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**BANGCLASH: Belongingness and the Harlem Drummers**

Harlem is vicious  
modernism. BangClash  
Amiri Baraka, "Return of the Native"

Like it or not, we are all living in an increasingly postmodern world that is creating new contexts and new challenges that cannot be effectively responded to by clinging to older ways of thinking and acting politically. The city and the urban still remain sites of contestation and struggle, but the social processes and spatial forms, and the spatial processes and social forms that define these struggles are now significantly different from what they were even ten years ago... (Soja, 1998).

INTRODUCTION

On a warm Saturday night in July 2007, a group of musicians gathered to play in an African drumming circle in New York City. For over thirty years, some composition of drummers had assembled at this precise location in Marcus Garvey Park, propelling the sound of loud, rhythmic beats throughout the 20 acre refuge of green grass into the bustling Harlem neighborhood that surrounded it (New York City Departments of Parks and Recreation 2009). On this night, however, two White police officers responding to a noise complaint about the music attempted to draw an abrupt end to the jam session. Infuriated, the mostly elderly Black performers resisted this effort to quiet their drums and refused to stop playing. Surprisingly, it was the rowdy band of musicians, and not the complaining white residents of a nearby co-op, that seemingly prevailed in their battle to lay claim to public space and sound in a gentrifying city area.

In this essay I argue that establishing 'belongingness' within public space is an essential component to the process in which any group of people move into an already occupied area. I specifically define "belongingness" *as ownership of and entitlement to a space that exists outside of financial claims which is demarcated by physical, aural, and temporal iconography and presence*. Generally speaking, "belongingness" is the *process*

*through which one demonstrates the 'right to be' in a public space. It urges one to imagine who should occupy a space, regardless of its actual residents. Thus, belongingness is the process by which one can both facilitate and resist the gentrification of an urban area.*

As a predominantly Black area in New York City, Harlem has a deep history of racial belongingness that situates it uniquely in response to other types of belongingness claims. The incident in Harlem demonstrates how belongingness may manifest itself in conflicts over space and, particularly when racially or culturally expressed, can serve as a counter process to gentrification. Through this case study, we can see the ways in which the displacement of people within spaces defined by racial belongingness, particularly as it relates to the Black public sphere, can complicate traditional scholarly understandings of struggles over public space. In the first section, I define and illustrate belongingness in geographic analyses, past and present. In the next section, I discuss how racial belongingness has been cultivated both within and outside of Harlem. The third section specifically describes the incident that occurred between the drummers, city officials, and White residents, and discusses how the claims made by those involved represent various forms of belongingness. Finally, I discuss the example of the Harlem drummers and the significance of belongingness in future examinations of public space and neighbourhood change.

## BELONGINGNESS

As a claims-making process, belongingness manifests itself in the visual, physical, aural and temporal organization of a space. Though not explicitly recognized as such, the concept of belongingness has been fully visible in the urban geography discourse that examines gentrification. John Western (Western 1993) notes that “many studies have indicated that an area’s perceived hip qualities seem to be associated with early stages of gentrification”. In his book, *The New Urban Frontier*, Neil Smith’s (1996) important analysis of gentrification in various cities uncovers a Western Frontier thematic in urban displacement. In his depiction of the transformation of New York City’s Lower East Side, Smith notes that:

In the language of gentrification , the appeal to frontier imagery has been exact: urban pioneers, urban homesteaders and urban cowboys became the new folk heroes of the urban frontier... The term “urban pioneer” is therefore as arrogant as the original notion of “pioneers” in that it suggests that a city is not yet socially inhabited; like the Native Americans, the urban working class is seen as less than social, as a part of the physical environment (p. xiv).

The idea of pioneers invading an ‘empty’ urban space is important rhetoric in urban gentrification. The “urban frontier motif” is both a mythological and ideological device that promotes gentrification while simultaneously dismissing those who are displaced.

More importantly, Smith’s description of the Western reinscription of the Lower East Side unwittingly depicts the creation and production of “belongingness” in the form of urban cowboy codification. That is, in order for new “yuppies” to move into the Lower East Side, belongingness needed to be established through physical markers that signified the rightful occupants. In the Lower Eastside, Smith observed that “Tex-Mex restaurants” and the consumption of “cowboy chic”, “desert décor”, and Indian American themed goods were woven into the transforming landscape block by block (pp. 15-18). Smith is not simply reflecting on 1980s New York fashion – he is witnessing how “belongingness” is constructed through art and symbolic ownership for new inhabitants attempting to recreate an already existing city space. In order to employ frontier imagery and claim urban space, physical markers of belongingness are essential.

