apartments. To encourage white tenants already in them to remain, some were even forced to reduce rents drastically. “As the tide of color continued to rise, threatening to completely envelop the Caucasian brethren, they quickly abandoned their fight and fled to more remote parts; Brooklyn, Bronx and Queens.”<sup>24</sup>

Although organized efforts of Whites to evict Blacks from their neighborhood failed, the exorbitant rent caused great hardship to Black residents who were mainly doing menial jobs with low income. In the early years of the black migration, Harlem in New York had an abundance of cheap housing available and landlords struggled to fill vacancies. “Before Negroes inhabited there, the antiquated dwellings could be let for virtually a song.”<sup>25</sup> However, the steady flow of migrants arrived. And most importantly, landlords elsewhere in the city were unwilling to rent to black tenants, increasing the black population of Harlem. The migration of southern Blacks brought more people into “overcrowded, segregated neighborhoods in a small section of New York about fifty blocks long and seven or eight

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 107-110.

<sup>23</sup> Boyd, “Harlem Rent Parties,” 4.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 2.

blocks wide.”<sup>26</sup> As a result, the vacancies in the neighborhood disappeared. An excessive rise in the charge for rents followed this demand for limited living space. The tenants were forced to pay exorbitant rentals because they could not escape. Rent kept rising to the point where rents in Harlem were higher than those elsewhere in the city, even as the housing stock decayed. In the late 1920s, for the similar housing, rent for Blacks in Harlem was \$9.50 per month whereas that for Whites in other areas of New York was \$6.67 per month.<sup>27</sup> As it was not easy for them to pay the rents, the Blacks began to think of some way to meet their ever increasing deficits.

House rent parties grew out of the need to meet the excessive rents charged by landlords during the early twentieth century. Not only did the house rent party help them to pay the rents, it also gave the Blacks the opportunity of “a temporary escape from humdrum loneliness and boredom.”<sup>28</sup> As high rents followed this increase in the demand for available housing, many black families transformed the southern Shin-Dig into the modern house-rent party to pay for the rent.<sup>29</sup> In the South, families historically provided themselves with extra money on occasion by hosting a party where they offered music and an opportunity for dancing. Guests paid a small fee to gain entrance. Rent parties allowed tenants to collect

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>27</sup> Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue*, 108.

<sup>28</sup> Boyd, 6.

<sup>29</sup> West, *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance*, 302.

money and avoid eviction. Therefore, during the 1920s and 1930s, such parties became an enjoyable and affordable way to dance and socialize and to satisfy an economic necessity.

However, Blacks were very careful to accept only the “right” people.<sup>30</sup> In the 1920’s, alcohol was banned due to Prohibition and buying, selling and providing alcohol was strictly prohibited. Some of the rent party hosts went abroad to purchase it or made it in their homes. During the Prohibition, the policemen were busy raiding apartments with suspicious activities. Because virtually any white man in Harlem could be a cop who would certainly appreciate the opportunity to raid a rent party for violating liquor laws, black hosts seldom welcomed the presence of unfamiliar and inquisitive white people. “With the advent of Repeal, the rent party went out.”<sup>31</sup> It was due to the danger and difficulty of selling whiskey after it became legal. Along with the rent parties, Blacks in Harlem were forced to take in lodgers not only due to their economic reasons but also the structure of apartments inappropriate for single families.

Although the black residents scraped to pay the ever-rising rents, Harlem’s apartment houses and brownstones did not meet the needs of the black community and forced them to take in lodgers. In the 1930s, like all working-class peoples in times of great migration, Harlem continued to be most heavily populated by young adults: 66.5% of Harlem Blacks were between the ages of 15 and 44. Family life had not begun for many Negro Harlemites.

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<sup>30</sup> Boyd, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 9.

Harlemites who were married had few children. Unfortunately, seventy-five percent of Harlem's apartments of five, six and seven rooms that had been constructed before 1900 were suitable for older white residents with larger families and larger incomes.<sup>32</sup> Only a handful of new houses were built in Harlem in the 1920s.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, over a quarter of black households in Harlem made their monthly rent by taking in lodgers. In 1940, still affected by the Depression, forty percent of black families in Harlem were taking in lodgers. "A four or five room apartment was often crowded to capacity with roomers."<sup>34</sup> "Shift-sleeping"<sup>35</sup> was very common in many places. Families who took in lodgers sometimes rented the same mattress or couch twice to different lodgers, first to those who worked during the day and slept at night, then second to others who worked the night shift and slept during the day. Because seldom did the beds have an opportunity to get cold, it was also called the hot bed system. Due to the tenements that were originally built for people with a radically different family structure from that of the new residents, an increasing number of Blacks were forced to adopt lodger system. Finally, political administration began to take an action.

The density and the deteriorating condition of the tenements with little investment led to the first attempt at housing reform in Harlem. The most important factor which led to the rapid deterioration and congested and unsanitary conditions of Harlem housing was the

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<sup>32</sup> "Information to Die For," 51.

<sup>33</sup> Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power*, (New York: Harper&Row, 1967), 30-31.

