Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies
Vol. 21, No. 3 (2025)

Between Harlem and Me: Layered Time, Memory, and Corporeal Migration

Dianne Smith

Abstract: This essay explores the intersection of corporeal migration and performance through the photographic series, *Between Harlem and Me*. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Katherine McKittrick, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Édouard Glissant, I position the series as a palimpsestic performance that memorializes Harlem and situates the community as a site of resistance against ongoing social and spatial transformation.

Introduction

As gentrification reshapes urban landscapes across the United States, the stakes of documenting and preserving communities like Harlem have never been higher. Visual art, as a medium of storytelling and resistance, has the power to reveal hidden narratives, challenge dominant discourses, and imagine new futures. Doing so ensures that the voices of those who have shaped these spaces are not silenced but celebrated.

Harlem is more than a neighborhood; it is a living archive of Black history, creativity, and resilience. For me, like many others, it is also a place filled with fond childhood memories. In the 1970s, my maternal granny and I often spent weekends at my uncle's house. I was about seven years old, but I remember being

Dianne Smith is a multidisciplinary artist whose career spans over two decades. She has been awarded numerous residencies and fellowships, including a New York State Council on the Arts grant, a Lunder Institute Fellowship, a Nancy Graves Foundation Award, and she is a Fulbright awardee from the U.S. Consulate General in Guayaquil, Ecuador. Her work is held in esteemed collections such as The National Museum of Women in the Arts, The Bronx Museum, The Brodsky Organization, and the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African American Art. Additionally, her papers are archived in the Barnard College Library Archives and Special Collections. Smith earned her MFA from Transart Institute in Berlin, Germany, through the University of Plymouth in the UK. She lives and works in Harlem, NY.

ISSN: 1557-2935 <http://liminalities.net/21-3/between-harlem-and-me.pdf>

thrilled about riding downtown on the C-train from the Bronx to 116th Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard in Harlem.

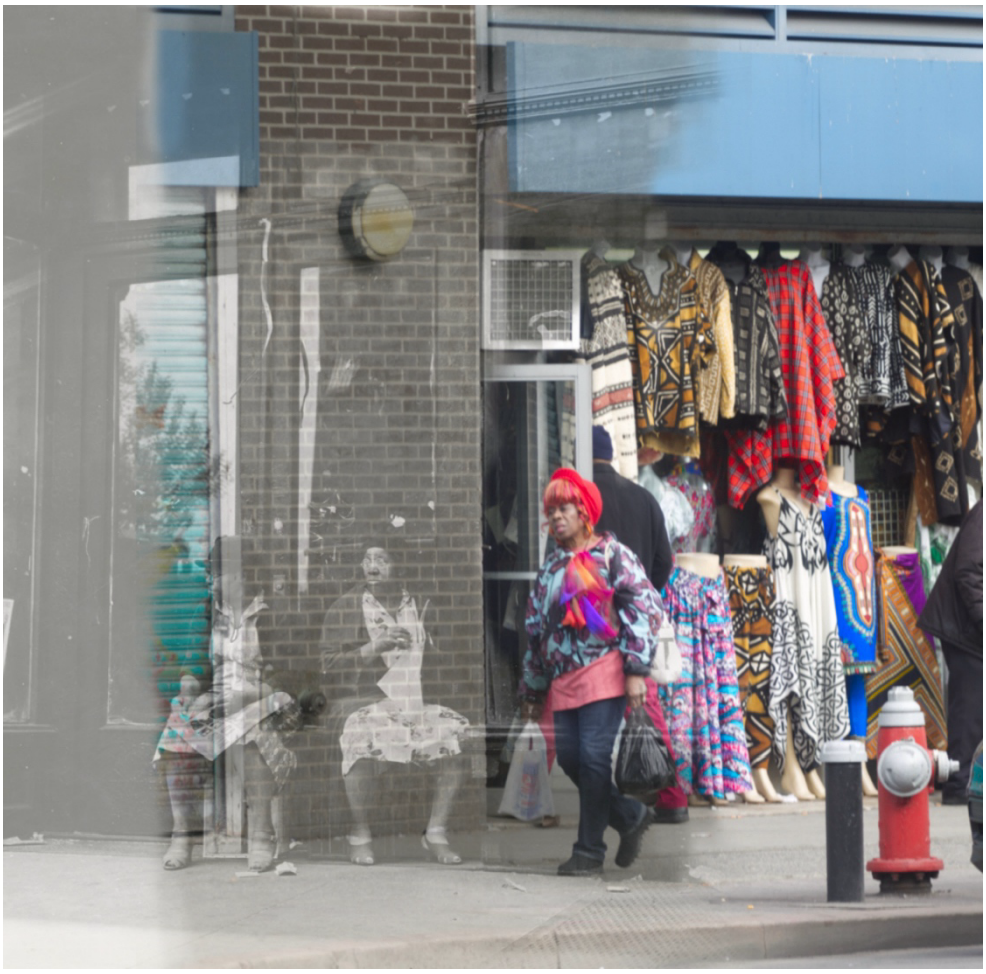

Image 1: Dianne Smith, *There No More*, 2018 - 2022, digital archive print, 20 x 20 in.

