

Black Perspective: On Harlem's State of Mind

By ROSA GUY

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WALKING through Harlem today I keep remembering the sermon of the Rev. Elder Hawkins of St. Augustine Presbyterian Church many years ago: "The slum has long arms that are forever creeping. You might escape for a time but not forever. It is then our duty as human beings to take a stand and fight against this blight of poverty, or the sickness that it creates will one day consume us all. It is not a question of nobility. It is a clear case of survival."

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BLACK people determine the geographical boundaries of Harlem. When I was younger, Harlem was bordered in the south by Central Park, in the north by 145th Street, in the east by the East River, and in the west by the park line—Morning-side and St. Nicholas Parks. As blacks and Puerto Ricans pushed slowly outward, the City College area crumbled into Harlem. The Columbia area miraculously resisted. But Harlem spilled over to Riverside Drive to the north and south of it, and in the north it is steadily creeping closer and closer to the George Washington Bridge. Harlem seeped down on both sides of Central Park, to the 90's in the east, and some say it is approaching the lower 80's in the west. In trying to slow down the spread of the "slums," middle-

a matter of time till, even here, "Harlem" pushes onward and outward.

However, it is the old Harlem—now called Central Harlem—that jumps to mind when we speak of Harlem. It is the Harlem of Harlem Square, where Black Nationalists held forth condemning white exploitation and black submissiveness and extolling the dreamed-of glories of Africa; the Harlem of the Savoy Ballroom, where Malcolm X danced the Lindy Hop and where the greatest jazz musicians of all times brightened the lives of students, hustlers and the domestic workers on their Thursday nights off; the Harlem of Small's Paradise, where wealthy whites came "slumming." The Harlem of Adam Clayton Powell and of Langston Hughes. The Harlem between 110th and 145th Streets. The Capital of the Black World. That Harlem is not so vibrant, not so colorful anymore.

This is a report about Harlem today. It is a report of the actual, every-day existence of its people: the hostilities, the anger and the small snatches of happiness. There are passages that are shocking and will be resisted by some readers—for example the conviction that the drug epidemic in Harlem is a genocidal plot against black people, and the account of the rape of a girl by a number of policemen. But while it is true that I did not try to amass

"ANYONE with half an eye can see that Harlem is dying. Ain't nobody around anymore. All those who could, have moved. Only ones left is those who can't go nowhere." I look around the once impressive little bar. Quartets and small string groups once gigged here on weekends, packing in people from the streets who dug progressive jazz. Now the place seems dingy, hardly able to hold its own. More whisky is served in false-bottom glasses for less money to attract customers, the leather on the seats of the booths is badly worn and even more badly repaired. The owner, an old friend, is not bitter, merely assesses the situation: "Everywhere you look you see boarded-up buildings. People gone. And those left don't drink whisky. They on drugs."

Seeing Harlem through his eyes, it does look like a dying city. The Savoy Ballroom has long been torn down to make room for Delano Village, a lower-middle-income complex; and now Harlem Square has been effectively silenced by the New York State Office Building, currently in the process of being built. Small's on Seventh Avenue and Club Baron on Lenox are both trying to hold on to a past era of great musicians, but the big spenders are gone. On every street the windows of abandoned buildings—legacy of rapacious landlords who have squeezed until

ever. If white landlords have abandoned buildings all over Harlem, it is still the white landlords who are profiting from the new middle-class housing complexes built to accommodate the rising middle class of Harlem. White butchers still sell fourth-grade meat for above-first-grade prices; if the butcher shops are fewer, it is because they have bowed to the white-controlled grocery chain stores which are now everywhere in Harlem. Small black businesses have cropped up all over Harlem. But big businesses are still in the hands of whites: furniture stores, where the poor buy on credit and never finish paying; jewelry stores; shoe stores; theaters; bars, and the big department stores and food centers along 125th Street, Harlem's main artery. If the riots of the sixties changed anything, it was merely to get a few blacks into positions as man-

agers, with whites still quietly hovering in the background.

There is a trend to move away from Harlem, particularly in the lower-income groups. In the 1960 census the black population of Manhattan was 397,101, with 336,364 living in "old" Harlem. By 1966, the Harlem population had dropped to 215,782. By 1970, the black population of Manhattan was down to 379,836, and it was estimated that the population of Harlem had fallen to well beneath 200,000. The live birth rate of Harlem Hospital Center reflects Harlem's dwindling population: In 1966, there were 3,053 live births at that hospital. By 1971, there were 2,307.

