

“The Famous Lady Lovers:”  
African American Women and Same-Sex Desire from Reconstruction to World War II

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
(History and Women’s Studies)  
in the University of Michigan  
2014

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## **Acknowledgements**

I often marvel at the irony that I had to move away from my queer community in San Francisco to study the history of queer communities. However, through entering the world of scholars engaged with race, gender and sexuality in American culture, and the archives that help me undertake this work, I have met and been supported by more people than I can thank here. My dissertation co-chairs, Jay Cook and Gina Morantz-Sanchez, have been wonderful mentors since I arrived at Michigan. Jay equipped me with the tools to transition from a cultural studies scholar to a cultural historian, has urged me to think bigger, and to engage with the messiness and complexity of the past. He has supported every aspect of my career, from the job market to publishing, and works to cultivate a community among his students. Since my first seminar paper, Gina has pushed me towards more lucid analysis of my historical subjects and helped me contextualize my work through introducing me to the rich historiography of women's history. My other committee members, Gayle Rubin and Sherie Randolph, have been indispensable during my time at Michigan as well. Gayle has helped me complicate common historical narratives about gender and sexuality while Sherie introduced me to the historiography of African American women's history and pushed me to further engage with race and power in all their complexity. My entire committee supported me throughout this long process

even as my topic shifted from my prospectus and I am grateful for their confidence in me and thankful for their guidance.

Many other people and institutions at the University of Michigan have helped me get here. In Women's Studies: Deborah Keller-Cohen, Nadine "Dean" Hubbs, Elizabeth Wingrove, Adela Pinch, Valerie Traub and Aimee Germain. In History I thank Matt Lassiter, Scott Spector, Mary Kelley, John Carson, Howard Brick, Matthew Countryman, Deirdre de la Cruz and Kathleen King. At Michigan I have been very lucky to receive exceptional financial support through the Rackham Graduate School as well as the Institute for Research on Women and Gender and the Institute for the Humanities. The latter two ushered me into vibrant intellectual communities that helped my project grow, where I received support and critique from Hannah Rosen, Sidonie Smith and many exceptional grad students and professors. The Institute for the Humanities was an ideal environment in which to complete this dissertation and introduced me to new colleagues and dear friends such as Jennifer Johnson and Maria Hadjipolycarpou who helped alleviate the stress of the academic job market with much camaraderie and kettle bells.

Michigan's American History Workshop has been a crucial venue for receiving feedback on this project. Thanks to smart and lovely folks such as Lauren Gutterman, David B. Green, Scott DeOrio, Rabia Belt, Katie Lennard, Nora Krinitsky, Tiffany Bell, Aston Gonzalez, Marie Stango, Patrick Parker, and the many others who gave me AHW feedback over the years. For feedback, editing help and friendship, I also thank Sara Lampert, Sarah Hamilton, Emma Amador, Chelsea Del Rio, and Thera Webb. Jay Cook's cultural history dissertation workshop this past year helped me fine-tune some of my chapters, and colleagues such as Holly Rapp and Jacques Vest gave me particularly

thoughtful critiques. This project has also been strengthened through feedback received at many conferences from people such as Chad Heap, Cheryl Hicks, Heather Love, Paul Amar, and Catherine Conner, among many others. I am also in Catherine's debt because she sheltered me during one of my archive trips, as did The Lady Ms. Vagina Jenkins, Katie Kretzmann and Michelle Morgan.

Many archives and several archive-based fellowships also supported this project. An African American History and Culture Fellowship from Emory University's Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library allowed me to spend two weeks in Atlanta while I worked on my prospectus. Serving as a Martin Duberman Visiting Scholar for the summer of 2011 was my gateway to spending two fabulous years researching and writing in New York City, so I thank the New York Public Library for this enriching opportunity. This project fundamentally shifted after a wonderful month of research in the summer of 2012 in Chicago, where I served as a Black Metropolis Research Consortium Short-Term Fellow. I offer gratitude to numerous archivists and librarians at Emory, the Manuscripts and Archives Division of the New York Public Library, the Lincoln Center Performing Arts branch of the NYPL, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Special Collections at the University of Chicago, the Chicago History Museum, the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College, the Chicago Public Library, the Southern Folklife Collection at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Duke University, the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia University, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, the New York Municipal Archives, the Lesbian Herstory

Archives, the GLBT Historical Society, and the Bentley Library at the University of Michigan.

Lastly, thanks to my family, who put up with me being practically broke for the entire decade of my 30s. I can only hope to treat them all to dinner someday. And so much thanks to old friends who have been with me from the beginning, like Kat Case and Joey Stevenson, as well as dear friends I met along the way, like Jina Kim, Randa Jarrar and Donia Jarrar. Above all, thank you to the incredible, indomitable women who came before me that I have the honor of writing about – I can only hope to do justice to their lives.

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### **Abstract:**

#### **“The Famous Lady Lovers:” African American Women and Same-Sex Desire from Reconstruction to World War II**

This dissertation examines the emergence of social networks created by African American women who loved women, and the public discourse that swirled around them. Focusing on specific urban locales in Chicago and New York, it examines the representation of such women nationally in the black press and the entertainment world. It highlights a variety of factors, which, by the 1920s, led to the increasing visibility of African American “lady lovers.” The Great Migration – the mass exodus of southern blacks to the North and West beginning with World War I – was a key stimulus to the communities these women helped to build in vibrant and heterogeneous segregated urban spaces. The overlap of vice districts with black neighborhoods brought a preponderance of boarding houses filled with single people, which helped stimulate the rise of mass culture and the entertainment industry. Black newspapers were especially important in disseminating what became common representations of lady lovers. Their narratives often included stories of violent “queer love triangles” occurring between women. Black reporters also gave voice to the disapproving black middle-class, understandably worried that the public behaviors of recent, uneducated southern migrants would tarnish their efforts to reproduce “respectability” as they defended themselves from the virulent race prejudice of the North. The black sector of the popular entertainment industry, with its touring vaudeville circuits, offered alternative and highly mobile forms of labor for talented and ambitious women, and also served as a central meeting place for lady lovers. Successful blues singers like Bessie Smith and Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, who recorded for the segregated “race records” industry, created complex and layered queer representations that increasingly engaged queer audiences, a burgeoning sector of city dwellers. Private parties, buffet flats, and other illicit Prohibition spaces enabled queer counterpublics to be enacted beyond the purview of white, thrill-seeking “slummers.” Though lady lovers were visible participants in the vibrant, black urban working-class districts of the early-twentieth century, the respectable black community accelerated its campaign against deviance from traditional gender norms, certain that the public presence of such women threatened their struggle for racial justice in the violent Jim Crow era.

**Introduction:  
“Have We a New Sex Problem Here?”**

In November of 1920, the black newspaper *The Chicago Whip* ran a front-page article with the provocative headline, “Have We a New Sex Problem Here?” The short article detailing “one of the most peculiar divorce cases to yet be heard in Chicago” described an incident involving a married couple and another woman. After six years of “marital peace and harmony,” Ida May Robinson had “forsaken” her husband, Sherman Robinson, when she “she left him without any cause” for a woman that she “had formerly known in Paducah, Kentucky.”<sup>1</sup> According to their landlord, the two women had been living together in a boardinghouse prior to the official divorce. The possibility that a woman would leave her husband to enter a romantic relationship with another woman and live with her as a family unit was a new concept for the anonymous journalist. So shocking was this notion that the author wondered if Ida May Robinson and her partner heralded a “new sex problem.”

The “here” to which the headline referred was the rapidly growing African American district of Bronzeville on Chicago’s South Side, which swelled with recent southern migrants like Ida May Robinson who were escaping the Jim Crow South. In 1920, the Great Migration, a mass exodus of African Americans from the South to the North and West, was in full swing.<sup>2</sup> The black population of the city had more than

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<sup>1</sup> “Have We a New Sex Problem Here?” *The Chicago Whip*, Nov. 27, 1920, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Secondary sources examining the importance of the Great Migration include James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989;

doubled since 1910, and women outnumbered men.<sup>3</sup> The majority of these southern black migrants were young and single, and often lived in boarding houses like the one in Bronzeville where Robinson and her lover made a home.<sup>4</sup> *The Chicago Whip*, like many black newspapers, was started and run by college-educated, middle-class African Americans who were generally not new arrivals to the North. Often referred to as “old settlers,” their families had lived above the Mason-Dixon line for a number of generations.<sup>5</sup> For this more established and affluent class of northern blacks, the sexual deportment of an ever-growing population of “new settlers” like Ida May Robinson was of great concern, not least because it clashed so strikingly with an established politics of respectability designed to present the race as fit for full citizenship in the age of Jim Crow segregation.<sup>6</sup> Respectability in this context demanded hewing to traditional gender roles, which did not involve women leaving their husbands for female companionship.

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Carole Marks, *Farewell – We’re Good and Gone: The Great Black Migration*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989; *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class and Gender*. Joe William Trotter, ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991; Farah Jasmine Griffin, *"Who Set You Flowin'?" : The African-American Migration Narrative*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995; Kimberly L. Phillips, *Alabama North: African-American Migrants, Community, and Working-Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915–1945*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999; Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration*. Cambridge: Belknap, 2003; Davarian Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration, and Black Urban Life*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007; Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration*. New York: Random House, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> On Chicago’s African American population in 1920, see E. Franklin Frazier, “Chicago: A Cross-Section of Negro Life,” *Opportunity*, March 1929, p. 70. On uneven sex ratios in urban black districts, see E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939, p. 272; Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915*. New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1968, p. 152.

<sup>4</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939, p. 272; Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915*. New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1968, p. 152.

<sup>5</sup> On “old settlers” and “new settlers” see Grossman, p. 8 and Baldwin, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> On respectability politics see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993; Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996; Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

This long forgotten story from Chicago touches on several of the key themes raised by this dissertation: the role of the Great Migration in creating queer black networks and gathering spaces, how women's mobility contributed to their ability to take part in queer relationships, the growing visibility of black "lady lovers" in the urban North, the role of the black press in disseminating information about them, and the "sex problem" that these women represented to the larger black community. While this article implicitly suggested that for Ida May Robinson to leave her husband for a woman was a form of rhetorical violence that wounded the black family and the race, soon literal acts of violence would saturate portrayals of lady lovers in the black press. Throughout the 1920s, multiple attacks and murders occurred between women that journalists and police declared were caused by "unnatural" desires for the same sex.<sup>7</sup> As many of the women involved were southern migrants, lady lovers became the ultimate symbol of the disorder of the urban North: women had turned respectable Victorian gender norms on their heads by acting like men. And not only old settlers were concerned; recent immigrants and migrants who adhered to the traditional gender roles prescribed through Black Nationalist thought via channels such as Marcus Garvey's newspaper, *Negro World*, were also incensed.<sup>8</sup> Black women needed to birth and raise the next generation of black men, and

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<sup>7</sup> I have found one similar murder case between white queer women in the 1920s and none concerning gay black men. Regarding black press coverage of queer men, the most common portrayals of gay men in the were regular reports on the popular drag balls that happened annually in black districts in the urban North. While journalists sometimes made fun of the gay men and female impersonators at these events, Kim Gallon argues that interwar drag ball coverage in the black press revealed a "moment of unprecedented tolerance for homosexual culture and life among the masses of urbanized African Americans." See Kim T. Gallon, "Between Respectability and Modernity: Black Newspapers and Sexuality, 1925-1940," PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2009, p. 222.

<sup>8</sup> See for example, John Houghton, "The Plight of Our Race in Harlem, Brooklyn and New Jersey, *Negro World*, April 21, 1923, p 8.

lesbianism displaced men as well as put the future of the race in peril.<sup>9</sup> There was no room for women's sexual deviance in an increasingly masculinized struggle for racial equality and full citizenship.

However, at the dawn of the 1920s, there were other milieus where black women could literally take center stage, such as the popular entertainment industry, which increasingly encompassed segregated forms of black vaudeville, the spectacle of black musicals and the rapidly expanding market for "race records."<sup>10</sup> Beyond creating new work opportunities for talented, capable women, these industries also served as a central meeting place for lady lovers. Women's live performances attracted diverse audiences, particularly southern migrants, who enjoyed hearing blues songs that often discussed the trials and tribulations of northern living and nostalgia for the South.<sup>11</sup> In 1920, blues singer Alberta Hunter was a regular performer at the black-owned Dreamland Theater, which was several blocks down State Street from Ida May Robinson's boarding house.<sup>12</sup> Robinson and her partner would have likely been familiar with the venue, which was one of the smartest cabarets on Chicago's South Side, famous for its glass dance floor, that lit up as people moved across it.<sup>13</sup> Hunter made thirty-five dollars a week singing at the

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<sup>9</sup> Michelle Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004; Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> "Race records" was the category used to denote record company subsidiaries created to sell recorded blues, spirituals, sermons and novelty songs to African American audiences; the term arose in the early 1920s and was eventually replaced by the category "rhythm and blues" in the 1940s. See David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009; Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Frank C. Taylor and Gerald Cook, *Alberta Hunter: A Celebration in Blues*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987, p. 35.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

Dreamland, which was much more than one could make as a domestic servant, the most common form of gainful employment for black women at this time.<sup>14</sup>

Alberta Hunter was a southern migrant who ran away from her Memphis home in 1911 at the age of fifteen. She took a train to Chicago, as she had heard that young girls made up to ten dollars a week singing in South Side cabarets.<sup>15</sup> Soon she was a regular performer at the Panama Café, where women such as Florence Mills and Ada “Bricktop” Smith also rose to popularity, as well as singer Mattie Hite whom Bricktop emphatically referred to a “bulldagger.”<sup>16</sup> While performing at the Panama Cafe in 1915, Hunter first encountered a finely dressed young woman with “the most beautiful legs that were ever on a person,” who turned out to be Lottie Tyler, the niece of popular performer Bert Williams. Tyler lived in New York and was passing through town while working as a personal maid for a white actress. Sensing the attraction between each other, Tyler encouraged Hunter to come visit her in New York. The two women soon became friends and off-and-on again lovers for many years.<sup>17</sup> Hunter’s story demonstrates the central role of mobility in black women’s lives at this time and how it facilitated queer relationships. Bessie Smith also initiated multiple relationships on the road with the performing women in her show, and popular singer Ethel Waters toured the country with her partner, dancer Ethel Williams, by her side.<sup>18</sup> Smith, like many women in the

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<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, “This Work Had an End: African-American Domestic Workers in Washington D.C., 1910-1940,” *To Toil the Livelong Day: America’s Women at Work, 1780-1980*. Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton, eds. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987, pp. 197-98; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*. New York: Basic Books, 2010; Enobong Hannah Branch, *Opportunity Denied: Limiting Black Women to Devalued Work*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Taylor and Cook, p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> Ada “Bricktop” Smith papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

<sup>17</sup> Taylor and Cook, p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> Donald Bogle, *Heat Wave: The Life and Career of Ethel Waters*. New York: Harper Collins, 2010, pp. 84-85; Chris Albertson, *Bessie*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.

industry, was married to a man but still enjoyed same-sex relationships that she sought to hide from her husband while traveling. Black performing women's increasing mobility helped them fashion new relationships and counterpublics.

Whether rehearsing performances, socializing backstage, touring on trains or staying overnight at segregated boarding houses, day-to-day forms of sociability offered myriad potential opportunities for women to enact same-sex relationships. While most women sought to keep their queer behaviors out of the public eye, this was even more of a concern for highly successful performers, who did not want to damage their celebrity status. Therefore, singers like Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters developed an entire range of strategies to make their queer behaviors illegible to those who would not approve. Similarly, songs, performances and record advertising by “the famous lady lovers” engaged with queer themes both subtly and overtly – and in ways that increasingly hailed queer counterpublics.<sup>19</sup> These performing women accessed the freedoms of mass migration and the new mobility of the twentieth century and in doing so crafted new sexual subjectivities.<sup>20</sup> This market driven mobility, in turn, allowed them to bring cultural texts and performances crafted from the urban North to the rural South (and vice versa) thereby circulating texts and performances about black women's changing conceptions of gender and sexuality.

Along with mobility, geographic space and the venues and meeting places that emerged in the Prohibition era are central aspects of this project. In the early 1920s,

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<sup>19</sup> As audiences understood and delighted in these titillating performances in illicit spaces, they constituted a counterpublic through their acknowledged tension with the larger public, both the larger black community and mainstream white culture. See Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books, 2002, p. 56.

<sup>20</sup> A. Davis, 1998; Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

Alberta Hunter was in a romantic relationship with a woman named Carrie Mae Ward, who owned a South Side boarding house where she also ran a regular semi-private party known as a buffet flat.<sup>21</sup> Ward was one of many entrepreneurial women who sought to making a living by taking advantage of the structural problems that arose during the early Great Migration. As African Americans came North to escape sharecropping, segregation, lynching, and racial violence, and to find new work and new freedoms in northern cities, they were forced to move into overcrowded segregated districts.<sup>22</sup> These neighborhoods were filled with buildings built to accommodate families, but many of the new urban dwellers were single.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, white real estate owners could gouge recent arrivals with high rents and they could do little about it, having few housing options due to the limits of segregation.<sup>24</sup> This led to a reorganization of the built environment by southern migrants, from creating boarding houses that could accommodate multiple single people in former family dwellings, to renting out single extra rooms in family homes. While boarding houses often supplied anonymity and therefore were an ideal setting for clandestine queer behaviors, my opening story shows that neighbors and landlords also sought to regulate the behavior of those in close proximity to them. Leisure functions were another way to re-appropriate space and pay the rent, when jobs paid little. Residents threw “rent parties” in their homes to entertain

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<sup>21</sup> Taylor and Cook, p. 49; Ada “Bricktop” Smith oral history, part seven, Delilah Jackson papers, Manuscript, Archive and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

<sup>22</sup> Baldwin, p. 23; Wilkerson, p. 86, p. 216; Stephen Robertson, Shane White, Stephen Garton, and Graham White, “Disorderly Houses: Residences, Privacy, and the Surveillance of Sexuality in 1920s Harlem,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 21, No. 3, September 2012, p. 443.

<sup>23</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, “Chicago: A Cross-Section of Negro Life,” *Opportunity*, March, 1929, p. 71.

<sup>24</sup> Owen Fiss, *A Way Out: America's Ghettos and the Legacy of Racism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003, p. 8.

neighbors and pooled their funds to pay their high rents.<sup>25</sup> Another type of residential social gathering was the buffet flat, where women gave regular parties in their apartments with live music, dancing, and entertainment.<sup>26</sup> Rent parties were advertised among neighbors but buffet flats were more secret; one had to be in the know to find them and gain entry. Here, alcohol and food were available for a price, as well as, oftentimes, commercial sex and sex shows.<sup>27</sup> Buffet flats, along with speakeasies, became central spaces in the Prohibition era that ranged from tolerating to welcoming a range of illicit activities including same-sex behavior.

In this study, which is the first in-depth exploration of African American women who loved women in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, I trace the formation of this new world of queer black women's networks, which could not fully emerge until the 1920s through the interaction of the Great Migration, Prohibition, a national black press, the popular entertainment industries, and changing notions of gender and sexuality in the interwar period. My chronology extends from Reconstruction through the early Great Migration and into the later phase of the Harlem Renaissance. Within this frame, however, the convergence of northern mass migration with Prohibition and rapidly changing gender and sexuality norms bring particular significance to the 1920s. As John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman note, "the 1920s stand out as a time when something in the sexual landscape decisively altered and new patterns clearly emerged. The decade was recognizably modern in a way that previous ones were not." The "values, attitudes,

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<sup>25</sup> Frank Byrd, "Harlem Rent Parties," Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, WPA Federal Writers' Project Collection, 1938.

