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BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

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Reading Group Guide

HARLEM IS  
NOWHERE

A JOURNEY TO THE MECCA  
OF BLACK AMERICA

by

SHARIFA RHODES-PITTS

## A conversation with the author of *Harlem Is Nowhere*

Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts talks with dream hampton of  
*Life and Times*

*I believe I've read you talking about your mother's book collection, and in particular her black women's fiction from the early '70s through the early '90s. Do you remember spending more time with any particular author or piece of work than others?*

My mom is a visual artist and an avid reader. She came of age during that moment when black women were really claiming the artistic stage in America. So her shelves were full of those books; I took them for granted. The summer I was eighteen, I had a job so I could save for college, and during my lunch hours I disappeared with three books taken from my mother's collection: Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, June Jordan's *Civil Wars*, and Lorraine Hansberry's *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*. They fortified and grounded me as I was about to leave home to attend college in New England. Creatively, the mix of history, personal experience, and politics in those books inspired me and solidified my interest in essays as a form. Later, I abandoned those beginnings—I read widely, across gender, race, nationality, and genre. The writers I found on my mother's shelves were a foundation, and then I had to broaden my tribe. In that camp, some crucial writers are: W. G. Sebald, Virginia Woolf, and Elizabeth Hardwick. But lately I've had a desire to go back to some of the black women's literature I began with. . . . I have a lot of reading and rereading to do.

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*New York is a walking city, and some of your book is about being in the streets on foot and overhearing conversations. In a city as noisy as New York, what about a conversation makes you tune in—to listen? Do you have a favorite pair of listening shoes?*

Hmm. So much of that is about kismet, you know? Being on a certain corner at a certain moment when some improbable tale flies out of someone's mouth. Or stopping to talk to someone when I could have kept walking. I had a meditation teacher talk once about every human encounter having the potential for resonance. When I first arrived in Harlem, I walked really slowly and made eye contact with everyone and was so obviously not a New Yorker, and this provoked all kinds of experiences. I would usually follow those moments where they led, so there's some kind of faith in that. No favorite listening shoes, but I spend summers in Dr. Scholl's; in other seasons I do a lot of time in clogs. I'm happiest of all in the countryside, feeling invincible in sturdy boots.

*It appears you spent time studying maps while researching this book. Part of what you discover and argue is that Harlem is constantly shifting, both in the imagination and then again in reality, with certain physical and/or corporate encroachments, as with, say, Columbia University. Harlem is of course named for Holland's Haarlem, and even though it was once Dutch farmland, do you think that efforts to protect it as a literal black space are important?*

Yeah, the question of whether the physical space is worth protecting is really crucial. Once, I was visiting the studio of my friend, the visual artist Leslie Hewitt. It's near the old Renaissance Ballroom on Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard. The Renaissance was built by Garveyites who put their money together to start an establishment where blacks could be entertained, since the most famous nightclubs, like the Cotton Club, were

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segregated. We provided the entertainment and labor but couldn't go there. So the Renaissance is this incredibly symbolic space, where self-determination in Harlem was expressed physically, through this enterprise. But in the early 1980s, it closed and fell into ruin and was neglected for decades by its subsequent owner, the Abyssinian Development Corporation. A few years ago, they argued *against* having this historic building named a city landmark because they wanted to build a high-rise condo there. And they won that battle. Sitting with Leslie just a few steps away from this half-demolished building, I started ranting about how it was a perfect example of the need to preserve the physical traces of our history. But she had a whole different take on it, challenging me to consider how, as a people, our relationship to space has always been fugitive, always threatened. And how we've always had to claim space in other creative ways. But I still have an attachment to land. When I moved to NYC, I actually could not comprehend that someone would buy a piece of real estate, an apartment, that was nothing but a floating piece of sky without land attached to it. That's a Texas perspective. I'm obsessed with that Malcolm X quote: "Revolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality."

*As a woman raised in the South, are boundaries important to you? Do they affect your interviewing style? Are you careful not to pry? Or do you ask difficult questions straight-out?*

In certain ways, I have no boundaries. I'm constantly talking to strangers. But I'm fairly passive about it. I didn't do interviews for the book. Any conversation that is mentioned happened in the course of my life. It was my life. It wasn't research. I'll have to approach that differently for other books, perhaps. I think I'm

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actually bad at interviews, but I'm told I'm good at listening. I listen a lot more than I ask questions. I observe and stare a lot, too. Whether or not it comes from being Southern, I do have a sense of propriety and privacy that means I don't push or pry in the way a journalist would. I'm more interested in the person than in "getting the story." So things unfold. Or they don't. Maybe that's a limitation. But it seems to me people reveal what they want to and need to in their own time. And what people don't say, their silence, often interests me, too. . . .

