Digital Harlem: Everyday Life 1915-1930

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I was first introduced to the figure of Hubert Harrison [2] as a history undergraduate attempting to write my final year dissertation on the role of Caribbean intellectuals in the Harlem Renaissance. Arriving in New York from St. Croix in September 1900, Harrison's brand of radical politics brought together class and race-based internationalism.(1) Described by A. Philip Randolph as the 'father of the Harlem radicalism', in 1917 he founded the Liberty League and *The Voice* newspaper that helped spark the 'New Negro Movement' of the 1920s.(2) At this time I was particularly drawn to accounts of Harrison's prowess as a soapbox orator. As historians such as Irma Watkins-Owens and Winston James have demonstrated, the street corners of Harlem were key sites of debate, where a diverse selection of black activists addressed the public on the pressing political issues of the day.(3) However, as a student reading these historical accounts for the first time, I initially struggled to fully comprehend the significance of this form of black political expression in the United States. I did not properly understand the importance of the street corner to black political life in Harlem – the diverse backgrounds of those who spoke, the amount of normal working people who would stop, listen and could actively respond to the arguments they heard, as well as the broader impact that this form of political street theatre had on the development of the Harlem Renaissance. In fact, it probably wasn't until I visited Harlem for the first time in the first year of my PhD study that I began to grasp the historical significance of such sites as the intersection of 135th and Lenox, where in the summer months thousands of people a day would have spilled out of the subway, off buses and onto the crowded streets, to be met with a cacophony of noisy proclamations on subjects as diverse as rent control, lynching and colonialism in Africa.

Digital Harlem: Everyday Life 1915-1930 [3] represents a valuable online tool through which the vibrant historical spaces that shaped the political and cultural life of Harlem can be better understood. Launched in 2009 by Stephen Robertson, Stephen Garton, Graham White and Shane White at the University of Sydney, the project is designed to offer 'a new perspective on what it was like to live in Harlem' between 1915 and 1930. Using Geographic Information System (GIS) technology, freely available through Google maps, the website presents a range of visual historical information about specific individuals, addresses and events in Harlem. Its fully searchable database draws on a number of sources, including newspapers, probation records, district attorney case files and the WPA Writers Program collection. A particularly useful feature is that these searches can be layered in ways that give a more detailed picture of a particular individual, event

or specific location. For example, to return to Hubert Harrison, an initial search for 'Soapbox speech' on the website yields five matches. This search, when plotted onto the 1930 real estate map of Harlem, that provides the visual backdrop of the project, includes a public talk Harrison gave on the evening of 1 July 1926 on the theory of evolution.

The pop-up tab provides more detail about the event that was said to have attracted 'one of the largest crowds ever seen on 7th avenue', and which was reported on in the local press. Whilst this raises immediate questions about the content of Harrison's lecture and its contemporary relevance to the assembled audience, *Digital Harlem* makes it possible for the user to situate this event within the broader physical environment in which it took place.

By adding a second search layer that accounts for a specific location, in this case 137th Street and 7th Avenue, it is possible to gain additional insights into the spatial environment that shaped soapbox speeches in Harlem. The search reveals that Harrison spoke on a corner made up of a mixture of residential and commercial properties that included a beauty parlour, restaurants and speakeasies. Taking place in the evening, the talk would have attracted people on their way home from work, whilst the location of the Renaissance Theatre and Casino immediately across the road may well have attracted curious onlookers on their way out for evening entertainment.

This layered search feature therefore provides important background details that are often overlooked in conventional historical texts. In addition to this, the regularly updated *Digital Harlem* blog [4] contains a range of posts on traffic, public transport and local businesses, that all help to build a picture of the street that the African American writer Wallace Thurman referred to as 'the Black Broadway'. All this allows the user to make a number of simple, but nevertheless important observations, in regards to the audiences that street corner orators were trying to reach and how they went about maximising the impact of their work.

