

Brynn Raymond

Hughes' Harlem

This summer I would like to engage in an interdisciplinary study of the history of Harlem and the Harlem Renaissance, broadly understood, and specifically through the life and poetry of Langston Hughes. My research would emphasize the function of space: first, how Harlem as a space was physically created and how the city instigated and shaped the art of the Harlem Renaissance, and second, how the art of the Harlem Renaissance and the poetry of Hughes in particular recreated this space based on experiences of Harlem and the broader world.

The first part of my project would use a historical lens to investigate how the physical space of Harlem was created. How did the urban planning of Harlem result in material realities for those who lived there, in terms of socio-economic status and de facto or de jure segregation? How did identities of gender, race, and class shape the experience of the city? I would also specifically investigate the ways in which this space was uniquely conducive to the creation of art during the Harlem Renaissance. In what ways was Harlem a safe space for such personal expression, and in what ways did individual or societal oppression lead to the creation of art?

I would then use the works of Langston Hughes as a case study to investigate how the space of Harlem was recreated through the art of the Harlem Renaissance. How did the city shape the lived experience of Hughes, and how did this in turn influence his poetry? How did Hughes' poetry affect the general zeitgeist of the Harlem Renaissance, and to what extent was his poetry in conversation with the myriad other art projects going on at the time? How did Hughes' identities of gender, race, and class shape his lived experience of Harlem and the broader world, and how were these experiences interpreted and reconstituted through his poetry?

This project intersects with my academic interests and future goals. As a junior majoring in English and history, I would love the opportunity to use my growing knowledge and skills in both disciplines to take part in an interdisciplinary research and writing project. The timing is also ideal, as engaging in such a project this summer will allow me to develop skills necessary for researching and writing two theses next year. The specific subject matter of the Harlem Renaissance and Langston Hughes also builds upon previous study; I have encountered the Harlem Renaissance both in African American history and English classes, and I have read Hughes' poetry both academically as well as on my own time. However, these encounters were relatively brief and were weighted towards either history or English, as they comprised only pieces of much broader courses. LARC would then provide the unique opportunity to research this area of personal interest in more depth than otherwise possible, and furthermore LARC would allow me to pursue scholarship in both history and English simultaneously.