Other authors have depicted the significance of belongingness in their studies of struggles over public space. John Urry (Urry 1995) observed that cultural groups vie over the interpretation and meaning of a space as a part of territorialisation. Similarly, Sophie Watson (2006) examined various urban controversies surrounding the erection of an inner-city eruv, a Jewish area with virtually invisible boundaries that permit free movement for Orthodox believers. Others who lived within the boundaries of the eruv

challenged it because it implied an acquisition of space that was already filled --- the eruv created belongingness, a critical step in claims-making which precedes physical occupation and subverts *property-based* entitlement. The vehement opposition that many residents posed to the erection of an inconspicuous eruv emphasized the importance of symbolic power in the creation and organization of space (p. 39). Nicholas Blomely (2004) further substantiates my concept of belongingness when he observes that

... Claims to property that escape the ownership model [are] enacted. ... They not only draw upon suppressed meanings and practices, but also can rework dominant enactment... (p. 23)

Here Blomely is describing how belongingness not only undermines traditional notions regarding financial entitlement and access to property, but also redefines and maintains alternative nodes of property. Thus, one key function of belongingness is that it relies largely on symbolic power to reconstruct public space and expand it into private property (and vice versa). As a result, belongingness can be used to legitimize the presence of some people while also excluding others.

This notion of belongingness as a claims-making process to a space is entirely distinct from the familiar geographical concepts of “sense of place” or “attachment to place”, though the concepts necessarily interact. Sense of place, or attachment to place, can best be described as an individual’s emotional or intellectual connection to a space, which gives that area personal meaning and makes it a “place” (Tuan 1977; Hummon 1992; Jackson 1995; Hay 1998; Ashworth and Graham 2005). For Hidalgo and Hernandez (2001) place attachment is the tendency of people to seek out places that they make them feel comfortable and secure. Massey (1993 and McDowell (1997) both suggest that social interactions alone can cultivate a sense of place or attachment to place, without any visual, aural, or physical space markers. In short, sense of place generally refers to the way a person emotionally relates to a place (Relph 1976). Belongingness, however, is the way people and objects are used within a public space to signal a readable

claim to an area. While sense of place, or attachment to place, seeks to explain an individual's personal connection or feelings of belonging to a space, belongingness creates a sense of place in area for an individual that does not necessarily have a previous connection to that space. Simply put, belongingness is the process of manufacturing a sense of place for both outsiders and residents within a locale. Or, in other words, belongingness is the material expression of a sense of place. Belongingness declares what and whom should be in a landscape.

Public space, inasmuch as it provides the place for belongingness, is where the interstices of race, class, and migration become most relevant. In this paper, I will draw on Sophie Watson's (2006) notion of public space *as a site of multiple connections and inter-connections among different people and location of contestation of fixed (and fluid) identities*<sup>i</sup> in combination with Iveson's (2007) procedural definition of public space, which is

understood to be any space which, through political action and public address at a particular time, becomes 'the site of power, of common action coordinated through speech and persuasion'(p. 10).

Thus, public space functions as a place of possibility for its inhabitants, where the action or presence of any given person has the potential for politicization through visibility, mobilization, interaction, and dominance. Consequently, public space is always a site of struggle. I also employ Iveson's understanding of "being public" as moving beyond the geographical confines of particular people within a particular place to also "imagining oneself and those others to be part of a public which exists beyond the spatial and temporal limits of any particular association or gathering"(p. 31). He argues that public address is the way "people can (re)present themselves before an audience of strangers"(p. 3). The projection of an audience for those who occupy public space is critical because it explains the ways in which people perform in public space, cognizant of how their performance is connected to and can be read by others outside of the immediate vicinity.

Without a recognizable context, an identified audience, a struggle over power, and a presumed response, a marker of belongingness is lost in a crowd of countless interactions and everyday symbols within public space – it is the readability of belongingness that makes it so salient. This conception of space emphasizes the usefulness of belongingness in addressing an imagined public – for if belongingness is the *ownership of and entitlement to a space that exists outside of financial claims*, public space provides the only venue to manifest and communicate such “alternative claims”.

Frequently, discussions of constructed, symbolic, and imagined entitlements to a place as produced by belongingness are often primarily concerned with the function of class rather than race and culture. When Blomely (2004) refers to “other understandings of property”, he is talking about ways to create space in which the “poor” oppose capitalist property relations and economically-motivated displacement (p. 55). In offering a geographical analysis of space and power in the city, Edward Soja (1989) writes that

...Both the social and spatial structures are constituted around an exploitative relation rooted in control over the means of production and sustained by an appropriation of value by the dominant social class (p. 111).

The creation of space and organization of people, Soja is arguing, is largely due to flows of capital and construction of class (Churchill and Vander Wall 1990; Bauman 2000; Auge 1996). This is a regular position of public space texts<sup>ii</sup>. The people discussed as excluded and displaced from public spheres are the homeless and the working class, who just *happen* to often be people of color.

