

Disorderly Houses: Residences, Privacy, and the Surveillance of Sexuality in 1920s Harlem<sup>1</sup>

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“White onlookers . . . must be made to remember that Harlem is not merely exotic, it is human,” W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in the *National Association for Coloured People’s* magazine *The Crisis* in 1927; “it is not a spectacle and an entertainment, it is life; it is not chiefly cabarets, it is chiefly home.”<sup>2</sup> In admonishing whites, Du Bois was assuming that homes presented a different picture of black Americans than public performances, that the residents of Harlem, New York City’s foremost African-American neighborhood, had adopted the bourgeois domestic ideals promoted by the black middle-class as a means of advancing the race toward equality. On other occasions, however, he was less certain of the propriety and order of black home life. Du Bois shared with reformers of both races a concern that many residences in growing urban neighborhoods were so overcrowded that their occupants lacked privacy, causing them to be corrupted by lodgers or pushed out into commercialized public spaces where men and women freely mixed. Such anxieties were rarely supported by evidence of what actually happened in homes.<sup>3</sup> Instead, reformers followed the logic spelled out by Lawrence Veiller, a leading advocate of housing reform, who while admitting “we are singularly without accurate information” about the effects of “the lodger evil,” insisted that “from the very nature of things the results must be of this kind.” “the introduction of strange men into the family life [leads] to the breaking up of homes, to the separation of husband and wife, to the going astray of young daughters, just emerging into womanhood.”<sup>4</sup> To what extent black residences fulfilled Du Bois’s hopes and

were a counterpoint to racist notions or whether they were the source of immorality that he feared has not been explored by historians examining sexuality in the world's leading black city during the 1920s. They have instead followed the white visitors Du Bois admonished in giving their attention to the neighborhood's streets, nightclubs and drag balls, and to prostitutes, blues singers, and literati of the Harlem Renaissance found there. Focusing on what happened in public in Harlem, on the sexualization of public spaces and commercialization of sex, has led scholars to portray the sexual geography of the neighborhood as that of a vice district.<sup>5</sup>

In this article we offer a picture of what happened inside the homes of Harlem that reveals neither the immorality focused on lodgers feared by reformers nor the bourgeois respectability for which they hoped. Privacy existed despite overcrowding, thanks to the regular, extended absence of residents at work, the willingness of those not bound by familial ties to look the other way, the ability to pass as married or as heterosexual, and the limited surveillance conducted by public and private authorities. Within that space apart could be found not only respectable reproductive sexuality, but also a range of other sexualities. We know intuitively that privacy can produce sexualities other than the bourgeois ideal, but that knowledge is only reflected in scholarship about gay and lesbian life, not in broader accounts of modern American urban sexualities.<sup>6</sup> This article shows that residents used their homes as sites for homosexual, extramarital, and premarital sexual activity, ranging from casual relationships to informal unions, and as venues that commodified privacy and gave others space for the same kinds of sexual expression.

Focusing on residences rather than public spaces recasts the sexual geography of Harlem from a vice district to a furnished room district. A feature of most major turn-of-the-

century American cities, such neighborhoods were marked by an abundance of rooming houses--in black Harlem, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier's research showed, they constituted just over half of the residential structures--and cafeterias, cheap restaurants, tearooms, cabarets and movie theatres catering to lodgers.<sup>7</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, in the only study to explore this sexual geography, showed that in Chicago both rooming houses and the places where residents spent their leisure offered numerous opportunities for men and women to meet. Weak community and parental pressure to conform to sexual conventions, and open expressions of sexuality by prostitutes and their customers, encouraged the sexualization of encounters between men and women. Thanks to the regularity with which lodgers changed address, an atmosphere of anonymity shrouded sexual relations in furnished rooms, and made informal, transient relationships the norm.<sup>8</sup> This sexual geography differed from a vice district in fostering not only prostitution, but also a range of extramarital sexual relationships. It was the combination of commercialized leisure and the privacy to be found in the dense concentration of residences that provided the space for urban dwellers to depart from sexual conventions and articulate a modern sexuality.

We found evidence of what happened inside black homes in new legal sources, the Manhattan District Attorney's case files and the Court of General Sessions' Probation Department files, and in reports by an investigator employed by the antivice organization called the Committee of Fourteen, and the pages of New York's two major black newspapers, the New York Age and the Amsterdam News. Crime opened private spaces to public view. Police and prosecutors gathered statements from victims and witnesses that described not only the circumstances of particular offences, but also an individual's situation prior to that moment.<sup>9</sup> Few of those who appeared in the legal system were professional criminals; most

were ordinary residents caught breaking the law, once, out of desperation or poverty. Nor was sexual behavior always what brought individuals into the legal system; rather, other actions led to scrutiny that exposed their sexuality. It was concern about interracial mixing that led the Committee of Fourteen to send a black man undercover to investigate Harlem's nightlife in 1928. The one hundred and thirty reports he filed described visits to apartments being operated as buffet flats, and recounted what he saw go on within them. Harlem's black newspapers reported events that uncovered private spaces, and paid particular attention to the work of private detectives.

On first glance it may seem contradictory to use evidence that exposed what went on in residences to argue that they offered privacy. However, much of that evidence exists not due to a breakdown in privacy but because individuals revealed their behavior.<sup>10</sup> In fact, cultural, spatial, and administrative constraints made it difficult for both public and private agencies to police homes in furnished room districts. Whatever limits thin walls and the proximity of neighbors imposed on privacy could be counterbalanced by residents' concern to mind their own business, to respect closed doors and drawn curtains, and thus to allow rooms to be a functional private space. Police raids could breach that privacy, but officers spent little time on such incursions. Those in uniform patrolled the street, but not, it seemed, the tenements and houses that lined it. From the sidewalk, it was almost impossible for them to detect what occurred inside those buildings. Officers needed to obtain a search warrant before they could enter a residence, the only exception being when they followed a suspected prostitute and his or her customer. Undercover investigators and private detectives were not so constrained by law, but, in Harlem, race created an additional barrier: Blacks displayed a reluctance to admit whites into their homes.<sup>11</sup> Very few blacks worked as police or

investigators for white organizations. A handful of black private detectives did ply their trade in Harlem, but they ventured inside homes only when hired by aggrieved spouses. Public and private authorities never made--could not make--a concerted effort to pursue sexual activity in dwellings. So when privacy was breached, it is clear that what is captured in the sources are instances of behavior that commonly went unexposed, even if there is no basis on which to judge exactly how typical they were.

Our argument has implications that reach well beyond Harlem. The features of the neighborhood we highlight were characteristics of the other black communities growing in northern cities in the 1920s. In cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland and Pittsburgh, the closing of red light districts turned the areas in which blacks lived into centers of vice, which became overcrowded as waves of migrants arrived from the South. These were neighborhoods too, where blacks controlled few of the businesses, and had to range across the city in search of work, and operate businesses, including venues that offered privacy for a price, in their residences.<sup>12</sup> It is less clear from existing scholarship whether black residents of those cities also experienced the same limited surveillance, which saw police and private authorities concentrate on public and commercialized spaces and only occasionally venture inside black homes, instead relying on black organizations and individuals for surveillance of domestic space.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of the culture of surveillance that operated, black neighborhoods in cities across the northern US states from Chicago to Baltimore shared the same broad sexual geography as Harlem; they too would have contained not just sites of commercialized leisure, populations of prostitutes and respectable homes, but also residences offering privacy that fostered a range of other sexualities at odds with the middle-class sexual order.