While my uncle and his wife only had one daughter at the time, it was a communal, multi-generational, multi-family household. As many immigrant families from Belize did, it was not unusual for a family member already established in the States to host newly arrived family members. My uncle's brother-in-law, wife, and their five children also shared the apartment until they were able to move out on their own. As an only child, waking up early on a Saturday morning

with lots of people around was always exciting. The smell of hot Johnny cakes, bun, creole bread, bacon, and eggs, along with the warm chatter of the women in the family still dressed in their batas, led by granny-speaking creole moving around the kitchen in a synchronized fashion is forever etched in my mind and heart.

The apartment is in the much-coveted Building, Graham Court, on the corner of 116th Street and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard. As a kid, I thought the big black iron rod gated circular courtyard was fancy. It had four buildings, a huge round planter filled with vegetation, and benches surrounding it. My uncle lived in one of the largest apartments in their building on the eighth floor. It had very high ceilings, fireplaces, and what seemed like endless rooms, including servants' quarters. After breakfast, me, granny and, my auntie would get dressed and head east on 116th Street to Park Avenue in East Harlem to shop. Like most immigrant families from the Caribbean, my Belizean family would shop for clothing, kitchen items, and anything they thought the family would need, as my granny would say, to "send back home."

You could hear Spanish accents, Belizean and Guyanese Creole, Jamaican patois, and many other Caribbean accents. The entranceways of shops were filled with colorful chancletas overflowing out of bins and tons of floral, embroidered lace batas hanging from the doorway. Barrels of all sizes for sale lined the sidewalks for shipping goods back home. There were fruit and vegetable stands where granny would buy her mangos, plantains, cassava, avocados, or, as she called it, pears, all things reminiscent of home.

In retrospect, my early childhood experiences in Harlem significantly shaped how I currently see and experience my community. Park Avenue and 116th Street thrived with multicultural vibrancy—an array of accents, sounds, colors, and foods, creating a rich tapestry of life. Despite our cultural differences, Harlem offered a space where those differences could coexist while emphasizing our shared humanity. Time spent in my uncle's kitchen, surrounded by family, planted the seeds of my hyphenated identity, blending distinct cultural roots into a unified sense of self.

From east to west, 116th Street remains a main thoroughfare of diversity. The corridor is still home to African American, Spanish, Caribbean, and African cultures. However, with the changing landscape, one cannot deny the evidence of gentrification, with high-rise condominiums, high rents, new businesses, and restaurants. My childhood memories are overlaid with the changes and current architecture. It is a palimpsest of memories, which I can only describe as the layered

and interwoven past and present experiences. These changes threaten to create a new narrative; however, my memories persist beneath these contemporary changes.

Through my ongoing photographic series, *Between Harlem and Me*, I document the shifting landscapes of my community—a place where I attended high school until the early 1980s, and I have called home since the 1990s. The series layers archival images with my photographs, creating a dialogue between Harlem's past and present while offering glimpses into its future. This work emerges from an urgent need to affirm Black and Brown life in America, resisting the distorting lens of stereotypes and reclaiming the narrative of a community under siege by gentrification. Gentrification transforms a community's neighborhoods and the broader city it inhabits. Between 2010 and 2020, Harlem experienced a substantial demographic shift, with the Black population decreasing by approximately 10,000 residents while the white population increased by about 18,000 (*Patch*, 2021).

It is widely understood that the arrival of wealthier, more highly educated residents often leads to the displacement of poor and working-class inhabitants. These newcomers can afford higher rents and purchase property, driving up property taxes. Old or neglected buildings are redeveloped into high-end condominiums while new businesses emerge, gradually replacing long-standing neighborhood institutions. These new establishments—shops, banks, restaurants, cafes, art galleries, and more—are tailored to meet the preferences and lifestyles of the incoming residents. The surge in property values has been pronounced, with housing prices on the open market soaring by 247% over a decade, leading to the displacement of long-standing Black residents (*Humanity in Action*, n.d.).

Building on the work of McKittrick, Du Bois, and Glissant, my photographic montages engage with the idea that history is embedded in physical spaces. However, these spaces are often mapped, controlled, and defined by white supremacist patriarchal epistemologies. Historically, Harlem has been a site of migration and transition, beginning in the mid-1600s when the Dutch purchased the land from its original inhabitants, naming it Nieuw Haarlem after a Dutch city. Later renamed Harlem by British immigrants, the area evolved as enslaved Africans constructed a path connecting lower Manhattan to Harlem, and farmland estates became secondary homes for affluent Manhattanites who traveled north by horse, carriage, or steamboat (*Smith* 24).

As McKittrick argues, such systems do more than exert physical and emotional violence on Black bodies; they impose a persistent mental knowing—an

implicit, often unspoken message that Black residents are unwelcome in spaces initially designed for white European settlers. Within this historical and conceptual framework, my photographic series becomes a form of corporeal and visual performance. It resists erasure, memorializes the lives and stories of Harlem's residents, and actively challenges the white supremacist cartographies that continue to threaten their place in the community.

