

Neither Snow Nor Rain: The Post Office as a Point of Contact with the State for Harlem Residents

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Overview

The United States Postal Service is a wide-reaching, immensely popular civic institution which allows all Americans to send and receive mail at a low cost. Its role in shaping the American state and population has been understudied in political science. This capstone aims to borrow frameworks for studying the influence of other apparatuses of the American state to do so for the postal service.

In *Political Consequences of the Carceral State* (2010), Lerman and Weaver established that contact with the carceral state functioned as a negative agent of political socialization upon these custodial citizens. They argue that this political socialization takes place in two spheres: a citizen's attitude towards their government, and towards themselves and their own citizenship. This capstone questions their conclusion, which surmised that Black Americans' main point of contact with the state is with the carceral state, and thus it is the only relevant agent of political socialization, an overriding agent. This capstone will examine the role of contact with the United States Postal Service on the political socialization of Harlem residents, through ethnographic research which has been postponed due to COVID-19.



Bronx General Post Office, Celeste Zhou for Untapped Cities



Jackson Heights Post Office, Michelle Young for Untapped Cities

Why the Postal Service?

Attention has been paid in historical scholarship to the role of the post office as a constructor of American culture. Works like *Wall to Wall America: Post Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Marling) and *Depression Post Office Murals and Southern Culture* (Beckham) detail the influence of USPS on American culture. They describe government projects to build post offices that reflect how American culture ought to be in the eyes of the federal government, demonstrating the importance of post offices as spaces where citizens come into contact with the state; many post offices were designed with the intention of inspiring certain feelings towards citizenship in their patrons. *How the Post Office Created America* (Gallagher) and *There's Always Work at the Post Office: African American Postal Workers and the Fight for Jobs, Justice, and Equality* (Rubio) detail the history of the postal service's political influence, on the creation of the American state itself and in the lives of Black Americans.



125th St Post Office, from Google Reviews

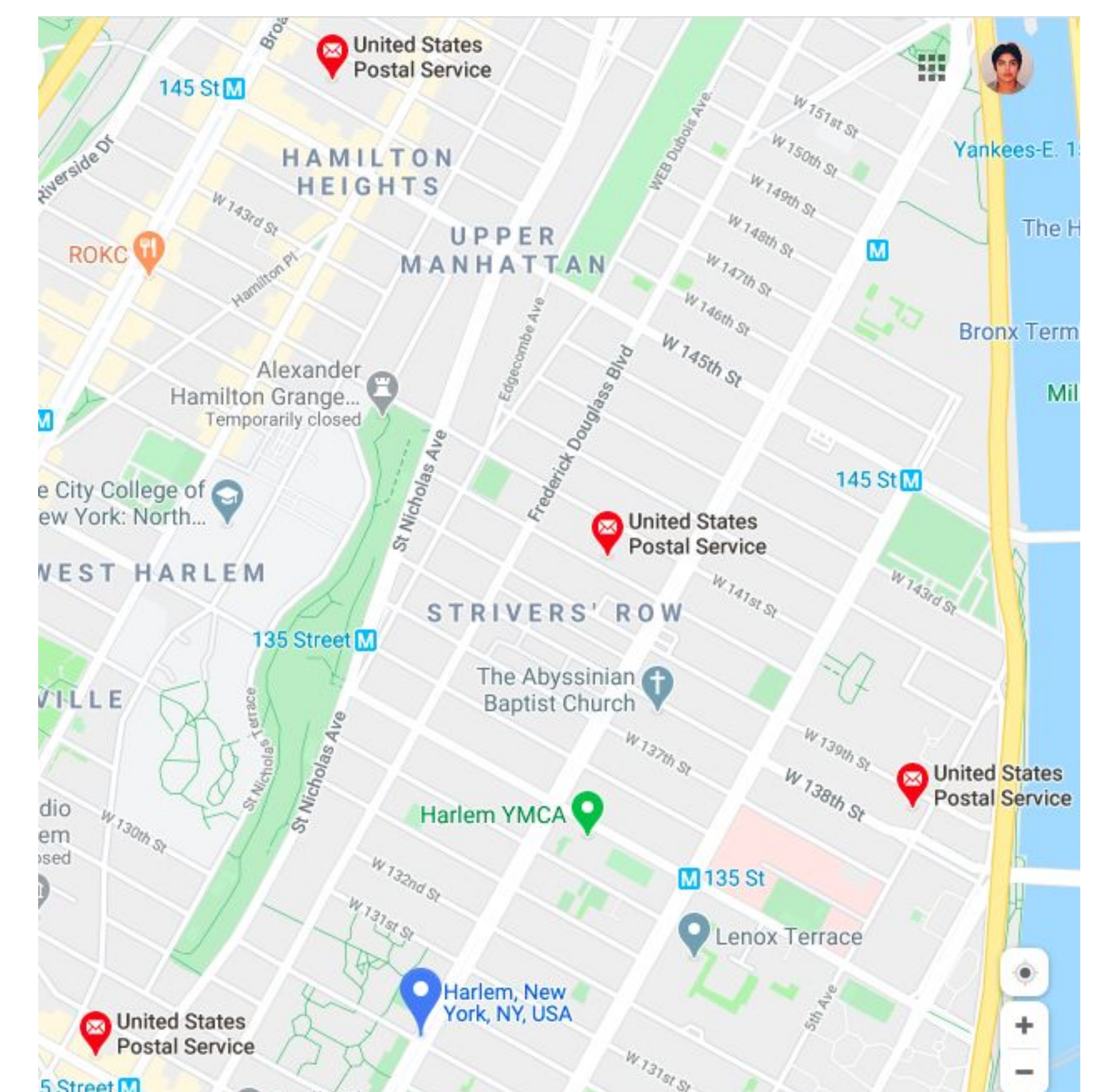
Qualifying a Point of Contact with the State

Lerman and Weaver's work provides a framework to qualify a point of contact with the state: was it voluntary or compulsory, frequent or infrequent, direct or indirect, visible or convoluted? Most importantly, did this given point of contact with the state leave citizens more or less likely to participate in electoral politics, or to seek out government in any form? Was it positive or negative?

Proposed Methodology

Why ethnography? Ethnographic research accounts for the outliers empirical research does not which, while not necessarily statistically significant, hold cultural significance and can be vital in explaining the effects of contact with the state for Harlemites. Fieldwork would supplement data; for example, it is one thing to know how many Black Americans work for the postal service, it is another to learn what this means for the *relationship* between Black American communities and the postal service.

To learn more about the role of the postal service as an agent of political socialization, I had planned to conduct multimedia ethnographic fieldwork over spring break at the following sites:



Unfortunately, COVID-19 eliminated the possibility of fieldwork, crucial to this project. My capstone advisor and I fully intend to conduct the proposed research once doing so is safe.