<sup>26</sup> Eric Garber, "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay & Lesbian Past*. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey, Eds. New York, Basic Books, 1989.

<sup>27</sup> Wolcott, p. 106; 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, pp. 175-78.

and activities of the pre-Depression years unmistakably point to the future rather than the past.”<sup>28</sup> This modernity was expressed through an increasingly national mass culture that disseminated northern black newspapers, such as *The Chicago Defender*, through the North and South via Pullman train porters; the “race records” segregated music industry that brought the heartbreaking blues of Alberta Hunter and Bessie Smith into living rooms; house parties, speakeasies, buffet flats and a black vaudeville circuit that these singers traveled with many other performing women, playing theaters to standing room only crowds. Performing women subtly hailed their audiences with veiled references to homosexuality, and took advantage of the privacy and liminal space of touring life to enact same-sex relationships on the road. Singer Ethel Waters and her girlfriend could often be found in a lover’s quarrel on Harlem sidewalks, while performer Gladys Bentley also took to the streets, day or night, in men’s suits.<sup>29</sup> Not only performing women, but also “sophisticated ladies” with “boyish bobbed hair,” wearing men’s “brogan shoes” were regularly viewed on Seventh Avenue in Harlem and State Street in Chicago.<sup>30</sup> “Young women bedecked in male attire” could be seen “perambulat[ing] with a distinctive and well practice swagger” down the main thoroughfares of black urban districts.<sup>31</sup> Black lady lovers were full participants and historical actors in the vibrant, urban working-class black districts that southern migrants helped fashion.

However, black women’s increasing autonomy to create and define their own

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<sup>28</sup> John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988, pp. 240-41.

<sup>29</sup> Joan Nestle interview with Mabel Hampton, n.d., p. 9, Eric Garber Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Historical Society; Wilbur Young, “Sketches of Colorful Harlem Characters: Gladys Bentley” *Negroes of New York* WPA microfilm, Reel 1, 1939, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

<sup>30</sup> Marcus Wright, “The Talk of the Town,” *The New York Age*, August 18, 1934, p. 4; Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, “Shave ‘Em Dry,” 1924, Paramount Records No. 12222.

<sup>31</sup> Ralph Matthews, “Women in Pants—Old Stuff Say Our Girls,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, March 18, 1933, p. 8.

relationships was met with disapproval from not only journalists but also religious authorities, which sought to curb deviant and disorderly activity in their neighborhoods. By the end of the 1920s, sermons against homosexuality in the black community were held in churches and documented in newspapers. One religious leader who spoke out against lesbianism was the powerful and popular pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem for almost thirty years, Adam Clayton Powell. *The New York Age* quoted a 1929 sermon where he singled out the harm caused by lady lovers. He exclaimed, “homosexuality and sex perversion among women” has “grown into one of the most horrible debasing, alarming and damning vices of present day civilization.” Powell “asserted that it is not only prevalent to an unbelievable degree but that it is increasing day by day.”<sup>32</sup>

In his autobiography, Powell noted that almost every black newspaper in the country reprinted excerpts or commented on this sermon.<sup>33</sup> The following week, he declared that he had “struck a chord” with congregants, who had sent him letters concerning sex perversion in their local communities.<sup>34</sup> He argued that much of this behavior came from “contact and association” and not “inherent degeneracy,” which offered the prospect of correcting or avoiding such “vicious habits” in the future. While not naming Prohibition outright as an environmental factor, Powell suggested that “the seeking for ‘thrills’ of an unusual character by the modern youth is responsible for some of” the emerging sex perversion problem, which resulted in debasing “the race.”<sup>35</sup> The reverend decried homosexuality for “threatening to eat the vitals out of America” as “wives leave their husbands for other women” and girls “mate with girls instead of

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<sup>32</sup> “Dr. A.C. Powell Scores Pulp Evils,” *The New York Age*, Nov. 16, 1929, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Adam Clayton Powell Sr., *Against the Tide: An Autobiography*. New York: R. R. Smith, 1938, p. 210.

<sup>34</sup> “Dr. Powell’s Crusade Against Abnormal Vice Is Approved,” *The New York Age*, Nov. 23, 1929, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*; “Dr. A.C. Powell Scores Pulp Evils,” *The New York Age*, Nov. 16, 1929, p. 1.

marrying.”<sup>36</sup> Church leaders sought to promote ideologies of respectability, morality and racial uplift and did not approve of homosexuality, which they conflated with other vices that were colonizing black neighborhoods and were thus a threat to the community.

The overlap of black neighborhoods with vice districts in the early-twentieth century was another reason that old settlers, especially black women reformers, were concerned with new settlers’ behavior, as the lure of immorality was never far away in the urban North. In particular, reformers were concerned about single black women’s sexual availability, disease, and the possibility of their entrance into prostitution.<sup>37</sup>

Typical of these reformers was Jane Edna Hunter, who was born in 1886 in South Carolina and moved to Cleveland in 1905 after training as a nurse. Upon first arriving in the urban North, she mistakenly sought shelter at a brothel, which gave her insight into the ease in which innocent southern migrant women could fall into a life of vice.<sup>38</sup>

Eventually she founded the Working Girls’ Home Association, which became the Phyllis Wheatley Association, in order to help “the young Negro girl” avoid “temptation and degradation.”<sup>39</sup> The National Association of Colored Women helped Hunter establish lodging houses for black women in multiple cities, which offered shelter and also prepared women to work as domestics.<sup>40</sup> While such work rarely led to better opportunities, it was honest work that Hunter saw as clearly preferable to prostitution.

The geographic proximity of black districts and vice “underworlds” allowed for illicit queer recreational spaces to emerge in the 1920s, yet also furthered the association

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<sup>36</sup> Powell, p. 216.

<sup>37</sup> Hazel Carby, “Policing the Black Woman’s Body in an Urban Context,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Summer 1992, pp. 738-755; Cheryl D. Hicks, *Talk With You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890-1935*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Carby, 1992, p. 741.

<sup>39</sup> Jane Edna Hunter, *A Nickel and a Prayer*, cited in Carby, 1992, p. 743.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

between same-sex behavior and vice. Progressive era reformers and religious leaders had worked to shut down vice districts nationally in the 1910s, but soon after prostitution, gambling, and then bootleg alcohol began to seep back into black urban neighborhoods.<sup>41</sup> Police generally turned a blind eye to these illegal activities in order to keep vice activity out of white neighborhoods and because they lacked concern for the wellbeing of African American communities.<sup>42</sup> This “wide open” atmosphere allowed for a multitude of queer behaviors and networks to emerge and momentarily thrive in the Prohibition era.<sup>43</sup> New and more liminal spaces opened up in the 1920s that straddled older definitions of “public” and “private,” such as the buffet flats run out of residential homes that were typically controlled by black women.<sup>44</sup> It was precisely these sorts of environments, found outside of traditional commercial establishments, where women gathered, flirted and, above all, enjoyed their leisure time.

While queer black women have historically socialized in their homes for reasons ranging from economics to safety, private parties became even more central to their leisure time during Prohibition as white thrill-seeking “slummers” descended upon black districts for entertainment, bootleg liquor, and interracial dancing and sex.<sup>45</sup> Some of the most famous clubs of the Harlem Renaissance era, such as The Cotton Club, only

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<sup>41</sup>Mumford, p. 35.

<sup>42</sup> Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922, p. 202; Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010, p. 226.

<sup>43</sup> Nan Alamilla Boyd uses the term “wide open” to define a city or district where illicit activities can take place free of legal repercussion, such as Gold Rush-era San Francisco. See Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> Blair, p. 175.

<sup>45</sup> Mumford; Rochella Thorpe, “‘A House Where Queers Go’: African-American Lesbian Nightlife in Detroit, 1940-1975,” *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*. Ellen Lewin, ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996, pp. 40-61; George Chauncey, *Gay New York*. New York: Basic Books, 1994; Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

allowed white and very light skinned African American patrons; only black employees and performers could enter.<sup>46</sup> Frustrated that they were good enough to entertain and serve whites but not sit among them as equals, urban northern blacks opened up residential spaces, such as buffet flats, which became important sites for working-class leisure and amusement. Among the performers whites came to see was Gladys Bentley, a large, masculine African American woman who played piano and sung dirty ditties all night long in various speakeasies along Harlem's "Jungle Alley."<sup>47</sup> One of the most infamous figures of the Harlem Renaissance and Prohibition eras, Bentley was also unashamedly open about her lesbianism; she flirted with white women in her audience and proudly told a white newspaper critic that she was marrying her girlfriend.<sup>48</sup> The visibility of queer figures such as Bentley to the white slumming crowd was an embarrassment to the black elite. White audiences sought out performers like Bentley, who represented the "primitivism" of "Jungle Alley," and offered them a momentary release from their routinized daily lives, but black journalists and critics were concerned that their neighborhoods were being used like a trip to the zoo or the circus. As W.E.B. DuBois wrote in his monthly magazine *The Crisis* in 1927 at the heart of the slumming vogue, whites "must be made to remember that Harlem is not merely exotic, it is human; it is not a spectacle and an entertainment, it is life; it is not chiefly cabarets, it is chiefly

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<sup>46</sup> Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009, p. 56.

<sup>47</sup> Jungle Alley was the name given to the nightclubs around 133<sup>rd</sup> Street, which were very popular with white slummers. Garber, 1989, p. 329.

<sup>48</sup> Eric Garber, "Gladys Bentley: The Bulldagger Who Sang the Blues," *Out/Look*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 1988, p. 58.

homes.”<sup>49</sup> DuBois and others feared that figures like Bentley were seen as representing the race, which was doing a disservice to the cause of racial uplift.

The formation of queer black women’s networks in the urban North was political for multiple reasons. Historically, African American women’s sexuality has been circumscribed by histories of slavery, colonization, segregation and labor that allowed women little sexual autonomy. Under chattel slavery, reproduction was prioritized by white planters and overseers, who benefited from the creation of future laborers. Mothers were often separated from their children and southern whites did not acknowledge bondspeople’s marriages, while rape and sexual violence at the hands of white masters was common.<sup>50</sup> The mass migration to urban centers and the creation of queer networks and increasing visibility of same-sex relationships represents black women’s prioritization of their agency, desire and autonomy. Despite the fact that remaining within solely heterosexual relationships could bestow a modicum of privilege to women with few others social advantages, this project examines women who nonetheless chose to resist social norms in order to fulfill their sexual and romantic desires and bring pleasure into their lives. Women strategically created queer networks inside and outside of the black entertainment industry that allowed them to take part in the newly emerging sexual subcultures of the early-twentieth century. Black women's same-sex relationships in the

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<sup>49</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, “Harlem,” *The Crisis*, September 1927, p. 240.

<sup>50</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts of the Culture of Dissemblance,” *Signs*, no. 14, Summer 1989, pp. 912-920; Evelyn Hammonds “Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality,” in *Feminist Genealogies*. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds. New York: Routledge, 1997; Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race and Power in Colonial Virginia*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996; Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004; Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

urban North modeled new forms of modernity: they reveal that changing conceptions of gender and sexuality at this time were not just enacted by white women. Instead, many black women prioritized relationships with women over or alongside marriage and motherhood.

This study examines both successful performing women and also “everyday” women, such as Mabel Hampton, a southern migrant who dabbled in chorus work but was primarily a domestic worker. By focusing on working-class subjects, this project is also part of the turn in African American history from studying elite Harlem Renaissance and New Negro intelligentsia to incorporating the lives of working-class women into these milieus.<sup>51</sup> At first glance the women in this dissertation do not appear to be part of the larger nebulous movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, in its traditional definition. Often referred to as a male-dominated arts and intellectual project or moment, its figureheads, W.E. B. DuBois and Alain Locke, did not see blues or jazz as serious art, and they believed that popular music’s marketplace cultivated the lowest common denominator in musical production while disseminating caricatures of blackness that they sought to refute.<sup>52</sup>

However, the emotional music of the classic blues women served as the soundtrack to the early Great Migration, and choreographed synchronized performances of chorus girls played a large role in creating the atmosphere associated with the era.<sup>53</sup> As

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<sup>51</sup> See Carby, 1992; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class*. New York: Free Press, 1994; Baldwin, 2007; Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, ed, *The Harlem Renaissance Revisited: Politics, Arts, and Letters*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010; Erin D. Chapman, *Prove It On Me: New Negroes, Sex, and Popular Culture in the 1920s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>52</sup> Steven Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920-1930*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1995, p. 94; Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001, p. 9.

<sup>53</sup> The “classic blues” was the name of the vaudeville-influenced genre that women such as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey popularized in the 1920s. This will be discussed further in the third chapter.

David Krasner argues, drama and performance were at the forefront of the Harlem Renaissance, and helped make black cultural expression more visible in the interwar era.<sup>54</sup> While literature is often the first genre associated with this milieu, this reading of the movement has been complicated by historians fashioning a newly expansive view of the Harlem Renaissance as more than an elite arts movement. Scholars have therefore sought to infuse working-class southern migrant culture into analysis of the Renaissance, since this newly arrived population played such a large role in reshaping the urban North in the interwar era.<sup>55</sup> Specifically, Davarian Baldwin's work brings working-class migrant life in Chicago to the center of a discussion of the New Negro movement and moment, by reconsidering the relationship between consumer culture and intellectual life. He argues that the marketplace was an important site for asserting solutions to race-based autonomy, as many people turned to leisure spaces seeking public displays of pleasure and bodily release.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Jacob S. Dorman argues, "examining everyday life and work patterns in 1920s Harlem illustrates that the abstracted Harlem of the literary imagination is an inadequate replacement for the knowledge of Harlem to be gleaned through social history."<sup>57</sup> Indeed, Dorman notes that many of the central literary figures associated with the movement did not even live in Harlem for much of the 1920s and 30s as the district became synonymous with African American literary, cultural and intellectual production. Thus, the Harlem Renaissance was more of an abstraction, an idea, than an on-the-ground development. However, there has been a recent turn to

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<sup>54</sup> David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance 1910-1927*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Carby, 1992; Krasner, 2002; Baldwin, 2007; Chapman, 2012.

<sup>56</sup> Baldwin, p. 9.

<sup>57</sup> Jacob S. Dorman, "Back to Harlem: Abstract and Everyday Labor during the Harlem Renaissance," *The Harlem Renaissance Revisited: Politics, Arts, and Letters*. Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, ed. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010, p. 75.

uncover everyday life during this period, which this project contributes to in its examination of how the entertainment industry functioned as a workplace, and through analyzing how segregation and Prohibition led to the creation of queer working-class gathering spaces.<sup>58</sup>

Journalists who discussed lady lovers in the black press often utilized the language of sexology, created by European doctors, to explain newly emerging sexual identity categories, demonstrate their cultural awareness of medical discourse, and distance themselves from such “deviant” subjects. Since the nineteenth century, sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis had noted the violence of female “inverts,” a category that preceded “homosexuality.”<sup>59</sup> Such women had an inverted, masculine gender, which explained their desire for women.<sup>60</sup> A series of “lesbian love murders” in the 1890s brought the modern conception of lesbianism to a national newspaper audience, and codified the association between female homosexuality and violence.<sup>61</sup> European sexologists also sought to distance white cultures from homosexuality by highlighting the prevalence of lesbianism within “primitive” African and non-Western societies.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Along with Dorman see the work of Robertson, *White and White*; for Chicago see Baldwin.

<sup>59</sup> Havelock Ellis, “Sexual Inversion in Women” in *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Vol. 2*, 1904; George Chauncey, “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Desire,” *Salmagundi*, No. 58-9, Fall/Winter 1982-83, pp. 114-146.

<sup>60</sup> Esther Newton, “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman,” *Signs*, Vol. 9, No. 4, Summer 1984, pp. 557-575.

<sup>61</sup> Lisa Duggan coined the phrase “lesbian love murder” to refer to a specific trope that emerged in the 1890s in which a masculine woman killed her feminine object of desire when the latter left the former for a male partner. While women rarely identified as “lesbians” in this era, Duggan argues that these cases helped formulate the concept of modern lesbian identity. See Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence and American Modernity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.

<sup>62</sup> Siobhan Somerville, “Scientific Racism and the Emergence of the Homosexual Body,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* vol. 5, no. 2, 1994, pp. 243-66; Julian Carter, “Normality, Whiteness, Authorship: Evolutionary Sexology and the Primitive Pervert,” *Science and Homosexualities*, Vernon Rosario, ed. New York: Routledge, 1997.

The association of black lady lovers with violence came from both the medical realm as well as the racial antagonisms of the Jim Crow era. As African Americans migrated North, their increased proximity to northern whites led to their further association in the white imaginary as violent criminals. While newly available crime statistics captured the bias of a white police force and court system that arrested and imprisoned blacks in increasing numbers, white social scientists read such statistics as objective reports that demonstrated African Americans' innately violent natures.<sup>63</sup> Black women were frequently arrested for solicitation, disorderly conduct, petty theft, and "crimes of passion" that were often acts of self-defense against abusive partners. By 1923, black women constituted 64.5 percent of the women in U.S. prisons, even though they made up less than ten percent of the female population.<sup>64</sup> Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, prison and reform school authorities documented the same-sex behavior of women in correctional facilities, which often had an interracial, gendered component, and increasingly so as black women migrated to the North.<sup>65</sup>

Against this background, Lillian Faderman notes, "a black lesbian subculture" emerged "fairly early" in relation to similar white subcultures because of the prison "demiworld." Here, black women who had been incarcerated learned not only about "lesbian sexuality" but also about the particular gendered sexual roles that emerged in single-sex environments, such as referring to partners as "mama" and "papa," that "developed in institutional situations in America" by the beginning of the twentieth

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<sup>63</sup> Muhammad, p. 4.

<sup>64</sup> Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Partial Justice: Women in State Prisons, 1800-1935*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990, p. 141; United States Bureau of the Census, "Summary of the Population of the United States and Outlying Possessions, By Color, or Race and Sex: 1920," *Fourteenth Census of the United States, Volume 3: Population*. Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1922, p. 11.

<sup>65</sup> Somerville, p. 260.

century.<sup>66</sup> However, Faderman's suggestion that this prison culture did not affect white women as well is odd, as prison authorities were quick to note that white women and black women both took part in these relationships and racial difference was often substituted for gender difference (i.e., black women were the "papas" to white women's "mamas").<sup>67</sup> By not historicizing the context of Jim Crow segregation and its repression of black freedom that instigated black women's descent into the criminal "demiworld," Faderman runs the risk of essentializing these women as violent.<sup>68</sup>

These emerging queer networks formed during the New Negro era of the interwar years, which brought the promise of a renewed commitment to changing the racial inequities of Jim Crow, but this new race consciousness was infused with a masculinization that prioritized black men over women.<sup>69</sup> This new outlook was consolidated not only through the success of black military in World War I but also in response to national race riots that were spawned by the growing racial tensions in the North as black populations rapidly increased during the early Great Migration. The 1919 Chicago riots, for example, began on a hot summer day when African Americans attempted to patronize a beach frequented by whites.<sup>70</sup> As racial violence spread across northern cities in the unfolding weeks, there was "a component of more determined and effected black resistance to assault by whites." The 1919 riots spawned a "defiant"

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<sup>66</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 74.

