# ❯Designing Harlem

Responding to the negative stigma associated with the city of Harlem and the subsequent impact that graphic design can have on transforming the city into a desirable location.

**N**ew York City can best best be characterized as a vast puzzle. From an outside view, the Big Apple is a web of neighborhoods that all come together to create the infamous and eclectic "City that Never Sleeps." Each stand-alone piece that creates this life-sized puzzle is made exclusive by recognizable geography, attractions, and history In the Northeast corner of this vast puzzle lies Harlem - one of Manhattan's most historical neighborhods but one of its least revered. As a native New Yorker, I found it atypical that I had spent time in every one of Manhattan's neighborhoods...except for Harlem. Historically, I was aware of Harlem's past hrough lessons learned in history class but my lack of personal interaction left me unaware of any present day attractions. I began to question why I had never been to Harlem and realized that like most people, I had this negative stigma of violence and poverty engrained in my mind that has long been popularized by movies, TV, etc. Unlike the rest of Manhattan's neighborhoods that advertise special features attractive to the populace, Harlem lacked a positive cultural identity despite its rich history and even more plentiful present. I asked myself - is there a way to represent the best of Harlem and change the negative stigma of one of hte most exception peices of New York's puzzle? I quickly realized that developing Harlem into a destination brand would help to highlight all that this hidden gem has to offer. My project- the study of Harlem as a destination brand- is the response to the negative stigma associated with the city of Harlem and the subsequent impact that graphic design can have on transforming the city into a desirable location,not only to visit, but also to live in.

# › Critical Questions

**Q.** Before I began designing for Harlem, I had to ask myself critical questions regarding the city and its identity within the greater municipality of New York.

**A.** The Answers became the basis of my driving force to close the perception gap between Harlem and the rest of Manhattan by developing a plan to make it fit into the grand spirit of one of the greatest cities of the world.

How exactly are neighborhoods characterized?

How does Harlem compare to the rest of Manhattan's neighborhoods?

What is it about Harlem that makes it unique?

What will attract people to this area?

What message do I want to convey?

Why is this important?
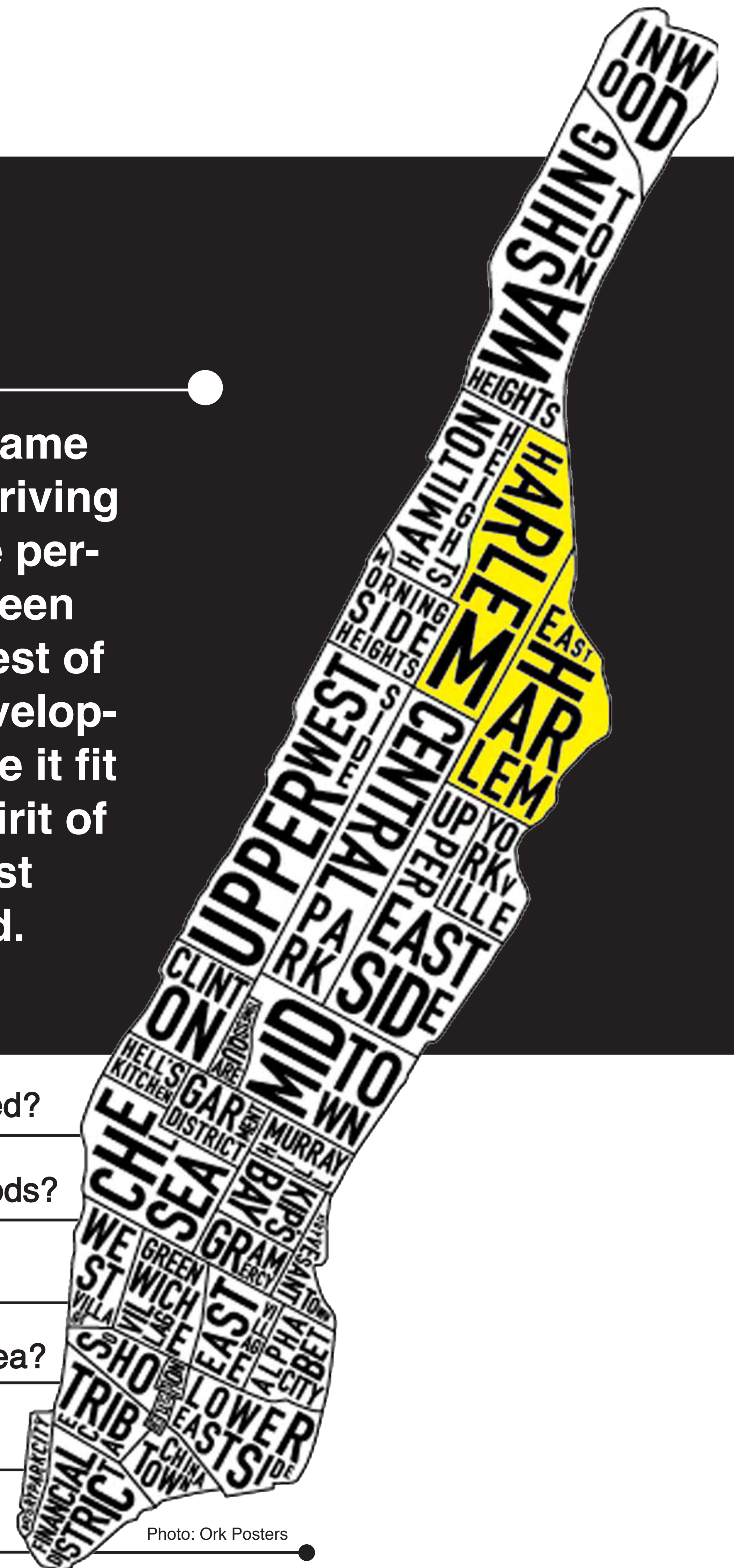
Photo: Ork Posters