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Beginning in 1904, black New Yorkers relocated their residences, churches and businesses from San Juan Hill, on the West Side between 59th and 65th Streets, to the streets around the new subway station at 135th Street and Lenox Avenue. Waves of African American migrants from the South and immigrants from the Caribbean joined them, creating a neighborhood in which blacks resided segregated from whites. By 1920 the area occupied almost exclusively by blacks stretched south to 130th Street, north to 144th Street, from Fifth Avenue across to Eighth Avenue, and encompassed a population of some 73,000 people. In the next decade Harlem became the “Negro Mecca,” a more cosmopolitan place than America’s other “black metropolis,” Chicago, one deserving of the title of the world’s black capital. By 1930, blacks, now numbering around 200,000, had spilled over Eighth Avenue to Amsterdam Avenue, and were living as far north as 160th Street, and approaching 110th Street to the south.<sup>14</sup> In this process of expansion, the area of black Harlem did not keep pace with the number of newcomers. Rising demand for housing produced skyrocketing rents, encouraging landlords to subdivide apartments, and forcing families into fewer rooms, and into sharing that limited space with lodgers. In an unremarkable building, 116 West 144th Street, almost half of the thirty-two households had lodgers in 1920, rising to more than three out of five in 1925, and three out of four in the depression year of 1930.<sup>15</sup> That pattern was replicated throughout the neighborhood: an Urban League investigation in 1927 found one in four Harlem households included a lodger, twice the rate among whites living in New York City.<sup>16</sup> Helped by these increasing numbers of lodgers, some blocks between Lenox and Seventh Avenues became among the most densely packed residential streets in all of New York City, as crowded as the better known tenements of the Lower East Side.<sup>17</sup>

In reformers' discussions of these conditions, the number of residents generally overshadowed the character of the spaces they occupied. Once the individuals or couples residing in a home exceeded the number of rooms, reformers schooled in bourgeois ideals treated an apartment as a single shared space. But as a physical environment, however crowded, such residences had rooms that offered space apart. Simple actions such as locking the door, closing the curtains and avoiding excessive noise could render a room a private space. It was having to pass through the apartment to get inside a room that made it difficult for both landlord and tenant to access the privacy it offered, by exposing to view whoever sought to go inside. In other words, the lack of privacy in a residence was contingent on all, or most of, its occupants being present. However, in Harlem's homes, that often was not the case.

Indeed, as densely populated as Harlem was, its inhabitants were never all present at the one time. A New York Times journalist in 1935 noted that "Harlem, in a manner of speaking, is a residential rather than a commercial or industrial city, self-maintained in its social aspects but reaching out into every section of New York in its economic life. Ninety-five percent of Harlem's working population travels to its job. Every morning sees an exodus of workers filling subways, surface cars and elevated trains and every evening sees them returning to their homes."<sup>18</sup>

Black workers left Harlem because the neighborhood offered them little employment. Whites controlled 75 percent of the businesses; as Claude McKay, the West Indian born writer lamented, "the saloons were run by the Irish, the restaurants by the Greeks, the ice and fruit stands by the Italians, and the grocery and haberdashery stores by the Jews."<sup>19</sup> As a result, unskilled laborers such as West Indian construction worker Morgan Thompson had to

seek work in downtown Manhattan and on the Upper East Side, and in the outer boroughs of Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx, while black women such as Annie Dillard had to travel to midtown hotels and the apartments of the Upper West Side for work as a domestic servant and to the bottom of Manhattan to find employment in a laundry.<sup>20</sup> During the day, with most of the employed gone, Harlem's residential buildings were sparsely populated. Thieves were well aware of that situation, burgling residences during the day, typically simply breaking open the apartment door to gain entrance.<sup>21</sup> Even after black workers returned in the evening, it was Harlem's streets rather than its homes that became crowded, as residents set out to shop and socialize. In the spring of 1920, Mrs. Jennie Taylor was among the witnesses to a shooting on Fifth Avenue near 137th Street just before 11 o'clock at night. She had left her home at 9:30 in the evening to shop at Solomon's butchery, and, having stopped several times to speak to friends and family, was still on her errand when the shooting took place. Not just butchers, but businesses ranging from beauty salons and barbers to music shops remained open until as late as midnight to cater to residents who were away from the neighborhood during the day.<sup>22</sup>

The ebb and flow of the neighborhood's population allowed residents to find privacy in homes that they shared with lodgers and family members. Although adolescent girls were hardly the only group who used that space apart for sexual activity, New York law caused their behavior to be exposed in a way that of older residents was not. The rape statute included an age of consent of eighteen years, punishing a man who had sexual intercourse with an underage girl regardless of whether she consented. As a result, police, and particularly the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NYSPCC), a private organization committed to enforcing laws protecting children, brought cases of heterosexual



activity to the courts.<sup>23</sup> But the authorities had not discovered those girls and their male partners having sex in homes. It was the consequences of sexual activity, usually pregnancy, not a lack of privacy that caused girls to appear in the legal system.

Norman Gilbert shared an apartment in 53 West 131st Street with his mother, father, sisters, and brothers, none of whom was present when he brought fifteen-year-old Helen Bernard home after they had been to a show at the LaFayette Theatre in August 1916. In their absence, he called Bernard into his bedroom, put his arms around her, kissed her, and asked to have sexual intercourse. Gilbert's family were away from home often enough for he and Bernard subsequently to have sex every week for several months; the closest they came to being discovered was one Sunday night in October, when his mother returned from church while they were in his room. But she had to ring the bell to get in, giving the couple time to rejoin their friends in the dining room before she came to the door.<sup>24</sup> Gilbert and Bernard's encounters occurred in the evening; more often couples used rooms during the day.<sup>25</sup> It was only when one of Bernard's friends told her mother about the pregnancy that the couple's sexual activity was exposed. In such circumstances, most working-class parents sought to marry off the couple, or to arrange for the man to support the child, only turning to the legal system if those efforts failed.<sup>26</sup> However, Bernard's mother disliked Gilbert's "appearance" and "had heard he was a good-time fellow," and had told her daughter not to bring him to their home. Consequently, she went straight to the police.

Such privacy encouraged the predatory as well as the amorous. A call from twenty-year-old Marvin Williams saying that his sister wanted to see her brought Edith Wallace to the apartment Williams shared with his brother and sister-in-law one afternoon in January 1925. She had met the West Indian waiter a month or so earlier at a cousin's house, and had

only been to his home once before, delivering fruit when he was ill. Williams was alone, in his pajamas, when Wallace arrived at the apartment. After a brief conversation, he “got fresh,” and holding her down by the shoulders, raped her. She struggled and “hollered,” to no avail. Although airshafts, open windows, and flimsy walls ensured that sound traveled freely in Harlem’s tenements, no one in the adjacent apartment came to her aid; pressed by a prosecutor to explain why, Wallace offered that “sometimes people mind their own business.”<sup>27</sup> We might expect residents to be concerned about sounds indicating a girl struggling with a man, but at this time violence against women was an unexceptional part of the sexual behavior of young men, common even in relationships into which girls willingly entered. That attitude was reflected in the very narrow range of circumstances that juries recognized as rape: when a woman knew her assailant, as Wallace did, even injuries such as knife wounds, bruises and a fractured jaw failed to convince juries that a woman had not consented to sexual intercourse. That attitude is also evident in the reaction of Wallace’s family. In a response that was far from unusual, her parents went to the police only after Williams reneged on his promise to marry Wallace. That the loss of virginity “ruined” an unmarried woman, left her without respectability and prospects for marriage, often made the circumstances in which she had sexual intercourse largely incidental to how even those closest to her perceived and reacted to her sexual activity.<sup>28</sup>

Even when apartments were occupied, a room could still offer a couple a degree of privacy if other residents were prepared to look away. Families may not have acted in this way toward adolescents, but those living apart from family could sometimes obtain privacy through the complicity of fellow residents. In August 1927, Lucy Brown occupied one of the six rooms that made up apartment 6W at 101 West 126th Street. She had rented the space

since her separation from her husband, John, three years earlier, collecting a court-ordered payment of \$10 a week from him. Hallum Yearwood, the landlord, lived in one room, single men occupied two of the other rooms, a married couple another, and two sisters the final room. Or at least that is how it appeared. In reality, although Yearwood had his own room, he slept in Brown's bed. Like her, he was married but separated from his spouse, who he alleged was a bigamist. Only the other residents would have been aware of the couple's sleeping arrangements, but, as was typical of lodgers, they maintained, as George Chauncey puts it, "a degree of respectful social distance."<sup>29</sup> The mobility of many tenants would have helped establish that detachment: at least three of Yearwood's tenants in August 1927 had been in residence less than two weeks.<sup>30</sup> In this case, privacy was also relatively easy to obtain because Yearwood was the landlord, and thus responsible for policing residents of the apartment.