This essay explores how *Between Harlem and Me* engages with the themes of corporeal migration and performance to reveal the silenced histories of Harlem, document its contemporary struggles, and imagine a future where Black and Brown communities remain visible and celebrated. By examining the series through the lenses of racialized geography, archival dialogue, and performative storytelling, I argue that visual art can serve as both a memorial and a site of resistance, reclaiming space and narrative for those whose histories have been marginalized.

Historical and Theoretical Context

My project draws on the ideas of three pivotal thinkers: Katherine McKittrick, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Édouard Glissant. Central to my work is corporeal migration, which intertwines the physical movement of bodies with the sociopolitical forces that constrain and displace them. McKittrick's analysis of racialized geographies highlights how Black life in the Americas has been shaped by systemic violence and spatial dispossession. She notes that communities like Harlem, despite their rich histories of Black cultural and political life, are continually mapped through "white supremacist patriarchal epistemologies" that enforce racial hierarchies and exclusion (4). Under these systems of knowledge, Black bodies are rendered hyper-visible—constantly watched and policed—while simultaneously excluded from the full rights of belonging.

Du Bois complements McKittrick's spatial critique by addressing the internal effects of racial oppression. His theory of double consciousness describes a "two-ness" in which Black individuals must navigate their identities while viewing themselves through both their perspective and the distorting gaze of a dominant, oppressive society (3). In Harlem, this experience is heightened by the forces of gentrification, which exacerbate the duality Du Bois describes. Despite being a vibrant, deeply rooted community, Harlem's long-term residents are forced to reconcile their love for their neighborhood with the pressures of cultural erasure and economic displacement. Like many in the community, I have always felt a strong

sense of pride and connection to Harlem. In this place, residents fiercely protect their cultural heritage and recount its rich history, often tracing it back to the Harlem Renaissance. Yet, while Harlem stands as a symbol of Black creativity and resilience, it is also a site of ongoing contestation, where displacement and exclusion loom large.

As previously mentioned, Harlem was not always a predominantly Black neighborhood. Initially settled by the Dutch in the 1600s, the area transitioned into farmland and became a suburban enclave for middle-class white families in the mid-19th century. It wasn't until the early 20th century, during the first wave of the Great Migration, that Harlem saw a significant influx of Black families from the South seeking refuge from the violence of Jim Crow and opportunities for economic advancement. This migration transformed Harlem into a cultural epicenter during the Harlem Renaissance, yet the struggle for belonging and self-determination persisted beyond that era.

Du Bois's double consciousness endures in Harlem's present-day reality, evolving into what Édouard Glissant describes as "landlessness." Glissant suggests that colonial legacies continue to frame Black populations as "landless folk," disconnected from secure ownership and control over their spaces and futures (Poetics of Relation 14). This tension is palpable in contemporary Harlem, where gentrification displaces long-term residents and reconfigures familiar communal spaces into sites of exclusion.

A personal experience that illustrates this dynamic occurred during a Sunday service at Abyssinian Baptist Church, when my late pastor, Rev. Dr. Calvin O. Butts, III, shared from the pulpit a story about a major car dealership planning to move into East Harlem. Dr. Butts welcomed the dealership and engaged in a series of cordial discussions about how their presence might create job opportunities and benefit the community. However, when he proposed that a percentage of the land be allocated for community ownership, the dealership representatives responded dismissively, claiming the land was "worth nothing." Dr. Butts replied, "Then give us a percentage of nothing." Following this request, the cordial dialogue abruptly ended.

For Dr. Butts, land ownership was not merely about economic gain—it was about ensuring that the community had a stake in Harlem's development and future prosperity. He believed that without ownership, Harlem's residents would remain spectators to the neighborhood's transformation, excluded from its growth and denied the ability to shape its legacy for future generations. This struggle for control over land and space is at the heart of Glissant's notion of landlessness and

underscores the ongoing challenge of displacement in historically Black communities.

In many ways, my photographs act as visual palimpsests, layering the past and present of Harlem and evoking McKittrick's, Du Bois's, and Glissant's theories. They serve as dialogic performances, inviting viewers to engage with both the aesthetic and internal effects of seeing. Through juxtaposing vibrant history and current erasure, my images seek to resist exclusion by preserving memory, honoring resilience, and insisting on Harlem's enduring presence as a space of Black cultural identity and collective belonging.