Other public space and geography scholars have described the consequences of prioritizing class as a primary analytic entry into examining the changing landscapes of racialized spaces. Gregory (1995) says focusing on Black middle class abandonment of Black areas like Harlem “offers a reductive and decontextualized perspective on class identities” (p. 153). Clyde Woods’ offers a stinging critique of the failure of geographers to

take note of the importance of race in land claims, regulations, and state investment and disinvestment practices. “Even progressive scholars” Woods writes, “seem to be incapable of seeing the new regional social and spatial foundation of post-civil rights racism” (pp. 64 -65). Without an analytical approach that prioritizes race in analyses of power in geography, Woods warns that “the dialogue and solutions offered by such studies are deceptive at best” (p. 65).

Racial and cultural belongingness are particularly significant because it situates itself in opposition to class construction (or, rather, division) in the territorialisation of the city. By introducing belongingness as part of a systematic approach to publicly inviting a select few and displacing devalued others in an area, I hope to broaden the conversation about gentrification and introduce a way in which scholars can more keenly identify the function of race in space conflicts. Moreover, clashes over public space in which racial belongingness is clearly recognized should present the most interesting possibilities for examining alternative claims to property and, thus, the most potential in redefining and rearticulating public space in critical ways.

In examining Harlem and the case of the Harlem drummers, I seek to demonstrate the meaningful nature of racial belongingness and its importance in challenging notions of public space and property. Areas specifically defined by racial, ethnic, or cultural occupation may more easily command what Blomely (2004) describes as the reframing of property and power relations where

*Subordination* can be recast as oppression, and thus politicized. Rather than reflecting false consciousness, rights struggles, from this perspective, are “intensely powerful and calculated political acts (p. 65).

It is in Blomely’s subordination-oppression-politics matrix that the salience of race becomes most important. Race is about subordination—and racial belongingness necessarily implicates oppression, in that it claims the need for sanctuary and refuge from

spaces of racial exclusion and marginalization. But racial belongingness also implies *insubordination* -- it also reifies the right to such a space. Thus, belongingness can serve as a potent argument and action against displacement and gentrification.

## HARLEM, USA

Harlem as a stage for the drumming incident is important, inasmuch as Harlem's social construction over the last century has depended upon the public and racial imagination, asserting its racial belongingness inside *and* outside of its physical boundaries. Harlem first became established as a space for Black people in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in response to an overdeveloped housing market in Manhattan in which there was both too much housing and an ebbing demand among Whites for homes (Smith, 1996). Since Whites limited the areas where Blacks could live in the city, residential space for Blacks was scarce and in high demand. Consequently, Blacks of every class group were charged higher rents to live in a place like Harlem and, with less pay than White peers, often shared densely packed living quarters (Taylor, 2002). Resourceful realtors quickly took advantage of this opportune situation and opened Harlem's doors to the rapid influx of Southern Black migrants into New York while at the same time purchasing homes cheaply from fleeing Whites.

The large numbers of Blacks flooding to Harlem facilitated the creation of Black organizations and institutions, like the National Urban League in 1918, and community mobilization efforts, like Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (Taylor, 2002, p. 7). In the 1920s, Harlem Renaissance writers and artists declared that Harlem was "the Black Mecca", implying that it was a place of sacred space and a pilgrimage destination for Blacks everywhere; indeed, Harlem became the "Capital of Black America" (Jackson, 2001).

Racial belongingness in Harlem was established by Black cultural production in public address and public space. Scholar Monique M. Taylor (2002) writes that many famous Harlem writers, like Langston Huges and Claude McKay, often used Harlem as a setting and symbol in their work (p. 11). Additionally, the use other forms of public address, like film, song and parades/marches were crucial to the racialized designation of

Harlem as a Black space in Black critical memory (Baker, 1999). As Sophie Watson explains, “How we imagine a place, space, city in large part creates the conditions of possibility for how we act, which itself creates the contours of that very space” (Watson, 2006, p. 8). Belongingness, then, represents the shift of imagination to social practice that constitutes “a form of negotiation between sites of agency (“individuals”) and globally defined fields of possibility” (Arjun Appaduri as cited in Baker, 1999, p. 273). Thus, public space in Harlem has been constructed and organized along the lines of the symbolic imaginary, bearing out physical witness to anyone who surveys the area. As a result, Harlem

stretches beyond the confines of its physical space to gather in a far-flung African diaspora. The distinctiveness of African, Caribbean, and southern and Midwestern U.S. blackness abounds in the sights, sounds, colors, and flavors of the traditions and day-to-day life in the community. Many of the streets of Harlem are identified by pairs of green street signs suggestive of the black claim. Here 125<sup>th</sup> Street is Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard; Seventh Avenue is Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard; Eighth Avenue is Frederick Douglass Boulevard. Important figures in black history – Jackie Robinson, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Sojourner Truth, and Mahalia Jackson—identify schools and housing complexes. Marcus Garvey Park sits on Fifth Avenue between 120<sup>th</sup> and 124<sup>th</sup> Streets. (Taylor, 2002, p. xv).

In short, Harlem is a place defined by racial belongingness, a space of easily legible racial and cultural symbolism.