In public, Harlem's landlords, following the politics of respectability predominant in black communities, disavowed any willingness to allow single tenants to have guests of the opposite sex in their rooms, effectively refusing to provide unmarried individuals with privacy that might allow sexual activity. Confronted with an adulterous couple caught in an apartment at 287 Edgecombe Avenue, the owner and superintendent, Hugh Kuehn, denied all knowledge of their presence, and declared to a newspaper reporter that he "would not allow his apartments to be used for immoral purposes."<sup>31</sup> To do otherwise would have damaged both a landlord's respectability and social standing, and that of their home. A residence in which unmarried couples had sexual intercourse was a disorderly house both in its failure to uphold the sexual order of marital heterosexuality, and also by the legal definition of the term, which made it a misdemeanor to "keep or maintain . . . a place for the encouragement or practice by

persons of lewdness, fornication, unlawful sexual intercourse or disorderly act of obscene purpose,” and to lease any part of a building knowing that it would be used in that way.<sup>32</sup> That property owners worried about such consequences is evident in the reaction of one landlady, Mrs. Simmons, satirized in The Inter-State Tattler in 1925, who became “hysterical” when asked by private detectives about the presence of a couple in her apartment, and, in her “excitement,” claimed “that her husband was sleeping in both rooms” of the residence.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, as the subsequent discovery of the couple in one of Mrs. Simmons’ rooms suggests, when not in the public eye, some of those leasing rooms in Harlem did allow their tenants to do what they pleased in the privacy of their rooms. A woman who solicited a black undercover investigator in a speakeasy in 1928 offered to take him home, saying: “Oh you can get in at almost any time. The landlady is very nice in that way.”<sup>34</sup> And for all the pieties uttered by landlords and landladies, tenants did not seem to regard asking for privacy as likely to lead to eviction. One prostitute, found for a white investigator by a taxi driver, who had brought the customer to Harlem in his cab, initially said she could not take him to her home because her “landlady does not know about her business.” When the investigator refused to have sex in the cab, the woman eventually responded, “Nothing tried, nothing gained. I think I’ll ask the landlady if she will let you come here.” When he called her half an hour later, she said it was all right with the landlady.<sup>35</sup> Property owners who offered such privacy, despite the risk of scandal and prosecution, were often motivated by money. Faced with competition for tenants they tolerated guests, granting their lodgers what were called “privileges.”<sup>36</sup>

Even if landlords refused to grant their tenants such privileges, they could not always control what happened within their property. Hugh Kuehn’s tenant had sublet her apartment without his knowledge to the couple caught there.<sup>37</sup> Other landlords rented to individuals,

only to have private detectives find someone else living with them; The Amsterdam News reported that Mr. Flemming, the owner of 131 West 143rd Street, having rented a room to Mrs. Ada Julian, was “at a loss to know why Mr. Thomas was occupying the room” at 2 o’clock one morning in 1925.<sup>38</sup> Even more difficult for property owners to detect were those couples who passed themselves off as married. In a population dominated by migrants and immigrants, landlords were unlikely to have personal knowledge of prospective tenants on which to draw. Nor was this yet a society in which there was any expectation that a couple would, or could, document their marriage.<sup>39</sup> This situation fostered what Beverly Schwartzberg has called a pattern of fluid marriage, in which “husbands abandoned wives, wives deserted husbands, and married folk living without their partners sometimes represented themselves as widowed or single and remarried,” either formally or by entering into common law relationships.<sup>40</sup> Archie Hargreaves and John Holden’s wife, unnamed in the newspaper story about them, fit this pattern. They had lived together as a married couple for two years before Holden and the private detectives he employed exposed them in December 1925. That discovery also revealed that Hargreaves had a wife and child in Greensboro, North Carolina.<sup>41</sup> While this couple appears to have set up a life together, others seem to have used marriage as more short-term pretense. James Archibald rented a room one night in 1925, giving his name as Lopez, returning the next day with Lillian English, a married woman whom he introduced to his landlady as his wife, Mrs. Lopez. The room was in an apartment on West 111th Street, on the margins of Harlem, far from the building on West 139th Street where English had resided with her husband, highlighting how the quantity of housing available in a furnished room district like Harlem fostered the ability of unmarried couples to find a place where “telling a simple untruth” could gain them privacy.<sup>42</sup> In this case, the

couple lived in their new home for only two weeks before English's husband tracked them down, leaving their long-term intentions unclear.<sup>43</sup>

Gay and lesbian couples could find privacy in Harlem's furnished rooms through a similar pretense, by passing themselves off as heterosexual. In most instances that involved no more than taking advantage of a presumption of heterosexuality: members of the same sex being inside a room together attracted little of the concern directed towards men with women. One man interviewed by George Chauncey, who shared an apartment with his sister, brought men back to his room on the pretext that they could not get home that night.<sup>44</sup> Gay men who rented apartments rather than rooms enjoyed greater privacy, as residents of buildings divided into apartments "generally sought to reproduce the privacy of an individual home by remaining aloof from the activities of their neighbors."<sup>45</sup> Alfred Matthews, a thirty-five-year-old black chef, leased a seven-room apartment on the top floor of 242 West 122nd Street, subletting rooms to help pay the rent. A man of "good manners" who prided himself on his home's "cleanliness and comfortable appointments," Matthews's apparently respectable dwelling actually housed a group of gay friends, and served as a place to engage in sexual acts with other men.<sup>46</sup> A similar household of lesbians lived next to the building in which Mabel Hampton rented rooms, also on 122nd Street, regularly hosting parties open only to women.<sup>47</sup> Twenty-four-year-olds Olivia Walton and Margaret Mason more explicitly passed themselves off as heterosexual, sharing an apartment for two years under the pretense of being married to the men with whom they resided. Legal records give few details of their lives, but neighbors believed the women were prostitutes, and the men their pimps, a view given some credibility by the fact that the jobs all four claimed to hold proved to be fictitious. Those whose windows gave them a view of the apartment claimed to have seen Walton "indulging in normal and

abnormal sexual acts,” and many were aware of the women’s relationship. However, no one appears to have reported what they saw to the authorities. The women’s sexual activity became public in that sense only when Walton stabbed and killed Mason, allegedly in a jealous rage over her attention to another woman.<sup>48</sup>

Public and private authorities posed little threat to privacy obtained within apartments through the absence of landlords, family members and other occupants, their willingness to look away, or the pretense of marriage or heterosexuality. Police largely remained outside Harlem’s homes, instead focusing their surveillance on the streets, with uniformed officers stationed at posts throughout the neighborhood and officers in plainclothes scattered among the crowds. Although by the 1920s, most prostitution in Harlem occurred on the streets, pursuing arrests for prostitution did bring officers into homes. They had the legal power to pursue immoral behavior in private as well as in public: the Tenement House Law gave officers the authority to charge women who solicited them indoors as well as on the streets. About half of all the arrests for prostitution in New York City in the 1920s occurred in private dwellings, to which a woman had taken an officer she had solicited on the street or, more often, into which police had observed a woman enter in the company of a man.<sup>49</sup> In the latter case, officers conducted what was known as a “jump raid,” in which they acted without first securing a warrant, on the basis of their belief that a crime was being committed, and relied on admissions made by those they found inside and circumstantial evidence such as a couple’s attire, or lack of it, the condition of the bed, and the character of the room, to provide grounds for an arrest. In an illustrative case from the Women’s Court, a black vice squad officer observed a black couple enter an apartment. Waiting “sufficient time . . . for incriminating evidence to be obtained,” he followed. On entering the apartment, he found a woman about

twenty years of age, naked, in bed with a man without trousers. The officer asked the man if he was married to the woman; no, he replied, “he had come there to have a good time with the defendant and had paid her \$6.” After making the woman return the man’s money, he arrested her, together with her landlady, who had received \$2 for the use of the room, and another woman living in the apartment, who had witnessed the transaction.<sup>50</sup>

Black prostitutes who were arrested less often took men inside residences than did their white counterparts, resorting instead to hallways, taxicabs and other “semi-public” spaces.<sup>51</sup> When they did take men inside, it was most often not to their homes, but to rooms that could be rented briefly as a place to entertain a “friend.”<sup>52</sup> And they did so with caution. One woman, explaining to a white man in 1927 that “I don’t take everybody who comes along,” described how, sometime earlier, a girl who she regularly let bring “friends” to her apartment called up to say she was coming over with a man. When they arrived, she found out that the girl had only just met him, and refused to rent them a room. But before she could usher them out of her home, a second man arrived. The men identified themselves as police officers, and arrested both women. She herself avoided imprisonment only because a medical examination found her free of venereal disease; the girl, who had syphilis, went to prison. Her wariness of the man to whom she related this tale was equally well founded; he was an undercover investigator for the New York’s leading anti-prostitution organization, the Committee of Fourteen.<sup>53</sup> Court records show that black prostitutes’ practice of not taking men to rooms led police to conduct fewer jump raids such as this in Harlem than in white neighborhoods. The apartments that police did enter were clustered between 127th Street and 135th Street, off the avenues that ran through Harlem, with the densest grouping in the tenements east of Lenox Avenue, the poorest quality and most overcrowded housing in the



neighborhood. Few arrests took place in addresses in the blocks of better housing north of 135th Street and west of Lenox Avenue.<sup>54</sup> Thus, although a disproportionate number of black women were arrested for prostitution, that police activity did not reflect any widespread surveillance of residences that would have compromised the privacy that those spaces offered.