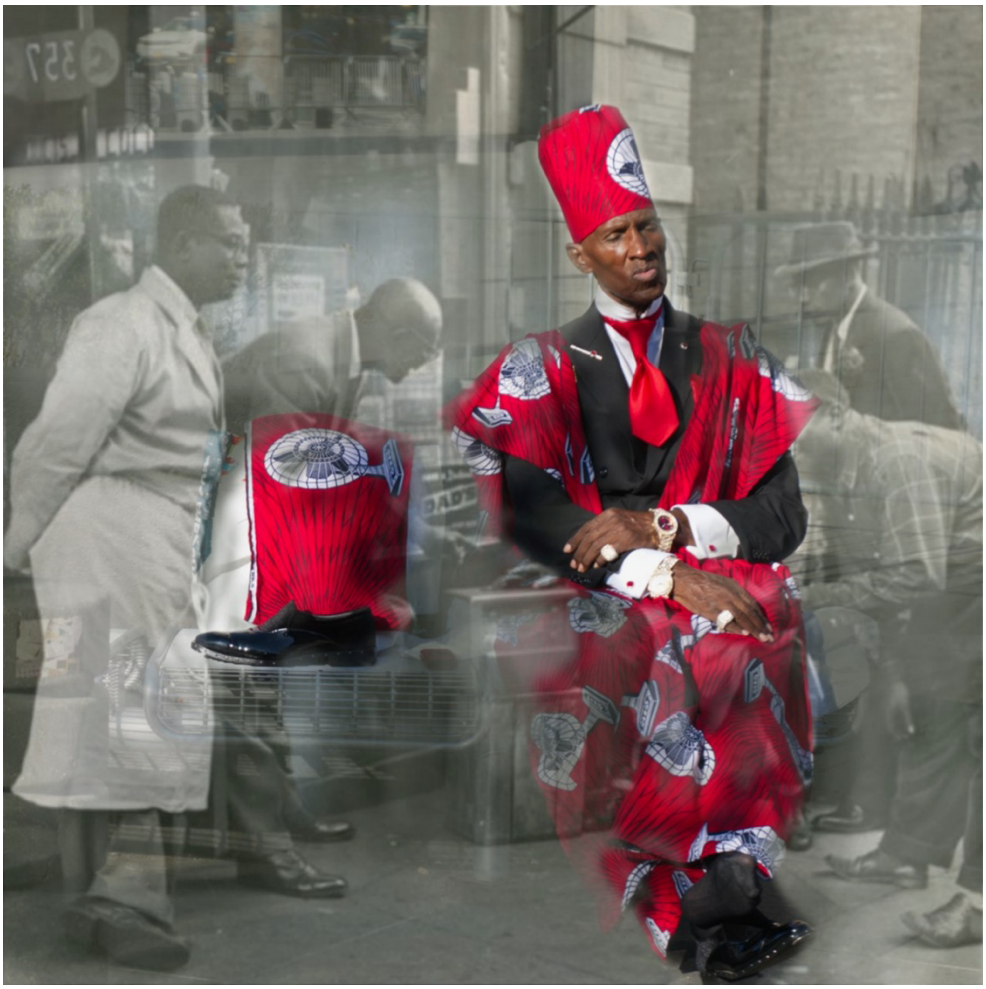

Image 2: Dianne Smith, *Red Ensemble*, 2018-2022, digital archive print, 20 x 20 in.