Beyond the visual superimposition of race upon physical locations, racial belongingness in Harlem has also depended upon contestations in the aural landscape of public space. Scholar Clare Corbould (2007) argues that noise in Harlem was used to

create a counter-public sphere in response to the presence of white landlords, shopkeepers, policemen, and visitors. She writes

What white visitors found "noisy"—whether they were excited or repelled by it—marked out the territory, as it were... This use of public space had as its analogue the formation of a black public sphere. Members of this counter-public sphere, including those associated with the Harlem Renaissance, defined themselves as aural beings, rather than as individuals oriented by sight. Debate erupted frequently within this sphere as to what was appropriate sound or noise, on the streets and especially in political and social agitation. The multiplicity of voices was ultimately the defining characteristic of the black public sphere, and of black modernity itself (p. 3).

Through aural, visual, and imaginative assertions, Harlem became a space of counterpublic Black racial hegemony. Harlem, too, created a space for white consumption of the “Black authentic” (Taylor, 2002). Most importantly, Harlem established a rehabilitatory space for racially marginalized people, despite its construction through and effects of ghettoization. Even as Harlem deteriorated later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it maintained its reputation in the social imaginary and within its geographical border as a space for Black dominance, pride, and respectability for people of color, a “Mecca” for the racially unwanted in America. It constructed an identity using racial belongingness, which provided it with a layer of cultural insulation from other rapidly changing areas of Manhattan.

In recent times Harlem has undergone another major demographic transformation, also known as gentrification. Gentrification is generally defined as the process by which the middle-class abandons and then returns to occupy an urban area. During the initial stage of gentrification, the outmigration of the middle class also results in corporate

disinvestment of urban spaces, which leads to lower quality housing, resources, and environment for the remaining population. Consequently, and as exemplified in the case of our Harlem drummers and the complaining co-op owners, one key component to gentrification is the rehabilitation of residential, and sometimes non-residential, areas (Schaeffer and Smith: 1986, p 347). As John Jackson Jr. (2006) explains, the impact of race upon the traditional gentrification narrative has meant that many scholars have blamed the dysfunction of the poverty-stricken communities of color like Harlem on the exit of the Black middle class (p. 194).

In Harlem, this hypersensitivity to Black middle class abandonment meant that people believed the key to its rejuvenation was a return of the *Black* middle class. Thus, much of Harlem's real estate endeavors in the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century specifically targeted members of the Black bourgeoisie to purchase and renew homes in the area (Taylor, 1991). Once new middle class occupants began to include Whites, people became much more aware of the other major component of gentrification – the displacement of lower income residents who can no longer afford to purchase or rent the homes that have grown in value as a result of the increased market demand. For some Harlem residents, this relocation of poorer inhabitants is “a deal-breaking by-product” of Harlem's revitalization (Jackson, pp. 192-193) and is strongly resisted.

The reindustrialization and renovation that occurs in gentrifying places also inevitably produces the same social displacement in public areas (p. 204). Thus, Jackson concludes that “gentrification is as importantly about reprivatizing public space as it is about evicting building tenants” (p. 204). As I mentioned previously, this reprivatization functions through the cultural transformation of a space as exemplified in the cowboy themed transition of New York's Lower East Side. However, in Harlem racial belongingness has endowed middle-class Blacks with a type of ‘*gentrifier exceptionality*’ and allowed them to use “counterclaims of racial communality” to justify their move to Harlem (and potential displacement of working class minorities) (p. 204). In other words, middle-class Blacks transcend (or largely evade) class strife through racial unity.

The connections between racial belongingness in Harlem and gentrification must be clearly stated. Harlem is a solidly racial space in the realm of Manhattan, serving as a

cultural capital in which Black residents are entitled to exist. As a symbol of Blackness, Black residents are essential to perpetuating this ideal, making the resistance to White gentrification much more compelling here than in other spaces. A new cultural claim cannot be so easily inscribed upon a landscape already defined by a recognized race or ethnic group. There is already a visual, physical, aural and temporal organization of space in Harlem that signals existing racial and cultural claims.

Some scholars critique racial belongingness in Harlem because it frequently depends upon the chimera of nostalgia and the fallacy of racial essentialism. Specifically, Monique M. Taylor (2002) deconstructs the “rhetoric of return” in Harlem, which involves “the real, imagined, exaggerated, and manipulated concepts invoked by black gentry to explain themselves as rightfully belonging in Harlem”. She writes that

Harlem’s marginality embodied for many black writers a dark despair that defined the space of “the other” in negative terms. By extension then, racial minorities, when they were seen as being limited or restricted by such spaces, needed to cast off the identities that marginal arenas reinforced (p. 22).

Using racial belongingness, then in “protecting” Harlem from non-Black gentrifiers has the potential to reinscribe racism for Blacks both within and outside of Harlem. That is, claims of racial belongingness are predicated exclusively upon racial exclusion and insubordination, making the presence of one dependent upon the existence of the other. This argument implies that the desire to eradicate racism is weakened within the Black community that should be primarily advocating for it- because without racism, *there is no Black community*.