Not all those women who had their dwellings raided were prostitutes, thanks to corrupt police and their use of “stool pigeons” or informants to bolster arrest figures. “Broadway” Smith, Malcolm Cowley reported in The New Republic, “preyed on the mothers of [honest] families, first entering their apartments under pretext of renting a furnished room, and later representing to the members of the vice squad, with whom [he] cooperated, that the money paid for rent was really paid for the purposes of prostitution.”<sup>55</sup> However, as the bulk of legitimate policing took place on the streets, so too did most manufactured arrests for prostitution. Stool pigeons typically followed the example of Charles Dancey, the target of a campaign by The New York Age, in entrapping women on the street. Dancey, the Age reported, used the offer of bargain underwear and stockings, or of a desirable job, to lure a woman to a location where he could assault her, at which point he also dropped money by her side. His police confederates would then appear, and, seizing on the money as evidence that the woman was a prostitute, place her under arrest.<sup>56</sup>

Police surveillance of gay men also focused on public spaces, such as the subway restroom in which African-American novelist Wallace Thurman was arrested in 1925, by officers hiding in the porter’s mop closet. Although an average of 500 men were arrested for homosexual solicitation in Manhattan each year in the 1920s, relatively few of those arrests occurred in private dwellings, and it appears that jump raids played little part in the policing of gay men, in Harlem or elsewhere.<sup>57</sup> The only example of police venturing into a private

dwelling that we found in legal records and Harlem's black press involved an officer responding to a complaint from one of Alfred Matthews's female neighbors about the "continued acts of degeneracy" that she observed across the airshaft between their apartments. The officer took a room in the neighbor's apartment, and one evening saw two pairs of men involved in oral sex. He promptly climbed over the fire escape, through the kitchen window, and into the apartment to arrest the seven men present.<sup>58</sup> Matthews could have preserved his privacy by the simple act of drawing the curtains. Other gay men clearly did, as most of the cases of men having sex with other men in rooms and apartments that Chauncey found in court records came to police attention as the result not of a breakdown in privacy, but of a "mishap"--an assault, a blackmail attempt, parents' discovery that a man had invited their son to his home, or an arrest on another charge.<sup>59</sup>

While police largely remained outside residences, newspaper reports reveal that private detectives regularly ventured inside. They did so not seeking to enforce the law, as private organizations such as the Committee of Fourteen and the NYSPCC did, but in the employ of aggrieved spouses. John Brown, for example, employed the Boulin Detective Agency to prove the adultery of his wife Lucy, mentioned earlier, and thereby end his financial obligations to her. Such evidence could be gained only from within Lucy Brown's home, so, using the name "Wilson," Herbert Boulin leased a room in the apartment owned by Hallum Yearwood in which she resided. Not satisfied with observing Brown and Yearwood entering the same bedroom, the private detective contrived an excuse to knock on the door of Brown's room at eleven o'clock one evening. From the doorway, he was able to glimpse them in bed together. Thus assured that he had found the evidence his client needed, Boulin organized a raid on the apartment. At 3 o'clock in the morning on 2 August 1927, he used his

key to admit John Brown, three or four of his friends and relatives, and three other private detectives. After the party had filed into Lucy Brown's room and arranged themselves around her bed, John switched on the light. It revealed Yearwood asleep next to her, evidence of adultery to which those present could testify in court. By the next day, that image had been shared with the readers of the Amsterdam News, in a story headlined "DIVORCE SLEUTHS RAID YEARWOOD. John L Brown Finds His Wife With Him."<sup>60</sup> Although Boulin's investigation ended in a raid similar to those conducted by police, the preparations involved more than simply following Lucy Brown into the apartment, as officers conducting a jump raid did. He had to become part of the household, to live undercover within the apartment, in order to expose what she did with the privacy that residential space gave her.

This raid had consequences for Herbert Boulin that suggest limits to the ability of private detectives to breach the privacy of homes. Alexander MacNulty, the Deputy Secretary of State, refused to renew Boulin's license on the grounds that he had entered Lucy Brown's room without her consent and "any lawful warrant," and as such was guilty of burglary, or at least "an aggravated invasion of the rights of a citizen," rendering him unfit to be licensed as a detective. An immediate uproar among private detectives about the decision, however, made clear that such a position was at odds with accepted practice: Tobias Keppler, the counsel for the New York Federation of Licensed Detectives--of which Boulin was the only black member--claimed that MacNulty's concern to preserve "people's right of privacy will place the sin of adultery on a pedestal." But, in fact, the ruling was never applied to any of Boulin's colleagues, provoking The Amsterdam News to charge that the detective was the subject of racial discrimination. In 1930, the paper's general manager helped Boulin convince MacNulty to reinvestigate the case. At the conclusion of that investigation, the official determined that

the complaints against Boulin by Harlem residents he had investigated were the result of “jealousy and personal animosity,” and restored the detective’s license, two and a half years after revoking it. Nonetheless, the experience did have an impact on Boulin’s practices, or at least on how they were reported. Accounts of subsequent raids he led published in The Amsterdam News carefully avoided any suggestion that the detective had broken into apartments. Instead, reporters described Boulin as entering rooms only after an occupant had opened the door, or employing various “ruses” to gain entry.<sup>61</sup>

Such stories of divorce raids were a staple of the Amsterdam News throughout the 1920s, and featured a cross section of respectable Harlem, from physicians, dentists, attorneys, insurance agents, musicians and bandleaders, to clergymen, prominent lodge members, churchgoers, and individuals simply identified as “well-known Harlemites,” caught throughout the neighborhood in bed with people other than their spouses.<sup>62</sup> But a story each week or two amounted to only a small fraction of Harlem’s ever-increasing population. Even though relatively large numbers of blacks in northern cities sought divorces, Dylan Penningroth’s research suggests that many of those came from outside the middle class and would have lacked the resources to hire private detectives and the most common motive for doing so, a desire to obtain or avoid support payments.<sup>63</sup> Those working-class blacks who did seek support from a spouse who left them often found it a fruitless endeavor. Thirty-six-year-old Nettie Long certainly did. Left with three young children soon after the family arrived in Harlem, she twice went to the Domestic Relations Court to secure support from her husband, a printer. But even though he lived only a few blocks away from her, he rarely made payments, forcing Nettie, and later her oldest daughter and son, to seek work.<sup>64</sup> With many

blacks having little to gain, and limited resources, it seems likely that more extramarital and adulterous sexual activity was not investigated by private detectives.

The limited surveillance of homes by police, private detectives and private organizations also made it possible for blacks to use apartments as sites for sexual commerce, to offer privacy to visitors as well as residents. In the 1920s, many homes became buffet flats at night, venues offering alcohol, gambling, music, dancing, and prostitutes.<sup>65</sup> When Raymond Claymes, a black Texas-born public school teacher, aspiring baritone, and undercover investigator for the Committee of Fourteen, asked a male acquaintance to help him find a woman one evening in July 1928, he was taken to apartment eight in 2460 Seventh Avenue. He would not have found the location had he simply been passing by: the seven-story building housed shops at street level and over fifty apartments on the upper floors.<sup>66</sup> Inside, he joined nine men and five women; two women, named Ruth and Hazel, operated a buffet flat in the apartment. They served drinks, and Ruth played dance music on a piano; gambling on dice was on offer in an adjoining room. When Claymes danced with Hazel, she rubbed her body against his. “Eh, sweetheart, don’t treat me like that,” he responded, “I’m getting all unnecessary,” before appealing, “Can’t I get relief?” “Certainly,” Hazel replied matter-of-factly, explaining that it would cost him “not much, about \$5.”<sup>67</sup> The investigator observed a succession of similar encounters in the hour he spent in the apartment, as a number of women came in, some of who picked up men. By 1928, buffet flats had become a more important location for prostitution than the better known cabarets and speakeasies (the name given to places that served alcohol illegally): Claymes visited a third more cabarets and speakeasies than buffet flats, but three quarters of the prostitutes that he encountered he found in buffet flats. Buffet flats also became central to gay and lesbian life, although Claymes did

not come across any such establishments. At the elite end, Clinton Moore hosted stylish events that sometimes offered sexually explicit entertainments. Although Mabel Hampton sometimes frequented A'Lelia Walker's equally stylish events, she spent most of her time at less lavish venues, recollecting, "I didn't have to go to bars because I would go to the women's houses."<sup>68</sup>

