

Harlem, History, and First-Year Composition: Reconstructing the Harlem of the 1930s through Multiple Research Methods

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This article describes a first-year composition project in which the students assumed the role of historians, visiting the site of a riot and examining archival documents few researchers have ever studied.

Harlem on a Rampage

Describing the Harlem Riot of 1935, black author and poet Claude McKay wrote, “On Tuesday the crowds went crazy like the remnants of a defeated, abandoned, and hungry army. Their rioting was the gesture of despair of a bewildered, baffled, and disillusioned people” (193). By nearly all accounts, the riot marks the historical end of the Harlem Renaissance, a period of extraordinary social advancement and prodigious artistic output by African Americans. As Langston Hughes famously observed, this was a time “when the Negro was in vogue,” and in which blacks assumed their rightful place in the cultural and political life of the United States (228). But the heady optimism of the 1920s captured in the literature and music of the era by artists like Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, and Duke Ellington gave way to disappointment and hopelessness as the Depression turned Harlem into a ghetto and as dreams of racial equality dried up like a raisin in the sun. The Harlem Riot of 1935 was a bitter reflection of the prevalent frustrations and served as an unfortunate coda to a truly remarkable age.

At LaGuardia Community College in Queens, New York, I recently taught a first-year composition course organized around the literature of the Harlem Renaissance. I used the Harlem Riot of 1935 as a point of departure for the required research paper because it proved to be a useful counterpoint and complement to the literature we discussed in class, while also encapsulating the raw strength and determination of the Harlem residents. The riot attested to the numerous social and political injustices of the 1920s and '30s, including housing conditions, economic exploitation, and police brutality, injustices that still, unfortunately, concern many New Yorkers of color. Because of its relevance, the abundance of primary sources available to the students, and the fact that it occurred just a short subway ride away from our campus at LaGuardia, the Harlem Riot of 1935 prom-

ised to be a project that would actively and intellectually engage the students. My goal was to introduce my students to a variety of research techniques and skills while making the Harlem Renaissance accessible (without oversimplification) and vital. For me, the project served as a palpable means of urging the students, many of whom had never written an academic research paper before and had very little background on the Harlem Renaissance, to grapple with the success, the failure, the high drama, and the lessons of the era.

Anne J. Herrington explains that a successful writing project should include elements of genuine contention, rather than one that asks students to merely reiterate familiar facts and ideas (68). Because of the conflicting information and widespread theorizing regarding the Harlem Riot, I felt that this would be an ideal subject for an investigative and analytical project. As Cheryl Greenberg correctly explains, it has only been relatively recently that historians have regarded race riots as worthy of serious study instead of as what were traditionally regarded as

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“little more than spontaneous, unruly, irresponsible violence led by the poor, generally in order to bash heads or to loot” (395). In fact, I devised the project so that the students would need to go beyond the sensationalized destruction the Harlem rioters unleashed, and asked them to consider the causes behind the riot. Although the assignment was grounded in academic research, I introduced the topic as if it were a crime investigation, which was a genre they understood, with a vocabulary that had more resonance than that of academic research. Admittedly, the project was tightly focused in the early stages to ensure a measure of success for the students, but it was also, as in Herrington’s view of an “ideal” research topic, “open enough for students to develop their own angle of interest” (68). At the same time, I also wanted to provide the students with an opportunity to develop their own voices within the parameters of an academic research paper, which, as recent studies have shown, is no easy task. As Renee M. Moreno affirms, students writing within prescribed departmental strictures (students in first-year composition courses at LaGuardia, for example, are required to write a five-to-seven-page MLA-style essay using at least three sources) often turn in essays that lack their own voices and merely replicate “institutional values” (227).

Gathering the Evidence

Because this was the first research project that many of my students had done, I deliberately took them through the first few steps of the process, focusing their attention on how to find research and how to use it. In preparation for the research project, I asked the students to read “Harlem Runs Wild,” Claude McKay’s description of the riot, which appears in the class text, *The Portable Harlem Renaissance*

Reader. In this short essay, McKay outlines the general events of the riot, which occurred on March 19, 1935. The eruption of violence was the culmination of a series of tragic misunderstandings created when Lino Rivera, a neighborhood teenager, stole a penknife from a five-and-ten-cent store. The police questioned the young man in the store, but because of escalating tensions in the neighborhood, rumors spread quickly that the perpetrator had been beaten by the police. Coincidentally, a hearse pulled up to a neighboring funeral home at the same time, and chaos ensued over the supposed death of the youth, who had actually slipped out the back of the store. In the end, three people were dead, and there was two million dollars in property damage.

A great deal of the specific information does not appear in McKay's essay, however, and when I asked the students to recount their understanding of the riot they had a difficult time. To them McKay's article appeared rather sketchy because it focuses on the theories that precipitated the riot rather than on the riot itself. The students agreed that the essay, which had originally appeared in a black news journal only a week after the riot, was not a comprehensive report because it was clearly written for people who already had a general understanding of the events. They would need to examine other sources to piece together the circumstances of the riot, which led to the first assignment connected with their research project.