<sup>67</sup> Somerville, p. 261.

<sup>68</sup> As Khalil Gibran Muhammad demonstrates, "specially designed race-conscious laws, discriminatory punishments, and new forms of everyday racial surveillance had been institutionalized by the 1890s as way to suppress black freedom." See Muhammad, p. 4.

<sup>69</sup> Wolcott; Mitchell; Summers, 2004; Chapman.

<sup>70</sup> William M. Tuttle, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996 (1970), p. 5.

resistance that was “more often overt and direct.”<sup>71</sup> An editorial that ran in the *Chicago Whip* as tensions over the bombings escalated demonstrates this: “the compromising peace-at-any-price Negro is rapidly passing into the scrap heap of yesterday” to be “supplanted by a fearless, intelligent Negro who recognizes no compromise but who demands absolute justice and fair play.”<sup>72</sup> The aftermath of the riots led to an increasing masculinization in the rhetoric of the struggle for racial equality, and heightened community policing of the behavior of southern migrants in the North. Women’s behavior “became a trope for the race, their public deportment and carriage the basis by which some assumed the entire race would be judged.”<sup>73</sup> A 1922 editorial in *The Chicago Whip* complained, “our women” fail “to conduct themselves with proper reserve and dignity.” Southern migrant women needed to learn that they were “under constant and continual surveillance,” and “must stand in position to satisfy the critical eye of the public.”<sup>74</sup>

In the private sphere, however, women could make a home together, which only came to the public’s attention when something extraordinary occurred, such as a crime. As more and more southern migrant women lived in boarding houses or rented one of several extra rooms from a family, fewer living arrangements in the urban North came to look like the traditional domestic sphere, which added confusion over what it meant for women to live together. Indeed, several of the murder cases that will be discussed occurred between women who were married or separated and rented rooms out to other

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<sup>71</sup> Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988, pp. 149-50.

<sup>72</sup> *The Chicago Whip*, June 28, 1919.

<sup>73</sup> Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after The Civil War*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 166.

<sup>74</sup> “Too Familiar,” *The Chicago Whip*, September 9, 1922, p. 8.

women. The black press in each case claimed that “perverted love” was to blame for these crimes of passion, but little evidence is given, or quotes from the women themselves, that confirm queer desires were actually the cause of the homicides. As more women of all races and classes sought out birth control, non-reproductive sex, remained single, separated or divorced their husbands, and had relationships with both men and women, lady lovers became less marginal and more symbolic of a system of gender and sexuality in the midst of upheaval.<sup>75</sup> In the nineteenth century, relationships between women were often assumed to be “practice” for marriage to men, or asexual friendships.<sup>76</sup> However, modern discourse gleaned from psychoanalysis and proponents of companionate marriage all emphasized women’s right to sexual desire, which meant that women’s relationships and family structures could also be sexual and might be a threat to heterosexual marriage and the family.<sup>77</sup> While this project focuses on social networks more than family units, this is still an intervention into family history, as the creation of non-nuclear families and living arrangements by black lady lovers was part of a long tradition in black women’s history of creating kinship forms and ties that were

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<sup>75</sup> Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: Birth Control in America*. New York : Penguin Books, 1977; Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America*. New York: Anchor Books, 1992; Elaine Tyler May, *Barren in the Promised Land: Childless Americans and the Pursuit of Happiness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995; Christina Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern: Women's Sexuality from the Progressive Era to World War II*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2009; Kristin Celello, *Making Marriage Work: A History of Marriage and Divorce in the Twentieth Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

<sup>76</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Autumn, 1975, pp. 1-29; Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*. New York: William Morrow and Co., 1981; Karen V. Hansen, “‘No Kisses Is Like Youres’: An Erotic Friendship Between Two African-American Women During the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” *Gender and History*, Vol. 7, No. 2, August 1995, pp. 153-182.

<sup>77</sup> Christina Simmons, “Companionate Marriage and the Lesbian Threat,” *Frontiers*, Vol. 4, No. 3, Autumn 1979, pp. 54-59; Faderman, 1991.

differentiated from white ideals and their legal standards.<sup>78</sup> This will be examined in more detail in the epilogue, which looks briefly at marriage ceremonies amongst black lady lovers in the early-twentieth century.

While journalists, reformers, religious leaders, and others sought to regulate black women's sexuality, and particularly same-sex desire, by the 1920s growing numbers of women took part in queer relationships, whether single or married. However, espousing a queer identity was a privilege that few black women in the Jim Crow era were in a position to claim. Homosexuality could only serve to harm the project of racial equality and the struggle for full citizenship, which led to heightened resistance against lesbianism by the black critics most concerned with "the race question." And as representations of the black family as female-dominated and lacking a male breadwinner were cemented by black social scientists like E. Franklin Frazier by the 1920s, lady lovers could not offer anything beneficial to the black community.<sup>79</sup> Longstanding European notions of the pathology of black female sexuality were only reinforced by representations of queer women. Yet at the same time, the multiple discourses condemning lady lovers served to bolster their visibility and cultural power. Despite the increasing concern over women's same-sex relationships, many women nonetheless sought such connections, demonstrating the lengths women would go to in order to create the type of relationship that satisfied their desires and brought them happiness.

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<sup>78</sup> Brenda Stevenson, "Distress and Discord in Virginia Slave Families, 1830-1860," *In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, 1830-1900*. Carol K. Rothrock Bleser, ed. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*. New York: Basic Books, 2010 (1985), p. 58; Christina Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern: Women's Sexuality from the Progressive Era to World War II*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2009; Heather Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

<sup>79</sup> Malinda Alaine Lindquis, *Black Social Science and the Crisis of Manhood, 1890-1970: We Are the Supermen*. New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 180.

Historians have discussed at length the methodological difficulties in carrying out work on working-class African American women, and the search for sources on black women who loved women is an even more daunting task. Finding these women's stories often requires reading "against the grain" those sources created to regulate and reprimand them in order to parse details of their lives that have rarely been saved for posterity in institutional archives. As George Chauncey has shown, for better or worse, the creation of subaltern histories demands relying heavily on "outsider sources" usually written by authorities "from above" instead of relying on a trove of sources "on the ground" that reveal the contours of black women's everyday lives.<sup>80</sup> Whenever possible I draw on autobiographies, biographies, and oral histories – sources that are still mediated but also offer an "insider" perspective on the experiences of black lady lovers. Yet this project has also been crucially formed by newspaper articles from the black press, vice reports, prison and reformatory authorities' reports, and sociological studies that have represented black lady lovers with all the of qualities that the black middle-class sought to refute. The danger here then becomes overestimating the role of policing and violence in the lives of these women, who often did not enter the official record unless they were charged with committing a crime.

When it comes to non-normative sexuality and relationships, yet another dilemma of the archives emerges: when economically privileged black women's lives have been documented for posterity, concerns over respectability have led to hiding details of same-sex relationships. For example, when literature scholar Gloria Hull was researching club woman Alice Dunbar-Nelson, who began to have relationships with women at the turn-

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<sup>80</sup> Chauncey, 1994, p. 365-368.

of-the-century, Hull found that Dunbar-Nelson's relatives did not want any details about this aspect of her life to be discussed in her study. Eventually Hull was able to convince Dunbar-Nelson's niece that her attraction to women "was only one aspect of her identity" and was important enough to be included, but not every scholar and historian has taken such a viewpoint.<sup>81</sup> Thus, while I argue that the Great Migration marked the beginning of modern queer networks for black women, there are likely many stories of black women's relationships prior to the 1910s that have not been collected and made available.

Undertaking queer African American history prior to the overlapping eras of gay liberation and black feminism in the 1970s involves hypothesizing, and filling in blanks with possibilities, as such subaltern subjects have not been attended to by scholars until the last several decades.

Evelynn Hammonds noted twenty years ago, "the restrictive, repressive, and dangerous aspects of black female sexuality have been emphasized by black feminist writers while pleasure, exploration, and agency have gone under-analyzed."<sup>82</sup> More recently, Jennifer C. Nash has called for a turn to "ecstasy as a corrective to injury," in order to organize "around the paradoxes of pleasure rather than woundedness" and "possibilities rather than pain."<sup>83</sup> This dissertation seeks to find these moments, when women wrote each other love letters, danced together in speakeasies, flirted at bus stops and in theaters, and sung and listened to the classic blues women's stories of desire and heartbreak. Following this, I use the identity category of "lady lovers" both to ground my

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<sup>81</sup> Gloria T. Hull, "Researching Alice Dunbar-Nelson: A Personal and Literary Perspective," *Lesbian Subjects: A Feminist Studies Reader*. Martha Vicinus, ed. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 17.

<sup>82</sup> Hammonds, 126-145.

<sup>83</sup> Jennifer C. Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014, p. 3.

language in the historical terminology of the early-twentieth century and to highlight that it was *love* that brought these women together, despite the wider cultural focus on their violence and jealousy.

Closely tied to questions of terminology and historical accuracy is the issue of whether these women took part in same-sex behaviors or claimed same-sex identities.<sup>84</sup>

Aside from some dirty dancing in speakeasies, there is very little explicit sex in this dissertation, unfortunately. Notable is Ethel Waters who once bragged to a friend that “she was a lesbian, and the best that ever did it,” but such exclamations were rare.<sup>85</sup>

Historians of sexuality agree that while same-sex behavior is not a modern phenomenon, our contemporary sexual identity categories are.<sup>86</sup> The growth in terminology referring to women who loved women – from “lady lovers” to “bulldaggers” – reveals the increasing visibility of queer women, but discourse often gestured more to an imaginary trope of “the lesbian” at a time when few women of any race self-identified as such. In this study, while sources *about* black lady lovers definitely outnumber those *by* them, very few women referred to themselves with labels that suggest they saw themselves in a category based on their desires.

The oral history of Mabel Hampton, who socialized almost exclusively with queer women in 1920s and 30s New York, suggests that while various terms were used, many did not emerge until later decades. When Hampton was asked what she called lesbianism

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<sup>84</sup> On the burden of lesbian historians having to “prove” subjects had sex, see Blanche Wiesen Cook, “The Historical Denial of Lesbianism,” *Radical History Review*, No. 20, Spring/Summer 1979, pp. 60-65; Leila Rupp, “Imagine My Surprise: Women’s Relationships in Historical Perspective,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies*. Vol. 5, No. 3, Autumn, 1980, pp. 61-70.

<sup>85</sup> Bogle, 2010, p. 516.

<sup>86</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978; David Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

in the 1920s, she responded, “I didn’t call it anything but to say they liked women.”<sup>87</sup> At the same time, in her recollections she referred to all-women parties where “the bulldykers would come and bring their women with them.”<sup>88</sup> This suggests Hampton used the term “bulldyker” to refer specifically to masculine women, as was common at the time. However, vice reports from the 1920s also reveal feminine women who referred to themselves as “bulldaggers,” and performer Maud Russell claimed, “lesbians weren’t well accepted in show business, they were called bull dykers.” She recalled, “girls needed tenderness, so we had girl friendships, the famous lady lovers...I guess we were bisexual, is what you could call it today.”<sup>89</sup> “Lady lovers” was also used in the black press interchangeably with “women lovers,” and as this term was indigenous to the urban North in the early-twentieth century, in black as well as white circles, I use it whenever possible. While many of the women in this dissertation had relationships with both men and women and were, as Russell noted, therefore “bisexual” in contemporary parlance, I rarely use this term since it was not utilized at the time. I refer to “lesbianism” throughout this study as the concept of women-loving-women and the act of building a life with a female partner while “lesbian” is generally referred to a trope in discourse.

Lastly, there is the complex term “queer,” which first emerged in the 1930s to signify same-sex behavior and identity – as an act or a category – and was primarily used in a negative way but some sources also show it was used as self-identification.<sup>90</sup> While

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<sup>87</sup> Transcription of Mabel Hampton tapes by Joan Nestle, 1999, part 2, p. 7, Box 1, Mabel Hampton papers, Lesbian Herstory Archives.

<sup>88</sup> Joan Nestle, “I Lift My Eyes to the Hill: The Life of Mabel Hampton as Told By a White Woman,” *Queer Representations: Reading Lives, Reading Cultures*. Martin Duberman, ed. New York: New York University Press, 1997, p. 267.

<sup>89</sup> Jean-Claude Baker, *Josephine Baker: The Hungry Heart*. Lanham, MD: Cooper Square Press, 2001, pp. 63-64.

<sup>90</sup> Regarding women self-identifying as “queer,” a woman at the Bally Hoo Café in 1933 Chicago was asked to dance by a male University of Chicago sociology student, who declined and told him “queer

“queer” is not a word that the women in this study used themselves, I have taken the liberty of using it throughout this study as a shorthand term for “women loving women” and “same-sex behavior.” Since the advent of queer theory and queer studies in the early 1990s it has been used as an expansive, umbrella term that refers to both non-heteronormative behavior and resistance to respectability vis a vis “assimilation.”<sup>91</sup>

Along with questions about the terminology for women individually there is also the issue of how to view their group formations at this time. I use the term “network” instead of “community” because while same-sex desire was a commonality between some women at this time, it is not clear if they saw it as a significant part of their identities or personalities.<sup>92</sup> As gay-identified Harlem Renaissance author Richard Bruce Nugent recalled, “Harlem was very much like [Greenwich] Village. People did what they wanted to do and with whom they wanted to do it. You didn’t get on the rooftop and shout, ‘I fucked my wife last night.’ So why would you get on the roof and say ‘I loved prick.’ You didn’t. You just did what you wanted to do.”<sup>93</sup> As E. Patrick Johnson argues, African Americans’ relationship to same-sex identity categories and communities differ from those of dominant white gay communities, which calls for an examination of the specific racialized sexual categories that emerged in the early-twentieth century.<sup>94</sup>

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people despise” straight people. See Box 98, folder 2, Ernest W. Burgess Papers, Special Collections, University of Chicago.

<sup>91</sup> As Jafari S. Allen has noted, while the term “queer” might be problematic, “no term, even those that may seem self-evidently local, indigenous, or autochthonous, is perfectly stable or synchronous with dynamic self-identification on the ground.” See Jafari S. Allen, “Black/Queer/Diaspora at the Current Conuncture,” *GLQ*, Vol. 18, No. 2-3, 2012, p. 222.

<sup>92</sup> In referring to “queer networks” I am taking a cue from the work of Tristan Cabello, “Queer Bronzeville: Race, Sexuality and Culture in Black Chicago, 1920-1985,” PhD dissertation, Northwestern University, 2011.

<sup>93</sup> Thomas H. Wirth and Bruce Nugent, *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections From the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002, p. 21.

<sup>94</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, “Introduction,” *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*. Mae G. Henderson and E. Patrick Johnson, eds. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

The first chapter examines African American women who loved women prior to the Great Migration. This is an understudied subject, thus this chapter synthesizes all the known sources on women's relationships prior to World War I. Five of the central themes in the subfield of lesbian history organize the chapter: romantic friendships, the discourse of sexology, newspaper accounts of "lesbian love murders," women passing as men, and same-sex relationships in institutional settings. Similar to the white press, by the 1890s, the black press began to run articles that pathologized women's relationships, as they came to be viewed as sexualized relationships similar to adult heterosexual relationships. Prior to this, correspondence between free black women in the Civil War-era North has shown that families and communities could accept women's relationships as long as they did not preclude marriage to men in adulthood. Despite this semblance of acceptance, it appears to be rare for women in same-sex relationships to have been connected to networks of like-minded women. Indeed, as the 1890s narratives of "lesbian love murders" among white and black women show, those who desired other women had to compete for their affections with men, not other female suitors. While there are many accounts of white women passing as men in the nineteenth century to access economic and professional freedoms as well as relationships with women, few sources speak to black women passing as men. I examine several accounts, which all appear connected to economic freedom and not sexual freedom, and argue that it was dangerous for black women to pass as black men during Reconstruction and Jim Crow, which was a central reason few black women explored this option. Lastly, I examine accounts of black women's queer behaviors in reformatories and prisons in the nineteenth and early-twentieth century. The high rate of criminalization of black women in an era of

increasing punishment and surveillance of African Americans contributed to the emergence of queer gendered behavior between women, which was commonly practiced in such homosocial settings. These behaviors, such as assuming “mama” and “papa” roles later became codified into the “butch” and “femme” roles that predominated among working-class lesbian culture for much of the twentieth century.

The second chapter turns to the context of the Great Migration, as thousands of young southern women came to the urban North in search of new opportunities and more freedom than the Jim Crow South could provide. The black press, which played a role in the migration by encouraging southerners to move North, helped connect African American communities nationally, and sought to further the struggle for full citizenship and equality by informing readers of current events from politics to lynchings to black entertainments. Newspapers were run by educated middle-class African Americans who had often lived in the North longer than the recent southern migrants, and thus came to be known as “old settlers.” They tried to use the press to regulate the behavior of “new settlers,” whose public comportment was often found lacking by the standards of old settlers who saw respectability and self-control as qualities that were key to receiving equal treatment from whites. Throughout the 1920s, multiple stories about violent crimes of passion enacted by lady lovers ran in the black press, which scapegoated the behavior of queer women and southern migrants, and worked to conflate the concept of lesbianism with violence. This chapter analyzes several such stories in New York and Chicago, arguing that these narratives in the black press exposed growing networks of black lady lovers and their private socializing to the greater public at this time. The reported crimes

always took place exclusively between women, revealing that in the urban North amidst the Great Migration, women's relationships no longer existed in isolation.

The third chapter delves into the relationship between the black popular entertainment world of vaudeville, race records and their touring circuits and the growing networks of black lady lovers in the early-twentieth century. These industries served as important alternative sites of labor for black women, who primarily worked as domestics at this time. Working as a performer was lucrative to varying degrees, depending on whether one became a highly successful recording artist like Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey or Ethel Waters, or was a chorus girl performing multiple times a day with long rehearsals. Either way, however, a life of performing and touring offered many opportunities to form same-sex relationships, which were ubiquitous in the industry. Indeed, the spaces of sleeping train cars, boarding houses that catered to black entertainers, and theater backstage areas offered privacy and acceptance that contributed both to the conflation of the theatrical world as a queer milieu and furthered the development of queer black counterpublics. Not only did women like Smith, Rainey and Waters take part in relationships on the road with their entourages of fellow performers, they also enacted queer cultural productions via the race records industry and on the stage. These expressions of same-sex desire and gender transgression were often coded so as not to offend industry executives or disapproving fans, but were understood by fellow queers who were hailed by their public expressions.

The fourth chapter turns to the particular context of Prohibition and how the illicit spaces that opened up from 1920-1933 affected black lady lovers and the formation of their networks. Using vice records from the New York based-Committee of Fourteen, I

examine the milieus of rent parties, speakeasies and buffet flats – illicit spaces serving alcohol during Prohibition that often allowed same-sex behavior along with live music, dancing, interracial contact, and commercial sex. I argue that the conflation of lady lovers with vice districts, which was a product of segregation and Progressive era reform, was another reason that the larger black community looked down on queer women. The historical associations between prostitution and lesbianism are also analyzed, as both forms of “outlaw” sexuality did not focus on reproductive sex, which made them suspect forces that endangered the black family. The oral history of Mabel Hampton demonstrates not only the importance of residential sites for lady lovers’ gatherings but also shows how single black women and queer women were regulated by their communities and conflated with prostitution and criminality. Gladys Bentley is also an important figure here, as she was one of the most popular performers in the speakeasy milieu, which catered to slumming white by the late 1920s. The repeal of Prohibition changed the landscape of queer black counterpublics, as many illicit spaces closed when the sale of alcohol became legal again. The advent of the Great Depression also furthered concerns about nontraditional gender norms and contributed to an increasingly hostile landscape for lady lovers, but black women were nonetheless able to continue socializing in private.