*Did you go to Harlem with the intention of writing Harlem Is Nowhere? If so, were you surprised at yourself when you ended up in advocacy meetings about fair housing with your neighbors?*

My move to Harlem in 2002 was improvised. I'd graduated from college two years before and saved money to travel (in India and Europe), then went home broke to my mother in Texas. I started working an office job while I figured out how to become a writer. When I didn't want to live at home anymore, I went back to the East Coast. I arrived in Harlem with ideas and notes for a historical novel set in Texas; writing about the neighborhood was not on my agenda. The writing came about because of my experiences: I was always meeting Harlemites who seemed as obsessed with history as I was. Based on those early encounters, I wrote a long essay. When it was published, it got a strong response and I started thinking about a book. I was absolutely surprised when I joined the organized resistance against gentrification in Harlem. My parents were both activists in the '70s — that's how they met — so I grew up around a lot of politics and was prematurely jaded. I never had a romanticized idea about the Revolution; I wasn't throwing fists up in the air. Though I saw myself as politically committed and informed, I had never joined a movement. In

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2007, I began attending community meetings, expecting to do my regular thing: listening, observing, taking notes. Then I was asked to stand up and give testimony at hearings about development in Harlem. And then I was asked to lend a hand—I threw myself into it. I stopped writing the book because I was organizing and going to meetings. I didn't plan to write about those experiences at all. Later, when the campaign was over and I was burnt-out and trying to get back to work, I realized I had just lived through something that was part of an ongoing story about land, power, and politics in Harlem.

*Can you please explain to me your vision for these three books? As I understand it, this is a trilogy of black utopia where you write about three places. Was there any other collection or even single work that inspired you or that you referenced when conceiving yours?*

The trilogy project is about three places: Harlem, Haiti, and the Black Belt of the South (in that order). Once I wrote that long essay on Harlem, the path for the book was pretty much set. My interest in Haiti is long-standing, way before the earthquake—I've been researching its history for years. So I had the notion for the Harlem book and the glimmer of an idea for a Haiti book that would meld history and travel. I was talking to a mentor, who said, "It's three books—what's the third place?" At some point I realized, *Duh... after going away to other places, I'd eventually need to reckon with home*. All three places hold power in the hearts and minds and souls of black folk, our political, creative, spiritual, aspirations. There's Harlem: the black Mecca. And Haiti: the first black republic. I want to trace the relationship between black Americans and Haiti and the ongoing American interventions in the country. In the South, I'm concerned with the idea of the Black Belt as a separate nation within America. This idea has a

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long history. I'm also interested in the all-black towns that cropped up before and after the Civil War. I imagine it as more of a road-trip book, traveling from place to place but also traveling in time. At the end of the road I'll be in Texas. I don't know if this project was influenced by any writer or work in particular. I just want to follow a set of ideas across space and history, and use my own experience as the frame through which those stories are told.

*Are you influenced at all by the work of Maya Deren? Of Zora Neale Hurston?*

Somehow I've avoided Deren, though I need to get up on her. Hurston is important to me in a way that's hard to talk about. . . . I feel similarly about someone like Baldwin. I can't rhapsodize in very academic ways about their work or how it has affected me. They are family; I have a reverence and appreciation for them that is similar to how you'd feel about a beloved great-aunt or great-uncle. They gave me a sense of what is possible.

*What are your writing rituals? Your restorative ones?*

I practice ritual procrastination. I usually have to sneak up on myself to get writing done. I write ideas on the backs of discarded envelopes, along with scribbled grocery lists and to-do lists. Eventually those shards get pieced together. It starts off very disorganized, but I can't really start writing until I have outlines and note cards. But in the midst of the plan there are lots of surprises. In more tranquil moments I keep a notebook. When I'm not traveling I'm a homebody and burrow into my domestic life. By all appearances it's rather idle and boring, but being still and quiet makes room for the ideas to land.

## Questions and topics for discussion

1. What do you think of when you hear the word “Harlem”? What does the neighborhood represent to you? How did this book change or confirm your initial impression?
2. A reviewer for the *New York Times* quotes Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, writing that she is clearly “very much enthralled by ‘something too vast to be contained on paper’ and so has chosen the medium of collage.” How is that collage like a scrapbook of your own personal place?
3. In *Harlem Is Nowhere*, the neighborhood is presented as having been both a place of great hope and a place that limited the possibilities of its inhabitants. Discuss this contradiction.
4. What do you make of the author’s personal interactions with neighbors who share aspects of their life stories, dreams, and obsessions? Do you think she shows respect for them?
5. The book quotes Alain Locke, who stated in 1925 that the cultural boom in Harlem was “the Negro’s latest thrust towards Democracy.” In an era when Americans have elected a black president, do you think neighborhoods like Harlem are still of



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value? Why or why not? If they should be preserved, how is this possible?

6. The book describes the author's relationship to various novels, poems, and photographs depicting Harlem—and the relation of those “imaginary” Harlems to what she found upon arriving. How does the book construct its own image of Harlem?
7. How do the minor historical characters to whom Rhodes-Pitts introduces us—from the collector Alexander Gumby to the impresario Raven Chanticleer—expand your knowledge of Harlem's legacy?

## About the Author

Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts's articles have appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, the *New York Times Book Review*, *Essence*, *Harper's*, *Transition*, and *Vogue*. She has received a Lannan Foundation fellowship, a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers' Award, and a 2012 Whiting Writers' Award, and she was a Fulbright Scholar in 2007. Rhodes-Pitts was born in Texas and educated at Harvard University.