As a class, we visited the college's own LaGuardia/Wagner Archives, a repository of papers of several New York City mayors. The staff in the archives presented a brief tour of the facility, pointing out the range of historical materials housed at the college and demonstrating how the documents and artifacts are preserved and collected. In addition to acquainting the students with a wonderful resource that many of LaGuardia's graduates do not even know exists, the tour provided an invaluable lesson on the difference between primary and secondary sources.

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do not even know exists, the tour provided an invaluable lesson on the difference between primary and secondary sources. The visit concluded with an introduction to several folders related to the riot, which I had organized with the archive staff prior to the class visit. These folders contained police reports, eyewitness testimonies, letters to Mayor LaGuardia, newspaper clippings, rally flyers, and other relevant materials. The students were then instructed to return to the archives on their own, and, using the documents, write a two-page report of the events surrounding the riot based on the evidence housed in the folders.

Although all the students had used the same sources to write their reports, when they shared these in small groups and then with the whole class they discovered there were conflicting positions. For example, some of the students' reports pointed to the restraint of the police at the scene, and others argued that the actions of the police had made the situation worse. The shooting of Lloyd Hobbs, a Harlem teenager, was the main source of contention, and students defended their stances on police involvement by indicating passages in legal reports and testimonies on the Hobbs incident they had found in the folders. For instance, while some of the

eyewitness reports state that Hobbs was shot after vandalizing a store and trying to flee from the police, others suggest that he was merely an innocent bystander. The discussion raised invariable comparisons to recent police shootings in New York City, but, more significant in the context of the class, it reflected the difficulty of determining the “truth” of a historical event. The conversations also pointed to what Gina L. DeBlase refers to as the “multiple voices in the composition classroom” whose individual experiences affect the ways in which texts are read (377). As researchers, students recognized the need to avoid assumptions while taking up the difficult task of presenting a well-supported argument using a variety of perspectives.

“Take the A Train”

At this point in the project, the students seemed to have a strong grasp of the events of March 1935, and they were able to speak with some confidence about the era. Their understanding, however, was purely academic, and I felt there was an opportunity to make the riot more concrete to them. Employing the detective metaphor, I suggested that as a class we investigate, as it were, the scene of the crime.

Led by a professional tour guide, we journeyed back to the Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s, crisscrossing streets and avenues, stopping at mostly unmarked monuments of the neighborhood’s heyday. For example, we saw the sidewalk spot where Marcus Garvey held his first rally; the palatial townhouse of A’Lelia Walker, the flamboyant daughter of Madame C. J. Walker who made millions off of her haircare products; and the site of the boarding house once lived in by authors Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, and Bruce Nugent, which Zora Neale Hurston famously dubbed “Niggerati Manor.” Our two-hour excursion concluded at 125th Street, which was, as it is now, the economic and social center of Harlem.

I showed them a picture of the strip in the 1930s from Allon Schoener’s *Harlem on My Mind*, and I asked them to compare it with what they saw in 2002. Although the block was bustling in both historical moments, the students noticed how the storefronts had mostly changed. In 1935, the block was lit by the signs of Blumstein’s Department Store, the Hotel Teresa, and, of course, the Kress Five & Ten Cent Store, where Lino Rivera stole the penknife and sparked a riot. In 2002, the block’s major attractions included the Disney Store, Magic Johnson’s Cineplex, and Bill Clinton’s new office. The one constant remains the Apollo Theatre, which continues to present shows featuring established as well as up-and-coming black talent. It was clear to the students that the thriving thoroughfare of the 1930s was every bit as vital today.

The students found the tour of Harlem extremely enlightening for several different reasons. The first is that it demystified the community for them. Although

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geographically Harlem is less than two miles from LaGuardia, most of the students had never visited the neighborhood. In fact, when I asked the students to write about the experience on the discussion board in the Blackboard computer site we used in the class, several students remarked that Harlem was not the scary, crime-ridden place they imagined it to be. One student, for example, wrote, "Considering I have never been to Harlem before, I was impressed by the difference of the way we hear about Harlem, and the way Harlem really is." Another student concurred, stating, "I've never been in Harlem either, and I thought it was actually decent. I mean, it [was] not at all [the] ghetto people make it seem." One of the students, a resident of Harlem, claimed she had a new appreciation for the neighborhood after the walking tour. "This is where I live," she wrote, "and every day I would hang in front of these places and walk [past] them without even knowing that [they were] a piece of history. Now that I know this, I go every day and tell my friends [about] sites that were part of history."