The brief epilogue connects black women’s same-sex marriage ceremonies in the 1930s to two other historical moments: bondspeople’s marriage rituals under slavery, and the queerly gendered relationships women enacted in prisons and reformatories that will be discussed in chapter one. In all of these examples, black women claimed their freedom to love and be loved in environments and historical moments that sought to dispute this

inalienable right. Indeed, lady lovers could not be accepted in the larger black community in the early-twentieth century because they offered no antidote to the overarching power of white supremacy and the structural, cultural and economic ways it disenfranchised African Americans. Despite this, through the enactment of marriage ceremonies, women asserted their citizenship and validated the importance of their relationships.

**Chapter One:**  
**Bosom Friends and “Unnatural” Passions:**  
**African American Women Who Loved Women Before the Great Migration**

In 1898, *The Wichita Tribune* – a weekly newspaper “For the Afro-American” – ran a lengthy, illustrated article with the headline, “Queer Love Affair: Two Missouri Girls Become Estranged; One Tried to Enlist in the U.S. Army But Is Exposed in Time to Prevent it – A Case of Perverted Affection.”<sup>95</sup> The article described the relationship between 21-year-old Adele Densmore and 18-year-old Ruth Latham of Saint Joseph, Missouri. Densmore, a “slender, fair-faced girl,” planned to “disguise herself in boy’s clothing” to join the military in order to fight in the Spanish-American War. However, Densmore’s parents discovered her plan and “called on her sweetheart to help keep the headstrong young woman at home.” The realization that her “sweetheart” was Ruth Latham, another young woman, was “the most surprising fact that was brought to light” in “the recent escapade.”

The women’s parents told the journalist that the couple had been together for four years and “the strange alliance had grown stronger year by year” while the article also stated “it has long been known in the neighborhood” that “they were sweethearts.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> “Queer Love Affair,” *Wichita Tribune*, September 17, 1898, p. 2.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

Their relationship did not appear to be of major concern to neighbors, who were said to look “upon it as a piece of silliness between the two girls.” However, while their parents did not regard the matter as a serious one for a long time, “lately they have come to realize that it is something more than the play of children.” The author explained matter-of-factly, “Miss Densmore plays the part of a man and Miss Ruth Latham is the girl she loves.” Perhaps in part due to Densmore’s apparent performance of masculinity, the author declared their relationship

a case of perverted affection, as plainly as any case that has ever been noted in medical books or by science anywhere. The two girls are plainly and insanely infatuated with each other. They are as deeply in love with each other as though Adele Densmore were a man. To all appearances their affection for each other is marked only by purity, although they make use of all the usual manifestations of love, and that to an extent that would not be dared by a young man and a young woman in the sight of others. They kiss when they meet, and kiss again when they are about to part, with their arms about each other.<sup>97</sup>

Despite their regular “osculatory caresses,” the two young women recently had “a lovers’ quarrel” which, their friends believed, led to “Miss Densmore’s determination to enlist as a soldier.” As she prepared to leave her home for the army, her parents discovered her plan and turned to Latham for her assistance in keeping their daughter safe at home. The article ended by noting, “It may have been that [Densmore] only wanted to show her innamorata that she was still more like a man – that she had the masculine bravery in her heart. If they had quarreled, it was made up again when they met, and Miss Densmore has been dissuaded from going to war – for the present, at least.”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

While romance between young women was indeed not unheard of in the late-nineteenth century, this article is extraordinary for a few reasons: it is one of the earliest articles published in the black press to discuss same-sex desire at such length and it displays several of the central themes which lesbian historians have formulated concerning women who loved women in the nineteenth century.<sup>99</sup> Yet at the same time, it is unclear whether or not Latham and Densmore themselves were African American: this article – and the other human interest pieces that ran along side of it – all later appeared in several other newspapers geared toward different demographics, which suggests that they were not written exclusively for the *Wichita Tribune*.<sup>100</sup> Further, the young women and their families were not explicitly described as being African American, which would most likely have occurred if the article was not written specifically for the *Tribune*. However, the article did appear in the black press first, and if it was written for the *Tribune*, the women's race would not necessarily be stated. Densmore is described as “a fair-faced girl” and Latham had “mild brown eyes and hair.” Later the author wrote, “The

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<sup>99</sup> Crucial works that have established the central themes of nineteenth-century lesbian history in the U.S. that this chapter will discuss in relation to African American women include: Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Autumn, 1975, pp. 1-29; Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* New York: Meridian Books, 1976; Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*. New York: William Morrow and Co., 1981; George Chauncey, “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Desire,” *Salmagundi*, No. 58-9, Fall/Winter 1982-83, pp. 114-146; Esther Newton, “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman,” *Signs*, Vol. 9, No. 4., Summer 1984, pp. 557-575; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985; San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project, “She Even Chewed Tobacco,” *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey, Eds. New York: Basic Books, 1989; Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence and American Modernity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.

<sup>100</sup> The exact article also appeared in the *Elkhart Weekly Truth* (Elkhart, IN) on September 29, 1898, twelve days after it was first published in the black newspaper the *Wichita Tribune*. It later appeared in *The Red Cloud Chief* (Nebraska), *The Philipsburg Mail* (Montana) and *The San Juan County Index* (New Mexico). Beginning in the 1850s, the Associated Press provided articles to newspapers throughout the country via wire service, see Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications*. New York: Basic Books, 2004, p. 174.

two girls are considerably alike in complexion and appearance. Both have brown eyes and hair and small, delicate hands and feet.” Another reason the article may not have been written for the black *Wichita Tribune* is that it described events in a small Missouri town over 200 miles away from the city the paper usually covered.

However, while the race of Densmore and Latham may be impossible to determine, this article’s appearance in a black newspaper at the turn-of-the-century is significant regardless, because it demonstrates that discourse on and consciousness of female same-sex desire was of interest to the paper’s midwestern African American readers at this time. The *Wichita Tribune* was founded in the 1880 by journalists who belonged to the “Exoduster” movement, the well-known mass migration of African Americans who left the South for Kansas in the late 1870s, hoping for freedom from the growing political and racial repression that foreclosed the promises of Reconstruction.<sup>101</sup> The inclusion of an article on ambiguously raced young women in love in a small town highlights turn-of-the-century discourses on overlapping configurations of race and sexuality. While the two young women are said to have “perverted affections” for each other, the general tone of the article does not pathologize them, despite the central role assigned to women in the Exoduster movement as shouldering the burden of racial destiny through motherhood.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Aileen J. Ratzlaff, “Ebony Triangle: The Black Newspaper Network in Kansas, 1878-1900,” *Seeking a Voice: Images of Race and Gender in the Nineteenth Century Press*. David B. Sachsman, S. Kitrell Rushing and Roy Morris, Jr., eds. W. Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2009, p. 119; Mitchell, p. 4; Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1992.

<sup>102</sup> As Michelle Mitchell notes, at this time there was a common conception that racial destiny and sexual practices were intertwined. Mitchell, p. 80.

This article engages with three of the primary tropes in the subfield of lesbian history: 1) romantic friendship between women, 2) women passing as men – represented here by Adele Densmore planning to joining the Army – and 3) the medical discourse of sexology, which at that time was fixated on same-sex desire and what was then termed “sex inversion” or the more general “sexual perversion,” later to be labeled “homosexuality” or “lesbianism.”<sup>103</sup> By utilizing all of these themes, this 1898 article highlights the divergent strands of thought about female same-sex desire currently circulating. The relationship was described as both “a case of perverted affection” akin to what was found in “medical books or by science” as well as affection that was pure despite its demonstrative nature. It was assumed that Densmore and Latham’s relationship had not extended beyond kisses, which were socially acceptable only because their relationship was not comparable to a heterosexual one, where such behavior would have been suspect and improper. In 1898 the idea of romantic love between young women was in flux. It could be still viewed as innocent and non-threatening though it was also slowly becoming a sign of perversion, or even possibly insanity, as intimated by the words “they are plainly and *insanely* infatuated with other [emphasis mine].”

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<sup>103</sup> I will refer throughout to the subfield of “lesbian history,” which is a term first used in the 1970s and 1980s despite the fact that very few of the women discussed in this dissertation self-identified as “lesbian.” Particularly in this chapter I refer to “lesbian history” instead of “queer history” since the central tropes of nineteenth-century lesbian history were theorized in the era prior to queer studies’ emergence in the early 1990s. For an overview on the history of the subfield and the turn from “lesbian and gay history” to “queer history” which measures the influence of queer histories on the history of sexuality and women, see Lisa Duggan, “The Discipline Problem: Queer Theory Meets Gay and Lesbian History,” *GLQ*, Vol. 2, 1995, pp. 179-191 and Donna Penn, “Queer: Theorizing Politics and History,” *Radical History Review*, Vol. 62, 1995, pp. 24-42.

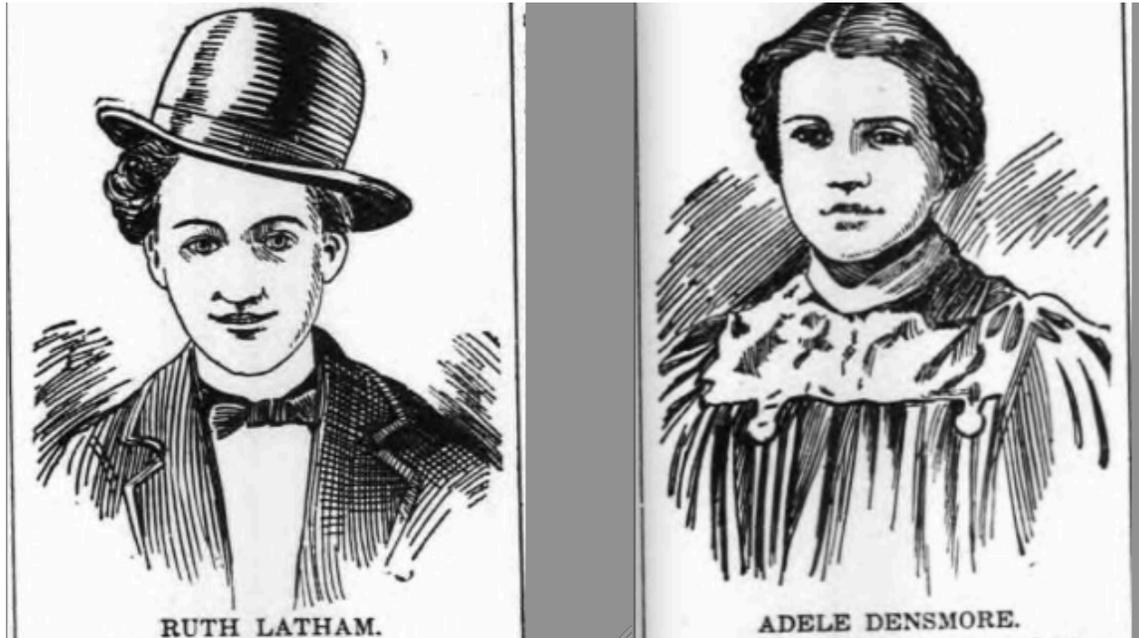
Trying to make sense of this situation, the author wrote that, “they are as deeply in love with each other as though Adele Densmore were a man,” suggesting that the only avenue of understanding romantic love between two women at the time was to imagine one of them as a man. This notion correlated both with Victorian assumptions that love relationships needed an active, masculine partner because women were inherently sexually passive, as well as with the medical concept of inversion, which conceived of sex-same desire as a function of having an “inverted” gender identity. Thus women who loved women were pathologically masculine.<sup>104</sup> Two women were not yet understood to love and desire each other as women, which was complicated by Densmore preferring to wear men’s clothing. The author concludes that, even though she donned her brother’s clothing and had her photograph taken in them, she did not have “the slightest resemblance to a man.”

The article included drawings of both women, which further added to the ambiguity of their race, yet notably, their names were mixed up, as the more feminine woman is labeled as Densmore and the woman in a man’s hat and suit is labeled as Latham (Figure 1). Densmore, while wearing a suit, bowtie and bowler hat, is still represented with feminine, thin, arched eyebrows, and her curly hair is either piled up under her hat or cut short, which would have been rather unusual for the time. Latham’s hair is braided and her modest dress covers her up to her neck; both images suggest a respectability that would soon be uncommon in representations of such women.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Chauncey, 1983, pp. 88-89.

<sup>105</sup> On the important of respectability politics for African Americans at the turn of the century and concern over nontraditional sexualities, see: Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s*



**Figure 1: Image from "Queer Love Affair," *The Wichita Tribune*, 1898.**

Indeed, several years prior to this article, an incident occurred that initiated the modern conception of “the lesbian” as a violent figure: the high profile Memphis murder trial of Alice Mitchell, a white woman who killed Freda Ward, the woman she loved, after Ward left Mitchell to marry a man. Several alleged “copy cat” murders occurred in the wake of the Mitchell trial, one of which involved African American women, which will be examined later in this chapter. As historian Lisa Duggan notes, almost all of the newspaper stories about female same-sex desire in the 1890s recounted narratives that resulted in the death of at least one woman, making the story of Densmore and Latham

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*Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993; Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the 20th Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996; Mattie Udora Richardson, “No More Secrets, No More Lies: African American History and Compulsory Heterosexuality,” *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2003, p. 65.

notable for not fitting into this theme.<sup>106</sup> As the cultural narratives of death surrounding women who desired women represented such relationships as impossible to sustain, this 1898 story is exceptional in that it does not foreclose the possibility that two women could enact a longstanding romance.

I begin with this story of racial and sexual ambiguity to highlight one of the central methodologies of this project. The scarcity of archival sources on African American women who loved women prior to the modern gay liberation movement and the rise of black feminism requires creative interpretations that cannot always center the women themselves as the primary historical agents. Instead, we are left with the discourses spoken about and around them by male observers, particularly journalists and doctors. These constitute a critical mass of texts that offer scholars the opportunity to decode ideologies of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. While such sources do not always shed light on the lived experiences or include the voices of the women they discuss, they do help us elucidate larger cultural beliefs and changing values in the United States during an era when sex and sexuality entered into public discourse more frequently.<sup>107</sup> The story of Densmore and Latham may not be one about *African American* women who loved women, but the appearance of the

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<sup>106</sup> Lisa Duggan, "The Trials of Alice Mitchell: Sensationalism, Sexology, and the Lesbian Subject in Turn-of-the-Century America," *Signs*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Summer 1993, p. 808.

<sup>107</sup> On changing mores of American sexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, see: Sander Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late 19th-Century Art, Medicine and Literature," *Critical Inquiry*, No. 12, Fall 1985, pp. 204-42; Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn of the Century New York*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986; Sharon Ullman, *Sex Seen: The Emergence of Modern Sexuality in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997; David Scobey, "Nymphs and Satyrs: Sex and the Bourgeois Public Sphere in Victorian New York," *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2002, pp. 42-66; Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008; John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012, p. 172. See, for example, "Sex O'Clock in America," *Current Opinion*, No. LV, August 1913, p. 113.

article in a black newspaper offers insights into how changing ideas concerning the innocence of women's relationships were represented in the black press. Scholars must consider this story, despite the possibility that the subjects were white, because of the scarcity of evidence from which histories of such relationships can be construed. This 1898 article contains many of the central tropes of lesbian history from this era that historians have utilized to understand white women in same-sex relationships. This chapter – which is the first historical attempt to create a cohesive narrative of African American women who loved women in the nineteenth century – will ask how black women's relationships shared commonalities and also diverged from these established themes.

From Reconstruction until the early Great Migration, African American women who loved women rarely considered their romantic desires to constitute an integral aspect of their identities, nor did their communities. While friends and family often supported these relationships, this was only the case if the couplings did not threaten or interrupt the women's eventual marriage to men.<sup>108</sup> Unlike white women, particularly the economically privileged women that have been analyzed regarding “romantic friendships,” racial and class oppression predominantly shaped and conscripted the lives of African American women during this era, which did not exclude the possibility of same-sex behavior but also did not encourage it either, particularly in regards to women

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<sup>108</sup> As Isabel Wilkerson has argued that the Great Migration continued for much of the twentieth century, I specific “the early Great Migration” when referring to the early-twentieth century. See Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. New York: Random House, 2010, p. 9.

being able to create a home together.<sup>109</sup> The rise of sexology beginning in the 1870s eventually led to increased discourse on the pathologization of such desires, and further conflated the bodies and sexuality of all black women with those of lesbians and criminals. However, even by the turn-of-the-century, as the article on Densmore and Latham suggests, seemingly contradictory understandings ranging from the innocence of romantic friendships to the deviance of perversion existed side by side. As the ideology of respectability was utilized as a central strategy for racial uplift during the rise of Jim Crow, newspaper and court accounts of murders associated with white and black women who loved women further distanced such behaviors from the black community. At the same time, club women such as Alice Dunbar-Nelson took part in romantic friendships and same-sex relationships while understanding the strategic significance of deploying respectability, despite their engagement with behavior that was now considered deviant or suspect. Indeed, for some middle-class black club women, same-sex behavior and respectability were not irreconcilable.

Lesbian history as a subfield of historical study has been pioneered and dominated by white women who have tended to focus on the experiences of women outside of and autonomous of the nuclear family, but this approach is not as productive for the study of women of color who love women, and especially for African American women in the modern post-slavery era. Beginning during Reconstruction, the focus for most black women was on rebuilding families: finding formerly separated kin, finally attaining legal marriage, and having the freedom to reproduce with one's chosen partner.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> N'Tanya R. Lee, "African Americans," *Lesbian Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia*, Bonnie Zimmerman, ed. New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 12.

<sup>110</sup> Leslie Ann Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997, p. 243 citing Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in*

Compounded with the emergence of sexology, which was influenced by the “scientific racism” of eugenics and anthropology that pathologized black women’s sexuality, this did not create a climate in which same-sex desire and behavior could be outspokenly embraced or supported by African American women and their communities. Indeed, white medical experts marked black women’s heterosexuality as hypersexual at this time.

While it is problematic to force evidence concerning African American women’s same-sex relationships into rubrics created without them in mind, as is generally the case with the established tropes of lesbian history, similar themes – albeit with less available amounts of evidence – can be found among both white and black women in the late-nineteenth century. One exception to this was “passing women,” which was a category that was much less attractive to African American women than white women during this era, as masquerading as a black man – for economic reasons, mobility reasons, or romantic reasons – was much more dangerous than for a white woman to pass as a white man. In addition to romantic friendships, the new discourse of the science of “sexology,” passing women, and lesbian love murders, same-sex desire between women during this time was also well-documented in prison and reformatory settings, where this type of behavior has often been referred to as “institutional homosexuality.” For working-class women, these locales were an exceptional arena in which interracial relationships were

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*Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*. New York: Vintage Books, 1977, p. 284; Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after The Civil War*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 37; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*. New York: Basic Books, 2010 (1985), p. 58; Heather Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

documented and described in multiple settings over several decades. I argue that the *interracial* aspect, more than the homosexual aspect, of such behavior is what led to the documentation of these relationships, which shocked and confounded male and female authorities in institutions more so than *intra-racial* same-sex relationships, which were rarely noted. These central themes will now be examined to offer context for the proceeding chapters, which focus on the early-twentieth century. I hope to begin what will become a larger discussion on African American women-loving women among historians and other scholars.