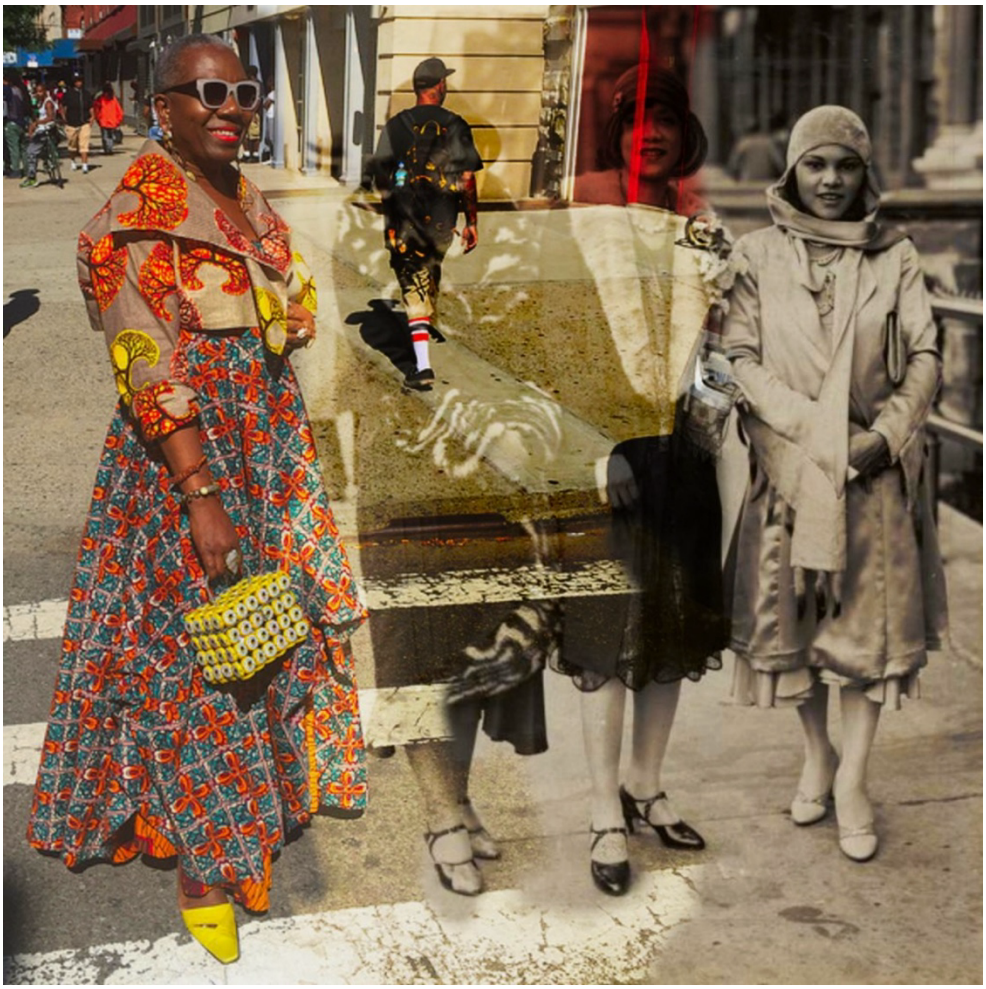

Image 3: Dianne Smith, *Harlem Ladies*, 2018-2022, digital archive print, 20 x 20 in.

Image 4: Dianne Smith, *Lil Fellas*, 2018-2022, digital archive print, 20 x 20 in.

Photography as a Site of Witness: Documenting and Performing Harlem

Between Harlem and Me employs the photographic montage as a medium to bridge Harlem's past and present. By layering contemporary photographs with archival images from the Schomburg Center, the series creates a palimpsest-like visual narrative, highlighting the continuity of Black life amidst ongoing displacement. The choice of montage is intentional: it resists linear storytelling, instead offering a fragmented yet cohesive narrative that mirrors the lived experiences of Harlem

residents. This approach underscores the fluidity of people, place, space, and time—key themes throughout the project.

Since the early 1990s, I have been documenting my Harlem community, capturing the everyday lives of my neighbors and finding beauty in the ordinary. My photographic process is organic, unplanned, and respectful, aiming to capture people in a dignified and regal way. These everyday individuals sustain Harlem's cultural fabric—they are the unsung heroes who embody the neighborhood's spirit. Their unique style, movements, vernacular, and fashion inspire global trends, yet they often go unrecognized beyond their immediate community.

In 2022, a photographer friend inspired me to extend my video work into still photography. While photographing someone in front of one of my video installations, he noticed the moving images created a soft, ghost-like illusion in his stills. Captivated by this effect, he suggested that I explore the idea further. After some reflection, I began revisiting the digital archive at the Schomburg Center, which I had accessed during a previous project. Understanding that time, space, and place can be fluid; I started layering archival images with my contemporary photographs, resulting in a series that excavates the past while engaging with the present and leaving artifacts for the future.

The process of creating these montages involves meticulous layering in photo-editing software. Typically, the archival images—often in black and white—are placed in the background, while my contemporary color photographs occupy the foreground. Each montage requires dozens of layers and hours of precision editing, as I selectively remove sections of both images to achieve the desired effect. The number of archival photos varies; sometimes, I use one, and other times several, depending on what the work needs. My goal is not to match exact locations but to evoke a sense of continuity and transformation.

The archives are a gateway to Harlem's rich historical memory, uncovering the stories of those who helped shape the neighborhood but whose contributions have often been overlooked or forgotten. Lately, I have been conversing about the significance of archiving—not just as an artist but also as a Black woman of Belizean descent. Archiving is a critical act of preserving family and cultural legacy, ensuring that the stories of marginalized communities endure.

The storied Instagram account *Black Archives* showcases the Black experience through visuals, much like *We The Diaspora*, which came after it. *The Black Beauty Archives* celebrates the evolution of Black aesthetics and beauty rituals through digital museum collections. *Black Film Archive* contextualizes lesser-known works of Black cinema and lets users know where to stream them. *Archiving the Black Web*

aims to document Black internet culture and make the process more inclusive. Thanks to the efforts of archivists and activists, artwork from the Black Lives Matter memorial is now on display online at the Library of Congress website *(CNN, 2022)*.

These initiatives underscore the importance of resisting erasure and reclaiming narratives, a theme central to *Between Harlem and Me*. My series performs an act of reclamation by juxtaposing archival images with contemporary scenes. The resulting dialogue between past and present emphasizes Harlem's cultural resilience despite ongoing cycles of displacement and gentrification. As the series suggests, the past is not a distant relic confined to memory or history books; instead, it is a dynamic, living force embedded in the fabric of the present. This idea is reinforced visually, as each archival fragment layered into a modern-day scene highlights the persistence of Harlem's spirit and culture.

Consider *Red Ensemble* (Image 2), a photograph that pays homage to the Harlem dandy, epitomizing Harlem's enduring legacy of culture and style. The subject of my contemporary image is seated on a bench in front of the State Office Building on 125th Street—a bustling area with a large plaza and benches where locals often gather, whether to rest or simply observe the lively street scene. One Sunday afternoon, as I walked west along 125th Street, I noticed this gentleman sitting alone. His striking appearance immediately caught my eye.