# › Touring the Past
## History repeats itself

Several years ago, NY Magazine posted an online article "Harlem: A History in Pictures," that prompted users to "Tour Harlem's Past" and featured a large collections of pictures outlining several important figures, places, and events. Some of the history featured included profiles of M&M Smith, Joe Louis, Ella Fitzgerald, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, James Baldwin, Jesse Jackson, and Al Sharpoton while it also included descriptions of famous places such as the Apollo Theater and the Cotton Club. When I attempted to research Harlem's present offerings, some of the places mentioned in NY Magazine still existed but the present structures and people didn't have the same level of fame or respect as the figures from the Harlem Renaissance.but the present structures and people didn't have the same level of fame or respect as the figures from the Harlem Renaissance.When I attempted to research Harlem's present offerings, some of the places mentioned in NY Magazine still existed but the present structures and people didn't have the same level of fame or respect as the figures from the Harlem Renaissance. It became apparent that the stance I had to take on developing a brand identity for Harlem would be a refelction on its past wonders in order to revive the spirit that once characterized Harlem as the Mecca of New York's arts and entertainment.
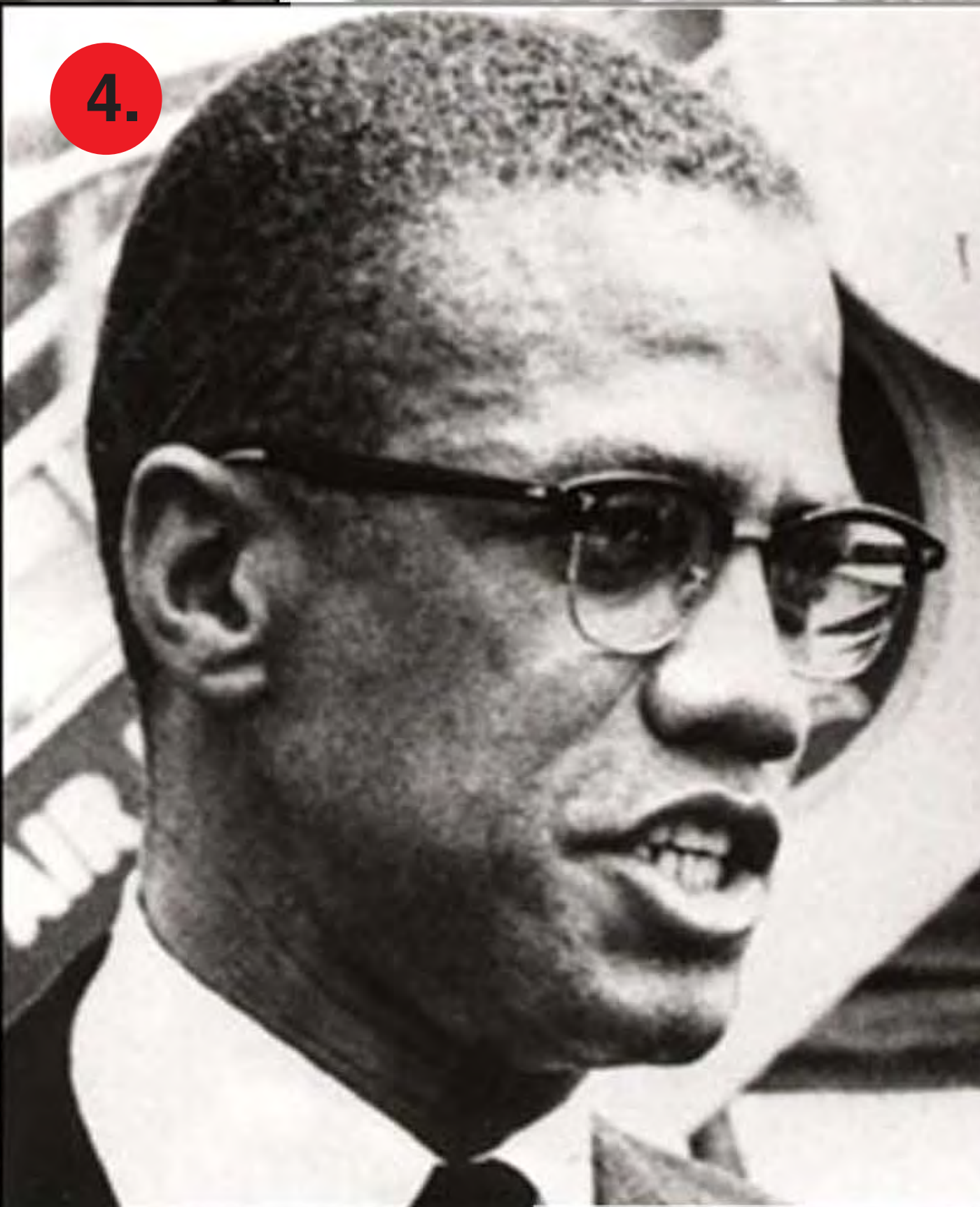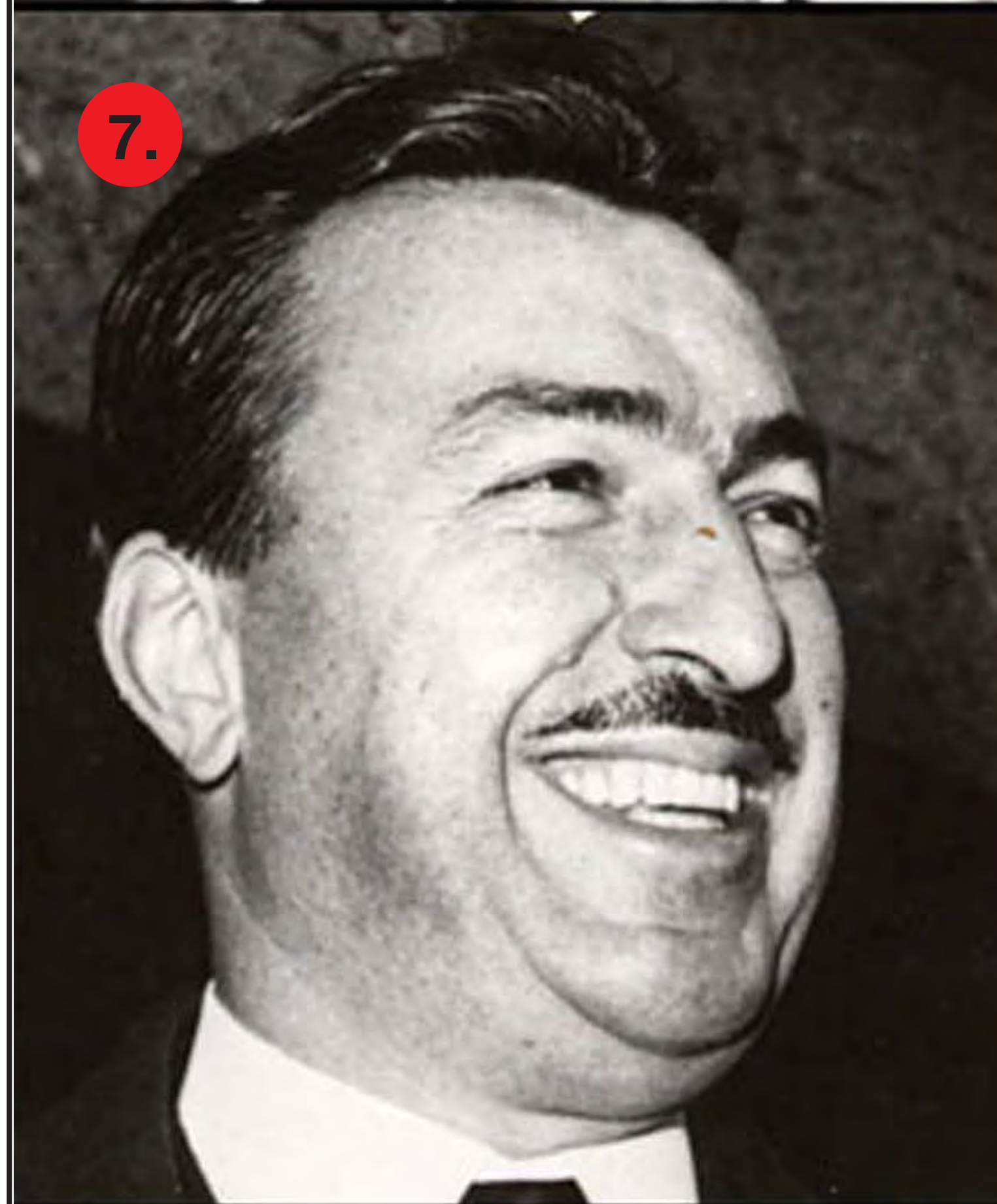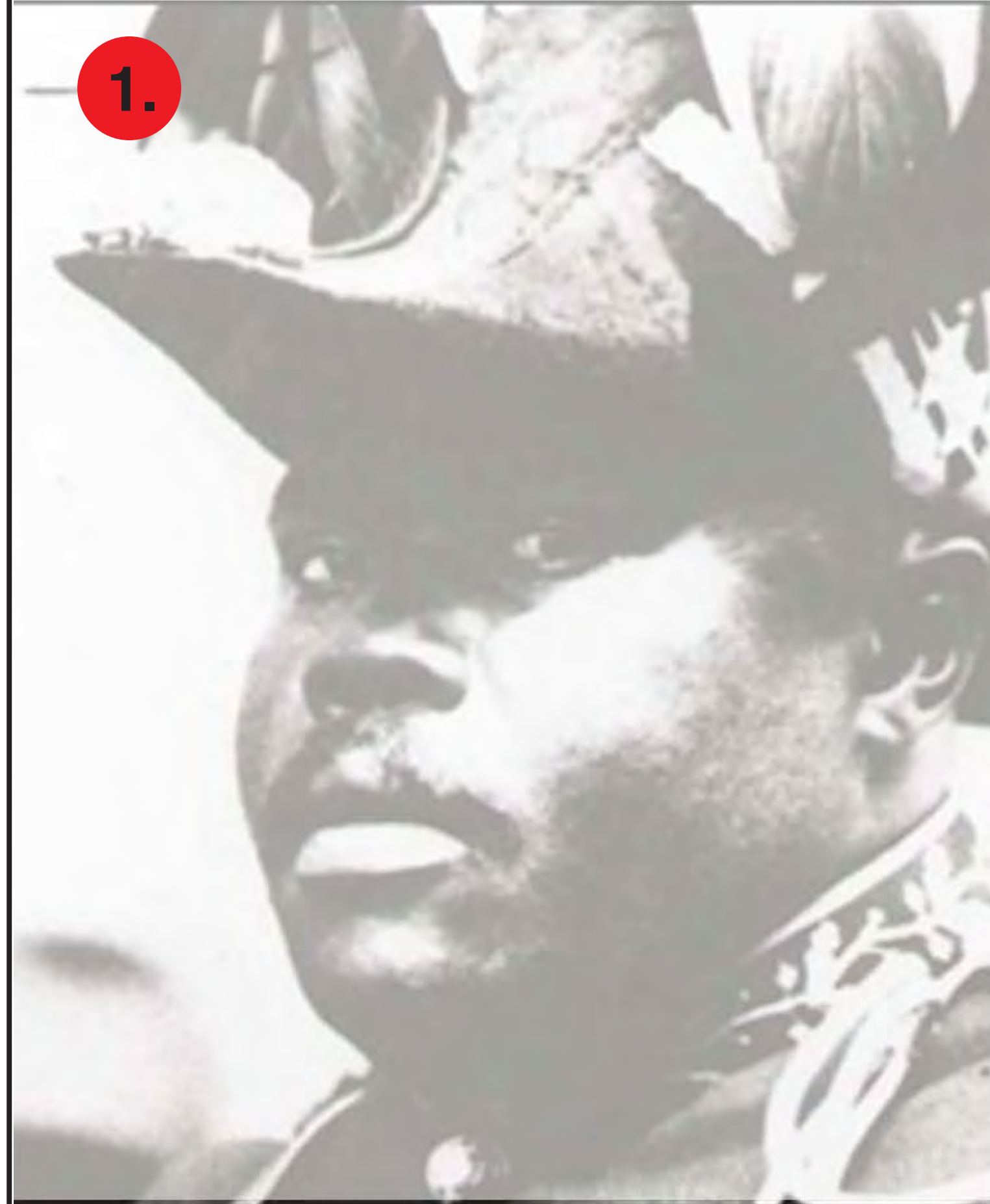