By providing a small-scale glimpse of everyday lives, events and places, *Digital Harlem* offers researchers a range of new perspectives on the 'Negro Metropolis' as an historic urban space. In doing this, the project addresses many of the key ideas in the rapidly expanding field of the digital humanities. Using digital databases and a range of freely available web publishing platforms to gather and present data, projects such as *London Lives 1690-1800* [5] and the *Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive and Transcription Project* [6] have begun to rethink the way in which historical research can be framed in order to reach new and diverse audiences. This emphasis on the democratisation of knowledge is at the heart of the digital humanities as well as being central to ongoing debates about open access and the 'ownership' of academic research. Whilst the potential of projects that harness the power new digital technologies are exciting, it is nevertheless essential that they continue to place original and innovative intellectual research questions at their centre. In the UK in particular, as academics scramble to meet funding requirements relating to impact and public engagement, the realm of digital humanities can often appear as a perfect quick fix solution. This can occasionally result in ill thought projects that appear to tick the right research council drawn boxes, but fail to bring together cutting edge research with innovative new technology. As Julia Flanders [7] writes, digital scholarship is at its best when its intellectual outcomes aren't simply judged by the power and the speed of the technology that it uses, 'but by the same criteria used in humanities scholarship all along: does it make us think? does it make us keep thinking?(4) This is not to say that digital scholarship should be viewed with scepticism, but to suggest that technology should not be used for technologies sake, but instead to drive and offer new perspectives on already innovative research projects. *Digital Harlem* is extremely successful on this front in that it presents rigorous archival research in an engaging manner and allows the user to develop their own specific research agenda. Whilst there are limitations in terms of the size and scope of the database, the project nevertheless represents a fantastic model for aspiring digital humanists to follow. Significantly, given the often suspicious academic reception this type of work receives, *Digital Harlem* has also been able to bridge the gap between digital and more traditional forms of research. The same materials that form the core of its online database have also been used to publish *Playing the Numbers: Gambling in Harlem Between the Wars* (2010) [8], an in-depth study of illegal gambling in Harlem, as well as four recent peer-reviewed journal articles [9]. That the project has apparently seamlessly spanned the worlds of digital scholarship and traditional publishing is further testament to *Digital* Harlem's originality and academic

grounding in original historical research.

Digital Harlem is a relatively old project in relation to the online world in which it operates. As the now infamous *Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0* [10] notes, whilst early online projects were largely quantitative, in that they primarily mobilised the search and retrieval powers of the database, the 'second wave' of digital humanities work should aim to move beyond this approach in order to become more, 'qualitative, interpretative, emotive, generative in character'.(5)

The *Digital Harlem* blog [4] can perhaps be seen as a response to this challenge. Through a series of detailed and analytically critical posts, the authors of *Digital Harlem* expertly show off the search features of the main website in order to raise a number of critical points relating to the urban geography of the Harlem Renaissance. Entries focus on a diverse range of subjects, including the life of the African American aviator Herbert Julian [11], black baseball [12] in the 1920s as well as the activities of the UNIA [13], and are combined with photographs and scans of archival material that do not appear as part of the project's mapping feature. However, *Digital Harlem* is not without its shortcomings in respect to this generative aspect of the digital humanities. Although the research carried out is detailed, it is still limited in range and seemingly overlooks the way in which these new digital technologies can be used to actively engage a broader network of researchers in a particular project. Whilst it is hard to bridge this gap between mass participation and rigorous research, *Digital Harlem* would perhaps benefit from an organised online crowd-sourcing programme that would enable researchers to actively contribute new forms of documentary material to its database. By opening up the project in this way, *Digital Harlem* would be able to draw on an international community of researchers with different forms of expertise who could add new material that would shape the project in exciting ways. As Christine L. Borgman [14] has argued, 'Collaboration is essential in digital humanities projects … Humanists should continue to seek out complementary partners and encourage people to listen and learn from each other'.(6) Whilst *Digital Harlem* has a strong international profile, new and expanded collaborations would further open up the project to voices outside the academy that might, in turn, shape the way in which documentary evidence is collected and interpreted. However, it is important to note that the authors are currently working to expand this project, having recently secured funds from the Australian Research Council to account for the 1935 Harlem Riot [15].

