The Center was pleased to host Paula Massood (Film, Brooklyn College) for her richly illustrated, “Living in the City: Harlem’s Representational Turn towards ‘Marketable Shock.’” Her lecture derived from her forthcoming book, “Making a Promised Land: Harlem and African American Visual Production” (Rutgers).

To introduce her lecture, Massood presented three emblematic photographs from the Harlem riot of 1943 that pictorially encapsulate life in Harlem at the time. The first photograph, frequently reproduced, shows three black male youth standing side by side in the street, wearing tuxedos looted from a formalwear shop. “The photograph is ironic for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the formal composition of the subject and the almost insouciant look shared by the young men. . . . The subjects look directly in the camera, asserting their agency as well as a multivalent and overdetermined performance of identity.”

For Massood, this first image serves as “an establishing shot for a more disturbing narrative, one that shares with the best Hollywood films an inciting incident, a conflict, and a resolution—that may or may not be happy depending on the viewer’s point of view.”

The second image shows one of the young men from the first image, still dressed in his tuxedo. This image is constructed more like a snapshot of action—unlike the formal poses of the first—where the black youth is still part of a trio, though his two friends are now replaced by two white policemen who are dragging him out of a police car. The youth continues to look directly into the camera, though “his brash insouciance has been replaced by a look of consternation.”
The final photograph offers “narrative resolution or uncertainty, depending on the viewer’s imagination or political leaning.” Here, the young man is “visibly constrained” while being lead into a precinct. “Perhaps even more disturbing than the boy’s distressed look may be the smiling expressions of the police officers and the onlookers, most of whom are white. The power has shifted; what began as a narrative of a youthful misdemeanor has become a visible lynching party.”

The written and visual texts produced about Harlem during this period show similar aesthetic and thematic concerns, including a continuing examination of the effects of urban life on African-Americans, a conscious interest in African-American representation and self-representation, and a struggle over “the presumed verisimilitude of the photographic image and cinematic form.” Many of the photographs and films that came from this period—whether fiction, non-fiction, or something in between—all asked the same question, What is the best format for telling the stories of the African-American experience, urban and non-urban? At this time, Harlem’s very real social and economic problems began to be embodied by both written and visual texts in the persons of young, black men.

Acknowledging Sara Blair’s work—Massood uses Blair’s phrase in the title to her presentation—Massood provided an overview to the documentary photo-text, a genre that became popular in the mid-1930s—around the time of the Harlem riot of 1935 that marked the end of the Harlem Renaissance—and was still a vibrant genre during this period under review. If photography of the Harlem Renaissance was identified with the portraits of James Van Der Zee, the economic collapse of the 1930s (as well as the development of quality, portable 35 mm handheld cameras) brought a new approach to urban photography—“one which changed the look of Harlem from Jazz Age Modernism to Depression-era poverty, decay, and criminality.”

Initially aided by Roosevelt’s New Deal social policies and programs that sent photographers and writers around the country to document the words and images of American life, the documentary photograph found popular appeal in magazines such as Life (est. 1936) and Look (est. 1937). The success of Margaret Bourke White’s and Erskine Caldwell’s You Have Seen Their Faces (1937), which documented the experiences of rural Southerners, both black and white, provided a model for a spate of photo-text books, most famously Walker Evans’ and James Agee’s Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (begun in 1936, published 1941).

At the same time, New York was a prime location for photographers and writers, especially those with an interest in Harlem and the African-American population. Aaron Siskind and members of the New York Photo League, with consultation by Michael Carter, an African American sociologist, created Harlem Document, a study of Harlem’s people, places, and institutions. Carter wrote the text to accompany the images, but the project never made it to book form; instead the project has had three iterations, two short spreads in Fortune (1939) and Look (1940) magazines, and as a book edited by Ann Banks, Harlem Document: Photographs 1932-1940 (1981), which, however, did not use Carter’s sociological descriptions but instead used transcribed oral
histories from the Federal Writers Project and a forward by the photographer Gordon Parks.