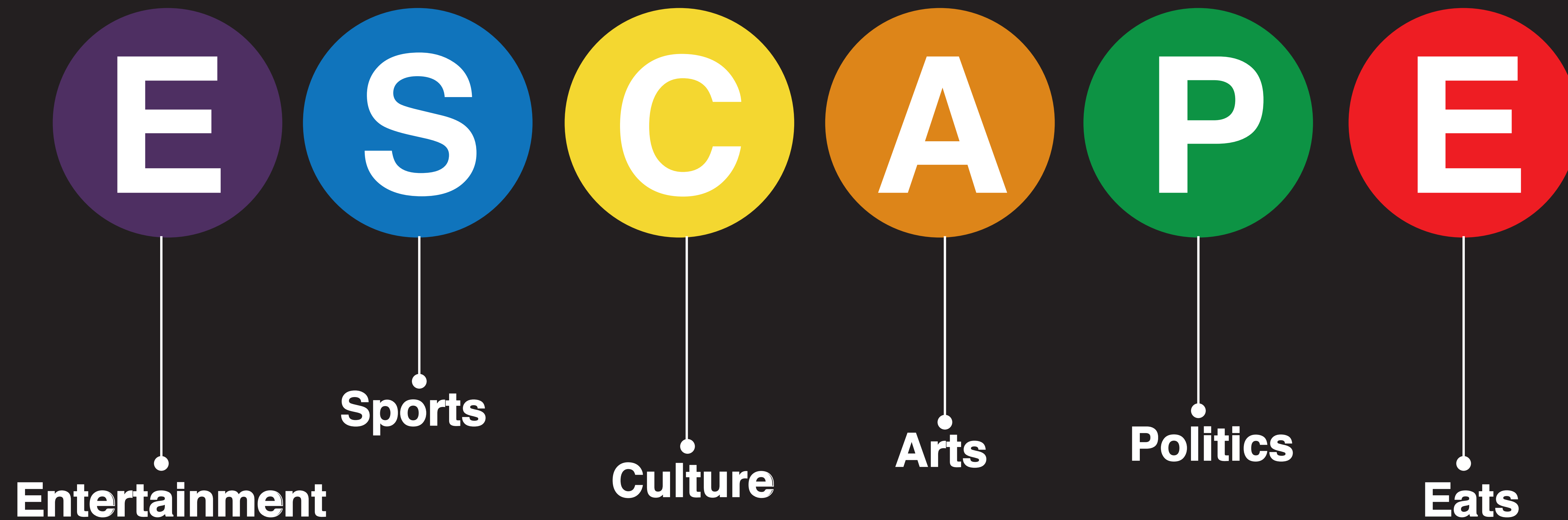1. Marcus Garvey     2.Miles Baldwin     3.125th Street     4. Malcolm X     5. Harlem Riots     6. M & M Smith     7. Adam Clayton     8. Ella Fitzgerald     9. Joe Louis

# › Developing an Identity

# ESCAPE

**Entertainment**

**Sports**

**Culture**

**Arts**

**Politics**

**Eats**

As I continued to research the history of Harlem, I noticed distinct groups of subsance (politicians, artists, entertainers, athletes) beginning to form. When put together, the groups formed the acronym ESCAPE - comprised of the words entertainment, sports, culture, arts, politics, and eats. The development of the word ESCAPE helped me create the brand driver for the city - the Harlem Escape - that doubles as a tagline meant to bring people into the neighborhood and a way to categorize the special areas of cultura that make Harlem as desirable destination brand.

To turn The Harlem Escape into a recognizable logo for the city, I looked to existing iconography in Manhattan - specifically the subway system - cause one of my goals is to bring tourists into Harlem. I mirrored the iconic colorful cicrles stamped with an upercase Helvetica number of letter to form the image ESCAPE while using a variety of typefaces to create the word Harlem, inspired by the multifariousness of the city. Color plays a role in helping to separate each letter of the ESCAPE acronym into its own category which is not only definitive by subject, but also by visual representation

The answers to the critical questions I raised before became the stimulus for the exposition of the campaign. The message that I convey is not only a historical tribute but also a statement about identity. Like the rest of Manhattan's neighborhoods, Harlem is just one part of the puzzle that uses the same subways, same taxis, the same parks, etc. as other New York neighborhoods...its geographic location, demographics, architecture, and cultural events are what make it unique. Instead of trying to change Harlem's individual customs I see the campaign as a way to gain attention and prompt New Yorkers to take the same subways they're already accustomed to and "escape" to Harlem where they would find a graphic representation of the history and culture that makes the area unique.

# ❯ Learning from Others

From personal experience I was familiar with the Flatiron / 23rd Street Bid which was the neighborhood's campaign and partnership to clean up the area. To do so, the area of Flatiron developed a recognizable logo, flags, banners, marquees, kiosks, etc. to help encourage the people of the neighborhood to keep it clean. Their campaign was clean, simple, butrecognizable – all elements that would be crucial in ensuring the success of my Harlem Escape campaign despite the busy and fast paced nature of Manhattan.

I looked to past examples of destination branding for inspiration as to how I would visually apply the theme of The Harlem Escape. Landor Associates, a creative and design consultancy was one of my biggest sources of stimulation. I took special note of their case study on Melbourne, Australia, which was an attempt to create a destination brand that would provide the city with a unified image. Landor was presented with the problem of how to overcome political complexities and unite the people despite a wide range of government entities in the capital city of the state of Victoria. Their solution was to create a bold M logo that was easily recognizable and multifaceted like the city, with the hopes of emphasizing the area's diversity. They applied the logo to building facades, publications, maps, etc. Landor's case studies helped me brainstorm possible applications of my visual creations but the next step I needed to take would be how to successfully do this in New York City.