While these points are important, I contend that racial belongingness also provides the potential to decenter the post-racial discourse of public space. By removing class as the most crucial point of investigative entry into gentrification, race forces the reality and experiences of race based organization of space into the discussion. More than

that, it offers alternative claims of belongingness for people in communities more defined by race and marginalization than by poverty and “blight”. The use of race recognizes the importance of what Elizabeth Alexander (1999) calls “the bottom line blackness” within the public sphere.

The bottom line here is that different groups possess sometimes-subconscious collective memories which are frequently forged and maintained through a storytelling tradition, however difficult that may be to pin down, as well as through individual experience. When a black man can be set on fire amidst racial epithets in the street because he inhabits a black body, as recently occurred in Florida, there must be a place for theorizing black bodily experience within the larger discourse of identity politics (p. 84).

In employing racial belongingness, one can recognize the contemporary and historical salience of race, without having to argue for its essential (or biological) nature. Race is not just the function of romantic nostalgia—it is also the lived reality of the ways that violence constructs public urban (and non-urban) space. Without it, space and class provide insight into a very limited view of urban space and experience. If race is not employed in urban discourse, racial belongingness becomes a misunderstood or neglected aspect of gentrification.

## DRUMMING OR NOISE

In describing what took place in Marcus Garvey Park in Harlem in June 2007, I have used multiple sources in constructing this retelling. Drawing on Iveson’s notion of public address, I offer up these sources as addressing different imagined audiences. Using all of them in order to reconstruct the “happening” of the drumming incident is important, for it exposes the variations in the language and details of the reporting about this event. I

consulted local reports from online blogs, Amsterdam News (one of the oldest Harlem based Black newspapers) and national news sources, such as the Associated Press, the New York Times, and the National Public Radio in order to recreate the events that occurred in summer 2007. I also interviewed two board members of the Marcus Garvey Park Alliance (MGPA), a park advocacy group founded by mostly middle-class Black Harlem residents in 1999. The two board members were each intensely involved in the events relating to the incident with in June 2007 and its aftermath, and their tellings provided me with firsthand perspectives<sup>iii</sup>. In using these diverse sources, I attempt to subvert the claim to objectivity that each source makes (and, to some extent, the notion of “objective fact” in and of itself) by resituating them equally as multiple forms of public address. The differences in language and detail employed in each account could serve as the basis of an entire essay on its own. I offer them here, not to supply an analysis of such distinctions, but rather to place them in context and identify the most fascinating departures in description.

At 7:30 pm on June 30, 2007, a group of people who were drumming in Marcus Garvey Park in Harlem were interrupted by “two white police officers” (Moorer, 2007). The officers explained that residents of a building close to the park had complained about the noise and demanded that the drummers stop. The drummers refused to leave saying that “We have been drumming every week until 9 pm for the last 30 years and we will continue to 9 pm” (Stevens, 2007). With tensions running high, the police officers called for reinforcement, ultimately bringing nine policemen and lights to the scene (Moorer, 2007). The drummers maintained that they would not leave, saying “It’s our culture from Africa” and several white residents watched the scene from their building above (Moorer, 2007). One blog writer reports that a woman associated with the drummers declared “if they don’t want to hear the drumming, they should move” (Stevens, 2007). Ultimately, the drummers continued playing while various members of the audience, including co-op residents who were watching from balconies above, recorded the interaction with video cameras and cell phones. After a 25-minute stand off, and following an MGPA boardmember’s urgent appeal to the local precinct’s commanding officer, the police officers left and the drummers continued (McIntosh, 2009).

A few days later, the Marcus Garvey Park Alliance organized a meeting between the drummers, park officials and building residents to discuss the noise conflict (Associated Press, 2007). In the end, the drummers agreed to move away from their normal drumming place to a location further inside the park. On Saturday, July 7<sup>th</sup> a rally “of solidarity” was held at the park in response to the police’s attempted dispersal of the drummers the week before. People from various states, including other drummers, poured into Harlem to show solidarity with the drummers and resist the pressure of the White co-op residents. On July 13<sup>th</sup>, a second meeting between park administrators, co-op representatives, members of the MGPA, and drummers occurred. After conducting a brief scouting tour of the park, the present attendees agreed to another designated drumming site within the park for the drummers that both created distance from the co-op building and permitted the musicians to drum until 9 pm without fear of police interruption or removal. One blog complained that the new location made the drummers invisible, writing “Try to find the drummers now!” Yet, the services that park representatives promised to provide in order to facilitate the drummers’ relocation, including assistance for the physically impaired, never came to fruition. By the time that a National Public Radio report aired on September 01, 2007, the drummers had moved back to their original location. The final move for the drummers would not occur until Spring 2008, when the official sign declaring the “Marcus Garvey Drumming Circle” was erected in the Park at a location that was much easily accessible for disabled drummers and still maintained a substantial distance from the co-op building. According to MGPA boardmembers, the drummers continue to play until 9:00 pm every Saturday in their circle (McIntosh, 2009).