The tour also changed their perspective on their research into the Harlem Riot of 1935. Although the neighborhood had changed considerably since the 1930s, the students felt they had a much stronger sense of the events, having been to the site where they occurred. In a discussion afterwards, the students reported that they took much more time to think through the details of the events and tried to imagine them after visiting the actual location. They agreed that they could now "picture" the riot because of their experience. As a result, they reexamined the evidence and testimonies from the archive more critically, such as an eyewitness description of a chase that ended in the shooting death of Lloyd Hobbs:

[The police officer] was out on the curb where 128th Street crosses 7th Avenue, just on the intersection of 128th Street. He came down 7th Avenue between 128th and 127th and he jumped out and ran back up 7th Avenue towards 129th Street. ("Depositions" n. pag.)

This information at first glance seems repetitive and not particularly enlightening. But having a clearer sense of these intersections in relation to the eyewitness (he

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was about two blocks away from where the shooting occurred), the students were much more critical of the testimony than when they read it before the tour. The witness testified that he did not hear the police officer shout "halt," but the students now questioned whether he would have been able to hear him anyway amid the sounds of windows smashing and

shouting all around him that night. If they were a jury hearing the case, they remarked, they would not have found the case as cut-and-dried as they had before having all of the evidence.

Putting It Together

After assuming the role of detectives, accumulating facts regarding the riot, the students were next asked to play the parts of attorneys, analyzing the information and making a case about the events. Whereas the initial assignments asked them to consider the “what” and “who” of the Harlem Riot (What was the catalyst for the riot? What happened during the riot? Who was involved?), the final phase asked them to consider the “why” (Why did the Harlem residents react the way they did?). They could focus on a particular social concern, such as housing conditions in Harlem, inequities in the public education system, or job discrimination. They could examine the political climate, such as Mayor LaGuardia’s relationship with the community or the purported link between Communists and the riot. I asked them to concentrate on one of these issues only, developing it with their analysis of the primary source material and bolstering it with secondary sources. Their response would take the form of a five-to-seven-page essay, written in MLA style, and conforming to the English Department’s requirements for a first-year composition research paper.

As with the first phase of the project, I took the students through the research paper, staging the often daunting aspects of such an assignment. We used Marian Arkin and Cecilia Macheski’s *Research Papers: A Practical Guide*, which offers an excellent step-by-step method for writing. Along the way, I collected and provided time for peer feedback on students’ research proposals (one-page summaries of what they intended to prove in their papers), preliminary and revised thesis statements, outlines, bibliographies, and paper drafts. The students received a great deal of feedback and support along the way, and because they were all focused on the same general topic, they were able to give advice on pursuing other sources, strengthening their analyses, and pointing out areas in need of further development. Although I use peer critique workshops when students are working on a range of topics, I found that in this case it worked especially well since they had all become quite knowledgeable on the topic and the variety of sources available to them.

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scintillating rather than the bland first-year-term-paper voices I usually receive. One student, for example, began his paper with a tone appropriate for the sensational events that occurred. In his paper, titled “A Disheartened Community: Misconceptions, Economic Issues, and the Harlem Riot of 1935,” the student wrote: “In 1935 Harlem was a tinderbox waiting to be ignited. On March 19th, 1935, a

sixteen-year-old young man was used as that igniter.” Immersing themselves in the often conflicting primary source materials gave the students the tools to be much more critical, confident, and creative in their reactions. And because they did not actually refer to secondary sources until late in the process, there was less temptation to rely on particular accounts or interpretations merely because they were published. By having the opportunity to review the relevant primary sources and visit the neighborhood involved the students wrote with a sense of authority, and the secondary sources supported and supplemented their arguments rather than dictating them and putting the students in the role of voiceless summarizers.

Finally, their familiarity with the material made the prospect of MLA citations and documentation far less threatening. Oftentimes the formal constraints of the research paper make the students feel as though their own perspectives are not important, and that the essential goal is to write “correctly,” demonstrating their mastery of seemingly random and meaningless academic symbols and formulae. Because of their closeness to the material, however, my students were able to appreciate the rigid guidelines as suitable shorthand for presenting, managing, and framing their own uses of the material. As a result, their final papers indicated that the students were less intimidated by issues of form and were able to connect the material to their own lives. One student, for example, concluded his essay by advocating that African Americans assume a stronger role in political matters in Harlem and “[force] politicians to adhere to the demands made by the Black community.” His reading of history provided him with a stronger commitment to the present.

I plan on introducing similar archival and location-based projects in my future first-year composition courses. The Harlem Riot of 1935 activity engendered a strong sense of community among the class members and enabled the students to write with assurance on a shared research topic, which also engaged them intellectually and socially. At the end of the semester, one student wrote in the Blackboard discussion site, “I never interacted so much in one class. I’m usually the boy that sits in the back of the room and says absolutely nothing. You could say that I acquired the skill of communication.” As history shows, sometimes it takes a riot to get people talking and writing. ◀

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