Finally, I'd argue that *Digital Harlem* is an extremely useful tool for the undergraduate classroom. As the convener of a Harlem Renaissance module who is currently supervising undergraduate dissertations in this subject area, the website has proved an excellent starting point in terms of guiding students to think about the physical environment that helped give rise to the art and literature of the Harlem Renaissance. Whilst students understandably get absorbed in the novels of Claude McKay, paintings of Jacob Lawrence and photographs of James Van Der Zee, it is often hard to paint a full picture of Harlem as a living space through which ideas relating to black identity were formulated and produced. Furthermore, the inclusion of *Digital Harlem* on a syllabus alongside studies by people such as David Levering Lewis [16], Nathan Huggins [17] and Cheryl A. Wall [18] encourages students to think about how they can disseminate historical research in new and interesting ways. For example, students could map the transnational dimensions of the Harlem Renaissance by using platforms such as Google Maps and Viewshare [19] to document the diasporic travels of black writers throughout Europe.(7)

Overall, the research showcased by *Digital Harlem* represents an important contribution to the social and urban history of the United Sates in the early 20th history. By challenging the researcher to think of Harlem in terms of everyday events, the project represents an explicit challenge to historical narratives that focus solely on the leading artistic and political lights of the era. However, what is particularly striking about *Digital Harlem* is its interactive nature that allows individual users to come up with their own research questions, whilst further contextualising the dominant narratives of scholarship on the Harlem Renaissance. Most importantly, this resource is free and extremely easy to use, which means that it has an almost inevitable impact beyond the immediate academic sphere. The fact that on my last visit to the Schomburg Center I found myself sat next to a group of local school children using *Digital Harlem* for a class project is testament to the website's accessibility. It is the broad appeal and potential uses of the data that underpins

this research that is its biggest asset. From school projects to undergraduate dissertations to peer reviewed publications, *Digital Harlem* has the potential to inform a wide range of humanities activities and pedagogical practices. The imaginative approach of the team behind this project should also encourage a range of academics to rethink the broader potential of how they conduct and present their own research. As a result, I'd encourage anyone with a passing interest in Harlem or African American history as a whole to just have a go – create some searches, check out the blog, and see what new questions come up.

Notes

1. A. Philip Randolph, cited in **Winston James,** Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia : Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America **(London, 1999), p. 123**Back to (1)
2. Jeffrey B. Perry, Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883–1918 (New York, 2009), Chapter Ten.Back to (2)
3. Irma Watkins-Owens, Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900–1930 (Bloomington, IN, 1996), Chapter Six; Winston, Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia, p. 124.Back to (3)
4. Julia Flanders, "The Productive Unease of 21st-century Digital Scholarship" Vol. 3, No. 3 (2009), http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/3/3/000055/000055.html [20].Back to (4)
5. *The Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0* was written by Jeffrey Schnapp, Peter Lunenfeld and Todd Presner.Back to (5)
6. Christine L. Borgman, "The Digital Future Is Now: A Call to Action for the Humanities" Vol. 3, No. 4 (2009), http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/3/4/000077/000077.html [21].Back to (6)
7. Dr. Andrew Fearnley [22] has used Google Maps in a similar way in his teaching in order to map the transnational movements of Caribbean intellectuals in the Harlem Renaissance. This idea also ties in with two ongoing research projects [23] designed to map black international travel [24] that I'm working on with Dr. Vincent Hiribarren [25].Back to (7)

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[19] http://viewshare.org/

[20] http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/3/3/000055/000055.html

[21] http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/3/4/000077/000077.html

[22] http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/profiles/andrew-fearnley

[23] http://www.nicholasgrant.co.uk/?page_id=49

[24] http://www.vincenthiribarren.com/maps/hutchinson/index.html

[25] http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/people/20030/faculty_of_arts/person/820/vincent_hiribarren