It was not unusual for Harlem's black residents to use their domestic spaces for commerce, but buffet flats were distinctive in commodifying the privacy offered by homes. Harlem's apartments contained beauty salons, the most prevalent black enterprise in the neighborhood, as well as the professional offices of physicians and realtors. One man even sold tropical fish from his apartment, filling one room with tanks in which he bred fish.<sup>69</sup> Many blacks had little choice but to operate their businesses out of residences. For the most part, white landlords would not lease them stores, and banks would not lend them the capital to buy their own premises.<sup>70</sup> Buffet flats were also not the only form of commercialized entertainment located in residences. More famous were rent parties, through which residents raised money for rent by charging guests a few cents for admission to their apartment and providing food, liquor, live music, and uninhibited dancing in a highly sexually charged, unrestrained environment. Over the 1920s, holding rent parties became, as black theater critic and columnist Theophilus Lewis put it in 1929, "a business conducted by specialists" and "an institution backed by skilled promoters."<sup>71</sup> Buffet flats offered similar entertainments to rent parties, but Claymes's investigations show that they occupied a very different place in the neighborhood's sexual geography. Rent parties changed private dwellings into public spaces, advertising their existence on brightly colored cards deposited around Harlem's subway stations, pool halls and apartment buildings, and allowing in anyone who paid the admission.

Buffet flats, by contrast, remained private spaces. Their operators did not advertise, but spread their location only by word of mouth, to ensure that their clientele would be made up of individuals known to the operator as well as whomever they chose to invite. One result was that almost all patrons were black; in only eight of the sixty-one apartments (13 percent) he visited did he encounter white patrons. That racial character extended to the operators. Fifty-six of the sixty-one (92 percent) tenement places Claymes visited were black enterprises, mostly run by women.<sup>72</sup> Avoiding attention was their largest concern, a sentiment captured in Claude McKay's novel Home to Harlem, published in 1928. When a fight starts behind the "heavily and carefully shaded" windows of a fictitious flat on 140th Street, "The proprietress fell upon [one of the fighters] and clawed at him. "Wha's the matter all you bums trying to ruin mah place?" she cries. Her customers' mutterings expressed her fears about the attention that an assault or murder would have attracted: "Soon as this heah kind a business stahts, the dicks [police officers] will sartain sure git on to us."<sup>73</sup> Venues catering to gays and lesbians took particular care to avoid publicity, fearing the raids and police crackdowns that accompanied the simultaneous fascination and disgust provoked by the visibility of homosexuals in the city's life and culture in the 1920s.<sup>74</sup> Such concerns troubled the organizers of rent parties far less: at parties held at 606 St. Nicholas Avenue, the building owner, W. E. B. Du Bois, complained, "the men urinate out of the windows, and the women sit with their feet out of the front windows."<sup>75</sup>

Buffet flat proprietors had not always been so concerned to maintain their privacy. Cynthia Blair's research on Chicago found buffet flats operating more openly and loudly in the early years of the century, attracting the attention of neighbors and sometimes the police.<sup>76</sup> By the 1920s, the advent of Prohibition, and the attendant increase in the number of whites

visiting Harlem's entertainments, led proprietors and customers to place more of a premium on privacy. From 1919-1933, the Federal government forbade the manufacture, sale and transportation of alcohol. As a result, the saloons frequented by black prostitutes closed, forcing more to ply their trade in public, on streets, where police targeted them, arresting black women, and disrupting the sexual activity of their customers, in disproportionate numbers. Prostitutes and those who patronized them thus needed the space apart from police offered by buffet flats. But prostitutes did not make their homes in those apartments nor did they typically have sex in rooms within them; buffet flats were not brothels. "I never keep any [women] here," Irene Morrison explained to Claymes when he visited her apartment in 42 West 138th Street, "It's a risky business."<sup>77</sup> She followed practices less likely to attract the attention of police, getting girls when a customer wanted them, arranging for girls to visit during the evening, and having them take their customers elsewhere. During Prohibition, privacy also became more important as Harlem's cabarets, nightclubs, and speakeasies drew unprecedented numbers of whites. Those crowds were part of increasing numbers of Americans who purchased illegal liquor and drank in nightclubs and speakeasies as enforcing Prohibition overwhelmed law enforcement agencies. For whites, the particular attraction of Harlem's venues lay in their reputation for being unregulated and uninhibited, rooted in official tolerance of vice in black neighborhoods that predated Prohibition, and a growing fascination with African American culture. The white owners of Harlem's venues encouraged that patronage, as did their locations, in commercial spaces, on or near the avenues that ran the length of the neighborhood, and accessible from the taxis, buses, streetcars and subways that conveyed visitors.<sup>78</sup> So many whites flocked to Harlem that when Rudolph Fisher returned to the neighborhood's nightclubs in 1927, after a five-year absence,



he found they had all “turned white,” leaving him the only black present. Finding himself “actually stared at,” he reported, “I frequently feel uncomfortable and out of place,” and like his friends, he became only an occasional visitor, not the nightly regular he had been in the past.<sup>79</sup> “Non-theatrical, non-intellectual Harlem,” poet Langston Hughes recorded, also “didn’t like to be stared at by white folks.”<sup>80</sup> The presence of whites also attracted more surveillance. The Committee of Fourteen had long worked to ensure that establishments in Harlem did not serve white customers. After letting their attention lapse in the early 1920s, the organization began to warn of the “moral hazards” and “probability” of “serious race riots” that would result from increasing numbers of whites mixing with blacks, and once again sent investigators to Harlem. It is likely that surveillance and the anxieties behind it were what buffet flat operators such as Jean Lamb had in mind when they explained they kept white women out of their premises “because they often get you in trouble.”<sup>81</sup>

If much of the privacy enjoyed by buffet flats came from their location in homes, some also flowed from the location of those homes. Most of those Claymes visited over a period of five months reporting on Harlem nightlife were not on Seventh Avenue or one of the other avenues that ran through the neighborhood and served as its major transport and commercial arteries, and the location of many speakeasies and nightclubs. One had to venture off those wide streets on to the neighborhood’s narrower residential cross streets to find buffet flats, which existed throughout the area in which blacks made their homes, with a large proportion located above 135th Street.<sup>82</sup> “Fully 90%,” Claymes reported, “were located in the well kept neighbourhoods and in the most elaborately appointed dwellings and apartment houses,” which he surmised was part of what attracted their patrons.<sup>83</sup> Certainly, that buffet flats could be found in such locations was what made them disturbing to middle class

reformers. George Haynes, a black sociologist and cofounder of the Urban League, writing about Detroit, argued that a buffet flat was “especially dangerous because it is usually in a private house in a neighborhood of homes, [and] is run with all signs of respectability.”<sup>84</sup> The appearance of domestic respectability ensured an additional level of privacy, generating a presumption that only family life took place within the walls of a residence.

Being located away from the street and commercial areas, and operated and patronized by blacks, allowed buffet flats to avoid the attention of white authorities, and later, when the Committee of Fourteen and the police did become aware of their existence, made them difficult for whites to locate, let alone police. Only in 1928, when the Committee of Fourteen hired Claymes, a black investigator, did buffet flats experience any significant policing. In five months of surveillance he located sixty-one apartments operating as buffet flats.<sup>85</sup> He did so by a means his white colleagues had been unable to employ, making the acquaintance of black men in Harlem’s nightclubs, and obtaining invitations and directions from them. Claymes’ investigations initially had no impact on the privacy provided by the apartments he visited, as the Committee, in order not to compromise his work, kept his reports from the police. Even when his investigation was complete and the reports were given to authorities, the policing that resulted had only limited and temporary consequences. Raids in April 1929 shut down twenty-nine buffet flats, but seventeen, or almost one quarter, were gone by the time officers sought them out, their proprietors protected by the mobility so characteristic of Harlem, having moved to a new address. In sixteen other apartments police failed to find sufficient evidence to make arrests.<sup>86</sup> While Claymes’ surveillance allowed white authorities to reach into spaces that had been beyond their reach, they still fell short of destroying the privacy offered by buffet flats. And a year later, with the Committee unable to find funds to

continue to employ Claymes, he reported “a serious backsliding” in conditions in Harlem’s apartments.<sup>87</sup> Homes, in other words, continued to offer privacy to visitors as well as residents.