He was dressed in a vibrant red robe, an African print grand boubou, paired with a matching aso oke hat, and a coordinating bag placed to his right. His left patent leather shoe rested neatly in front of the bag, revealing his black nylon-socked foot. Beneath the boubou, he wore a white button-collar shirt accented with red cufflinks, a red Windsor knot tie, and a black suit jacket adorned with lapel pins. Gold watches gleamed on both wrists, and gold pinky rings adorned both hands—every detail of his attire exuded elegance and intentionality. His dignified presence dominated the composition, evoking a lineage of African heritage while offering a bold counter-narrative to historical portrayals of Harlem's residents as marginalized or burdened.

The Schomburg archival digital image circa the late 1940s is layered behind him, which adds depth. The unknown photographer captures a black-and-white picture of men who symbolize the resilience and quiet perseverance of previous generations listening to a radio outside a storefront. This juxtaposition of past and present transforms the image into a visual performance of corporeal pride, asserting a continued claim to identity and space in a neighborhood undergoing the

pressures of gentrification. *Red Ensemble* becomes a testament to Harlem's vibrancy, dignity, and resistance through this layered composition in the face of ongoing change.

Harlem Ladies (Imgage 3) layers a vibrant, contemporary image I captured of Harlem life over an archival photograph, creating a dynamic interplay between past and present. The archival image, taken in 1927 by an unknown photographer, provides a glimpse into Harlem's historic pulse. It features three members of Northeasterners, Inc.—Edith Scott, Louise Swain, and Helene Corbin—standing elegantly on Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard. Dressed in fur-trimmed coats, Mary Jane shoes, and 1920s cloche hats, the women exude style, joy, and a sense of sisterhood. Their poised expressions reflect a moment of community and shared pride during an era when Harlem flourished as a cultural hub.

In contrast, the contemporary figure is a regal woman I photographed on Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard. She wears a vibrant Dutch wax print dress in orange, blue, white, and yellow patterns under a wide lapel, beige, and orange Dutch print cropped jacket. Her yellow pointed mules and small handbag crafted from yellow bottle caps add a unique, modern flair to her ensemble. Her cropped salt-and-pepper hair, sunglasses, and bold red lips accentuate her cheekbones, emphasizing elegance and individuality. She embodies the resilience, pride, and evolving style of Harlem's present-day residents.

This juxtaposition creates a powerful visual metaphor for Harlem's resistance to erasure. While the streets and fashions may have changed, the essence of Harlem—its spirit, style, and strength—remains steadfast. Watching the woman walk towards me, I was struck by her beauty and grace. Everyday life in Harlem often feels like a continuous performance, not because its residents are putting on a show, but because their authentic presence—how they dress, walk, and move through the community—reflects Harlem's enduring cultural vibrancy.

Continuity and disruption lie at the heart of *Lil Fellas* (Image 4). This photograph juxtaposes the innocence and vitality of Harlem's children with an archival image of five boys posed on wooden crates with wheels, their makeshift go-carts evoking a sense of play and ingenuity. The most prominent child in the archival photo wears a peacoat and wool watch cap, while the others sport bomber jackets and aviator hats. The boys, likely around the same age, hunch forward on their carts, captured in a moment of playful camaraderie. This layering of past and present emphasizes what has remained and what has changed: Harlem's streets are

still spaces for youthful creativity and community, yet the physical and social landscape has been transformed. The enduring architecture in the background is a silent witness to these shifts, symbolizing continuity and disruption over time.

The contemporary image was made during my daily walks down Lenox Avenue to Central Park. I noticed three young boys, likely brothers, walking together. At the center, the eldest wore a plain white T-shirt and jogging pants. The boy on his right, presumably the next eldest, has a black graphic T-shirt with bold yellow lettering, partially obscured by his stance and black sneakers. The youngest, to the left, wore a gray T-shirt with yellow and blue stripes and Crocs. A pair of blue gym shorts with red stripes peered through his shorts, adding to his carefree look. Their relaxed posture and casual outfits captured the unfiltered simplicity of childhood.

What struck me most about this scene was the boys' presence and the way they strolled together—it evoked a sense of familial connection, protection, and siblinghood. It reminded me of my childhood visits to my uncle's house in Harlem when all the cousins would venture out to the corner store together, with the eldest tasked with keeping watch over the younger ones. This moment brought back memories of those deeply rooted bonds of family and community, which remain a defining feature of Harlem life.

What made the scene even more poignant was the rare and beautiful sight of three Black boys simply existing as children—free, unburdened, and full of innocence. In a society where Black boys are often denied the experience of childhood, this moment felt especially significant. I wanted to capture it, to preserve that fleeting sense of freedom, knowing all too well how quickly and unfairly that innocence can be stripped away in America. *Lil Fellas* is both a celebration of their youth and a quiet meditation on how fragile innocence is in a world that often views Black boys through a distorted adultified lens.

Interestingly, people's responses to this image often highlight how, despite being decades apart, the boys in the archival photo and those in my contemporary image seem related. There's a shared essence between them as if time has folded in on itself, connecting these boys across generations. This reaction underscores the continuity of Harlem's spirit, where children still occupy its streets with a sense of play, joy, and resilience despite the ever-changing world around them.

