Books

Finding the Harlem of the Here and Now

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“I didn’t go to graduate school in anthropology at Columbia to go across the street and study northern Manhattan,” says John L. Jackson ’00GSAS, author of *Harlemworld: Doing Race and Class in Contemporary America* (University of Chicago Press, 2001). “I anticipated leaving the U.S., going to Central or South America. But when I found myself residing in Harlem—a kid from Canarsie in Brooklyn who rarely went uptown—it struck me that it wasn’t the Harlem I saw on the cover of the New York Post or read about in English class. It had an everyday quality to it—an ordinariness—that couldn’t be caught in headlines and wasn’t reducible to assumptions about a glorious past.”

Jackson is a Harvard junior fellow teaching at Duke University this fall. Though a self-professed shy person (“the Achilles’ heel of any self-respecting anthropologist”), he spent roughly four years doing his field work for *Harlemworld*. After finishing course work he moved out of Columbia housing and into an apartment on Old Broadway and 125th Street, “a main thoroughfare and commercial artery for the Harlem community,” conducting more than forty interviews and spending countless hours of “deep hanging out.” He found a Harlem of “the here and now,” more diverse and eclectic than stereotypical representations of the place. In the end, he says, he wanted not just to present an ethnographic study but to offer a narrative about Harlem that is neither an homage to the Harlem of yore nor a reduction of Harlem to a poverty-stricken slum. “For me, it was a chance to tell a story about a place we all take for granted, that we all *think* we know, but that I argue we don’t know at all.”

Still, the immersion had to have a method, and this, Jackson says, didn’t come at once. As an anthropologist he was first interested in “spaces of coalescences” or “contact zones,” “places where people are forced to act across class lines.” Gradually, however, he realized that his would have to become a “peripatetic anthropological method,” navigating the “curving, shifting, pockmarked boundaries”

of the people, places, and perceptions within Harlem. “No one is teaching methods,” he says. “You have to find what works, and for me the spatial became a sort of space-in-motion. I think of myself as a flaneur. In Harlem you’ve got to keep up.”

The central argument of Jackson’s book is that race and class are performative, not essentialist categories. “Many of the Harlemites I met,” he writes, “play with interpretations of actions to define social sameness and difference in interesting and even idiosyncratic ways.” The actual term *harlemworld* is a neologism from hip-hop, which Jackson said he came to later on in his research. “So many folks— especially in their teens and twenties—call Harlem ‘harlemworld.’ They use the hip-hop term that’s out there in the public sphere to talk about the place they live and interact in everyday. The constant invocation of that term in Harlem proper really, for me, captures the connection between serious theory and an equally serious playfulness.”



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