



Making a Promised Land: Harlem in Twentieth-Century Photography and Film

Paula J. Massood

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Making a Promised Land examines the interconnected histories of African American representation, urban life, and citizenship as documented in still and moving images of Harlem over the last century. Paula J. Massood analyzes how photography and film have been used over time to make African American culture visible to itself and to a wider audience and charts the ways in which the “Mecca of the New Negro” became a battleground in the struggle to define American politics, aesthetics, and citizenship. Visual media were first used as tools for uplift and education. With Harlem’s downturn in fortunes through the 1930s, narratives of black urban criminality became common in sociological tracts, photojournalism, and film. These narratives were particularly embodied in the gangster film, which was adapted to include stories of achievement, economic success, and, later in the century, a nostalgic return to the past. Among the films discussed are *Fights of Nations* (1907), *Dark Manhattan* (1937), *The Cool World* (1963), *Black Caesar* (1974), *Malcolm X* (1992), and *American Gangster* (2007). Massood asserts that the history of photography and film in Harlem provides the keys to understanding the neighborhood’s symbolic resonance in African American and American life, especially in light of recent urban redevelopment that has redefined many of its physical and demographic contours.

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