Since the White residents who lived in the co-op were ostensibly using state resources to displace the drummers, many people viewed this incident as a classic gentrification struggle between higher-income new residents versus previous low-income residents. Still, this situation was much more complex. First, the building near the drum circle was a newly constructed co-op, so the arrival of its new tenants had not directly displaced Black residents (although the development of corporate-owned lots is a common feature in gentrification (Smith 1996)). Second, the members of the drum circle

were not all residents of Harlem—that is, their claim to the space in the park was not based upon their status as residents but, rather, upon the idea that they were entitled to the space in Marcus Garvey Park because of their many years of use and their form of Black cultural expression. Thus, the case expressed an explicit example of “racial belongingness” – that is, the drummers were asserting a claim to the space in Marcus Garvey Park that countered the claims of recently arrived white, property-owning inhabitants. The authority of disapproving and invading Whites was directly threatening the “culture” of Black Harlem.

The Blackness of the drummers provided them with an entitlement to the space that could challenge the residents making the complaints – the complex, overlapping identities that connect race with socio-economic status had transformed any White person into a Harlem gentrifier. That is, a White person who was obstructing the ‘rightful’ occupancy of Black people in a Black space signified the simultaneous *displacement of* the Black space by its *replacement* with a White one. Racial difference made what could have been read as a common noise complaint a story about gentrification, a tale about the consequences of invasive and privileged “others” who pit their interests against that of their neighbors, operating with a zero-sum game mentality. The importance of this Harlem example is the salience of the drummers’ appeal to racial belongingness, which evoked sympathy, anger, and active support from citizens and journalists nationwide.

There are several components to the arguments surrounding the park contestation and their resulting reports that stand out, particularly because they show how public space is both surveilled and contested through racial belongingness<sup>iv</sup>. Certain words tactically address the Black public (and perhaps incite the white public) by describing the drummer’s situation as a “battle” (Hansen, 2007) over the “sacred/spiritual” use of a public space. In one article, a drummer commented that:

The drum is also spiritual. It's about bringing healing and culture. It's about not forgetting our sacred ancestry... When we come together like this, it's about being harmonious as a people. This is the beauty of the drum (Price, 2001).

The invocation of the “sacred/spiritual” is important in its own right, as it posits a semi-religious claim to the space that is also counter-Christian (read: counter-hegemonic). Specifically, in a warning, one drummer explained that

Some of these drums are prayed over, blessed in Africa.  
And if a policeman comes over and puts his hands on the  
drums, it'll be over (Associated Press, 2007).

Another drummer commented:

This park is an Indian burial ground, so the drums belong  
here. People - like people move in to the area and they just  
want to change everything, and we're not having that. This  
is our church. So if they don't like (unintelligible), then  
they got to go back in the suburbs (Hansen, 2007).

Designating the drum as sacred and remarking that the park is an “Indian burial ground”, strategically invokes the symbolic memory of Indian genocide in the face of urban frontierism, while designating the space the drummers occupied as sacred. This particular belongingness claim establishes the police officers’ intervention as a state-based intrusion of a religious ceremony or realm. To designate it as solely a religious claim, though, is to undermine its importance, for the Black community’s identity and mobilization has always been inextricably tied to religious organization and identity (Billingsley, 1999; Cone 1997, Raboteau 1995; Rabouteau 1978). This intersectional ethno-racial and religiously based claim of the sacred is important. The sacredness of Africa, or drums being ‘blessed’ in Africa implies a divine transnational movement against white supremacy and the degrading effects of racism, which drew Africa as a location of savagery and incivility. To make Africa – and the drums that represent it - a locale of the sacred is the function of a decidedly anti-racist effort. In part, this claim may have

contributed to the police's aversion to physically removing the Black male drummers and the decidedly racial undertones of the incident in which the drummers became willing martyrs.

As a symbol, the African drum also embodies the recovered legacy of post-slavery America and a symbol of Black racial solidarity and White oppression. As one Black middle class Harlem resident said, silencing the drum “was almost like going back to slavery, when the drum was taken away from us” (McIntosh, 2009). Despite presumed class similarities to the White co-op residents, i.e. home ownership, income, education, another Black middle-class Harlemiter echoed similar feelings (Bradley, 2009). One blogger reported a drummer supporter saying “The communal power of the drum circle would not submit...The drum has always been the soul and connecting point of the people”(Johnson, 2007). The incident surrounding the drum was a reminder of previous racial oppression and subjugation that united other Harlem Blacks of various socio-economic levels with the elderly and disenfranchised mix of Garvey Park drummers. Through what Houston Baker Jr. calls “critical memory”, members of Harlem's black public sphere understood the importance of the symbolic in relation to black struggle worldwide. “Critical memory works to illustrate the continuity, at a black majority level, in the community-interested politics of black publicness in America” (Baker, 1999, p. 265). The use of the formerly forbidden drum in the Harlem public space represented a signal of racial progress and belongingness, a cultural act that was generally well-received by Black residents in the area, regardless of class status.