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The spreads in *Fortune* and *Look* were in keeping with the New Deal photo-text aesthetic of the time: photographic subjects were accompanied by text that provided an overview to the living conditions and experiences of the subjects. In this case, they were primarily intended to present black, urban poverty to a white middle class. The *Fortune* spread, for example, was in an issue devoted to New York’s World Fair that was intended to introduce readers to the city. The *Look* article was entitled “244,000 Native Sons,” echoing the popularity of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), which the magazine’s editors described as “the most effective blow struck for Negroes since *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.”

Carter’s text introduces the neighborhood primarily through facts and figures, most of which are used to expose the area’s overcrowding, poverty, and decay. “While the text’s intentions are to move the socially minded American to contemplate the effects of the substandard living conditions in Harlem on its residents—disease, infant mortality, and delinquency—it just as often overdetermines the impact of the images. For example, one photo of five boys, some who appear unhappy or sullen, some who are smiling, is entitled ‘Five Social Problems.’” The passage continues with a description of Harlem’s crime, while the photos all show black male youth, none of whom are shown in the acts described in the text. “The overall effect of such text and image combinations is to visually, and authoritatively—and here I think the text works like a voice-over narration—underscore the delinquency of young black men. . . . In effect, the problem of color lines as famously described W. E. B. Du Bois has been redefined and re-presented as a problem of black male youth.”

In the photo-text, the juxtaposition of text and image resulted in almost something akin to Sergei Eisenstein’s dialectical montage, an aesthetic concept much in the air during the 1930s and 40s. “But the photo-text offers more than a trite analogy to montage aesthetics, for its struggles with the presumed indexicality of the photographic image, along with its self-consciousness about the voice, mirrors the continuing struggle of African American artists and intellectuals over who can speak for black experience, a struggle at the very heart of image production.”

Many of the famed African-American writers of the time—Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin—who were drawn to the photo-text were also the most outspoken critics of Hollywood, establishing a tension between the fiction film, represented by Hollywood, and the reality of the documentary. For Massood, this tension provides a clue to understanding the first films devoted to African-American urban spaces, primarily Harlem, from the 1940s through the early 1960s.

One of the earlier filmmakers she discussed was Helen Levitt, a white woman and a New York Photo League photographer for many New Deal projects. Levitt’s major project in the 1930s was photographing children in East Harlem. It was this work, shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 1943, that brought her to the attention of...
Richard Wright. “Considering the aesthetic and social environment in which she was working—where the still and moving images, the fiction and non-fiction modes, were increasingly mixing—it seems almost natural that Levitt would move into film making.” In fact, her first film, *In the Street* (1948), can be seen as an animation of the phototext, a moving image sequel to her photographs of children. Although this 16-minute film was based on real events—Italian-American, African-American, and Puerto Rican children at play in East Harlem—it moved beyond basic documentary reportage by having a somewhat experimental quality to it, as well as being accompanied by a lyrical text by James Agee.

Levitt’s next film, *The Quiet One* (1948)—on which she is credited as editor and Sidney Meyers as director, with text again by James Agee—“further troubles the difference between documentary and fiction film.” The film tells the story of Donald Peters, an emotionally disturbed young boy, whose impoverished life in Harlem leads him into trouble and eventual rehabilitation at the Wiltwyck School for Boys, a residential school for delinquent boys in upstate New York. The film’s story is presented in documentary form, complete with a voice over that provides details of Donald’s background, his psychic state, and the State’s efforts at reforming him. The white male narration—done by Gary Merrill—is sociological and psychological in tone, suggesting that Donald’s ghetto background—poverty, missing parent, general lack of love—is what has led him to delinquency and an inability to communicate.

Both *The Quiet One* (1948) and *The Cool World* (1964) “trouble the difference between documentary and fiction film.”