The privacy that could be found in Harlem’s residences existed despite the overcrowding and surveillance to which the neighborhood, and the black sections of other northern cities, was subjected. That conclusion suggests problems with the way historians have conceived privacy: residences have been viewed in terms of bourgeois ideals that saw privacy as existing only when each family member had a separate room and each nuclear family a home. In everyday life, privacy was more fluid, defined only in part by the nature of a residence and how many people slept there. The absence of some residents at work, school or taking their leisure created privacy for those with whom they shared their home. Even when they were present, residents could look the other way, ignore sounds, and avoid neighbors, allowing adults with who they shared residences sufficient distance to achieve some privacy. Individuals should only have been able to have spaces of their own in a community governed by middle-class respectability on the condition that they took no one of the opposite sex inside. But blacks in Harlem found landlords anxious enough for tenants to allow them to have guests in their rooms despite the risk of scandal. Others renting apartments operated them as venues that offered short-term privacy to paying customers. Couples also simply passed themselves off as married to enjoy the privacy accorded to a husband and wife. In practice, neither shared residences nor norms restricting who could access a space of their own created barriers to privacy. Had they known about it that situation would have offered black leaders promoting respectability such as W. E. B. Du Bois both some hope and some cause for fear. But the limited surveillance of Harlem’s residences provided little sense of

what went on within dwellings. Police focused their efforts to control prostitution on the streets, the Committee of Fourteen secured information only during the five months it employed a black investigator, and private detectives pursued just the small number of individuals whose spouse or ex-spouse could afford to pay the costs of an investigation. If those who secured space apart did not expose themselves, they faced little risk that public or private authorities would invade their privacy.

In regards to the uses to which Harlem's residents put the privacy that they secured, the situation was much worse than W. E. B. Du Bois and his fellow reformers feared. Worries about the behavior of lodgers seem largely unfounded, but multiple other forms of sexual activity took place that reformers did not consider. Privacy did not simply ensure stable marriages and shelter girls until they entered married life; it fostered homosexual, extramarital, and premarital sexual acts and relationships. Such a range of activity does not fit with a vice district, the sexual geography ascribed to Harlem and its counterparts in northern cities by other scholars. Such a district is defined by the presence of prostitutes and spaces devoted to commercialized sex, juxtaposed with residences where the sexual order of marital sexuality held sway. The broader range of sexual activity that existed in Harlem reflects a different sexual geography, that of a furnished room district. The combination of commercialized sex and the privacy individuals could find in the dense concentration of residences fostered the range of sexual expression outside marriage that came to define modern sexuality. In comparison with the homes in a vice district, which helped contain sexuality within marriage and maintain the sexual order and offered a counterpoint to prostitution, residences in a furnished room district were disorderly houses. Perhaps it is just

as well for the politics of respectability that W. E. B. Du Bois sought to advance that few followed his urgings to focus their attention on Harlem's homes.

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<sup>1</sup> The research and writing of this article were supported by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant (DP0343148). An earlier version was presented at the "Let's Talk About Sex" conference at Macquarie University, 2 October 2008. Many thanks to Ken Cobb, Leonora Gidlund, and the staff at [Municipal Archives](#) in New York City for their help and patience in accommodating our research in their collections over a period of several years.

<sup>2</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, "Harlem," The Crisis, (September 1927), cited in Kathleen Drowne, Spirits of Defiance: National Prohibition and Jazz Age Literature, 1920-1933 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), 123.

<sup>3</sup> Michele Mitchell, Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 82, 134-35, 141, 145, 148, 153, 159; Victoria Wolcott, Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 52-53, 59-60; Kevin Gaines, Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 78-79, 166-71; James Grossman, Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners and the Great Migration (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 133.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Veiller, "Room Overcrowding and the Lodger Evil," American Journal of Public Health 31 (1913): 13-14. See also John Modell and Tamara Hareven, "Urbanization

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and the Malleable Household: An Examination of Boarding and Lodging in American Families,” Journal of Marriage and the Family 35, no. 3 (1973): 468-69.

<sup>5</sup> For Harlem as a vice district, see Kevin J. Mumford, Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 19-35; and Elizabeth Clement, Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 203.

<sup>6</sup> George Chauncey’s geography of gay New York includes the hotels, rooming houses, and apartment buildings in which men lived, but focuses on public spaces, the city’s streets, parks, cafes, and bars. See George Chauncey, Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940 (New York: Basic Books, 1994). Matt Houlbrook’s picture of London devotes more attention to residences. See Matt Houlbrook, Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), especially 109-34. J. A. Podmore has argued that the focus on public spaces has contributed to the limited attention given to lesbians in analyses of sexual geographies, a situation that can be remedied by the reintegration of the domestic sphere into interpretations of urban space (cited in Gavin Brown, Kath Browne, and Jason Lim, introduction to Geographies of Sexualities: Theory, Practices, Politics, ed. Kath Browne, Jason Lim and Gavin Brown (Ashgate, UK: Aldershot, 2007), 7).

<sup>7</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Family in the United States (1939; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 313-14, 638. Harlem may have had more of a mix of

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residential structures than a prototypical furnished room district, but the large number of lodgers in those other residential structures gave it the character of such a neighborhood.

<sup>8</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, "Sexual Geography and Gender Economy: The Furnished Room Districts of Chicago, 1890-1930," Gender and History 2, no. 3 (1990): 275-77.

<sup>9</sup> Some crimes are reported in the black press, but most of our evidence comes from the Manhattan District Attorney's case files, held in Municipal Archives in New York City. This is a vast collection, including all the felony cases held for trial by Magistrates, so we gathered a sample consisting of all the case files involving blacks that we identified from the years 1916/1917, 1920, 1925, 1928, and 1930, a total of 2929 cases. Our intention was to sample every five years from 1915 to 1930, however, we had to substitute June 1916-June 1917 for 1915 because a large proportion of the files from that year and the early months of 1916 are damaged. We later added 1928 to take advantage of the increased number of files involving blacks in the years after 1925. We also sampled the files of the Probation Department, also held in Municipal Archives, examining all the files from 1925, and the last 16 boxes from 1928 and from 1930, a total of 1660 files, finding 341 Harlem residents. For more on the Probation records, see Stephen Robertson, Shane White, Stephen Garton and Graham White, "This Harlem Life: Black Families and Everyday Life in the 1920s and 1930s," Journal of Social History 44, no. 1 (2010): 97-122.

<sup>10</sup> George Chauncey found that the sexual encounters involving gay men that appeared in court records in the first three decades of the twentieth century likewise resulted from individuals revealing their behavior not from a breakdown of privacy. See Chauncey, Gay New York, 152.

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<sup>11</sup> This reluctance also played a key role in frustrating the efforts of white gangsters to take complete control of Harlem's incredibly lucrative numbers gambling racket. See Shane White, Stephen Garton, Stephen Robertson and Graham White, Playing the Numbers: Gambling in Harlem Between the Wars (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). On the difficulties white undercover investigators faced in Harlem, see Stephen Robertson, "Harlem Undercover: Vice Investigators, Race and Prostitution, 1910-1930," Journal of Urban History 35, no. 4 (2009): 486-504.

<sup>12</sup> On these various local experiences see Wolcott, Remaking Respectability; Grossman, Land of Hope; Mumford, Interzones; Allan Spear, Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Kenneth Kusmer, A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870-1930 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976); Peter Gottlieb, Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-1930 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Richard W. Thomas, Life For Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Kimberley Phillips, Alabama North: African-American Migrants, Community and Working-class Activism in Cleveland, 1915-1945 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Davarian Baldwin, Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration and Black Urban Life (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Cynthia Blair, I've Got to Make My Livin': Black Women's Sex Work in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Victoria Wolcott does describe similar patterns of surveillance in Detroit, noting that black reformers had to try to police immoral young women and gay men, and identify



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buffet flats, because white authorities either did not or could not, and that police concentrated on arresting streetwalkers rather than raiding private houses (Remaking Respectability, 99, 108, 111).