Naming is another issue that surfaces among the retellings. Mount Morris Park was renamed “Marcus Garvey Park” by the City Council in 1973, during the height of the Black Power movement (Bradley, 2009). The area surrounding the park, however, is still officially the Mount Morris Park Historical district and some people continue to refer to the park by its original name (Lasner & Swett, 2004; Lee, 2008). Naming is an integral aspect of belongingness because it identifies for whom a space is created. Tensions between Harlem community members over the misuse of the park's current title, which memorializes a famous Black nationalist leader who led a “return” of African Americans to Africa, demonstrates the importance of belongingness iconography in supporting the

drummers' and other Black claims to the space. Refusing to use "Marcus Garvey Park" serves as a passive dismissal of a racially encoded entitlement to the park. Other such dismissals have already occurred in Harlem—for instance, Columbia University's refers to its surrounding Harlem neighborhood as "Morningside Heights".

Temporal boundaries are also crucial to the contestation over drumming. In many of the articles, one white female resident is frequently quoted as saying that the "drumming is wonderful for the first four hours, but after that, it's pure, unadulterated noise" (Dobnik, 2007). Four hours becomes her established boundary for the drumming before it *becomes* noise. Thus, it is not the presence of the drummers or merely the noise of the drums that the woman underpins as her primary complaint – it is the time. Temporal control is a useful device, as it is a passive indicator that distinguishes what, or whom, is important within a space. Many parks close at night to prevent homeless people from sleeping in them – thus, a temporal constraint can be employed to effectively remove a certain member of the public from the public space. More than that, temporal control allows for a reemergence of patterns as framed for and by those with power, particularly in the city.

Urban time appears to be transparent, organized for business and the transportation of people across the spaces of the city and routinely expressed in the preoccupation with timetables, starting and finishing times, opening and closing times (Westwood & Williams, 1997, p. 6)

Restrictions regarding noise can also be employed in the same ways, revealing different ideas about what is allowed in a space, undermined by the "who" gets to set and establish codified norms. Time and sound are thus mutually dependent in constructing boundaries of an aural landscape – for while time is important because it allows for the presence of a certain public within a space, noise is integral because it establishes an aural public who is being addressed. It is precisely time and noise arguments that can excuse the "exclusion from public spaces [as] the product of so-called 'anti-social' and criminal

behaviour” (Iveson, 2007, p. 5). Thus, the establishment of temporal and aural boundaries alludes to the deviant “other” and functions to exclude those “others” from a space, while embracing some individuals or groups who are deemed more important.

The drummers neatly counter the building residents’ property based entitlement to temporal and aural control over the park through rhetorical assertions of their cultural/traditional/ritual (and, in some ways, temporal) right to the drumming location. The claim that they had been drumming in that park at that specific time for “over 30 years” -- since 1969, to be exact (Associated Press, 2007) -- places them as the context of the space, not merely its inhabitants. The drummers, in essence, argue that they *are* the public space in the park. They are, in fact, artifacts of racial belongingness. They also signal their racial belongingness in their use of “we” and “they” in reference to themselves and the (white) residents. The drummers claim that they have a right to the spot due to their previous temporal and physical occupation – a claim rooted in Harlem’s historically racial roots. It is ultimately their use of belongingness that allows them to continue their drumming that night, and thereafter.

## DISCUSSION

Through this case study, we can see the ways in which racial belongingness complicates class based understandings of the struggles over public space and claims to property within the city. For racial belongingness reconstructs notions of the public in general.

The black public sphere—as a critical social imaginary... draws energy from the vernacular practices of street talk and new musics, radio show and church voices... Its task is not the provision of security for the freedom of conversation among intellectuals, as was the case of bourgeois public spheres of earlier centuries. Rather it marks a wider sphere of critical practice and visionary politics, in which intellectuals can join with the energies of

the street, the school, the church, and the city to constitute a challenge to the exclusionary violence of much public space in the United States (Black Public Spheres, 1995, p. 3).

In the drumming incident, people who do not live in Harlem (the drummers) were able to demand and, for the time being, secure their ability to occupy a space to which they had no financial entitlement. Their proprietary claims to the space in the park drew on temporal, cultural, symbolic and traditional claims that reside fully upon a Black identity as articulated through naming and historical allusion. This case complicates Blomely's argument for alternative property rights, for Blomely can only envision such claims made by residents of and within a particular location – racial belongingness, however, allows for proprietary claims that extend beyond a geographical residency.