People move away if they can, but also the migration of blacks to Northern big cities has slowed down, and in Harlem it has become a trickle. (The bulk of migrants who come to the New York area now join family and friends in other boroughs and counties. From 1960 to 1970, the black population in Brooklyn multiplied by more than nine (!) times, from 71,405 to 654,980; in Queens it rose from 145,855 to 258,322; on Staten Island, from 9,674 to 15,792. In Nassau and Suffolk Counties the rise was 4.6 and 4.8 per cent, respectively.)

ONE of the obvious reasons for leaving is the crumbling buildings, most of them dating

living will kill me, but the minute I can, I'm clearing out."

Another reason is that many of the manufacturing industries that employ unskilled labor are moving into the suburbs and to Puerto Rico. The poor worker must follow or be forced to accept welfare.

Schools are, of course, another reason. Here again, the poor worker and the welfare mother are anxious to get their children out of the grip of the decaying school system before they are of school age, or at least before they get into their teens: "When they get in their teens, they break out like measles."

Another big problem is "crime in the streets." I teach creative writing to fourth and sixth graders, and I asked them the other day to write about their neighborhood. One 11-year-old wrote: "Living in my neighborhood is like living in a bad dream." And another: "My neighborhood is an ordinary neighborhood. It's very typical. In my neighborhood you have typical things like gangs, robbery, murder and other things. . . ." But most of them wrote about heroin. They cannot help being affected by the number of young boys and men nodding along the streets. Beautiful children play around the addicts, adults avert their eyes, policemen walk by with indifference. Everyone is aware that when their "fix" wears off, these men—and women—will stalk the streets like zombies doing the bidding of "the Man."

While junkies stand around nodding, their minds seem to record what matters to them: They know when someone leaves his home—that's the time to burglarize; when someone buys an extra package—that must be his payday, so he's worth mugging; when a relief recipient receives a check or an older person his Social Security benefits. The older person lives in terror more than anyone else. He hates to brave the streets, not knowing what might happen. But it is more than the streets. One retired man told me: "I'm not afraid of the streets, it's going into

on her way home, and when she did get home, she found her apartment had been burglarized. Evening time used to be swinging time in the streets of Harlem. But today, from the Central Park side of 110th Street up to 145th Street—with the possible exception of 125th Street and a few bar areas—the streets are left to the zombies and the cops.

MOST blacks believe that the reason drugs found their way into Harlem was a deliberate plan of genocide—that whites want to exterminate blacks. "They get to the kids and the kids get to us and that's the end of their black problem." If this was the plan, it certainly backfired, because the white kids got hooked as well. "But even at that, they keep the good drugs and give us the junk," a journalist said, referring to an article by a white student in Forest Hills who wrote about black youths coming to Forest Hills to buy better drugs.

Another important reason for blacks wanting to leave Harlem is the role of the police in perpetuating crime. "The only one surprised by that Knapp Commission testimony was Mr. Knapp himself. Any 5-year-old could have told him that the biggest crooks in the city is the police," says one resident, Mrs. Brown, the mother of five boys, all on drugs. She doesn't want to leave Harlem, though. What can happen here can happen anywhere. "It ain't the people. It's the law." Mrs. Brown has a great sense of humor and laughs at stories that would make other mothers cry. "They sell dope right across the street from me. Everybody know it. Traffic around here is thicker than on Times Square. And cops

going in all the time to get theirs. First time I saw it, my oldest son showed me." Mrs. Brown has been living in the same house for more than 20 years. This happened when her son was 14. "Before then, I used to always try to get my kids to respect the law. But they don't let you. Here comes this car. Pulls up right in front of the house. A black cop and a white cop is inside

that sounded so weak."

Another mother spoke of how a policeman picked up her 12-year-old son for buying wine. The policeman brought him home and told her to be sure that he was in court the next morning to testify against the liquor-store owner. "I told him, sure. And I should've known. The next day my son comes back home and told me that the cop promised him \$15 if he would forget the whole thing. He never gave the kid a dime. Then about a week later, my son tells me he's going to the precinct to ask that cop for his money. I told him, 'Fool, don't you know that cop will shoot you and swear that you was reaching for a weapon?' Yes, honey, when I was little, they used to shoot you and say you wouldn't stop running. Today they shoot you and say you was reaching."