<sup>14</sup> Gilbert Osofsky, Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper, 1971), xvi; James Weldon Johnson, Black Manhattan (New York: Da Capo, 1930), 147.

<sup>15</sup> In 1920, the census enumerator found lodgers in fourteen of thirty-two apartments. Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Population Schedule, ED 1440, Sheets 44A, 44B, 45A, 58B, 59A, 59B. In 1925, eighteen of thirty-one households are recorded as having lodgers. New York State Census, 1925, Population Schedule, Block 1, ED 33, AD 21, 10-12; In 1930 nineteen of the twenty-five households had lodgers, an increase even if there were none in any of the households the enumerator missed. Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930, Population Schedule, ED 31-997, Sheets 19A, 19B, 21B, 23A, 23B, 24B. This address was home to a man convicted of assault and placed on probation in 1928; for a discussion of his family's life at this address, and those of other individuals who lodged in Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s, see Robertson, White, Garton, and White, "This Harlem Life."

<sup>16</sup> New York Urban League, "Twenty-Four Hundred Negro Families in Harlem: An Interpretation of the Living Conditions in Harlem," New York: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, 1927).

<sup>17</sup> In 1935, 142nd and 143rd Streets between Lenox and Seventh was "the city's most crowded tenement block," with 133rd and 134th, and 138th and 139th not far behind. See Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, "Or Does It Explode?" Black Harlem in the Great Depression (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 185.

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<sup>18</sup> New York Times (hereafter NYT), 24 March 1935, E11.

<sup>19</sup> McKay, quoted in Colin Grant, Negro With a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey and his Dream of Mother Africa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 186. For surveys of Harlem's businesses, see New York Age (hereafter NYA), 9 March-27 April 1916, 1; NYA, 5 February-23 April 1921, 1; Edgar Grey, "The New Negro Slavery in Harlem," Amsterdam News (hereafter AN), (13 May 1925): 16; and Greenberg, "Or Does It Explode?," 27.

<sup>20</sup> For Morgan Thompson, see Court of General Sessions Probation Department Case File (PDCF), 11076 (1928, Municipal Archives, New York City (hereafter MA-NYC)). The names of the subjects of these files have been changed at the request of Municipal Archives. For more on this man's life in Harlem, see Robertson, White, Garton, and White, "This Harlem Life," 97-98, 100-4. For Annie Dillard, see Inmate #3711, Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, Records of the Department of Correctional Services, New York State Archives, Albany. The name of the subject of this file has been changed as required by the New York State Archives.

<sup>21</sup> For example, see District Attorney's Closed Case Files (DACCF) 158424 (1925) and DACCF 180189 (1930), MA-NYC.

<sup>22</sup> People v. Otis Wilson (1921), Trial Transcripts of the County of New York 1883-1927, Case #2974, Roll 358, 344 (John Jay College of Criminal Justice); AN, 15 July 1925, 6; AN, 9 July 1930, 2, 7; World, 24 August 1930, 5E. For visitors' accounts of all-night businesses, see NYT, 6 September 1931, 143; and Afro-American, 14 July 1928, 1.

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<sup>23</sup> Stephen Robertson, Crimes against Children: Sexual Violence and Legal Culture in New York City, 1880-1960 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Only heterosexual acts fell within the rape statute, but in 1929, the New York Daily News reported a case in which women were involved in sexual acts with underage girls. In prosecuting a twenty-one year old woman for “soliciting school girls for immoral purposes,” a police officer reported, “It is the practice of a group of girls of abnormal sex habits to wait outside the school and make dates with girl students. The female party would then go to the home of one of the girls whose parents and relatives were not at home and conduct their ‘sex circus.’” Cited in James F. Wilson, Bulldaggers, Pansies and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 31.

<sup>24</sup> DACCF 113733 (1916), MA-NYC. At the request of Municipal Archives, we have changed the names of all the individuals who appear in these case files.

<sup>25</sup> DACCF 160562 (1925), DACCF 163006 (1925), DACCF 173634 (1928), DACCF 183113 (1930), MA-NYC.

<sup>26</sup> Robertson, Crimes against Children, 95-115.

<sup>27</sup> DACCF 160670 (1925), MA-NYC. For other examples of girls attacked while visiting residences, see DACCF 182472 (1930), and DACCF 183212 (1930), MA-NYC. On sound in Harlem, see Clare Corbould, “Streets, Sounds, and Identity in Interwar Harlem,” Journal of Social History 40, no. 4 (2007): 859-94.

<sup>28</sup> Robertson, Crimes against Children, 32-33, 102-3.

<sup>29</sup> Chauncey, Gay New York, 153.

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<sup>30</sup> Minutes of Hearing in the Matter of the Application of Herbert S. Boulin for a private detective license, January 30, 1928, in Record on Order of Certiorari (In the Matter of Boulin against MacNulty), 225 App. Div. 796, New York Supreme Court Appellate Division Records and Briefs Collection (New York State Library, Albany).

<sup>31</sup> “Dr Ramsay Involved in Harlem Divorce Scandal,” AN, 25 May 1927, 1.

<sup>32</sup> New York Penal Code, Section 322, quoted in Edwin Baylies, Bender’s Justices’ Manual of Civil and Criminal Law and Practice for Justices of the Peace and Police Justices in the State of New York (Albany, NY: M. Bender, 1925), 240.

<sup>33</sup> “Boulin Detectives Raid Apartment While Married Woman Hides in Closet,” The Inter-State Tattler, 18 September 1925, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Investigation Report, 23 May 1928, Folder “1927-30,” Box 35, Committee of Fourteen Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library, New York (hereafter COF Papers); Investigation Report, 22 March 1928, Folder “1927-30,” Box 35, COF Papers. Many of the folders in this collection share the same label or are not labeled at all, precluding precise and consistent citations.

<sup>35</sup> Investigation Report, 15 February 1928, Folder “1927-30,” Box 35, COF Papers.

<sup>36</sup> Chauncey, Gay New York, 153; Clement, Love for Sale, 23.

<sup>37</sup> “Dr Ramsay Involved in Harlem Divorce Scandal,” 1.

<sup>38</sup> “Divorce Action Follows Night Raid,” AN, 7 October 1925, 1.

<sup>39</sup> For the still developing culture of documentation in the early-twentieth-century United States, see Craig Robertson, The Passport in America: The History of a Document (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). See also the discussion of the lack of

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documentation of age in the early twentieth century in Robertson, Crimes against Children, 84-86, 234.

<sup>40</sup> AN, 9 December 1925, 1; Beverly Schwartzberg, “‘Lots of Them Did That’: Desertion, Bigamy and Marital Fluidity in Late-Nineteenth-Century America,” Journal of Social History 37, no. 3 (2004): 573. See also Stephen Robertson, “Seduction, Sexual Violence, and Marriage in New York City, 1886-1955,” Law and History Review 24, no. 2 (2006): 331-73.

<sup>41</sup> “\$10,000 Suit Started by Hubby After Wife and Man Are Trapped in Room,” AN, 9 December 1925, 1.

<sup>42</sup> The phrase is from Schwartzberg, “‘Lots of Them Did That,’” 592.

<sup>43</sup> “Private Detectives in Two Raids,” AN, 25 November 1925, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Chauncey, Gay New York, 266-67.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 158.

<sup>46</sup> PDCF 1293 (1925), MA-NYC.

<sup>47</sup> Joan Nestle, “Excerpts from the Oral History of Mabel Hampton,” Signs 18, no. 4 (1993): 932-34

<sup>48</sup> PDCF 10900 (1928), MA-NYC. For another murder in 1926 in similar circumstances, see Wilson, Bulldaggers, 41, and Eric Garber, “A Spectacle of Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem,” in Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey (New York: New American Library, 1989), 321. Mabel Hampton recounted a story suggestive of another means by which lesbian couples might have used the pretense of heterosexuality to

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gain privacy: a marriage of two women in 1938, who “passed downtown at City Hall! That girl looked so much like a fellow you couldn't tell her apart--just like some of them do today. She was the splitting image and didn't have to change her voice. They went down there, had a blood test and everything and got it and brought it back and gave it to the minister (Nestle, “Excerpts,” 934).”