The film blends fiction and non-fiction so that it shares a kinship more with Italian Neo-realism than with post-war American documentaries: it combines both professional and non-professional actors, it was shot on location in both Harlem and Wiltwyck, and its focus on social and economic circumstances that although not caused by war are just as devastating. With a narration by the school psychiatrist, the film is closer to a docu-drama than it is to a typical documentary. Donald’s story is a collage of actual dossiers of the school’s residents, and yet many of the circumstances are presented as if they are experienced by Donald. “While many of these events are drawn from observations by the school staff, Donald’s experiences related in flashbacks question the relationship between the image and the voice since they are presented as his experiences yet narrated by another. We are asked to identify with Donald, but through the voice of authority, in this case the white male doctor/narrator. Although the children in residence at Wiltwyck are of different races, the film’s implicit narrative supports the popularization of the black male youth as the primary problems facing politicians of the time.”

The popular sociological, anthropological, and psychological discourses of the day that sought to explain urban deviancy and black male aberrancy continued over time into the 1960s, argued Massood, as seen in Shirley Clarke’s *The Cool World* (1964), another film that troubles the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, image and voice, and African American representation and self-representation. The film focus on Duke (Hampton Clanton), a black teenager and member of a Harlem street gang, the Royal Pythons. Duke’s home life is a mess: his bible-quoting grandmother only sees the world in stark, religious terms; his mother is distracted by a string of demanding husbands and work; and his father is absent. Duke’s main goal is to buy a gun from a gangster name Priest (Carl Lee) in order to take leadership of the gang from Blood (Clarence Williams III), its current heroin-addicted president. Duke manages to oust Blood, but he never raises enough money to buy the gun. The film ends with Duke’s brutal arrest after he’s killed a member of a rival gang. *The Cool World* tells the familiar story of a Harlem teen who succumbs to a life of crime for the lack of any better options.
Originally trained as a dancer, Clarke made a series of experimental documentaries in the 1950s. At the same time, she was a member of the New American Cinema Group, a loosely organized collective of independent filmmakers eager to liberate their films from “product films” and to build a cinema based on personal expression. Clarke was as equally involved in this world as the non-fiction world, and her films incorporate a combination of the documentary and avant-garde filmmaking techniques. As the first film produced by Frederick Wiseman, *The Cool World*, in addition to exhibiting features of the photo-text, the documentary, and the art film, continues some race conventions of the 1930s and 40s, especially those related to the gangster genre, and in this way can be seen as a continuum of black city films. Duke’s behavior is a result of his environment, rather than any deep-seated criminality; an impoverished home life is partly to blame for his outcome. Duke, like many of his gangster forebears, is punished for his crime.

Yet *The Cool World* is neither a gangster film nor a race film. It breaks these conventions in significant ways: 1) Duke is only 14, yet already declared irredeemable by his mother and grandmother, as well as the State, 2) Duke and his fellow gang members are considered criminals by both the black and white communities, and 3) gangs, which used to be highly organized, adult operations now rest in the hands of adolescents “who are concerned with day-to-day subsistence rather than the fiduciary health of the organization.” Duke and his fellow gang members exhibit a nihilism, an apathy. “The film, drawing from pre-existing sociological, political, and aesthetic discourse has replaced the gangster with the gang member.”

*The Cool World* appeared 20 years after the 1943 riot, and just before the 1964 riot. “In the intervening years, Harlem, and the nation as a whole, experienced a multiplicity of political, social, and aesthetic changes. In fact, *The Cool World* references one such political change in its opening sequence in which a Black Muslim delineates the problem of the white man for a sidewalk audience in Harlem. And yet some continuities remain, particularly when we focus on the ways in which African-American urban life and experiences became increasingly visually connected to the themes of poverty and criminality. The problems of African-Americans at this time may have been the white man, but for the nation as a whole the problem of the city was most often embodied by black male youth engaged in criminal activity.”

Massood’s lecture effectively traced both the changes and the continuities in the representation of black men in Harlem during these mid-century decades.