Criminal acts against the innocent by policemen seem to be a way of life in the inner cities. And it is not just graft, the sale of drugs or wanton shooting. While visiting a fellow writer in a mixed Spanish-black neighborhood recently, I saw a police car pull up and two white policemen get out to enter the basement of the brownstone building next door. "Yeah," my friend said when I mentioned it to him. "They arrested an old Puerto Rican guy about two weeks ago, and they've been coming back ever since. Sometimes two cars at a time." He deliberately waited for me to ask why, before saying, "The man left his 11-year-old daughter behind." Neighbors were standing at windows and stoops all around looking toward that building. Wasn't anyone going to do something? "Look," he said. "Those cats leave their cars and hitch up that big gun bulge on their hips. They run down into that apartment, they stay about one-half hour. They come out and hitch that bulge again before they get in their cars. They know as long as they hitch that bulge they got us. Those cats are serious about their law-and-order thing."

Hostility against the police has had one good effect, though: increasingly uniting the poor blacks and Puerto Ricans. To meet the threat of

est country in the world. When we ask for bread, they say: 'Let them have dope!' And, baby, they see that we get it."

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BUT even with these monumental problems besetting Harlem—and no one has any answers—there is a movement afoot to save Harlem for blacks. It is a movement made up mainly of the middle class—intellectuals and artists who love Harlem because of their nostalgia for its excitement, its color, its historical importance. Some in this group have always lived in Harlem, a part of the middle-class and intellectual community, others have come flocking back with the advent of "Black Power" and the new Black Consciousness in general. Some have moved into the middle-income complexes that ring Central Harlem; many are buying old brownstone houses and renovating them; artists have rented lofts in drug-infested areas and have transformed filthy firetraps into lovely theaters and dance studios with the determination to keep Harlem the black cultural center. There is the Studio Museum, run by Ed Spriggs; Barbara Ann Teer's National Black Theater; Olatunji's African Dance Center; Roger Furman's Afro-American Heritage Theater; Ernie McClintock's Afro-American Total Theater; Al Fann's Theatrical Ensemble; Ed Bullins's New Lafayette; Sonia Sanchez teaches poetry at the Countee Cullen Library, and the Harlem Writers Guild gives training in prose writing, poetry and drama. There are even two young poets who have begun a day-care center on Fifth Avenue where the only requirement for admission is that a child be between the ages of 1 and 4 or hungry.

Joining this group are other lay groups who believe that the city planners plan to take over Harlem for whites. The thinking goes that whites let Harlem deteriorate deliberately in order to regain it, because it is one of the choicest locations in New York, in proximity to business centers and universities of the city. This thinking receives

of that size must bring an influx of whites into the neighborhood, where up to this time they have been afraid to come. Second, Harlem Hospital has already been taken over by Columbia Presbyterian, and the impression is that Morningside Park—scene of the confrontation between Columbia University and the Harlem citizens a few years ago—will quietly be taken over by Columbia again when the State Office Building is up and enough whites move in to shift the balance of power in the area. Third, the middle-income housing complexes of Harlem—Esplanade Gardens, River Bend, Lenox Terrace, as well as Morningside Gardens—appear to have been part of a long-range plan designed to keep poor blacks from moving back into Harlem after leaving it. Fourth, the numerous buildings that are being burned out—some say deliberately—are being torn down, to be reconstructed—the thinking goes—at rents that poor blacks will not be able to afford. Fifth, landlords are refusing to give leases to black businessmen now trying to establish themselves in the 125th Street area. Further, black artists who have rebuilt those firetrap lofts say they are being harassed more and more by landlords, and rents are being pushed up to prices they cannot afford. Babatunde Olatunji, for instance, is now being asked to pay more than \$1,000 a month. And there seem to be many other factors that would support the theory of a white take-over. (It has been pointed out that Lombard Street in Philadelphia, from Broad Street to the Schuylkill River, was taken over this way.)