<sup>34</sup> Boyd, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

high cost of living in the community and poor salaries, forcing people to live in close quarters. "Housing experts have estimated that, sometimes, as many as five to seven thousand people have been known to live in a single block."<sup>36</sup> The unprecedented demand for housing in Harlem allowed landlords to charge more but to maintain and invest less. For instance, one third of the apartment buildings did not have proper bathrooms. "That was the beginning of housing conditions that have been a headache to a succession of political administrations and a thorn in the side of community and civic organizations that have struggled valiantly, but vainly, to improve them."<sup>37</sup>

Although housing projects in Harlem were ambitious, they were unsuccessful in meeting the needs of the black community. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. agreed that a housing crisis existed in the ghetto, and he immediately began to purchase land for a complex of new apartments. In 1928, he backed the construction of the Paul Laurence Dunbar Houses, attempting to provide affordable housing for the Harlem residents. To eliminate the lodger evil, roomers were not permitted in the new Rockefeller houses. Because more blacks than white mothers in the city worked away from home, the Dunbar Apartments had its own nursery. To provide a reliable tenantry, every applicant for an apartment was interviewed.<sup>38</sup>

Unfortunately, the high hopes surrounding the new undertaking lasted an exceedingly short time. Not only were the houses completed on the eve of the Great

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>38</sup> Osofsky, *Harlem*, 105-106.

Depression which forced the management to modify its original plans radically, but Rockefeller's plan for the housing plan had serious weakness. Although the initial intention for this project was to give Harlem residents the opportunity to live in and purchase their own homes over time, the housing they provided was for middle class housing at relatively high rental prices. The majority of the population was mainly lower class. More than fifty-thousand families in Harlem, desperately in need of better homes at a relatively low cost, were unable to afford those houses. Because the housing problem was too serious, it was beyond the resources of private charity, individual social reform, or private capital.<sup>39</sup>

In the 1920s, civic management was also established to improve unsanitary living conditions in the community, which was also unsuccessful, but for a different reason. Between 1929 and 1939, four times as many Blacks died of tuberculosis in Harlem as did Whites in other New York neighborhoods. Some forty or fifty social service agencies were active in Harlem in 1920s. As tuberculosis was Harlem's number one killer throughout the Great Depression, one of the most publicized institutions founded in the 1920's was the Harlem Tuberculosis and Health Committee. The Committee concentrated its major efforts on eradicating TB but conceived of its task broadly and eventually set up health clinics to cover social hygiene and nutrition. Committee doctors visited homes without charge in an

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 157-158.

effort to locate Harlemites with pre-tubercular conditions. Public lectures were given in churches, schools, and fraternal organizations.<sup>40</sup>

Despite all the good will and effort, the Harlem Committee failed because it was almost impossible to end unusually high rates of infant and maternal mortality, juvenile delinquency, illegitimacy, dope addiction, all of which were caused by a lack of access to education and better economic opportunities. More importantly, the constant state of flux in the Harlem community had an impact on the failure. Continual Negro migration disrupted the development of more stable and promising pattern of community life.<sup>41</sup>

To conclude, “Harlem Rent Parties,”<sup>42</sup> reveals that Blacks established their own community in cities such as New York City, considering it as the modern Promised Land. They did know that it was white discrimination that continued to block their efforts to improve their lives. Despite the discrimination in the housing market and employment, the Blacks managed to deal with the situation, by having house rent parties, taking lodgers and forming an organized protest against discriminatory employers. Although both political and civic management intervened in the community for creating better environment by building housings and health centers, they failed to satisfy the genuine necessity of the community.

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<sup>40</sup> Henry O. Harding, “Health Opportunities in Harlem,” *Opportunity*, IV, (December 1926), 386-387.

<sup>41</sup> Osofsky, *Harlem*, 153.

<sup>42</sup> Boyd, 1.

By analyzing the primary source, “Harlem Rent Parties,”<sup>43</sup> it was possible to know the cause and effect of the Great Migration on the Blacks who were mainly sharecroppers in the Deep South. The creative use of social custom such as transforming the Shin-Dig to a house rent party to afford their housing and also to temporarily escape from unpleasant life was impressive to notice. It is clear now why “community wide significance and impetus were given to this institution.”<sup>44</sup> The failure of political administration to fight against the housing problems proves that genuine necessity is difficult to be met without knowing what the community actually wants and needs.

It is also important to note that the Blacks were trying to maintain their values and customs that they had before moving to the North. Blacks maintained their customary Shin-Dig. West Indian Blacks contributed an emphasis on the importance of individual’s talent over skin color, ultimately generating the strong opposition to discrimination in the job market, and was a major driving force to fight against the prevalent racism against Blacks. Most importantly, the Blacks scraped to survive in the strange place although the most southern Blacks were initially driven to the North by northern recruiters providing better employment and their counterparts residing in the North. It is meaningful that they themselves established their own promised land through organized efforts against inequality in the employment and housing.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

In order for minorities to overcome their underprivileged status, closer attention should be paid to their community. Plus, not only is governmental aid necessary but also their own efforts to improve their status in society. The success is ultimately up to their determination to design their Promised Land.