



Harlemworld: Doing Race and Class in Contemporary Black America

By John L. Jackson Jr.

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Harlem is one of the most famous neighborhoods in the world—a historic symbol of both black cultural achievement and of the rigid boundaries separating the rich from the poor. But as this book shows us, Harlem is far more culturally and economically diverse than its caricature suggests: through extensive fieldwork and interviews, John L. Jackson reveals a variety of social networks and class stratifications, and explores how African Americans interpret and perform different class identities in their everyday behavior.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

From being "in vogue" during the Renaissance of the 1920s, when this thriving, culturally rich and diverse African-American community was a favorite entertainment nightspot for white down-towners, to the late 1960s, when its image was that of a strife-torn war zone, Harlem has become the mythological site of American "blackness." It is this myth "Harlemworld" that Jackson, a Columbia-trained sociologist and postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University, is eager to deconstruct. Leaving his Columbia University student housing and living on one of Harlem's commercial avenues, Jackson began doing field work and interviewing dozens of residents. For some, Harlem represents an actual return home ("this is where my people are from"); others, like Paul, a middle-class architect who just moved there, view it as a new, and complicated, beginning. Neatly and expertly weaving theory with analysis through these interviews (and while monitoring the increasingly rapid gentrification of the neighborhood), Jackson discovers that both identities built around race and class are far less monolithic than even Harlem residents believe. He also presents astute and often astonishing insights into the images of Harlem promoted in African-American-produced popular culture like rap, hip-hop and films like *Hoodlum*. While written from an academic perspective, the original and exceptionally perceptive analysis Jackson provides about race and class in U.S. culture will interest anyone trying to think them though. (Dec.) Forecast: While this book never completely transcends its roots as a doctoral thesis, it does read enough like a trade book to be reviewed in newspapers; pundits will take it up either way, and journals like the *New Republic* are a lock. University libraries and syllabi will be a steady long-term market.

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From Library Journal

Offered as the first of a two-part ethnographic field project aimed at identifying and understanding racial differences in everyday action, this work blends participant observation, interviews, and general social research in an introduction, conclusion, and six brief essays. Starting with a brief history of New York City's Harlem, Jackson, a postdoctoral fellow in cultural anthropology at Harvard, probes popular beliefs and folk theories of race, place, and class to uncover connections between identity and behavior. Exposing the varied lives of Harlemites, he argues that rather than being segregated by race or separated by class, Harlemites share broad social contacts across class lines and beyond racial monoliths. Jackson's "Harlemworld" is a place where race and class are complicated and contradictory, and the social realities portrayed in this book challenge easy and exclusionary social-science categories. Not for the general reader, this is a work scholars may wish to relate to Elijah Anderson's works, such as *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community* (Univ. of Chicago, 1990). For collections in cultural anthropology, class, identity, race, and New York history. [Plans for publication of the second part are not yet set. Ed.] Thomas J. Davis, Arizona State Univ., Tempe.

- *Thomas J. Davis, Arizona State Univ., Tempe*

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From [Booklist](#)

Jackson, a social scientist, explores the complexities of race and class identification in contemporary America. Although centered in Harlem, the quintessential black neighborhood, this book reflects a broader and more fluid consciousness. Jackson offers exceptionally rich portraits of individuals of varying social status: from self-defined "just regular folks," to the upwardly mobile aspirants and the solidly middle class. In contrast to the assumed dichotomy between the middle class and the underclass, Jackson exposes an

ongoing interactive and overlapping relationship among economic strata. This ethnographic study reveals complex and fluid definitions of race and class. Much of the class-race indicators expressed by the subjects of this study reflect some idealized notions that define *Harlemworld* as a status beyond Harlem. Jackson provides a compelling critique of hip-hop culture, which originated the term *Harlemworld*, and Hollywood's impressions of *Harlemworld* and its overuse of the *N* word. This is a compelling look at contemporary black reality in the post-civil rights era. *Vernon Ford*
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Cathy Spearman:

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