I do not mean to dismiss the necessarily powerful relationship between race and class, or pretend to sever their inextricable ties to one another. Rather, I contend that race both solidifies class resentment and promotes geographical structuring in a way that defies class categories. The historical formation of Harlem as a Black cultural capital is a clear example of this phenomenon. As a Black space, it has always been a mixed class community. Consequently, Harlem shows the ways in which race can serve as a critical lens in analyzing urban displacement, mostly because it functions in ways that challenge dominant readings of class and capital based spatial organization. Bobby M. Wilson (2002) observes that, “capital does not operate as pure logic” (p 43). While it is clear that race and class both determine power (and vice versa), I am not yet convinced that they necessarily determine each other in creating space and place.

While the production of a Black public sphere has reproduced similar types of dominance and exclusions as those found in a white public sphere, ones based upon gender, class, and sexuality, it has also uniformly presented a challenge to capitalism, marginalization, and the dynamics of exclusion. In places like Harlem, racial belongingness establishes physical territory, via naming, decorations, aural expressions, street signs, and other markers. Thus the western-style tropes of urban gentrification and

frontierism that relied upon perceiving a space to be empty and full of blight are not as effective in the case of Harlem. The myth of the urban cowboy cannot be invoked without making explicit its xenophobic and racist ethos, nor can it commodify itself in an already culturally commodified space like Black Harlem<sup>v</sup>.

Ultimately, racial belongingness requires that some scholars reconceptualize the city public as it is currently conceived. Racial belongingness challenges Nancy Fraser's notions of 'subaltern counterpublics', in which "members of subordinated social groups" like "women" and "gays and lesbians" create their own spaces to contest their exclusion -- in reality, some of these "alternative" publics also exclude and subjugate Blacks (and vice versa) (Fraser, 1990). Thus, the Black public sphere is, in effect, a counter-counter-public. Moreover racial belongingness within a Black public space writes dominant White narratives of "civilization" and "urban frontierism" as counterpublics within Black space. This presents fascinating possibilities for analyzing the ways in which dominant (White) power relations outside of Harlem will interact with dominant (Black) power relations within the area.

Examining racial belongingness also requires that we reconsider contemporary geography's resistance to homogeneity in urban space. For example, Sophie Watson summarizes Hanna Arendt's notion of public heterogeneity and argues that:

The significance of the public real lies in the fact that it is a space away from family life where everybody sees and hears from a different position and things can be seen and heard from a variety of perspectives and aspects. (Watson 2006, p. 11)

Watson believes that oppression and subjugation can only be subverted when the homogeneity of public spaces is interrogated and challenged. But, the real question is whether that argument has any significance for homogeneous spaces that are created in response to oppression and subjugation. Spaces like Harlem are restructured to serve as a response to the exclusion imposed by heterogeneous urban spaces – or, rather, Harlem

has become a homogeneous space *as a function* of the violence of heterogeneous spaces. Watson's oversimplistic argument tackles public spaces made largely of the powerful (the racially dominant) and not the marginalized. Heterogeneity cannot possibly be assumed an important asset in all public spaces, unless the violence that often accompanies it can also be removed. In a country where integration has become a major societal goal, an emphasis upon the importance of homogenous spaces in city life may seem to be counterproductive. Yet, I am suggesting here that the opposite is also true.

As a process of laying claim to space, belongingness will always be present in efforts to counter or facilitate urban gentrification. In the Lower East Side, the process of "belongingness" was key to the dislocation of working poor residents in exchange for the invading city cowboys. In the Harlem case outlined here, a group of black drummers used belongingness to secure a non-property based right to aurally occupy a city space that defied the wishes of white, land-owning residents. Examining belongingness as a process of neighborhood change will provide geographers with a critical analytic tool through which they can deconstruct the ever-shifting city landscapes of the post-modern world. Belongingness allows the seemingly innocuous public markers present in everyday movement and interaction to be seen for what they are - parts of a group's systematic and cohesive effort to lay claim to a space at the exclusion of another.

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<sup>i</sup> Watson is specifically talking about publics that are invisible, but since the black public sphere has, often out of necessity, manifested itself within invisibility, the use is appropriate here.

<sup>ii</sup> This is an issue that Phil Cohen explores in more depth in his piece “Out of the Melting Pot into the Fire Next Time (Cohen, 1997).

<sup>iii</sup> Attempts to contact and interview the park officials, residents, and drummers were unsuccessful.

<sup>iv</sup> One component that I do not explore here is the use of recording devices during the police interruption. Several of the bloggers referred to the use of video cameras and cell phone recordings during the confrontation. In light of Iveson’s discussion of public address, it’s clear that maintaining a visual record of the incident was important – it implied the potential for engaging a wider public, which may have also dissuaded the police officers from acting in violence against the drummers.

<sup>v</sup>According to a boardmember of the Marcus Garvey Park Alliance, the area surrounding Marcus Garvey Park was officially designated as the “Mount Morris Historical District” in 1971, two years before Mount Morris Park was renamed to Marcus Garvey.