### **Romantic Friendships**

The affectionate, long-lasting relationship between Densmore and Latham serves as an example of the phenomenon of romantic friendships, which flourished in the nineteenth century and have been examined at length in the U.S. context by historians Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Lillian Faderman.<sup>111</sup> These intimate and emotional fellowships between young women have generally been documented through diaries and letters, allowing historians to access the thoughts of their subjects. Romantic friendships usually occurred between young middle-class women. Interestingly, such arrangements were not viewed as threatening to parents or community. They were generally viewed as

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<sup>111</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Autumn, 1975; Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*. New York: William Morrow and Co., 1981; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985; Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.

“good practice” for the heterosexual marriages they would make in the future.<sup>112</sup> The timing of the 1898 Densmore-Latham relationships is late for this phenomenon, which flourished between the eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, before the rise of sexology in the late-nineteenth century began to pathologize them, reframing them as overtly sexual and suspect.<sup>113</sup>

This is why Carroll Smith-Rosenberg does not link romantic friendships to lesbian history, but argues instead that they accurately represented an emotional landscape in the nineteenth century where unmarried men and women grew up in separate, homosocial spheres.<sup>114</sup> Indeed, in an era in which modern homosexual identities had not yet cohered, women were encouraged to nurture intimate and emotional relationships with other women, and since there was little concern that such ties were deviant, they were allowed to flourish unabated. Both Smith-Rosenberg and Lillian Faderman, who have analyzed romantic friendships between white women, argue that, while passionate, they were not “sexual” in the modern sense. Still, Faderman insists, romantic friendships were “love relationships in every sense except genital.”<sup>115</sup>

This is understandable since Victorian women often internalized the commonly held view that proper ladies were devoid of sexual passion.<sup>116</sup> As Smith-Rosenberg writes,

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<sup>112</sup> In 1890, close to seven percent of American black and white women had not married by age thirty-five. See *U.S. Decennial Census (1890-2000)*; American Community Survey (2010). See Smith-Rosenberg, 1975, p. 9.

<sup>113</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991, pp. 48-54.

<sup>114</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, 1975, pp. 1-2.

<sup>115</sup> Faderman, 1981, p. 16.

<sup>116</sup> The cultural notion that Victorian women were not sexually passionate is disputed by scholars such as Karen Lystra, as well as Michel Foucault who put forth the “repression theory” to critique the simplistic trajectory from Victorian repression to twentieth century liberation. See Michel Foucault, *The History of*

the essential question is not whether these women had genital contact and can therefore be defined as heterosexual or homosexual. The twentieth century tendency to view human love and sexuality within a dichotomized universe of deviancy and normality, genitality and platonic love, is alien to the emotions and attitudes of the nineteenth century and fundamentally distorts the nature of these women's emotional interactions.<sup>117</sup>

Lesbian historians have nonetheless brought romantic friendships into the discussion of nineteenth-century same-sex love. There are several reasons for this inclusive approach. Martha Vicinus and Leila Rupp, for example, do not assume that such relationships were free of intimate sexual contact, as Smith-Rosenberg and Faderman do. Instead they suggest that these relationships can be placed on what they term a "lesbian continuum" despite their difference from women's relationships that are recognized as queer today.<sup>118</sup> Historians interested in the topic often feel the need to seek "proof" of genital-based contact before confidently labeling their subjects as queer, which is after all a more expansive notion of what constitutes sex and intimacy than existed in past eras. Indeed, more careful terminology is still needed.

Among nineteenth-century African American women, there is only one known correspondence documenting a romantic friendship. Historian Karen Hansen found a remarkable set of letters at the Connecticut Historical Society between two free black

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*Sexuality, Vol. 1.* New York: Pantheon, 1978, and Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men and Romantic Love in Nineteenth Century America.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

<sup>117</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, 1975, p. 8.

<sup>118</sup> Martha Vicinus, "Lesbian History: All Theory and No Facts or All Facts and No Theory?" *Radical History Review*. No. 60, Fall 1994, p. 65; Adrienne Rich put forth the notion of a "lesbian continuum" as a spectrum of women-centered behavior, with the love between mothers, daughters and female friends on one end and overt same-sex genital-based sexuality on the other end. See Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs*, Vol. 5, No. 4, Summer 1980, p. 631-660.

women hailing from Hartford, Connecticut in the 1850s and 1860s.<sup>119</sup> Addie Brown, a working-class domestic, wrote quite often to her dear middle-class friend, Rebecca Primus. When the latter became a teacher, she left Hartford for Maryland to teach newly freed African Americans in the aftermath of the Civil War. Family and friends of both women were aware of their relationship and respected it, yet they also encouraged their relationships with men. Eventually Brown and Primus both married men, yet Brown made it clear to her friend that she would have preferred to marry Primus, had it been possible. One set of letters is not sufficient for making generalizations, but the correspondence makes it clear that romantic friendships were not the sole province of middle-class white women in the nineteenth century.

Indeed, the letters, analyzed by Hansen and published by scholar Farrah Jasmine Griffin, are exceptional in several ways.<sup>120</sup> First, they expand our limited archive of ordinary free black women in the North, because most of the available documents about black women's lives are concentrated among female "race leaders."<sup>121</sup> Second, Hansen does not use the term "romantic friendship." Rather, she argues the "passion between Addie and Rebecca that suffuses the letters" was more than a "romantic outpouring of sentiment," which leads her to define their relationship as self-consciously sexual and therefore an "erotic friendship." Despite no references to genital contact, "the friendship

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<sup>119</sup> See Karen V. Hansen, "No Kisses Is Like Youres': An Erotic Friendship Between Two African-American Women During the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Gender and History*, Vol. 7, No. 2, August 1995, pp. 153-182.

<sup>120</sup> See Farah Jasmine Griffin, ed., *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends: Letters from Rebecca Primus of Royal Oak, Maryland, and Addie Brown of Hartford, Connecticut, 1854-1868*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.

<sup>121</sup> Hansen, p 178-79.

included passion, kisses,” and what Hansen labels “bosom sex.”<sup>122</sup> Most of the letters are from Brown to Primus, so the documentation is one-sided. But Brown often refers to Primus’ questions and comments in prior letters, allowing the reader to access the thoughts of both women.<sup>123</sup>

For example, at the beginning of their correspondence, Brown writes to Primus,

You are the first girl that I ever *love* so and you are the *last* one. Dear Rebecca, do not say anything against me *loving* you so, for I mean just what I say. O Rebecca, it seem I can see you now, casting those loving eyes at me. If you was a man, what would things come to? They would after come to something very quick. What do you think the matter? Don’t laugh at me. I not exactly crazy yet [*italics in original*].<sup>124</sup>

This passage, written in 1859, offers insight into the ways that Brown and her contemporaries conceived of same-sex love. Her letter both predates the sexological work to come that would define women who loved women as “inverts” and also deemed such women pathological and “crazy.” Throughout her letters, Brown made such claims of love for Primus, which situate her as actively desiring and pursuing her friend, yet here she wonders how things might be different if Primus “was a man.” While it is also possible that they were not sexually active and Primus believed they would have to be a male-female couple in order to “consummate” their relationship, such a reading denies the sexual agency of nineteenth-century women. As Martha Vicinus notes in a critique of the work of Lillian Faderman and Carol Smith-Rosenberg, who assume romantic friendships were most likely not of a sexual nature, this notion reinforces the idea that “until middle-

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid, p. 183.

<sup>123</sup> The abundance of letters from Addie Brown is also important because as a working-class woman she refutes Lillian Faderman’s argument that romantic friendships were generally the province of middle and upper class women, since less privileged women did not generally have the leisure time and privacy to pursue such liaisons. See Faderman, 1991, p. 38.

<sup>124</sup> Addie Brown to Rebecca Primus, August 30, 1859, republished in Farah Jasmine Griffin, 1999.

class women had a sexual vocabulary, their relationships were asexual or guiltily furtive.”<sup>125</sup>

Near the end of their correspondence, in 1867, Addie Brown was working as a cook at Miss Porter’s, an elite school for white girls in Connecticut. Brown wrote to Primus, “The girls are very friendly towards me. I am either in they room or they in mine every night often and sometime just one of them wants to sleep with me. Perhaps I will give my consent some of these nights. I am not very fond of White I can assure you.”<sup>126</sup> While sharing beds was a common custom in the nineteenth century that did not imply sexual activity, Primus nonetheless inquired about this situation.<sup>127</sup> Throughout their correspondence it appears Brown often tried to stir up feelings of envy in Primus during their time apart from each other.<sup>128</sup> Brown responded, “if you think that is my bosom that captivated the girl that made her want to sleep with me she got sadly disappointed enjoying it for I had my back towards her all night and my night dress was button up so she could not get to my bosom. I shall try to keep you favorite one always for you. Should in my excitement forget you will pardon me *I know*.”<sup>129</sup> While Karen Hansen argues this passage reveals that “sleeping with a woman involved providing access to her breasts,” it is not clear here whether or not Brown’s co-worker actively tried to touch her breasts, or if that was why she had wanted to share a bed with her.<sup>130</sup> What it does demonstrate is that this was an activity Brown and Primus took part in together – and

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<sup>125</sup> Martha Vicinus, “Lesbian History: All Theory and No Facts or All Facts and No Theory?” *Radical History Review*. No. 60, Fall 1994, p. 65.

<sup>126</sup> Letter from Addie Brown to Rebecca Primus, October 27, 1867, in Griffin, p. 226.

<sup>127</sup> Faderman, 1991, p. 1.

<sup>128</sup> Hansen, p. 185.

<sup>129</sup> Letter from Addie Brown to Rebecca Primus, November 17, 1867, in Hansen, p. 186.

<sup>130</sup> Hansen, p. 186.

perhaps quite often if Primus had a “favorite.” This brief passage alone reveals more erotic activity than the many letters and diaries analyzed by Smith-Rosenberg and Faderman.

It would be highly inaccurate to assume that one set of letters signified inherent differences between the sexual nature of black and white women’s romantic friendships. After all, these letters instead suggest that sexual intimacy may have infused relationships between women across race, as the example of the young white women at Miss Porter’s demonstrate in their attention to Brown. Instead, they reveal behaviors that white and black working-class women enjoyed and even wrote about, which middle-class women may have found improper to discuss in letters. However, other recent studies of white women and romantic friendships, such as those by Martha Vicinus and Sharon Marcus, leave “no doubt about the erotic and sexual aspects of at least some of these relationships.”<sup>131</sup> Thus, the correspondence of Primus and Brown serves as an important example that there could be an erotic component of such relationships between African American women as well, yet this did not necessarily preclude support from family and community.

Another important contribution of this collection of letters between Primus and Brown is the breadth of intelligence and thirst for knowledge revealed by a working-class African American woman. Although Addie Brown had little formal education, she read voraciously. Her letters reveal a complex, intelligent and highly literate, self-taught

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<sup>131</sup> Leila Rupp, *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love between Women*. New York: New York University Press, 2009, p. 4; See Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004; Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

woman who had little choice but to spend her life in domestic service for want of other options.<sup>132</sup> She wrote derisively of a female guest who “don’t care for *books*,” noting in a letter to Primus that the woman “has been here nearly two weeks...and I only seen a book in her hand but once.”<sup>133</sup> She ended one 1866 letter to Primus by noting, “Oh I am reading the *Life of Frederick Douglas* I never had the pleasure before” and in another letter to her “beloved sister” she summarized speeches by Henry Ward Beecher she had been reading.<sup>134</sup> Throughout her years of correspondence with Primus, Brown mentioned articles of note that she read in white and black newspapers, which further displayed her interest in current events and local and national culture.<sup>135</sup>

Primus, whose father was a grocery clerk and mother was a dressmaker, had a high school education and became a highly respected teacher who chose to leave the familiarity of her family and hometown to help educate newly freed southern African Americans in Maryland.<sup>136</sup> As Jasmine Farrah Griffin has argued, until recently, the accomplishments of black women during Reconstruction have generally been ignored; even W.E.B. DuBois failed to note the work of black female teachers such as Primus.<sup>137</sup> She was one of many African American northern women who went south to teach freed people, and saw this as a political act to help educated a disenfranchised population that

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<sup>132</sup> Domestic work was the most common occupation for free black women in the North in the 1850s and 1860s. Judith E. Harper, *Women During the Civil War*. New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 6.

<sup>133</sup> Letter from Addie Brown to Rebecca Primus, January 7, 1866 in Griffin, pp. 104-105.

<sup>134</sup> Letter from Addie Brown to Rebecca Primus, May 29, 1866 in Griffin, p. 126; Letter from Addie Brown to Rebecca Primus, October 16, 1866 in Griffin, p. 140.

<sup>135</sup> Griffin, p. 13.

<sup>136</sup> Hansen, pp. 180-181.

<sup>137</sup> Griffin, p 10. Scholarship on black women and work during Reconstruction includes: Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*. New York: Basic Books, 2010 (1985); Hunter, 1997; Jacqueline Jones Royster, *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000; Jacqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004.

had not had regular access to formal teaching instruction.<sup>138</sup> The Primus home also served as a boarding house and support system for southern African Americans, especially young women, in the years directly after the Civil War. Both Brown and Primus wrote of women living in the Primus household at the time, demonstrating a familial and collective concern for the larger black community during a time of extreme transition for former bondspeople.<sup>139</sup> Thus, a young middle-class black woman took part in an “erotic friendship” while redoubling her commitment to racial uplift through her educational and literacy work. The black middle class of the mid-nineteenth century, similarly to the white middle class, placed emphasis on education, Protestant work ethic, and a “strict adherence to a code of respectability.”<sup>140</sup> Further, Primus had grown up during the era of “the cult of true womanhood” in which morality and piety were stressed for middle-class women.<sup>141</sup> While romantic friendships have been generally associated with women who were confined to the domestic sphere and had an abundance of leisure time, both Brown and Primus lived busy lives: the former had to constantly work to support herself and the latter was committed to improving the quality of life for southern African Americans.

The individual racial justice work taken on by teachers such as Rebecca Primus in the Reconstruction era became more structured in the late-nineteenth century through the creation of formal organizations, which coalesced into the black club women’s movement led by middle-class teachers and activists such as Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin and Mary

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<sup>138</sup> Griffin, p. 99.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, p. 18.

<sup>140</sup> Carla L. Peterson, *Black Gotham: A Family History of African Americans in Nineteenth-Century New York City*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011, p. 7.

<sup>141</sup> Christina Simmons, “‘Modern Marriage’ for African Americans, 1920-1940” *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 2000, p. 275; Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” Originally printed in *American Quarterly*, reprinted in Lucy Maddox, *Locating American Studies*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999, pp. 43-70.

Church Terrell.<sup>142</sup> The 1890s in particular became known as “the women’s era,” as the rise of Jim Crow laws and the increase of racial violence further galvanized club women, spurred on by the fight against lynching led by journalist and activist Ida B. Wells.<sup>143</sup> Disparate local clubs connected under the National Alliance of Colored Women which formed in 1896, with the motto, “Lifting As We Climb” which signified club women’s commitment to improving not only their own lives and opportunities but also those of the greater black community.<sup>144</sup>

The letters of writer and activist Alice Dunbar-Nelson from the turn-of-the-century reveal that same-sex liaisons could be a part of this homosocial milieu of club women. In her personal papers, Dunbar-Nelson documents several affairs with women, which occurred between and during her three marriages to men. Her first husband was the well-known writer Paul Laurence Dunbar, from whom she separated in 1902 for reasons that her biographer Gloria T. Hull suggests might have been related to her love of women.<sup>145</sup> Dunbar-Nelson moved to Delaware after the separation to teach at a school for African American students, where she entered into an intense relationship with the school’s principal, Edwina Kruse. One letter from Dunbar-Nelson to Kruse in 1907

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<sup>142</sup> Maude T. Jenkins, *The History of the Black Women’s Club Movement in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984; Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998; Martha Jones, *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African-American Public Culture, 1830-1900*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

<sup>143</sup> Gail Bederman, “Civilization, the Decline of Middle Class Manliness, and Ida B. Wells’ Antilynching Campaign,” *Radical History Review*, Winter 1992, pp. 5-30; Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996; Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn’t for the Women: Black Women’s Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community*. New York: Orbis Books, 2000, p. 20.

<sup>144</sup> Wilson Jeremiah Moses, “Domestic Feminism, Conservatism, Sex Roles, and Black Women’s Clubs,” *Black Women in American History, Vol. 3*. Darlene Clark Hine, ed. Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1990, p. 175; Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1999 p. 54.

<sup>145</sup> Gloria T. Hull, *Color, Sex and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, p. 96.

exclaimed, "I want you to know dear, that every thought of my life is for you, every throb of my heart is yours and yours *alone*. I just can not ever let any one else have you."<sup>146</sup> Gloria Hull sees Dunbar-Nelson's letters as displaying "the ardency that Carroll Smith-Rosenberg discovered was common in the homosocial 'female world of love and ritual' during the nineteenth century" and further notes that, "given the circumstances and Dunbar-Nelson's later documented lesbian friendships, they may bespeak more."<sup>147</sup> Here, Hull refers to Smith-Rosenberg's insistence that such relationships were generally not sexual, but Dunbar-Nelson was known to take part in same-sex relationships and thus likely took part in liaisons that were indeed explicitly sexual.

African American club women utilized the politics of respectability to help the cause of racial justice by adhering to Victorian standards of gender and sexuality, in hopes that the full humanity of black women would be acknowledged.<sup>148</sup> In one notorious 1895 example that added fuel to the fire of their organizing, a white editor referred to all black women as "thieves" and "prostitutes," to which the National Association of Club Women responded vigorously.<sup>149</sup> However, while black middle-class women sought to position themselves as moral exemplars primarily as wives and mothers, the agitation for women's rights and suffrage, in which many club women were involved, sought to expand women's roles in the public sphere.<sup>150</sup> While these divergent aims appear at odds,

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<sup>146</sup> Personal correspondence from Alice Dunbar to Edwina Kruse, 1907, cited in Hull, p. 63.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs*, No. 17, Vol. 2, Winter, 1992, pp. 271-272.

<sup>149</sup> Simmons, 2009, p. 22.

<sup>150</sup> Louise Newman, *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Modern Feminism 1870-1920*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1999.

one study of over a hundred black club women born in the mid-to-late nineteenth century found that, while three-quarters of the women were married, only one-quarter of them had children.<sup>151</sup> Thus, despite their strategic efforts to uphold normative gender roles, these women still tended to focus their energies on social reform and careers above traditional notions of motherhood. An article in an 1894 issue of *The Women's Era*, a Boston publication by and for African American women, actually emphasized this point by claiming that, "not all women" were intended to be mothers. "Some of us have not the temperament for family life," the article stated. "Clubs will make women think seriously of their future lives, and not make girls think their only alternative is to marry."<sup>152</sup> The club network served not only black women's social and political activism, but also in some cases enabled same-sex relationships.

The growing public discourse on sexuality was deemed a threat to the club women's movement by some, because open discussions of black women's sexuality did not bespeak the "dissemblance" that many scholars argue black women strategically employed to counter dominant white notions of their alleged pathological hypersexuality.<sup>153</sup> Hazel Carby notes that, "the link between black women and illicit sexuality during the antebellum years had powerful ideological consequences for the next hundred and fifty years."<sup>154</sup> Well into the post-slavery era there was still a mentality on

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<sup>151</sup> Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. New York: William Morrow, 1996, p. 108.