<sup>49</sup> Willoughby Waterman, Prostitution and its Repression in New York City, 1900-1932 (1932; New York: AMS, 1968), 53, 94-5; George Worthington and Ruth Topping, Specialized Courts Dealing with Sex Delinquency: A Study of Procedure in Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia and New York (1925; Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith, 1969), 287, 300-2.

<sup>50</sup> Worthington and Topping, Specialized Courts, 316-17.

<sup>51</sup> “Special Women’s Court Bulletin,” Bulletin 1842, Box 89, COF Papers.

<sup>52</sup> Of the seventy-eight prostitutes who solicited the Committee of Fourteen’s black investigator in 1928, and offered to take him to a room, only sixteen (20 percent) offered to take him to their homes.

<sup>53</sup> Investigation Report, 25 April 1927, Folder “Rivington-West Tremont,” Box 36, COF Papers.

<sup>54</sup> Card files, Women’s Court, 1925 (Box 70 and 71) and 1930 (Box 74), COF Papers. For maps of prostitution arrests in Harlem in these years, see “Digital Harlem Blog: Prostitution Arrests,” <http://digitalharlemblog.wordpress.com/2009/10/05/prostitution-arrests/> (accessed 15 February 2012).

<sup>55</sup> Malcolm Cowley, “The Vice Squad Carries On,” The New Republic, 25 June 1930, 179. See also NYA, 5 June 1926, 4; and NYA, 25 September 1926, 1.

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<sup>56</sup> NYA, 5 July 1924, 1, 2; NYA, 12 July 1924, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Chauncey, Gay New York, 147, 152, 185; Mumford, Interzones, 89-90.

<sup>58</sup> PDCF 1293 (1925), MA-NYC.

<sup>59</sup> Chauncey, Gay New York, 152.

<sup>60</sup> Record on Order of Certiorari (In the Matter of Boulin against MacNulty); AN, 3 August 1927, 1; emphasis in original.

<sup>61</sup> AN, 16 May 1928, 1, 2; AN, 11 June 1930, 1, 2; AN, 30 September 30 1931, 1; AN, 22 February 1933, 1.

<sup>62</sup> AN, 12 January 1927, 1. For a physician, see, NYA, 23 July 1927, 1, 7; for a dentist, see AN, 17 September 1930, 2; for an attorney, see NYA, 20 January 1926, 1; for a clergyman, see AN, 24 March 1926, 8; for musicians, see AN, 7 October 1925, 1; Tattler, 18 September 1925, 3; for lodge members, see Hotel Tattler, 26 October 1922, 6; AN, 15 July 1925; AN, 17 August 1927; for insurance clerks, AN, 25 May 1927, 1; AN, 13 April 1932, 1; for expressmen, see AN, 9 December 1925; and AN, 24 March 1926; for a garage owner, see AN, 21 December 1927, 2; for a carpenter, see AN, 11 March 1925, 1; for a baker, see AN, 26 January 1926, 1. Frazier notes coverage of the divorces of prominent blacks was characteristic of black newspapers in the 1920s; see Frazier, The Negro Family, 387.

<sup>63</sup> Dylan C. Penningroth, "African American Divorce in Virginia and Washington, D.C., 1865-1930," Journal of Family History 33, no. 1 (2008): 23. See also Frazier, The Negro Family, 380-90.

<sup>64</sup> Robertson, White, Garton, and White, "This Harlem Life," 110-13.

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<sup>65</sup> George Haynes, the black sociologist, described buffet flats as “a sort of high-class combination of a gambling parlor, a ‘blind tiger’ [speakeasy] and an apartment of prostitution.” Haynes, Negro Newcomers in Detroit, Michigan (New York: Home Missions Council, 1918), 21. For more on buffet flats in Harlem, see Robertson, “Harlem Undercover,” 496-500. For buffet flats in Detroit, see Wolcott, Remaking Respectability, 107-8. For buffet flats in Chicago, see Blair, I’ve Got to Make My Livin,’ 175-84.

<sup>66</sup> The building, named St. James Court, was on the west side of Seventh Avenue, between 143rd and 144th Streets. The 1930 Federal Census recorded fifty-two households in the building (United States Federal Census 1930, ED 31-998, images 44-51).

<sup>67</sup> Investigation Report, 17 July 1928, Folder “135th-207th St,” Box 36, COF Papers.

<sup>68</sup> Garber, “A Spectacle of Color,” 322-23; Nestle, “Excerpts,” 934.

<sup>69</sup> PDCF 15694 (1930), MA-NYC.

<sup>70</sup> NYA, 9 March 1916, 1; NYA, 6 April 1916, 1; NYA, 19 March 1921, 1.

<sup>71</sup> Inter-State Tattler, 5 April 1929, cited in Wilson, Bulldaggers, 24.

<sup>72</sup> COF Annual Report for 1928, 33-34, Box 86, COF Papers. Blair argues that Chicago’s buffet flats were also “underground community places that catered predominantly to black men and women” (Blair, I’ve Got to Make My Livin,’ 281n85). That these venues were black spaces explains the limited attention given to them in scholarship focused on interracial encounters, such as Mumford, Interzones; and Chad Heap, Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). The predominance of women among buffet flat operators reflected the way that Prohibition opened up opportunities for women to engage in commercial enterprises. See



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Mary Murphy, "Bootlegging Mothers and Drinking Daughters: Gender and Prohibition in Butte, Montana," American Quarterly 46, no. 2 (June 1994), 174-94.

<sup>73</sup> Claude McKay, Home to Harlem (New York: Harper, 1928), 13-14, 49-53, 103-4, 106-11.

<sup>74</sup> Wilson, Bulldaggers, 40-42.

<sup>75</sup> Cited in *ibid*, 26-27.

<sup>76</sup> Blair, I've Got to Make My Livin', 178-79.

<sup>77</sup> Raymond Claymes, 11 May 1928, Folder "135th-207th St," Box 36, COF Papers.

<sup>78</sup> For maps showing the location of these venues, see the investigation reports in Boxes 35 and 36, COF papers, and the maps at "Digital Harlem: Harlem Undercover--the maps," <http://digitalharlemblog.wordpress.com/2009/04/17/harlem-undercover-the-maps/> (accessed 15 February 2012). The locations of additional speakeasies were reported in the black press, with the NYA regularly printing a list of such addresses; see AN, 9 January 1929, 1-2; NYA, 30 September 1922; 18 November 1922; 1 September 1923; 17 January 1925; 25 April 1925; 8 August 1925. A total of 168 speakeasies are identified in these sources. For Prohibition, see Michael Lerner, Dry Manhattan: Prohibition in New York City (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Daniel Okrent, Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition (New York: Scribner, 2010).

<sup>79</sup> Rudolph Fisher, "The Caucasian Storms Harlem," American Mercury 11 (May 1927): 393, 395

<sup>80</sup> Langston Hughes, The Big Sea (1940; New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), 228.

<sup>81</sup> Robertson, "Harlem Undercover," 489-90, 495, 497.

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<sup>82</sup> For the locations of buffet flats, nightclubs, and speakeasies, see the maps at “Digital Harlem: Harlem Undercover--the maps.”

<sup>83</sup> Raymond Claymes, “A Brief Summary of Conclusions of Vice Conditions in Harlem,” Folder “Harlem. Report on Conditions,” Box 82, COF Papers.

<sup>84</sup> Haynes, Negro Newcomers, 21.

<sup>85</sup> Ninety-eight of the 130 reports Claymes filed (including four reports filed after the completion of his five-month investigation of Harlem) concerned residences; the remaining thirty-two reports dealt with dance halls, clubs and cabarets. For more on Claymes and his work for the Committee of Fourteen, see “Application for Position as Investigator for the Committee of Fourteen,” and Flyer for “Second Song Recital by Raymond Claymes,” March 11, 1928, Folder “1928,” Box 7, COF Papers; and Robertson, “Harlem Undercover,” 486-89, 495-500.

<sup>86</sup> A far greater proportion of arrests in buffet flats were for prostitution or related offenses than in clubs; 37 percent (84 of 226) compared to 6 percent (70 of 1013). The vast majority of arrests in clubs were for violations of the Volstead Act (Prohibition) (41 percent) or disorderly conduct, usually gambling (52 percent). “Police Action in Harlem, 1929,” Box 37, COF Papers; and “Police Cards,” Box 52, COF Papers.

<sup>87</sup> Bulletin 2038, Directors’ Meeting, December 2, 1931, Box 89, COF Papers.