Description

Harlem, New York, in the 1920s and 1930s was a community in transition. What had been a predominantly white immigrant community became a largely African American and West Indian one during this relatively short period. While historians of the era and New York City have noted the waxing and waning of black cultural production—commonly known as the Harlem Renaissance—and leftist black political activity during the Great Depression, the history surrounding the ways in which the inchoate black community mobilized around issues of community maintenance has been largely ignored.

Historians of New York City in general and the African American experience within New York City in particular fail to address black people’s quotidian efforts to make their lives sustainable, improve their physical health, enhance their emotional dispositions, and enrich their neighborhoods during the initial decades of urbanization in Harlem, New York. However, this urban black community’s struggle surrounding community formation and maintenance of health during the 1920s and 1930s in many ways was a test case for how black people negotiated city life nationwide during the first major era of black urban life in the twentieth century. This book offers a way of looking at black life during Harlem’s interwar period that complements studies of black creative production and black radical and nationalist politics.
Using a sociological, historical, and psychological approach, this work offers a multidisciplinary perspective and fills the research gap about the Harlem community and urban black life during the Jazz Age and the Great Depression. This book proposes that Harlem was an intricate domain of competing ideologies, needs, and interests wherein there were many crosscutting forms of power and exclusion. Such competition placed the community at the intersection of complicated power relations in which local, citywide, and nationwide power, policies, and commitments overlapped. Changing economic circumstances that characterized the interwar period, combined with the shifting municipal politics including community reliance on government support and the political strength of medical societies, left Harlem residents politically and economically circumscribed in their efforts to build and fortify institutions focused on maintaining community wellness.

In this larger circumscription, citywide, statewide, and nationwide politics made health for black people a politicized affair during the early twentieth century. This work further reveals that in conjunction with the political economy of race, health was a major issue of debate that residents of Harlem could enter into despite systematic efforts by politicians and medical professionals to simultaneously limit residents’ political agency and regulate health services and institutions in New York City. Such fissures and cracks within the political structure allowed for community engagement and empowerment.

This study provides for a more comprehensive understanding of the connections among black morbidity, mortality, health care delivery, and black political engagement in Harlem, New York, and aims to expand the historical understanding of race and politics, as well as the lived experiences of black people in New York City in the early twentieth century.

As a scholarly work in the field of African American urban history, Building a Healthy Black Harlem is accessible to upper-division undergraduate and graduate students in courses in post-1865 U.S. history, African American history, and urban history. It also possesses the insight and rigor for specialists in the field of New York City history and African American urban history.