<sup>152</sup> Cited in Giddings, p. 108.

<sup>153</sup> Gray White, pp. 128-129; Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts of the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs*, no. 14, Summer 1989, pp. 912-920.

<sup>154</sup> Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New York Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 39.

the part of whites that black women could not be raped because they were inherently licentious, immoral, and sexually available to white as well as black men.<sup>155</sup> Darlene Clark Hine argues that this historical legacy greatly contributed to this notion of “dissemblance,” under which “the behaviors and attitudes of black women...created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors.”<sup>156</sup> Similarly, black women in the homosocial space of the club networks took part in same-sex flirtations and liaisons in this women-centered world, while at the same time aligning themselves with ideals of morality and self-dignity and not speaking publicly of their same-sex desires, which many also hid because they were married.<sup>157</sup> This suggests that women such as Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Edwina Kruse well understood the strategic significance of deploying respectability, despite their engagement with behavior that was now considered deviant or suspect. Indeed, for some middle-class black club women, same-sex behavior and respectability were not irreconcilable.

Prior to the Great Migration, African American women took part in local and long distance romantic and erotic relationships with other women, yet there are very few sources to construct these histories. The examples of Primus and Brown and Dunbar-Nelson and Kruse offer evidence of two such relationships. Hopefully, future research will eventually reveal more such stories – especially in the South, where the majority of

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<sup>155</sup> Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after The Civil War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 34.

<sup>156</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” *Signs*, Vol. 14, No. 4, Summer, 1989, p. 912.

<sup>157</sup> White elite women reformers and educators also took part in same-sex relationships at the turn-of the century, see Leila Rupp, “Imagine My Surprise: Women’s Relationships in Historical Perspective,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies*. Vol. 5, No. 3 (Autumn, 1980), pp. 61-70; Faderman, 1991, p. 13.

black women lived at this time. Anecdotal evidence suggests such relationships existed; activist Francis Ellen Harper wrote about black southern women who worked on and managed farms with other women. An 1878 article penned by her mentions the ten-year partnership of “Mrs. Jane Brown and Mrs. Halsey,” who saved considerable money and lived independently by leasing “nine acres and a horse” and cultivating “the land all that time, just...as men would have done.”<sup>158</sup> Such anecdotes help us speculate about how southern black women's labor regimes and novel work opportunities created interesting avenues to romantic relationships.<sup>159</sup>

### **Passing Women**

Another way women lived independently in the nineteenth and early-twentieth century was through claiming a male identity. This behavior has been attributed to working-class women more than middle-class women, yet documentation in the case of African American women is rare. While the category of “romantic friendships” inherently suggests intimacy between women, “passing women” are most often linked to greater access to economic opportunities, although in some cases women also passed in order to gain access to other women. A few scholars argue that some passing women felt more comfortable expressing a masculine gender identity, and might best be considered proto-transgender, since the medical concept of transsexuality did not emerge until the early-

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<sup>158</sup> Frances Ellen Harper, “Colored Women of America,” *Englishwoman’s Review*, Jan. 15, 1878, p. 12, cited in Giddings, pp. 71-72.

<sup>159</sup> I am indebted to my colleague and writing partner, Jennifer Jones, for this analysis.

twentieth century.<sup>160</sup> For example, Jonathan Ned Katz has extensively documented passing women, many of whom married women while living as men; often their former female identities were not discovered until their death. In some cases, wives claimed they were not aware of their husband's anatomy until they died.<sup>161</sup>

There are very few known cases of African American passing women in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, however. One likely reason is that the act of masquerading as a black man during the rise of Jim Crow, when thousands of lynchings took place in the South and racial violence was increasing in the urban North, held little appeal for black women.<sup>162</sup> Indeed, being a black man brought its own dangers, especially if one became too successful economically and thus was deemed a threat to white men.<sup>163</sup> One could also not be too friendly to white women. Even the term “passing women” – which signifies a masquerade of gender, not of race – suggests that the category was created to describe white women. While there are some known cases of African American women who passed, none of them reveal a motive of desiring relationships with women. The terminology of “passing women” was created by scholars because of archival evidence documenting numbers of white women who masqueraded as men, and the term does not align with the lived experiences of black women, particularly those who sought to enter relationships with women. Nonetheless, I have

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<sup>160</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 5.

<sup>161</sup> Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* New York: Meridian Books, 1976. Also see: San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project, “She Even Chewed Tobacco,” *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey, eds. New York: Basic Books, 1989.

<sup>162</sup> Lynchings occurred mainly in the rural South post-Civil War and declined after 1910 while urban racial violence increased rapidly in the North after 1900. See Susan Ozlak, “The Political Context of Competition: Lynching and Urban Racial Violence, 1882-1914,” *Social Forces*, Vol. 69, No. 2, 1990, p. 396.

<sup>163</sup> Gail Bederman, p. 28.

found quite a few accounts of black women passing as men in white newspapers, which may help us better understand the charges of violence and criminality amongst black women who loved women that we will soon explore at length.

In 1884, several New York City-area newspapers wrote about a married, eighteen year old African American woman named Sarah Thompson who stole four hundred dollars from her place of work and then disguised herself as a man to avoid being found by the police. “Curiosity was excited” when “a good-looking young colored woman who wore a suit of boy’s clothes” was arrested for stealing from her employer on the Bowery, where she was “a maid-of-all-work.”<sup>164</sup> New York police “scoured the negro quarters” to eventually find her in Plainfield, New Jersey, “disguised as a man, and living with another colored woman as her husband.”<sup>165</sup> Her boss reported that she had stolen the money from under his wife’s mattress, and he informed the police of a noticeable scar Thompson had on her face. When she was arrested she said to one of the detectives, “You never would have caught me if I could have got whiskers to cover up that scar.”<sup>166</sup> In this case, Thompson’s passing as a man merely helped her resist arrest after committing a crime, although the fact that she was “living with another colored woman as her husband” is a provocative detail, as is her access to her boss’s wife’s bed. However, as this case demonstrates, women passed as men for various reasons not always connected to same-sex desire. In this example, the married Thompson apparently passed as a man and pretended to be living with a wife only in order to avoid the police.

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<sup>164</sup> “A Woman in Male Attire,” *New York Daily Graphic*, January 29, 1884, p. 662.

<sup>165</sup> “She Put on Pants,” *The Trenton Times*, January 29, 1884, p. 2.

<sup>166</sup> “A Woman in Male Attire,” *New York Daily Graphic*, January 29, 1884, p. 662.

In 1905, Henrietta Alexander, who had passed for five years as Henry Alexander, was arrested for trespassing along with an African American man after the two of them were found riding in a boxcar on the Santa Fe railroad. Alexander was first placed in the men's prison, and was only later discovered to be female in court, after which "she was immediately taken to the female apartment of the prison where women's clothing were supplied her."<sup>167</sup> When asked why she had been living as a man, Alexander replied that she had been passing as a man so "that she could get men's work and better support herself." Eighteen years old and originally from Texas, she had "spent the past few years roaming the country, disguised as a man working with railroad gangs and in oil mills."<sup>168</sup> While historically, African American women had also performed "men's work" in the fields as well as domestic work in the home, such forms of hard manual labor were generally reserved for men.<sup>169</sup> Indeed, at the turn of the century, over ninety percent of African American women still worked as domestic servants.<sup>170</sup> The story of Henrietta Alexander suggests that since the hard labor she was able to access as a young black man was more lucrative than the work she could secure as a black woman, the harm that could potentially affect her when disguised as a black man was worth the tradeoff to better support herself financially.

Another case reveals that not only working-class black women were interested in passing as men. In 1909, a "bright young negro woman" named Maud Allen who had

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<sup>167</sup> "Masqueraded as a Man Five Years: Sex of Negress in Men's Clothing Determined in Corporation Court This Morning," *Fort Worth Telegram*, March 30, 1905.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Partial Justice: Women in State Prisons, 1800-1935*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990, p. 99; Brown, 1996.

<sup>170</sup> Hunter, p. 111.

passed as a man for eight years while teaching in Baltimore public schools was discovered and arrested for wearing men's clothing. When asked why she had passed as a man, she replied, "because she thought it gave her a better chance to make progress in the world."<sup>171</sup> The journalist noted, "that her theories may have been correct." He attested that as "a girl in her teens" she was at "the head of her class in a boys' high school," and later as "a young woman in trousers" she worked as "a teacher in the public schools of Baltimore."<sup>172</sup> This case is particularly interesting because teaching was a common occupation of middle-class African American women at this time. The majority of black teachers were young women, and they were often paid so poorly that, according to Jacqueline Jones, many black men left the profession altogether, as in some cases teaching paid even less than working in domestic service, despite the respectability and upward mobility the field represented.<sup>173</sup> Allen therefore must have earned more money as a male teacher, but the fact that she began to pass as a male while still in high school is curious, as is the detail given in the article that "she shaved her head and grew a beard."<sup>174</sup> No further information is given about her life or family so readers can only speculate as to why Allen chose to live as a man, but her entry into a female-dominated profession and her decision (and ability) to grow a beard suggest that more than mere economic opportunities may have been at play; perhaps she was more comfortable living as a man giving the circumscribed gender norms of the era.

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<sup>171</sup> "Negress In Trousers Found She Could Get Along Better in the World," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, April 26, 1909, p. 8.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, p. 123-4.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

Although in 1898 Adele Densmore was “dissuaded” from going to war by “her imorata,” Ruth Latham, quite a few women served in American military efforts, from the Revolutionary War to the Civil War.<sup>175</sup> Densmore was said to bear not “the slightest resemblance to a man” despite her proclivity for wearing men’s clothing, thus it seems unlikely that she would have been able to pass as a male soldier while fighting in the Spanish-American War.<sup>176</sup> The author of the newspaper article suggested that Densmore expressed interest in becoming a soldier only in order to impress Latham with “the masculine bravery in her heart.” However, it was Densmore’s final decision not to enlist that afforded the article the opportunity to end with the “sweethearts” “making up,” which disturbed the usual newspaper narrative at this time that described death between women lovers. One of the article’s multiple headlines, “One Tried to Enlist in the U.S. Army But Is Exposed in Time to Prevent it – A Case of Perverted Affection” appears to further associate Densmore’s attempts to garner male privilege via the army with her pathology, along with her love of Latham.<sup>177</sup> Thus, both her love object and desire for military service belonged to the province of men, and the article shamed Densmore’s for breaching traditional gender codes.

The story of Adele Densmore is the only known potential example of an African American woman who loved women attempting to pass as a man, and yet, as noted earlier, it is not definitive that Densmore herself was indeed African American. The

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<sup>175</sup> Alfred F. Young, *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier*. New York: Vintage Books, 2005.

<sup>176</sup> “Queer Love Affair,” *Wichita Tribune*, September 17, 1898, p. 2.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

dearth of sources on black women passing as men in Reconstruction and later serves to bolster the argument that passing as a black man was not a popular strategic move for black women at this time. While white women passed as white men more often, usually to enter different lines of work but also to enter relationships with women, the lack of work opportunities for black men, compounded by growing racial tensions and violence in the post-slavery era, reveals divergent paths for black and white women. Passing as a man was more likely to be a temporary strategy used to hide one's identity or to take advantage of male privileges, but in general this was not a common technique utilized by black women who loved women – or any black women – in the late-nineteenth century.

### Sexology

By the early-twentieth century, reading an article like the Densmore-Latham story which tenderly recounted a romance between two young women would become rare; Victorian sentimentality was eclipsed by the discourse on medical pathology and its link to crime and vice. Though Wichita's *Tribune* article made use of the language of sexual science, it also waxed poetically over the flirtations between Densmore and Latham. While describing the relationship as “a case of perverted affection, as plainly as any case has ever been noted in the medical books,” the author also complimented Densmore on being an “anxious and solicitous lover.”<sup>178</sup> Familiarity with the growing work on sex perversion and sex inversion is taken for granted here by the author, but such perversions were rarely noted in the black press at this time. A New Orleans black newspaper, the

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

*Weekly Pelican*, for example, published an article about pioneering Austro-German sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing's work in 1887. However, sexology was not discussed regularly in the black press until the 1910s.<sup>179</sup>

Historians have not reached consensus on the influence of medicalization on the emergence of queer identities, but most agree that despite the appearance of sexological discourse in the popular press and other sources, few came to terms with their same-sex desires by reading Richard von Krafft-Ebing or Havelock Ellis.<sup>180</sup> Lillian Faderman has argued that the rise of sexology in the late-nineteenth century led to the "morbidity" of women's relationships: once deemed innocent, such relationships then took on a deviant, pathological hue and became something to be ashamed of or to avoid.<sup>181</sup> George Chauncey, however, argues that it is important not to overemphasize the influence of sexologists in the creation of queer identity categories and their pathologization.<sup>182</sup> While the leading sexologists of the late-nineteenth century were European men, American doctors also began to research and write about sex inversion by the end of the century, yet African American women were rarely discussed in their texts. However, as the history of sexology was heavily impacted by anthropology, it is possible to trace a long lineage that has placed the bodies of women of the African diaspora under the lens, so to speak, which both distances and connects them to the sexological study of female sex inverts.

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<sup>179</sup> "Freaks of the Insane," *Weekly Pelican* (New Orleans), August 6, 1887, p. 4.

<sup>180</sup> Chauncey, 1983; Rita Felski, "Introduction," *Sexology and Culture: Labeling Bodies and Desire*. Laura Doan and Lucy Bland, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 5; Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine and Homosexuality in Modern Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1999.

<sup>181</sup> Lillian Faderman, "The Morbidity of Love between Woman by 19th-century Sexologists," *Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol. 4, Fall 1978, pp. 73-90.

<sup>182</sup> Chauncey, 1983, p. 87.

Indeed, African women played a highly visible role in early-nineteenth century European scientific studies that embodied what has more recently come to be known as scientific racism; scientists used techniques of comparative anatomy to argue for the civilized superiority of the Anglo race and the primitive inferiority of people of color.<sup>183</sup> Of specific note is the story of Sarah Baartman, a South African woman of Khoisan descent, who was exhibited and displayed as “The Hottentot Venus” in early-nineteenth century European freak shows due to her large posterior and supposedly elongated vaginal lips. When she died of an unknown illness in 1816, George Cuvier, Napoleon’s surgeon general, performed an autopsy on Baartman’s body and her genitals were dissected and placed in a jar, which was placed on view at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris until 1974.<sup>184</sup> Baartman and the black female body she represented became a symbol of “the central icon for sexual difference between the European and the black” according to Sander Gilman.<sup>185</sup> Her “primitive” genitalia were seen as evidence of her “primitive” sexuality and thus used by medical authorities to shore up support for the superiority of the white race.<sup>186</sup>

Julien-Joseph Virey, the French author of *Dictionary of the Medical Sciences* (1819), an influential scientific study that categorized humans by race, summarized the dominant views on black women’s sexuality using Cuvier’s work on Sarah Baartman as

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<sup>183</sup> Londa Schiebinger, *Nature’s Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993; Siobhan Somerville, “Scientific Racism and the Emergence of the Homosexual Body,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1994, pp. 243-66.

<sup>184</sup> Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2005, pp.19-20.

<sup>185</sup> Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 83.

<sup>186</sup> Evelyn M. Hammonds "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*. Janet Price, Margrit Shildrick, eds. New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 95.

his evidence. Virey argued that African women's "voluptuousness" was "developed to a degree of lascivity unknown in our climate, for their sexual organs are much more developed than those of whites."<sup>187</sup> The rise of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution in the following decades further supported this type of analysis, which saw black and white women as inherently different due to their anatomy. Darwin believed that the more highly evolved a race was, the more differentiation would be found between the sexes through the process of natural selection.<sup>188</sup> Thus, the protruding genitalia of African women such as Baartman was deemed further evidence that they belonged to a lower race than Europeans. However, European travelers to southern Africa as far back as the eighteenth century had described the "Hottentot apron" as the hypertrophy of the labia "caused by manipulation of the genitalia and considered beautiful by the Hottentots and Bushmen as well as tribes in Basutoland and Dahomey."<sup>189</sup> While this suggests that the anatomical difference was thus cultural and not biological, it nonetheless still supported the notion of African women's hypersexuality from the perspective of European doctors.

By 1877, the "Hottentot apron" was presented in detail in standard gynecology handbooks in the discussion of errors in development of the female genitalia. The German author of one such manual, Theodor Billroth, linked this malformation with the overdevelopment of the clitoris, which he saw as leading to those "excesses" which "are called 'lesbian love.'" Thus, Sander Gilman claims, "the concupiscence of the black was

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<sup>187</sup> Gilman, p. 85.

<sup>188</sup> Somerville, 1994, p. 255.

<sup>189</sup> Gilman, p. 85.

by then inherently associated with the sexuality of the lesbian.”<sup>190</sup> While in 1877 “lesbian” was still generally an innocuous term that referred to the Greek poet Sappho and her home, the Isle of Lesbos, it is telling that Billroth was German, for Germany was home to Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and physician Karl Westphal, men now considered the pioneers of the gay emancipation movement due to their scholarship.<sup>191</sup> However, their work spoke not of “lesbians” but of “contrary sexual feeling” and it is unclear exactly how “lesbian love” was read at this time. It is possible that Billroth was harkening back to the early modern trope of “the tribade,” a mythical figure whose clitoris was so large she was able to penetrate another woman with it, thus rendering men unnecessary for sexual pleasure.<sup>192</sup> Either way, this association between “lesbian love” and the “Hottentot Venus” demonstrates how male European medical experts conflated the assumed corporeal “excesses” of African women and women who loved women, considering both a type of degeneration from the more highly sex-differentiated Europeans. The ideologies put forth from this body of work would influence popular sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, and other lesser-known American doctors in the decades to come.

Sexologists rose to popularity in tandem with medicine’s professionalization in the last third of the nineteenth century. As norms of gender and sexuality changed under industrialization and urbanization, doctors tried to account for sexual ‘abnormalities’ through the creation of various taxonomies of behaviors, proclivities and fetishes which

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid, p. 89.

Harry Oosterhuis, “Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s ‘Step-Children of Nature’: Psychiatry and the Making of Homosexual Identity,” in *Sexualities in History: A Reader*, Kim M. Phillips and Barry Reay, eds. New York: Routledge, 2001, pp. 271-292.

<sup>192</sup> Katherine Park, “The Rediscovery of the Clitoris: French Medicine and the Tribade, 1570-1620,” *Body in Parts*. David Hillman and Carla Mazzio, Eds. New York: Routledge, 1997; Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2002.

they often documented through detailed case studies of their patients.<sup>193</sup> Before the heterosexual/homosexual binary became ingrained in western culture in the early-twentieth century, the common medical explanation for women who desired women and men who desired men was the theory of “sexual inversion:” such individuals had an “inverted” soul which was primarily responsible for their deviant desires; according to this logic, a woman who loved women felt herself to be a man.<sup>194</sup> Such language is reflected in the 1898 newspaper story on Adele Densmore and Ruth Latham, in which “Miss Densmore plays the part of the man and Miss Latham is the girl she loves.”<sup>195</sup> Inversion did not denote the same phenomenon as homosexuality; sexual inversion referred to varied “cross-gender behavior” of which “homosexual desire was only a logical but indistinct aspect.”<sup>196</sup>

Krafft-Ebing also introduced the theory of degeneration, under which the Victorian sex/ gender system was the pinnacle of civilization, and only primitive societies embraced lust and non-monogamy, same-sex behavior, and sex outside of marriage, which were all degenerative signs of society.<sup>197</sup> The influential British sexologist Havelock Ellis also argued that female same-sex behavior was more likely to occur within the “lower races.” He documented sources that found same-sex practices to be common among women in “Brazil, Bali, Zanzibar, Egypt, French Creole countries, and

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<sup>193</sup> John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, eds., *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983, pp. 100-113; Oosterhuis.