As the title suggests, the twenty-five images that comprise *Between Harlem and Me,* including *Harlem Strut, Sunday Funday, and King and Queen* (not pictured), collectively confront the corporeality of community—how bodies occupy space and

the precariousness of such occupation amid displacement. They ask critical questions: *Who gets to stay? Who becomes displaced? What memories remain, and how do they shape the present?* By weaving together past and present, the series invites viewers to see Harlem as a site where memory, culture, and identity continue to evolve, reminding us that communities like Harlem persist not as static relics but as dynamic spaces of resistance and hope.

Ultimately, the fluidity of people, place, space, and time underscores the interconnectedness of human experience. This fluidity frames Harlem as a physical location and a living, breathing archive shaped by its inhabitants. Through this lens, *Between Harlem and Me* becomes an act of resistance that preserves Harlem's legacy while acknowledging its ever-evolving future.

The palimpsest nature of *Between Harlem and Me*—layering past, present, and imagined futures—transforms the series into a performative act of memory. Each photograph is a stage where history and corporeality converge, inviting viewers to witness the persistence of Black life in Harlem despite the forces of erasure. Corporeality is central to this performance. The bodies captured in the photographs are not passive subjects but active agents who claim space and resist displacement. Claiming space and resisting displacement is particularly poignant in the context of gentrification, where the physical presence of Black and Brown bodies in Harlem becomes an act of defiance against the spatial and economic forces that seek to erase them.

Layered Time and Migration of Memory

The African belief of Sankofa, symbolized by a bird looking backward while moving forward, offers a powerful lens through which to understand the layered time and memory in *Between Harlem and Me*. Sankofa, which translates to go back and fetch it, emphasizes the importance of retrieving and learning from the past to guide the present and future. This philosophy profoundly aligns with the visual and conceptual framework of my photographic series, where the act of layering archival images over contemporary photographs mirrors the process of revisiting history to inform Harlem's ongoing narrative.

My concept of Layered Time refers to the simultaneous coexistence of past, present, and future within a single visual or conceptual space. In *Between Harlem and Me*, this concept is vividly brought to life through the montage of contemporary photographs with archival imagery. The series challenges linear understandings of time by overlaying modern-day scenes onto Harlem's historical moments,

suggesting that history is not confined to the past but lives on in the present. This layering invites viewers to reflect on the enduring impact of historical narratives, the cyclical nature of change, and how urban spaces evolve yet retain traces of their origins.

Migration of memory explores how collective and personal memories move through time and space, adapting to new contexts while retaining their essence. In this series, the migration of memory is represented by blending archival images with contemporary portraits. The archival photos are not merely static records; they are memories that have traveled across generations, adapting and recontextualizing themselves in the minds of viewers. These visual migrations highlight how memory connects individuals to their roots and fosters a sense of belonging, even amidst the forces of displacement and gentrification.

There No More (Image 1) is part of the *Between Harlem and Me series*. I made the contemporary image in the photograph in 2018 from the opposite side of 125th Street and Lenox Avenue in Central Harlem. The image captures a vibrant scene from contemporary Harlem, juxtaposed with an archival image to evoke the layered history of the neighborhood. In the foreground, a woman in colorful clothing walks by an African store, its exterior lined with bold, patterned garments hanging outside. Her attire—bright red headscarf, multicolored jacket, and pink blouse—contrasts the muted tones of the brick storefront behind her. The shop displays an array of fabrics and traditional African garments, vividly symbolizing the cultural presence of Harlem's African and diasporic communities.

Underlying this contemporary moment is a faded black-and-white archival image of two women seated against what appears to be an older version of the same street, but it is not. These ghostly figures, subtly integrated into the brick wall, evoke a sense of Harlem's past, conjuring memories of a bygone era. The contrast between the color and black-and-white elements visually represents the tension between past and present, underscoring the changes brought by gentrification and the community's evolving identity.

The shop featured in this image no longer occupies the location I originally photographed. Like many businesses along that corridor, it was forced to relocate or close entirely to make way for new development. I have known Mohammed, the shop owner, for many years—he was a fixture in the community, a familiar face everyone recognized. I often purchased garments from him, and he custom-made dresses for me whenever I had a special event. His shop was one of my trusted Harlem go-to spots. He always greeted me with a warm smile and a cheerful "Hello, Sista." It was deeply disheartening to return one day, not long after

capturing this image, only to find his once-luminous storefront replaced by a dark, empty space.

I later discovered that he had relocated his shop to 124th Street and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard. Still, my connection to the memories of the old shop and its original location remains strong. The rapid transformation of place and space in Harlem underscores the community's struggle against the erasure of its cultural identity. In its layered composition, this image becomes a poignant reflection of those personal and collective memories—the Migration of Memory—capturing a moment in time that now exists only in the past. Mohammed's relocation is emblematic of the displacement many long-standing businesses and residents face, yet his enduring presence reminds us of Harlem's resilience in the face of change.

This image embodies the concept of Layered Time, where the past, present, and future coexist within a single frame, challenging linear understandings of time. By blending archival and modern-day imagery, the photograph illustrates the Migration of Memory, showing how personal and collective histories move through time, continually adapting while preserving the essence of identity. The photograph's interplay of light and shadow enhances this layered effect, blurring the boundaries between time periods. The archival image, almost spectral in its appearance, suggests that while the physical landscape of Harlem has transformed, traces of its past remain embedded in its architecture and streets.