Street banners samples from the Flatiron District

Application of the logo used to promote city-wide contributions to increase sanitation

Melboune photos courtesy of Landor Associaties

Flatiron photos courtesy of the Flatiron BID

# ❯ Crafting a Campaign

**P**erhaps my biggest source of inpsiration and the key factors that allowed me to realize that success would only be achieved if I captured the romance and excitement of the city was Paula Scher, designer and partner at Pentagram. Paula, a long-time New Yorker, has done extensive work with New York public spaces, which prompted me to look at my materials and question how my design choices would get people to Harlem. Several years ago at a lecture given at the University of Michigan Paula said, "people don't go to a part of the city because of a logo," so what was it, other than my logo, that would create an emotional connection with the populace?
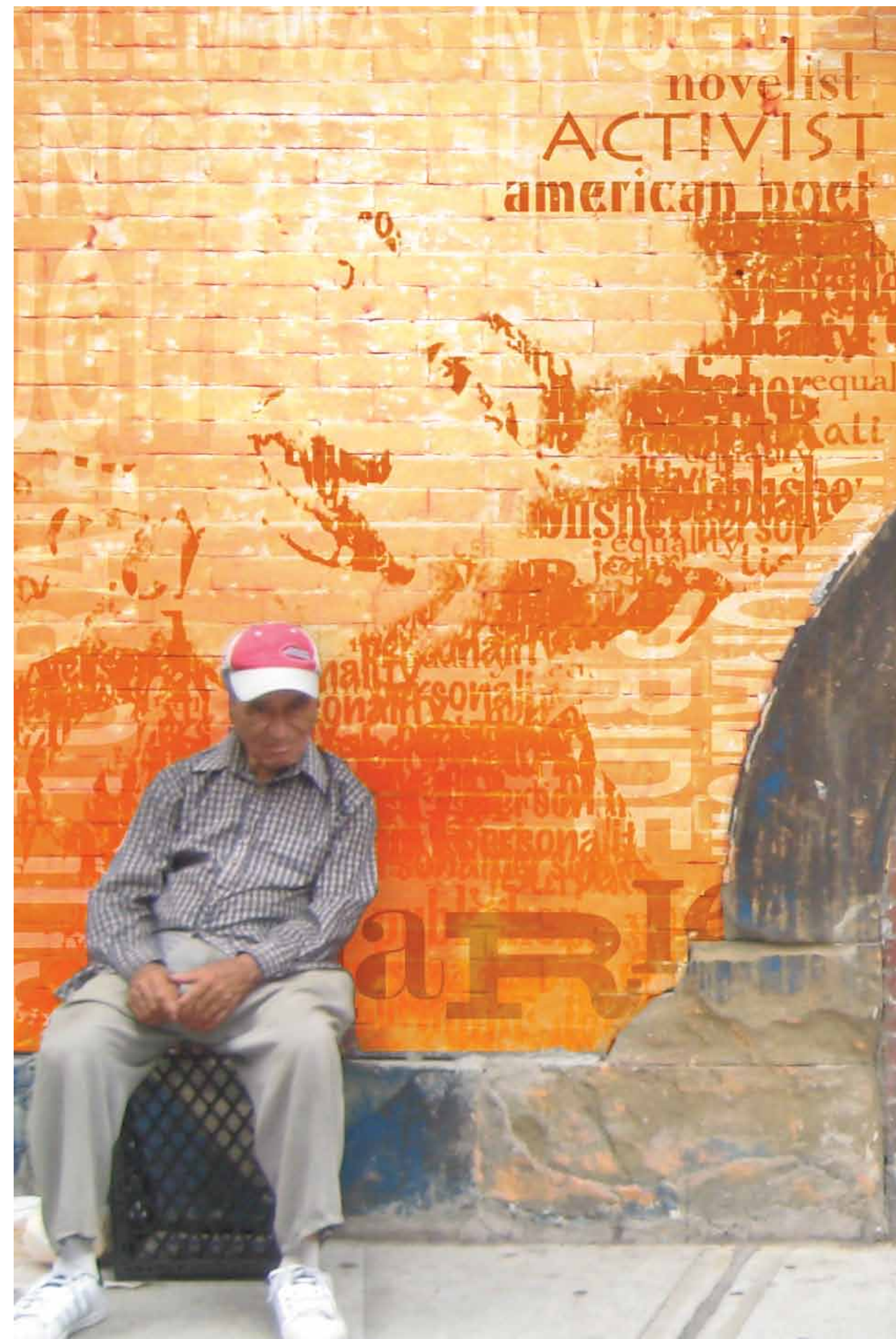
My one time idea of simple logo placement elevated into a large-scale campaign complete with painted buildings and a high empahsis on street art that captured the spirit of Harlem's present that, through imagery, would also link to its past.
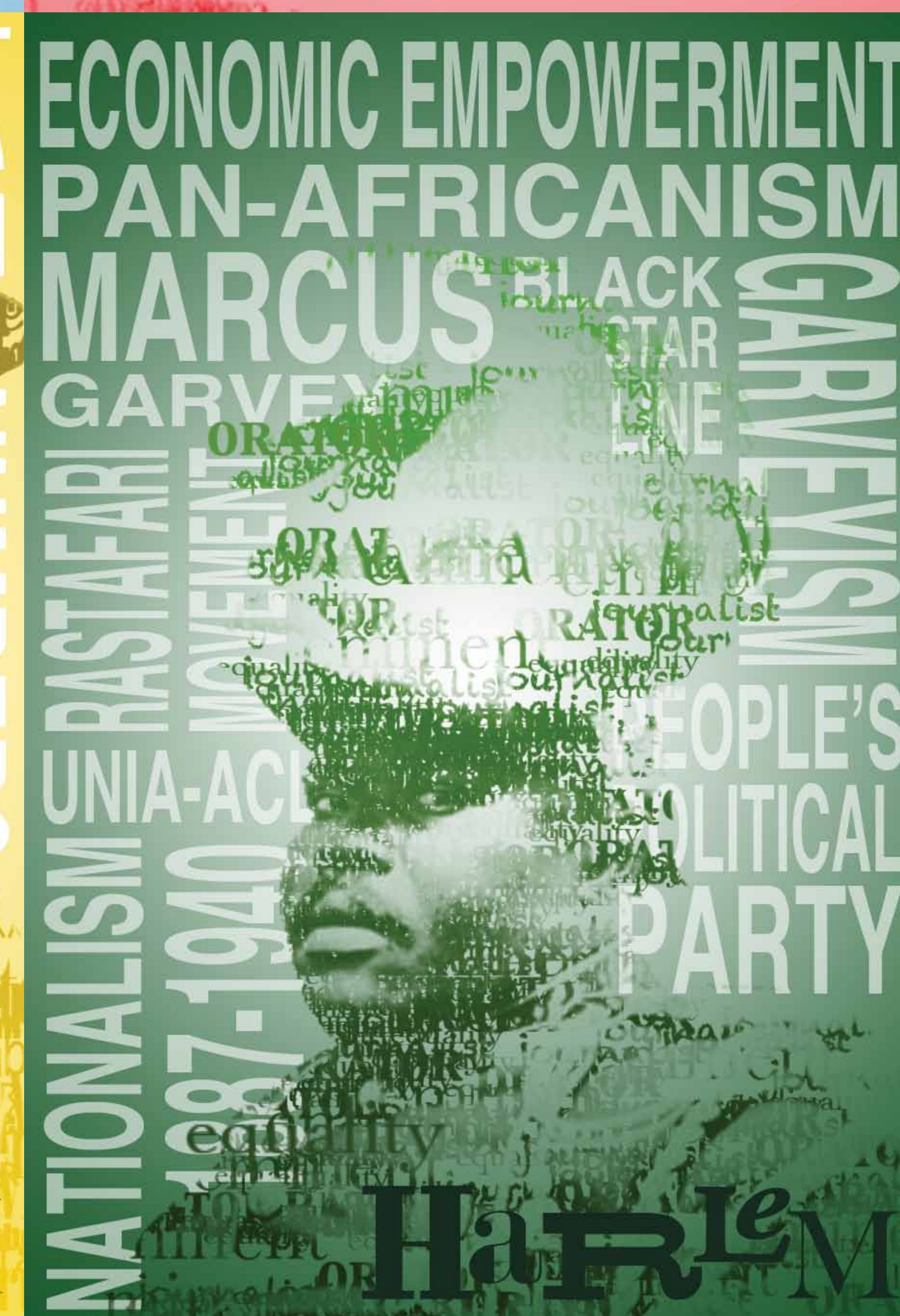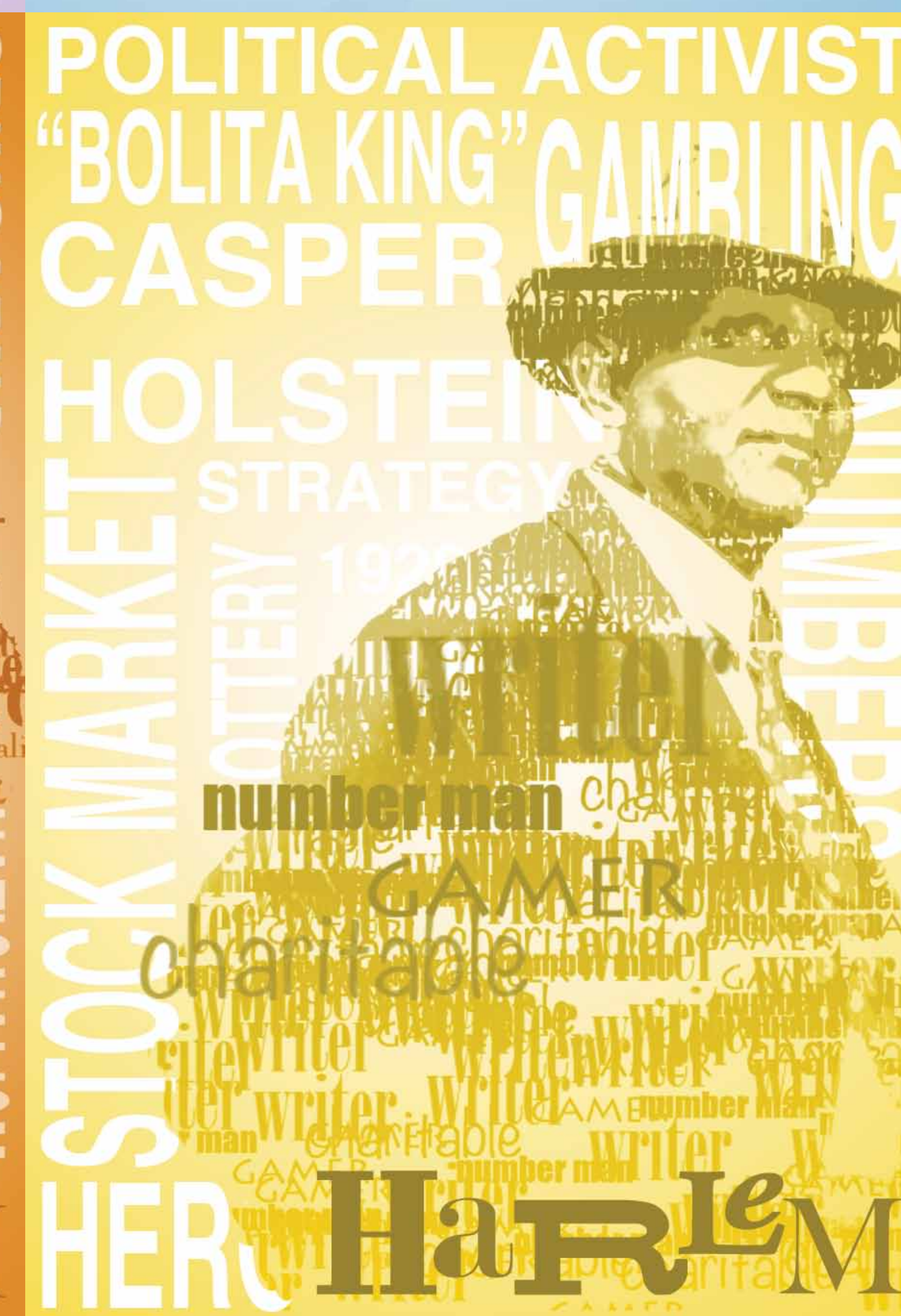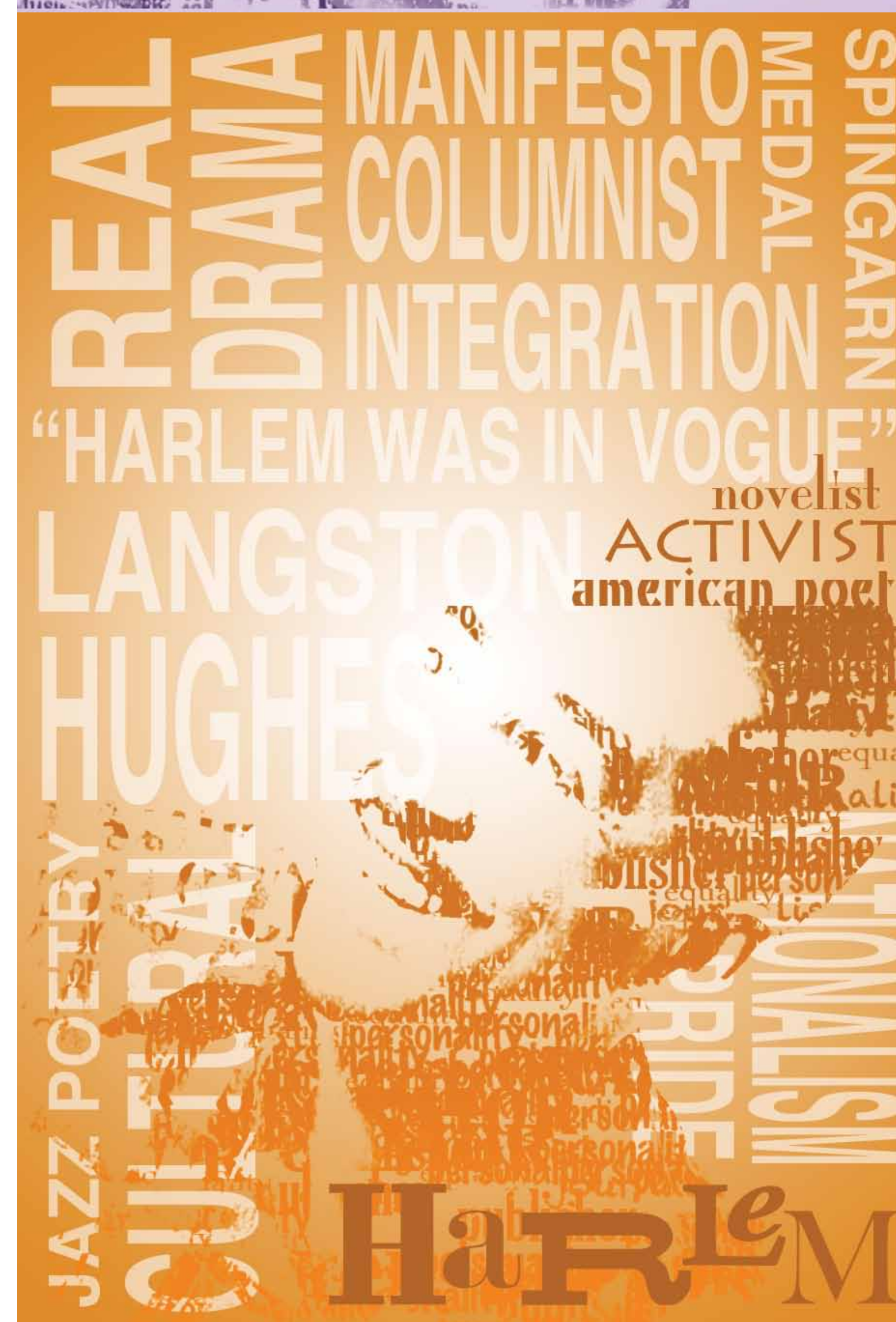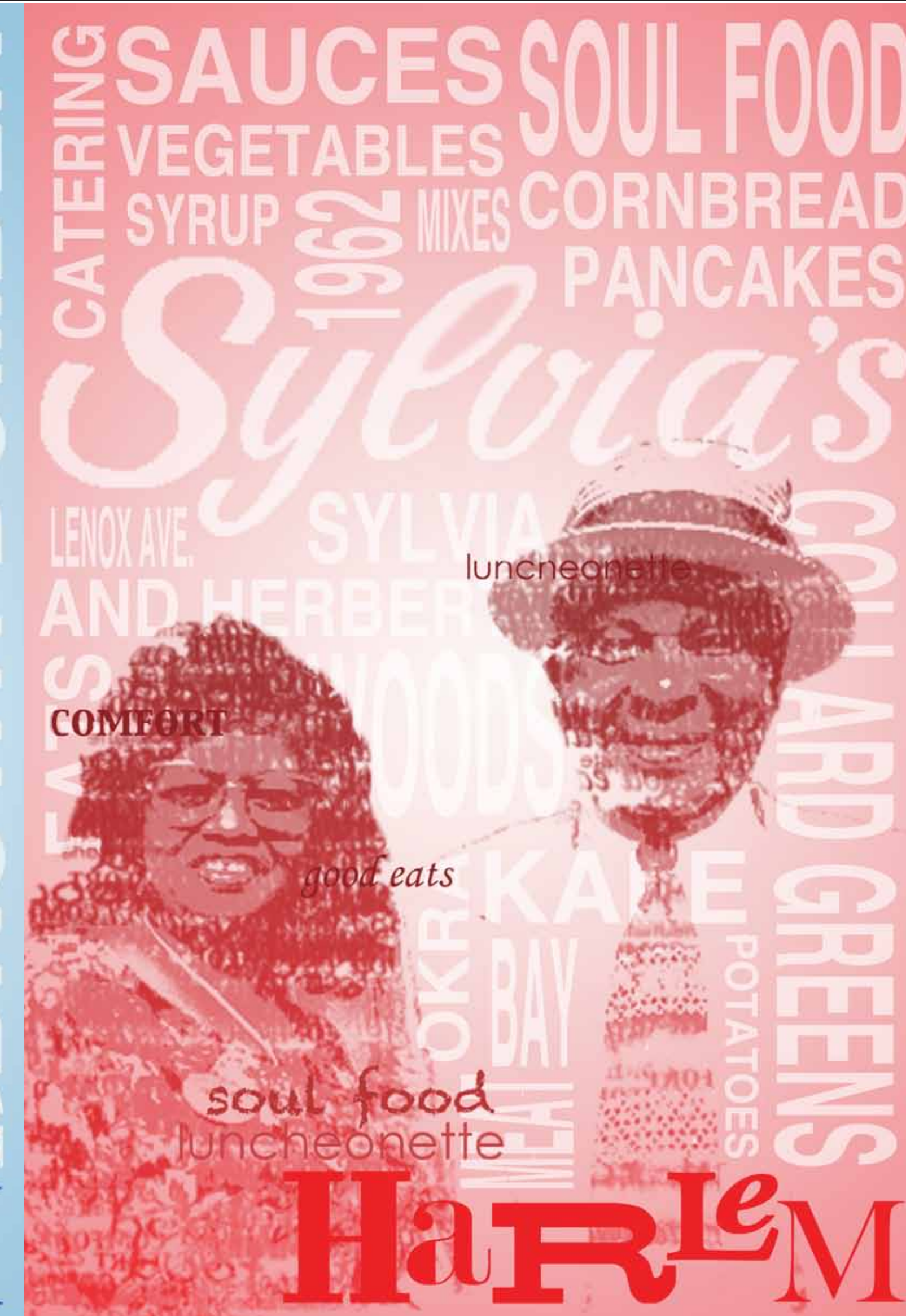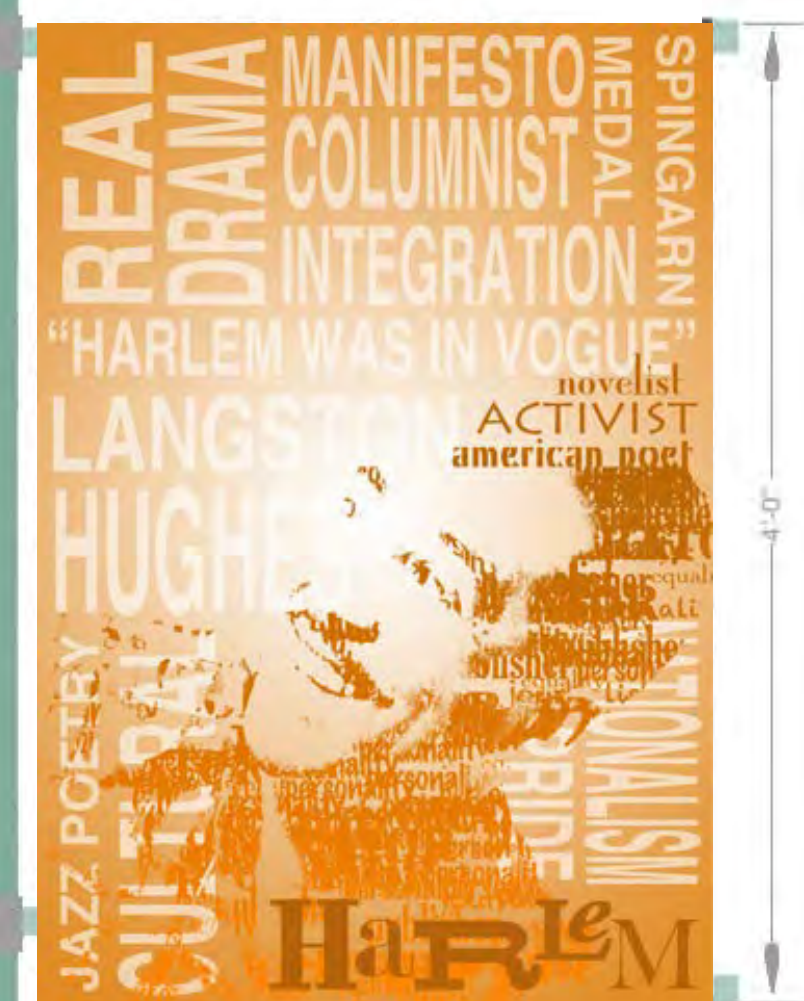
# › City-wide Celebration

Outside of Harlem's borders I used the ESCAPE logo and created a series of posters that appeared on billboards, taxis, subways, etc. throughout Manhattan. Extra emphasis was placed on putting these motivational posters on subways, buses, and taxis because I want passengers to recognize the easy at which they can travel to Harlem on the same form of transportation that they are already familiar with.

# › Uniquely Harlem

**I**nside of Harlem's borders I used the categories created by the acronym ESCAPE to form a series of posters, banners, street murals, etc. that were placed around the city. The style in which the posters were created is a play on modern graffiti because I feel that it keeps the urban nature that classified Harlem while also integrating the historical message I am trying to convey.

# › What's Next?

Through graphic design, I hope to connect all of the piece of Manhattan's puzzle by creating a cohesive visual compaign throughout the city. Ultimately, I hope that the Harlem ESCAPE will revitalize the neighborhood to its past splendor while subsequently drawing in New Yorkers and tourists alike.

# ❯ Works Cited

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