<sup>194</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, p. 2.

<sup>195</sup> “Queer Love Affair,” *Wichita Tribune*, September 17, 1898, p. 2.

<sup>196</sup> Chauncey, 1983, p. 88-89.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

India,” among other non-western locales.<sup>198</sup> Sexologists tended to dwell on the sexual perversions found in “primitive cultures” thus allowing them to develop “an argument for the inevitability and correctness of white supremacy.”<sup>199</sup>

European experts often drew on anthropological descriptions of non-western peoples, but occasionally they turned their gaze on African Americans as well. Ellis noted in the third edition of *Sexual Inversion* that he had “a medical correspondent in the United States” who informed him “that inversion is extremely prevalent among American negroes.” His anonymous correspondent hypothesized, “I believe that 10 per cent of negroes in the United States are sexually inverted,” predating Alfred Kinsey’s later general theory about American male sexuality by almost fifty years.<sup>200</sup> The author conflated sexual perversion and abnormality with a people deemed inherently inferior to whites, thus suggesting that sexual inversion is not a white problem. This further reflected the Darwinian and Victorian ideas that sex differentiation was a sign of civilization, and only primitive societies and groups were plagued by overly sexual women, and further, that their men and women were often indistinguishable from each other, correlating racialized stereotypes about masculinized women of color and feminized men of color.

Sexologists’ earliest medical models considered inversion to be an acquired disease, which a woman could avoid by refraining from improper activity. But by the end

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<sup>198</sup> Havelock Ellis, “Sexual Inversion in Women” in *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Vol. 2*. Philadelphia: F.A. Davis, 1904, p. 124.

<sup>199</sup> Julian Carter, “Normality, Whiteness, Authorship: Evolutionary Sexology and the Primitive Pervert,” *Science and Homosexualities*, Vernon Rosario, ed. New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 160.

<sup>200</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 1922 [1897], pp. 19-20; Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1948, p.651.

of the century, inborn theories replaced environmental ones, and sexologists became further interested in reading somatic signs of the body as innate symptoms of deviance.<sup>201</sup> Just as earlier anatomists had been obsessed with the “excessive” genitalia of Sarah Baartman and other African women, so too were turn-of-the-century sexual scientists focused on the bodies and genitals of female inverts, in order to locate symptoms of innate abnormality. Sexologists did not view variations in queer women’s genital size and appearance as mere human variation. Physicians saw abnormal size as a sign of over-stimulation, which was symptomatic of deviant sexual behavior. Women’s self-abuse signified passions more appropriate for men. Havelock Ellis, for example, described an excessively large clitoris as “a rudimentary penis,” which led to the diagnosis of other masculine traits in a woman.<sup>202</sup>

Such phenomena had serious social implications. Ellis emphasized that women carried out “a considerable proportion” of the crimes of violence caused by “inversion.”<sup>203</sup> Sexologists believed that female inverts were more apt to be violent; indeed, the very act of taking on male attributes in a patriarchal culture was viewed as usurpation.<sup>204</sup> Hence, even before she was raced or classed, a woman who desired women was linked with violence and criminality. These assumptions were reinforced by the fact that female same-sex behavior was often hidden from male purview until an extraordinary event, often criminal, brought it to the public’s attention.

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<sup>201</sup> Chauncey, 1983, p. 130; Jennifer Terry, “Anxious Slippages between ‘Us’ and ‘Them’: A Brief History of the Scientific Search for Homosexual Bodies,” in *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular Culture*. Eds. Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

<sup>202</sup> Ellis, 1897, p. 264.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>204</sup> Ngaire Naffine, *Female Crime: The Construction of Women in Criminology*. Sydney & Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987, p. 43.

Male sexologists attempted to locate the female-only spaces in which such behaviors flourished; Havelock Ellis denoted female sex inversion as a category produced under “special circumstances,” defined primarily as single-sex institutions including schools, prisons and reformatories, or among prostitutes. Krafft-Ebing concurred: “prostitutes of gross sensuality” often turned disgustedly from their clients to “the sympathetic embrace of persona of their own sex.”<sup>205</sup> He noted that female inverts “do not act in obedience to an innate impulse, but they are developed under conditions analogous to those which produced homosexuality by cultivation. These ‘forbidden friendships’ flourish especially in penal institutions for females.”<sup>206</sup> Thus, not only were women who loved women associated with non-western, “primitive” cultures, but their deviance was conflated with criminality. As Lynda Hart argues, “the [female] invert in sexological discourse was not identified merely as a sexual subject, but was always also a race and class specific entity.” The female invert’s medical construct “displaced the threat of women’s sexual ‘deviance’ onto women of color and working-class women.” If a “composite of Ellis’ ‘typical’ invert,” were made, Hart suggests, “she might well appear as a working-class woman of color who was either a lunatic or a criminal.”<sup>207</sup> Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, medical discourse had codified the bodies of black women and women who loved women as degenerate, primitive, and criminal. We will now

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<sup>205</sup> Krafft-Ebing, p. 263.

<sup>206</sup> Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 1998, p. 406.

<sup>207</sup> Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 4.

examine the case material the sexologists in the United States and Europe gathered to support such claims.

### **“Lesbian” Love Murders**

In the first edition of *Sexual Inversion* (1897), Havelock Ellis argued that one of the reasons sexologists paid more attention to same-sex desire in men than in women was because, society was more “accustomed” to close female friends than to male “intimacy,” and was less likely to suspect women of “any abnormal passion.”<sup>208</sup> Remember that the newspaper that reported on Adele Densmore and Ruth Latham insisted that, “to all appearances their affection for each other is marked only by purity.”<sup>209</sup> However, several years before this article appeared, a case broke nationally that helped position love between women as perverse rather than innocent. Some of the language that this case brought to the American public appeared in the *Wichita Times* piece without specific reference, which suggests new language circulated unevenly to describe new sexual identities emerging at the turn-of-the-century.<sup>210</sup>

The 1890s, in fact, marked a turning point in the United States concerning how relationships between women were construed, in part because of the rise of what Lisa Duggan refers to as “lesbian love murders.” Duggan details the 1892 case of Alice

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<sup>208</sup> Ellis, 1897, p. 79.

<sup>209</sup> “Queer Love Affair,” *Wichita Tribune*, September 17, 1898, p. 2.

<sup>210</sup> As Mary Poovey argues, gender ideologies that look coherent from the outside may still be contested, are always under construction, and often develop unevenly throughout a culture. See Mary Poovey, “The Ideological Work of Gender,” *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Mitchell, a nineteen-year-old white woman who murdered her lover, seventeen-year-old Freda Ward, after she spurned Mitchell to marry a male suitor. Mitchell had planned to pass as a man so that she and Ward could elope and live together as a heterosexual couple. Duggan describes such murders, which appeared more frequently in the press over subsequent years, as containing specific tropes, which the Mitchell case helped to codify. Duggan identifies them as, “a masculine/ feminine contrast between the central female couple, a plan to elope, an erotic triangle [involving a man courting the feminine woman], and a murder.”<sup>211</sup>

The Mitchell case also captured the national spotlight because the white women involved came from middle-class families. As mentioned in the section on “passing women,” such individuals were generally working-class women who sought expanded economic opportunities. Alice Mitchell, in contrast, came from a more privileged family and passed as a man not to gain access to manual labor jobs but rather to claim a masculine subjectivity, including sexual desire for women. For a middle-class white woman to express herself in this manner was considered so preposterous that it required a diagnosis of insanity.<sup>212</sup> Because of these extraordinary circumstances, the national press covered Mitchell’s murder trial, and the incident became a case study in the work of several sexologists, who thought it was an important example of the deviance and criminality of female same-sex relations.<sup>213</sup> The trial also expanded European interest in the United States as a site for emerging lesbian identities.

In the wake of the national newspaper coverage of Ward’s murder, several similar

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<sup>211</sup> Duggan, 2000, pp. 4-5.

<sup>212</sup> Lisa Duggan, “The Trial of Alice Mitchell,” *Signs*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Summer, 1993, p. 798.

<sup>213</sup> Ellis, 1897, p. 49; Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 1899, pp. 388-391.

incidents, deemed copycat murders, were reported in various newspapers and medical journals in the following months. In *Sexual Inversion*, Havelock Ellis quoted Chicago sexologist James Kiernan, who informed him that, “of the three murders from perverted sexual jealousy by women in the United State in two decades, one was a negress’s; and of four similar attempts to kill, two were [by] negresses.”<sup>214</sup> No further specific details are given regarding these cases, but the first example probably refers to the murder of Eleanora Richardson by Emma Williams, which took place in Mobile, Alabama in 1892, just months after Alice Mitchell killed Freda Ward.<sup>215</sup> In 1892, *The Medical Fortnightly* ran a short article with the headline, “Epidemic Sexual Perversion,” which began, “as might have been expected...instances of Mitchell-Ward-like love affairs are cropping up in various parts of the country.”<sup>216</sup> It is unclear whether the author, most likely a medical doctor himself, thought the media attention given to the Mitchell-Ward case itself was influencing similar cases, or if he thought such occurrences were just becoming more prevalent in general. The author went on to recount the “tragedy” of Eleanora Richardson, a “dusky damsel” who “undertook to bring order into the chaos of her aching bosom by slashing her ‘sweet-heart,’ Emma Williams, of equally dark complexion.” He ended by noting that, “Verily, the course of true love of this sort is rough – for at least one of the two parties, anyhow.” Violence was viewed as a defining factor in “love of this sort”

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<sup>214</sup> Ellis, 1897, p.121.

<sup>215</sup> Duggan, 1993, p. 794, p. 800, p. 803.

<sup>216</sup> “Epidemic Sexual Perversion,” *The Medical Fortnightly*, March 1, 1892, p. 148.

between “freaks of humanity.”<sup>217</sup> Such stories not only further bolstered this association but also suggested that a happy ending was impossible for such women. As these types of reoccurring articles continued to ostracize women who loved women, they additionally situated heterosexuality as the safe and logical, correct form of sexuality.

While the *Medical Fortnightly* article merely mentioned the race of Richardson and Williams in passing, the white newspaper *The Memphis Commercial* also ran a lengthier article on this murder, with the headline, “Instances Multiply,” which referenced the Mitchell-Ward case. The article began,

Eleanora Richardson is now lying at her home in [Mobile], between the borders of life and death from seven stab wounds, the most severe being through the lower rib. She will die. She is a handsome and well-formed mulatto, 17 years of age. Emma Williams, a black but comely woman of 23, is in jail, awaiting the results of the wounds she inflicted upon her friend...The motive was a paroxysm of jealousy resulting from an unnatural passion similar to the case in Memphis, which has caused the world to wonder. The two women have been living in the same house for nearly a year. Eleanora says the past six months Emma Williams has been taking the most unusual interest in her...the Williams girl went to work and her wages supported and clothed her and the girl. If the Richardson girl spoke to a male acquaintance, the woman would upbraid her, and beg her not to allow any man to ever separate them...

Last week Eleanora Richardson left the house where the Williams woman was and took up her residence with a married sister in another part of town. Her companion, wretched almost to the point of madness, yesterday afternoon was told by someone who knew of her unnatural infatuation, that Eleanora had left her because she was going to be married. This the Williams woman answered, “Never mind; I’ll get her.” She went immediately to the girl’s house and...asked when...[she] was coming home. Her companion replied that she would be back when her sister tired of her. Bursting into a fury of rage, the Williams woman said: ‘You are lying and trying to deceive me; you shall never marry that \_\_\_\_\_,’ and rushing upon her she drew the murderous knife from

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid. Note that the author mixed up the names of the suspect and the victim here. This was a common occurrence in newspaper articles on female couples, which may merely be poor copyediting but also could be a symptom of the confusion such reconfigured gender relations brought about in many.

her stocking and attacked her, plunging the knife into her body repeatedly, saying with each stab, 'Oh you darling.' The girl's screams finally brought her sister's husband on the scene, and the furious woman was seized and disarmed, but not until she had inflicted wounds which the physicians declare dangerous and possibly fatal.<sup>218</sup>

Unlike the story of Alice Mitchell and Freda Ward, whose court trial revealed the mutuality of their relationship, Richardson did not return Williams' affection, thus presenting the soon-to-be-common stereotype of the aggressive lesbian predator who sought to seduce and convert an innocent woman to her deviant way of life. The article also does not note a difference in the gender presentation between the two women, unlike in the Mitchell/Ward case and the Densmore/Latham story. While such "love crimes" were also commonly discussed in the press between whites and opposite sex couples as well as this time, the use of phrases such as "paroxysm of jealousy resulting from an unnatural passion," "wretched almost to the point of madness," and "unnatural infatuation" all work to paint an incredibly unsympathetic portrait of an African American woman attempting to foil the object of her desire's marriage to a male partner.<sup>219</sup>

This case is also one of the very few known examples of same-sex desire between black women in the South at this time, although, again, the level of consent between the two women is unclear. While the women were said to live together, it is not mentioned whether they made a home together alone or lived in a boarding home with other roommates. The latter appears most likely as the *Memphis Commercial* article mentioned that Richardson appeared confused by Williams' "taking the most unusual interest in her."

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<sup>218</sup> "Instances Multiply," *Memphis Commercial*, February 1892, cited in Duggan, 2000, pp. 139-140.

<sup>219</sup> Duggan, 1993, p. 794.

As the 1890s also marked the institutionalization of Jim Crow law, attention to Emma Williams' crime could be used as fodder to bolster white supremacy and serve as an example of African American women's lack of fitness for citizenship. Such incidents underscored why same-sex relationships and deviant sexuality were subjects often swept under the rug by the black community during a time when respectability was a central strategy in the fight for racial uplift and justice.<sup>220</sup>

By the time the case made its way to the pages of the black newspaper *The Indianapolis Freeman*, it was recounted in considerably less lurid tones than in the white *Memphis Commercial*. The article began, "Emma Williams, colored, was to-day charged with fatally wounding Eleanor Richardson, also colored. The case resembles that of Alice Mitchell, Memphis. Eleanor is a bright mulatto, seventeen years of age, and Emma Williams is a comely black of twenty three. They have been living together for more than a year, Emma displaying a most ardent affection for her companion. She declared that no man's love should separate them, and said if Eleanor married, she would 'fix' her. Last night Eleanor went to a ball with a male friend. Emma followed and calling her from the room, stabbed her repeatedly with a large knife, inflicting fatal wounds."<sup>221</sup> Here both women are physically described in more attractive detail, and the language of romantic friendships is utilized to convey Williams' "most ardent affection for her companion." The detail that Richardson was attending a ball suggests that they may have been middle-class, which is also of note. Williams' attack on Richardson is recounted matter-of-factly, without the sensational details that the white newspaper utilized. This article suggests that

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<sup>220</sup> Mitchell, Higginbotham.

<sup>221</sup> "An Alice Mitchell Case in Black." *The Freeman* (Indianapolis), March 5, 1892 p. 5.

by the early 1890s, African American journalists were not yet fluent in the medical language that could pathologize Williams based on her sexual attraction for another woman.<sup>222</sup> While the article does not express direct sympathy, neither does its language further situate Williams as abnormal.

A similar case occurred in the next decade in Scranton, Pennsylvania between two African American women, and this incident received a great deal more attention in the black press than the Williams and Richardson case did. In 1905, Emily Lee shot and killed Stella Weldon, her friend since childhood, when the latter married a man and gave birth to his child.<sup>223</sup> Unlike the Mobile case, the affection appears to have been mutual between Lee and Weldon at one point: the two were known for walking arm and arm in the streets and “would kiss each other just like a boy and a girl.”<sup>224</sup> There was also a noted gender differentiation between the women, as Lee alone was said to be “kind of a tomboy.”<sup>225</sup> Kali Gross, who discusses this case in her book on black women and crime in turn-of-the-century Pennsylvania, argues that their relationship was somewhat tolerated in their community prior to the murder, as they were known to be affectionate together in church and in local social events.<sup>226</sup> Again, this bears a similarity to the Adele Densmore and Ruth Latham story, and even further back to Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus, as such relationships, while appearing exceptional, were not ostracized from the greater black community as long as they occurred between young, unmarried women who eventually married men.

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<sup>222</sup> Gallon, p. 152.

<sup>223</sup> Kali Gross, *Colored Amazons: Crime, Violence, and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880-1910*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, pp. 84-85.

<sup>224</sup> “The Emma Lee Case: Sensation of the Hour,” *Scranton Defender*, Oct. 19, 1905, cited in Gross, p. 83.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>226</sup> Gross, p. 87, p. 116.

Yet, after Lee shot Weldon, the story of their relationship became common knowledge to the greater black community outside of their neighborhood. One contributor to the black newspaper *The Scranton Defender* argued that, if “Lee possessed those qualities which constitute a perfect womanhood she would be free and happy today. Virtue, chastity, and good morals she has ignored; therefore her calamity.”<sup>227</sup> Unlike the Williams case a decade prior, the black press now moralized about the 1905 murder and Lee’s lack of proper femininity. Kali Gross notes that before the queer aspect of their relationship was discovered, the local black community had been more sympathetic to Lee and hoped to stand by her as she fought for justice in the white-dominated judicial system. As access to heterosexuality was often the only modicum of potential privilege available to black women, to actively choose to reject it was hard for many to fathom and may have contributed to the critiques of Lee.<sup>228</sup> Yet at the same time, Gross argues that despite the general disgust at Emily Lee for killing Stella Weldon, for the black community and its press to label Lee as “biologically deviant might aid racist discourses they sought to contest.”<sup>229</sup>

While Alice Mitchell was never suggested to represent all white women, black women were often pressured to represent “the race,” and thus the trope of the “lesbian love murder” had the potential to indict all black women. The common themes of these 1890s and 1900s murders are important because they varied in important ways from the

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<sup>227</sup> Gross, p. 86.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid, p. 84, citing Barbara Smith: “Heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black women have. None of us have racial or sexual privilege, almost none of us have class privilege, maintaining ‘straightness’ is our last resort.” Barbara Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*. New York: Feminist Press of City University of New York, 1993, p. 171.

<sup>229</sup> Gross, p. 87.

homicides we will examine next between women in the 1920s urban North. Here the stories of Alice Mitchell, Emma Williams and Emily Lee's crimes shared the following aspects: the convicted women were said to be less feminine than the women they loved, they killed because the women they desired left them for men, and they were not known to be a part of larger networks of women who loved women. While all the examples of desire between women discussed so far occurred intraracially, one final site that emerged as a troublesome locale for queer young women in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century was almost exclusively implicated in interracial same-sex sexuality: that of reformatories and prisons.<sup>230</sup>

### **“Situational Homosexuality:” Penal Institutions**

Since the early-nineteenth century, the U.S prison was a site where sexual practices, norms, and identities developed in distinctly different patterns than those commonly noted outside of prison walls.<sup>231</sup> As Regina Kunzel has argued, while turn-of-the-century sexological discourse was disseminating the notion that sexuality was an innate aspect of identity, sex-segregated institutions often stood as a liminal exception to this growing norm, where presumably heterosexual individuals took part temporarily in same-sex behavior. Some girls and women who had relationships with other females in prisons and reformatories went on to become “normal” again after leaving, while for others, such spaces were conducive to their preferred desires or introduced them to a type

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<sup>230</sup> The only exception so far is the potential sexual activity between white and black domestic workers at Miss Porter's School for girls that Addie Brown wrote about to Rebecca Primus in the 1860s.