The visual dialogue between past and present invites viewers to reflect on Harlem's evolving identity and how historical narratives remain imprinted in the urban fabric, though threatened by gentrification. This engagement with layered time—past, present, and imagined future—resonates with the cyclical nature of Sankofa, where time is not linear but interconnected. Together, these concepts underscore my goal of affirming Black and Brown life in America by positioning these communities within a continuum of resilience and cultural richness. By visually linking Harlem's historical identity to its present, the series performs an act of cultural remembrance that resists erasure and invites viewers to reflect on Harlem's legacy. Through this lens, *Between Harlem and Me* becomes a medium for storytelling that transcends temporal and spatial boundaries, offering a vision of Harlem as a site of memory, resistance, and belonging.

Vital to *Between Harlem and Me* is the rejection of the white gaze—a lens that distorts and dehumanizes Black and Brown lives by framing them as "other." In the tradition of what bell hooks terms the "oppositional gaze," my series seeks to reclaim the act of looking as a form of agency. hooks describe the oppositional

gaze as a counter-hegemonic practice that enables Black viewers to critically interrogate and resist dominant visual narratives (*Black Looks* 116). By documenting Harlem through my perspective as a resident and artist, I center the humanity and complexity of its people.

The images in the series capture moments of everyday life: children playing in the neighborhood, a woman dressed in her Sunday best, or a Harlem dandy dressed in red taking a rest on 125th Street. These scenes are not sensationalized but mundane yet powerful in their ordinariness. They resist the exoticization of Black life and instead assert its normalcy and vibrancy. This act of normalization is radical in a society that often portrays Black and Brown communities through a lens of pathology or threat.

By focusing on these intimate, unguarded moments, the series also challenges the narrative of gentrification as progress. It highlights what is lost when communities are uprooted—the relationships, histories, and rituals that define a place. In doing so, it asserts that Harlem's value lies not in its real estate but in the lives and stories of its people.

Conclusion

Through *Between Harlem and Me*, I engage with the themes of corporeal migration and performance to document Harlem's layered histories, resist erasure, and envision a future of belonging for Black and Brown communities. The series serves as both a visual and performative reclamation of space, challenging the white supremacist cartographies that have shaped Harlem's past and continue to threaten its future. By centering the lives and stories of its residents, my work asserts that Harlem is more than a geographic location—it is a living archive, a site of memory and resistance, and a beacon of cultural continuity.

At its core, the series also invites a dialogue with the future. Bridging archival imagery with contemporary scenes challenges viewers to reflect on Harlem's evolving identity and consider who will have a place in it as the neighborhood changes. This forward-looking perspective is hopeful and urgent, emphasizing the necessity of preserving Harlem's history, culture, and people against the forces of displacement. *Between Harlem and Me* insists that Harlem's legacy is not just something to be remembered but something to be carried forward, honored, and fought for in future generations.

Corporeal migration is not just an abstract concept; it is deeply personal. My journey through Harlem is a testament to how bodies move through space and

time while remaining connected to place. As a child, I spent time in Harlem with my extended family, spending weekends at my uncle's house with my maternal granny. My uncle's son and his family live in that apartment today. Signaling a new generation carrying forward the rhythms of daily life in a neighborhood that continues to evolve. My experience attending LaGuardia High School of Music and Performing Art in Harlem, worshiping at the historic Abyssinian Baptist Church, and now living and working as an artist in the very place that shaped me all speak to the embodied nature of history. My presence in Harlem is part of a larger continuum that resists erasure by ensuring that the stories, memories, and cultural legacies of those who came before me remain visible. In this way, *Between Harlem and Me* is about documenting Harlem's history, living it, performing it, and ensuring it endures.

Works Cited

Garber, Nick. "Harlem Lost 10k Black Residents, Gained 18k Whites This Decade." *Harlem, NY Patch*, Patch, 18 Aug. 2021, patch.com/new-york/harlem/harlem-lost-10k-black-residents-gained-18k-whites-decade.

Fellowship, Marie Gørrild 2008 New York City, et al. "Gentrification and Displacement in Harlem: How the Harlem Community Lost Its Voice En Route to Progress." *Humanity in Action*, humanityinaction.org/knowledge_detail/gentrification-and-displacement-in-harlem-how-the-harlem-community-lost-its-voice-en-route-to-progress/. Accessed 27 Jan. 2025.

Kaur, Harmeet. "How Black Archives Are Highlighting Overlooked Parts of History and Culture." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 19 Feb. 2022, www.cnn.com/2022/02/19/us/black-archivists-history-culture-cec/index.html.

Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Trans. Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk.* Dover, 1903.

McKittrick, Katherine. "Demonic Grounds : Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle." Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006, http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=310740.

hooks, bell. *Black Looks : Race and Representation.* London: Routledge, 1992.

Smith, Dianne. "Trash, Consumption, Class and the Politics of Race." Creative Practice, vol. MFA, Transart Institute, 2012.