THESE groups working for the regeneration of Harlem believe in black togetherness, in fighting issues together, in working in the community. They admit they have a long way to go. Their motivation must not be confused with the segregationist thinking of Dr. Thomas Matthew, the black neurosurgeon who currently keeps himself in the public eye by his stand against blacks moving to Forest Hills. Many are angry that Dr. Matthew is taking a "black

that my great-grandfather shed his sweat and blood to build." Another student, who has to step over drug addicts to enter her building, angrily asserted: "They just want to keep us in one place so they can get rid of us when they're ready. Well, I don't want to be hemmed in in no South African reserve, no matter what Nixon and his bosom-buddy Matthew say." (She was alluding to the fact that in January, 1970, President Nixon commuted Dr. Matthew's six-month prison sentence for income-tax evasion.) "If Matthew really wants all blacks to stay in Harlem, he should take on the Mafia. All these so-called black leaders supposed to be talking for black folks. They step right over our addicts in the streets to bring their goons to attack legitimate businesses while the police look the other way. But we don't see nobody, but nobody, attacking the Mafia."

It is difficult to get the people of Harlem to agree on any one thing. They are of all different political persuasions. Some are even staunch Republicans, because "Abraham Lincoln was a Republican." But there are a few things that most agree on, and one of them is the question of genocide. Even those in otherwise apolitical circles believe it.

Speaking with a group of men at a bar near The Amsterdam News offices, I was led outside by some of them. "Now show me," one thick-chested man bellowed loud enough to flicker the eyes of the junkies nodding on that corner, "just show me one of these kids who make a million dollars off stuff. Not one. And none of the slick pushers riding their Cadillac cars around here neither. I'll tell you where to find them. Up there in Government, that's where. Or else hiding out in Forest Hills. Talking about they don't want poor folks living in Forest Hills because of crime. They the criminals!"

"Yeah, they the criminals," his friend agreed. "Right there in Forest Hills. That's why their kids are on dope. Because they know how criminal their parents are. Their children's on dope and they stay quiet about it. They'll see all of

ing Elliot Ness, and he done got tired. No, everybody too busy looking for little girls like Sister Angela."

ONE can almost physically feel the hostility, and the issue of Forest Hills has certainly helped to broaden the gap between the two races. "Look," one young dancer said, "the man that sells us rotten meat, the cop that's on the take, the racketeer that sells us junk, the landlord who exploits us, all take our money and run to hide in Forest Hills. They think our money makes them untouchable. Well, I've got news for them." Even more depressing than this general hostility is that blacks feel there is a pattern of genocide and that all whites, not only the "silent majority," give their silent endorsement.

I sat next to an old woman on a bus from Central Harlem to midtown. She was a lovely lady with a certain lavender-and-old-lace fragility. I noticed that from the moment that whites began replacing blacks in the bus she started a rocking movement. Her eyes settled on a middle-aged white couple deep in conversation, and as though unable to contain herself, she turned to me. "Look at them," she said indicating the couple. "They the meanest people in the world. All they doing sitting there is talking about money. They kill their own mothers for it. They killed our President for it." For a moment she stopped her rocking. "And look how they are killing our sons for it."

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THE lack of power is frustrating to every group I spoke to, but most frustrating of all to the young militants. I am talking here mainly about the poor young dropouts who came out of the harsh realities of the crumbling cities but did not succumb to the drug culture. Those I spoke to were bright. They had still been very young when Malcolm X was killed, when Martin Luther King was killed and when white liberals copped out after the call for Black Power. They came into maturity with the jailings of Huey Newton

were dropouts who went through the fire and came out brilliant." They have no faith in government, less even in black politicians because "if they black and they politicians, then they tools of the Establishment." When asked about Congressman Charles Rangel, they talk about press publicity over the cost of Rangel's Harlem home. "It just shows that he is like white folks. All he want is money and anybody who just want money can't work for black folks because black folks ain't got none."

Most were too young to vote for Powell when he was put out of office. Powell seems to have made one fatal mistake: "He should have gone to jail," one angry youth declared. "That was where it was at. After all, all of the other black leaders went to jail. He would have forced blacks into a confrontation with the Establishment. That's where it was at."

"That's right," a young girl agreed. "That where it was at. But the way I see it, Powell didn't have that extra something to push him to jail. He just wasn't an idealist. He was nothing but a politician."

Older citizens of Harlem do not agree. There may be a general apathy about the Presidential election around Harlem, but there has been no apathy around the Powell issue. Florence Rice of the Harlem Consumer Education Council says: "Many people who are eating today, whites as well as blacks, have Powell to thank. He passed 60 bills when he was Chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee in Congress. He passed the first Minimum Wage Bill, he passed the Higher Education Bill and even the Financial Assistance Bill for students. And now they trying to kill every one of those bills. Black people ain't seen nothing yet. The thing is on the board to kill niggers."

"Powell must be vindicated," she insists. "They pretend they thought he didn't know what he was talking about, but after the Knapp Commission hearings they know he was right. So they must vindicate him."

ulous prices and high installment rates that the poor can never finish paying. Now she is head of the Harlem Consumer Education Council. Like most women I spoke to about the Presidential race, she would vote—even though she might be “throwing away” her vote—for Shirley Chisholm, because “Shirley is the only one up there who is saying anything.”

However, she is convinced that the Presidential race is not as important as the race for Congress. Anger is high around some quarters because Rangel ran for Powell's seat. One old Black Nationalist complained to me: “What power does he [Rangel] have? Trying to outlaw needles so that racketeers can sell them too and have these kids killing twice as many of us to have the money to buy them? That seat [Powell's] should have stayed empty. That would have been a symbol. That's the trouble with black folks. We use a million words where one symbol will speak twice as loud.”

But Florence Rice insists: “It isn't only Rangel. The whites got him in just like the whites got Powell out. It is *all* our so-called black leaders. They're all being used against us. What I'm talking about is power. We don't have power. The reason that they got Powell out is because he was in line for Speaker of the House. That was too much power to give a black. They can't stand us to have power.”

Very typical of Harlem's attitude is that of Lewis Micheaux, who was the proprietor of the oldest and largest bookstore in Harlem.

The store was razed to make way for the New York State Office Building, but it is still a neighborhood institution at its temporary location on 125th Street near Lenox Avenue. Mr. Micheaux has seen every movement around Harlem, from the Garvey movement to the Black Panthers. And he agrees: “Power is the thing. They do everything they want with us because they have power and we don't. The trouble is, the black man is too honest. Never mind all this talk about crime. Everybody know the white man is the criminal. The white man know it! These young punks around here stealing and carrying on, they victims. We are the victims of the victims. Just look out on the street. See cops giving out parking tickets like tickets going out of style. And all the while a pusher leaning up against him and he pretend he don't see. That's power! He better not see!”

On the subject of whites taking over Harlem, Mr. Micheaux exclaims: “Sure, they taking it over and who's to stop them? We don't have one voice up there in Congress. Everybody up there got a price. That's right, everybody got a price, and all they have to do is sit there and say nothing. That's right, don't do and don't say nothing. We ain't got no power. The people in Forest Hills got power. What you want to bet that they stop the construction of those houses. The Jews got power. But the bulldozers will come and move every one of

us right out and won't nobody be able to do nothing. 'Cause everybody got a price. That's right.” After a brief pause he adds: “Sure there was Powell. But Powell was a machine man. You can't be a part of a machine and then buck it. It'll chew you right up.”

Mr. Micheaux is convinced that the basic trouble with the black man is his honesty: “A man come in here one time, tells me he needs money. Ain't got no food to eat, he says, nothing to wear, no place to stay, can't get a job. I told him he didn't have no problem. Go out and steal, I say. Steal, he says. I can't steal. I'm an honest man. No, you ain't, I tell him. You a hungry man. But he still shakes his head. What you got to lose, I ask him. If you steal and get away, you'll have money and won't have to beg. If you get caught, then you'll have a place to stay, clothes to wear and food to eat, and you still won't have to beg. What you got to lose?”

“**A**IN'T nothing complex about power,” Mr. Micheaux has decided. “You either have power over your own life, or someone else will have power over you. Man come in here berating me because I don't go to church. You can't live like that, he says. You don't have a decent life. Come to church and pray to the Lord. I told him, ain't but one Lord I know and that's the landlord. And I seen many a landlord put many of your Lord's churches in the street.” ■

STREET SCENE: A collage of Harlem today, by the black artist Romare Bearden.

It's a far cry from the vigor of old Central Harlem.

But Harlem is still the Capital of the Black World; the problem is still survival.

NIGHT LIFE — Evening time used to be swinging time in Harlem, but now, except for a few places like the Apollo Theater, above the street