<sup>231</sup> Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008, pp. 1-2.

of relationship they might not otherwise have been able to access. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, psychologists and sociologists utilized the phrase “situational homosexuality” to describe this behavior, to distinguish these practices from a conception of an authentic homosexuality, which presumably had a congenital origin.<sup>232</sup>

Situational homosexuality, Kunzel notes, can be difficult for the historian to approach, as it “may seem peculiarly, even obstinately, ahistorical, produced by spatial arrangements that appear, at least in part, to transcend the historical.”<sup>233</sup> This is true regarding women in penal institutions in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, as almost all of the cases authorities found worthy of writing about involved not merely situational homosexuality between women, but interracial homosexuality specifically, which appears to have occurred quite rarely outside of correctional facilities. Thus, the newspaper coverage and reports on these cases reveal that during the Jim Crow era, interracial socializing and romantic and sexual behavior was considered even more illicit and damaging to social norms than same-sex behavior. While there most likely were also intimate relationships between African American women in institutions as well, activities solely among black women apparently did not pique the interest of white authorities – it was only when white women were also involved that such cases became a matter of greater concern. As Siobhan Somerville has argued, it was the way that racial difference visually marked the girls that further revealed the sexual nature of their relationships, whereas intraracial same-sex behavior was rarely of interest, perhaps because, as

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<sup>232</sup> Kunzel, p. 52; For one of the first uses of “situational homosexuality,” see Charles E. Smith, “The Homosexual Federal Offender: A Study of 100 Cases,” *Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology, and Police Science*, Vol. 44, 1953-1954, pp. 582-591.

<sup>233</sup> Regina Kunzel, “Situating Sex Prison Sexual Culture in the Mid-Twentieth-Century United States,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. Vol. 8, No. 3, 2002, pp. 253-55.

Havelock Ellis argued, people were more accustomed to intimate relationships between women than between men.<sup>234</sup>

Increasingly, by the mid-nineteenth century, women were imprisoned because of their difficulties securing work in a rapidly industrializing economy or because of the gradual criminalization of female immorality in the Victorian era.<sup>235</sup> While women were always the minority in correctional facilities compared to men, within that group African American women were overrepresented, which became further exacerbated in the Jim Crow era. For example, from the 1880s to the 1890s, the proportion of incarcerated black women in Illinois jumped from seventeen percent to forty-two percent despite the fact that their population did not grow beyond 1.5 percent of the state.<sup>236</sup> By 1923, African American women represented sixty-five percent of the population of the nation's state penitentiaries, whereas they were only twelve percent of those sent to women's reformatories.<sup>237</sup> One of the reasons for this was judges were often disinclined to send white women to penal institutions as opposed to reformatories. In contrast, the increasing conflation of blackness with criminality and immorality explains the harsher sentencing for African American women.<sup>238</sup>

Reform institutions for women grew out of the women's penal reform movement in the nineteenth century, created with the hope that through domestic training, education and emotional support, young women who had committed crimes could be

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<sup>234</sup> Somerville, 1994, pp. 261-262; Ellis, 1899, p. 79.

<sup>235</sup> Estelle Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1981, p. 13, pp. 19-20.

<sup>236</sup> L. Mara Dodge, *Whores and Thieves of the Worst Kind: A Study of Women, Crime, and Prisons, 1835-2000*. Northern Illinois University Press, 2002, p. 116.

<sup>237</sup> Rafter, p. 147.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid*, p. 141; Muhammad.

rehabilitated.<sup>239</sup> Progressive era reformers were particularly interested in the sexuality of working-class women during a time when young women were “reinventing female adolescence” by “rejecting Victorian standards of girlhood virtue to lay claim to sexual desire, erotic expression, and social autonomy.”<sup>240</sup> The first state-run school for girls in the U.S. opened in Massachusetts in 1856, and many more soon after followed, populated by young women often sent there due to “poverty and its consequences” which tended to be considered “crimes against morality,” such as vagrancy, begging, deceitfulness, and lewd conduct.<sup>241</sup> As sexual offenses were a frequent charge against girls who were sent to reformatories, many of the young women present were already sexually experienced, which may have contributed to their interest in taking on different forms of sexual behavior in a sex-segregated institution.<sup>242</sup> Of course, some of the women may have already been familiar with same-sex sexuality and relationships before entering institutions, but as sources on the intimate lives of working-class women in the nineteenth century outside of institutional settings are scant, it is difficult to know if this was a common situation.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Sarah Potter, “Undesirable Relations: Same-Sex Relationships and the Meaning of Sexual Desire at a Woman’s Reformatory During the Progressive Era,” *Feminist Studies*, No. 30, Summer 2004, p. 395.

<sup>240</sup> Ruth M. Alexander, *The Girl Problem: Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998, p. 12.

<sup>241</sup> Barbara Brenzel, *Daughters of the State: A Social Portrait of the First Reform School for Girls in North America, 1856-1905*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983, pp. 3, 103.

<sup>242</sup> Kathryn Hinojosa Baker, “Delinquent Desire: Race, Sex and Ritual in Reform Schools for Girls,” *Discourse*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Fall 1992, p. 50.

<sup>243</sup> Exceptions to this include Kathy Peiss’s work, which does not mention same-sex behavior among working-class women specifically. Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn of the Century New York*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986. Also see Joanne Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Notably, the very first known account from the nineteenth century concerning same-sex behavior between women in a corrective facility described interracial liaisons. A matron at the Western House of Refuge in New York in 1887 wrote in the institution's daily journal, "the open, or associate dormitory plan is the most diabolical system yet devised for the demoralization of girls! In spite of the attention of a watch woman...the black and the white girls elude her and get together in bed."<sup>244</sup> Since small numbers of women were inmates at such institutions compared to men, less thought was given to their sleeping accommodations, and communal sleeping quarters facilitated same-sex liaisons.<sup>245</sup> Further, this account of black and white girls "get[ting] together in bed" shares similarities with Addie Brown's experiences as a cook at the elite Miss Porters' School just a few decades earlier, where various white servants attempted to sleep with her as well. Such accounts, occurring between women of different races and classes suggest that such incidents were not rare at all despite a general lack of their documentation. The accounts are not, however, explicit with regard to the type of behaviors that took place in such sites, which makes Addie Brown's reference to what Karen Hansen terms "bosom sex" an important piece of evidence concerning possible sexual activity.

While the New York incident was merely documented in a warden's journal, just a few months after Alice Mitchell killed Freda Ward, in March of 1892, a fire at a women's reformatory in Indianapolis brought to light interracial relationships between women inmates nationally via the press. The fire, set by white seventeen-year-old Minnie

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<sup>244</sup> Robert M. Mennel, *Thorns and Thistles: Juvenile Delinquents in the United States, 1825-1940*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1973, p. 108.

<sup>245</sup> Kunzel, 2008, p. 24.

Brown, who was in the facility for theft, resulted in the death of a six-year-old white girl who was under the care of the institution, which brought further attention to the case. A short article in the upstate New York newspaper *The Marcellus Weekly* announced,

The burning of the Indianapolis Female Reformatory on the night of March 1<sup>st</sup> by which one little child lost her life has brought to light a most shocking story of revolting unnatural love that has existed among the female prisoners for the past twenty years. What is most remarkable, each case is a mixture of the races. Efforts of the authorities to break it up by separating the girl lovers enraged Minnie Johnson, a pretty 17 year old white girl, and she now admits that she set fire to the building.<sup>246</sup>

An Oklahoma City newspaper noted that the incident was “a counterpart of the Ward-Mitchell affair,” as Johnson set the fire “out of revenge because of being separated from her chum Patsey Williams, a colored girl.”<sup>247</sup> A Pennsylvania newspaper found that,

in her confession the Johnson girl said that she had not intended to fire the building, but simply to create a scare “to get even” because Patsy Williams a colored girl, had been separated from her. An intimacy of long standing and of a revolting nature had been detected between the two girls and the officials removed the negro girl from the prison. This confession gave rise, of course, to further inquiries by reporters and elicited the information that there are no less than 20 such cases of [interracial] unnatural love among the female prisoners.<sup>248</sup>

An Indiana newspaper quoted Johnson declaring, “that she would rather die than be parted from her colored companion.” Once again their relationship was compared to the Mitchell-Ward case, as the article ended, “It is a strange case and one as mysterious as

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<sup>246</sup> *Marcellus (NY) Weekly Observer*, March 23, 1892, p 2.

<sup>247</sup> *Oklahoma Daily Times*, March 21, 1892, p 1.

<sup>248</sup> *Bradford Era* (Bradford, PA), March 21, 1892, p. 1.

that which led to the recent murder in the South.”<sup>249</sup> The *Detroit Free Press* said that Johnson and Williams’ relationship “had been detected through notes between them that had been intercepted, and the officials of the prison had made every effort to break it up without success, until they finally removed the negro girl from the prison.”<sup>250</sup> It was not clear why Williams was removed instead of Johnson or where Williams was sent to next; that the relationship had been extinguished was deemed the most important piece of information. Regarding the other “twenty such cases among the female prisoners,” the *Free Press* journalist asserted that, “It is always a negro and white girl, never two of the same race.”<sup>251</sup>

Thus, just months after the national attention given to Alice Mitchell for killing the woman she loved, which was declared a most unusual occurrence, yet another case entered the country’s consciousness that conflated love between women with crime and murder. While both incidents centered on crimes by young white women, this time the object of affection was African American, and while another life was lost as a consequence of Johnson’s actions, the death of the six-year old girl was not intended but was the outcome of Johnson’s desire to “get even” with reformatory officials after they separated the young lovers. While Mitchell and Ward were not part of a larger network of women-loving-women, and were middle-class women who had lived with their respective families, Johnson and Williams were apparently taking part in a type of relationship that was ubiquitous at the reformatory, and which had been a longstanding

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<sup>249</sup> *Goshen Daily News*, March 22, 1892, p. 2.

<sup>250</sup> “A Fine State of Affairs: Confession of the Girl Who Fired the Female Reformatory at Indianapolis,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 21, 1892, p. 1.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*

tradition of the institution, at least according to various newspaper accounts. Specifically of interest here is the statement that such relationships at the reformatory were always interracial, and never intraracial. Despite the usual concerns of whites over miscegenation – that it would lead to inferior mixed race children and dilute the white race – which were not applicable in same-sex affairs, reporters still appeared incredulous that a young “rather pretty” white woman would go to such lengths to be romantically involved with a “negro” girl.<sup>252</sup>

Journalists and institutional authorities’ confusion over why such interracial relationships occurred between women in these settings continued into the twentieth century, and in 1913 a now oft-cited report was published which attempted to analyze these queer cross-race couplings. Margaret Otis, the resident psychologist at the New Jersey State Home for Girls, wrote about her charges in an article entitled, “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted” which focused on interracial same-sex relationships between young women. She first compared the inmates’ “ardent love-affairs” to the “well-known” and “ordinary form that is found among girls” in “high-class boarding schools,” an unusual observation in and of itself, as such cross-class comparisons were rare at this time.<sup>253</sup> Otis assumed her audience was already familiar with respectable “romantic friendships,” which she did not pathologize, and placed interracial “situational homosexuality” on a behavioral spectrum. While Otis labeled these relationships a

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid; Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997.

<sup>253</sup> Margaret Otis, “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 1913, Vol. 8, p. 113; Hinojosa Baker, p. 61.

“perversion,” she also observed that, “sometimes the love is real and almost seems enobling [sic],” although elsewhere she referred to the relationships and their rituals as mere “silliness.”<sup>254</sup> Indeed, Otis herself was part of a cohort of educated, white middle-class Progress era women who married and had children less often than the generations before them and were often known to take part in Boston marriages, which may have been one of the reasons the same-sex aspect did not appear to confound her as much as the interracial issue did.<sup>255</sup>

To explain the popularity of cross-race couplings, Margaret Otis noted, “the difference in color, in this case, takes the place of difference in sex” when “both races are housed together.”<sup>256</sup> She first described how the relationships began by stating, “a white girl on arriving would receive a lock of hair and a note from a colored girl asking her to be her love. The girl sending the note would be pointed out, and if her appearance was satisfactory, a note would be sent in reply and the love accepted.”<sup>257</sup> However, later in the article she admitted, “opinions differ as to which one starts the affair. Sometimes the white girls write first, and sometimes the colored. ‘It might be either way,’ said one colored girl. One white girl, however, admitted that the colored girl she loved seemed the man, and thought it was so in the case of the others.”<sup>258</sup> Notably, she included the opinion of a white girl who thought the African American girls “seemed the man” while no such

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<sup>254</sup> Otis, pp. 115-116.

<sup>255</sup> Lillian Faderman found that of white middle-class women who attended college between 1880 and 1900, fifty percent of this cohort did not marry. See Faderman, 1991, p. 14.

<sup>256</sup> Otis, p. 113.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid, p. 114.

description came from any African American inmates, other than one mention that the black inmates were not necessarily the ones who initiated the relationships.

Otis's account represented African American women as inherently masculine and their white lovers as "normal" feminine women. In this way Otis's narrative is similar to the sexologists who sought to show the prevalence of lesbianism in women of color and other "primitive" groups. Further, masculine, or inverted, women were more often deemed congenital cases, who were born different, while feminine women who desired women were more likely to be diagnosed as easily influenced by their environment or the persuasion of inverted women. This dichotomy situated the African American girls as innately deviant. While the findings of Otis' article may have been shocking to some, they also assuaged fears by highlighting the way that black women were mere substitutions for men, who were temporarily unavailable. As Estelle Freedman argues, Otis "tamed anxieties about race mixing and lesbianism by depicting interracial relationships between women as essentially heterosexual."<sup>259</sup> Otis also attempted to diffuse the threat of interracial relationships by focusing on their situationality, commenting, "one case is on record of a [white] girl, constantly involved in these love affairs with the colored, who afterwards, on leaving the institution, married a colored man. This, however, is unusual, for the girls rarely have anything to do with the colored race after leaving the school."<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Estelle B. Freedman "The Prison Lesbian: Race, Class, and the Construction of the Aggressive Female Homosexual, 1915-1965," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2, Summer 1996, p. 400.

<sup>260</sup> Otis, p. 114.

At the same time, Otis described the ensuing relationships as ranging from casual to those of an “intensely sexual nature.”<sup>261</sup> She also charted the various rituals that took place between the girls, from the writing of love notes, to the making of “curious love charms” out of “locks of hair of their inamorata,” then further noting that some practices were “of so coarse a nature that they cannot be written down.”<sup>262</sup> The love notes she was able to read showed “the expression of a passionate love of low order, many coarse expressions are used and the animal instinct is present.”<sup>263</sup> Otis’ descriptions of the inmates’ practices appear informed by sexological work, as she described the love by and for African American and working-class girls as primitive and animalistic due to their stark depictions of active female desire. It appears that one of the reasons Otis found the “ordinary form” of love between young women in “high class boarding-schools” to be more acceptable was because their correspondence was known for sentimental and romantic language, and not just explications of sexual longing. At one point Otis defended the white girls (and, one could argue, the black girls as well) involved in these institutional relationships by arguing, “some of the girls indulging in this love for the colored have, perhaps, the most highly developed intellectual ability of any girls of the school.”<sup>264</sup> However, such a defense merely further demarcates the intelligence of the white girls from that of the African American girls, whose intelligence is not mentioned. Nor is the black inmates’ interest in the white inmates analyzed in any specifics, as if it

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid; Freedman, 1996, p. 399.

<sup>262</sup> Otis, p. 116.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid, p. 114.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid, p. 116.

was common sense that African Americans would choose white partners if allowed, due to white women's presumed superior beauty and femininity.<sup>265</sup>

Similar interracial relationships were also documented in the following years at Bedford Hills women's prison outside of New York City. An investigation conducted in 1914 and 1915 found a pattern of "unfortunate attachments" between white and black women in the reformatory. Assistant Superintendent Julia A. Minogue testified that "there is as much of this romantic attachment between white girls as there is between white and colored girls" yet "there is no denying that the colored girls are extremely attractive to certain white girls and the feeling is apt to be more intense than between white girls alone."<sup>266</sup> Minogue did not offer an explanation for why there would be an increased intensity; she likely was referring to the social taboo of interracial relationships in general at that time, but the statement may have been informed by notions of scientific racism that regarded black women as more masculine, passionate, or emotional than white women, any of which could fuel such an "increased intensity." Notably, investigators at Bedford Hills accused the white women who took part in interracial same-sex behavior as promoting "race suicide" and recommended racial segregation of the women.<sup>267</sup> While any form of same-sex behavior could be labeled a type of "race suicide" due to its lack of reproduction, authorities were specifically concerned that the white women would not enter into relationships with white men after leaving the institution.<sup>268</sup> At the same time,

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<sup>265</sup> Elise Lemire *Miscegenation: Making Race in America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002, p. 28.

<sup>266</sup> Cited in Alexander, p 91.

<sup>267</sup> Alexander, p. 92.

<sup>268</sup> Freedman, 1996, p. 400.

similarly to Margaret Otis, white female authorities at Bedford Hills admitted that same-sex relations between the women were not always deviant. Assistant superintendent Julia Jessie Taft – known to have had a female life partner herself – defended the practice “between girls, white and white, or white and colored” as “a romantic attachment rather than any immoral relations; it takes a romantic form.”<sup>269</sup> Again, relationships amongst black women were not even mentioned by Minogue or Taft, which was most likely due to the white female authorities lack of interest in them, as they were more concerned about the future and well being of their white charges.

Since the turn-of-the-twentieth century, black women took part in “mama” and “papa” roles in institutional settings, which they then brought back to the outside world after serving their sentences. These same-sex relations in prison and reform settings played a role in formation of queer black subcultures in northern urban areas such as Harlem in the 1910s and 20s.<sup>270</sup> Interracial couples at Bedford Hills during this era also referred to each other as “mama” and “papa” or “daddy,” but there was not always a clear-cut dichotomy between “aggressive black women and oversexed, passive, white women” even though authorities documenting these relationships focused on such couplings.<sup>271</sup> At the same time, some black women who took on a masculine role at Bedford regarded their masculinity as “a point of pride to be embraced rather than a shameful expression of deviance or inversion.”<sup>272</sup> What may have began as merely “situational” homosexuality eventually influenced future generations of women who did not have to choose female

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<sup>269</sup> Potter, p. 399.

<sup>270</sup> Faderman, 1991, p. 73.

<sup>271</sup> Potter, p. 407.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid, p. 408.

lovers in order to find companionship, but actively did so nonetheless. Thus, for some working-class African American women, prisons and reformatories were a crucial setting that helped instigate future formations of queer relationships, networks and identities.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has offered an initial overview on the central themes and sources for analyzing the changing landscape for African American women who loved women prior to the Great Migration. Through examining the story of Rebecca Primus and Addie Brown it becomes clear that not only elite white women took part in “romantic friendships” in the nineteenth century, and some of the African American women to do so were both accepted in their communities – as long as they eventually married men – and were also involved in the post-Emancipation movement to educate newly freed southern people. The story of Adele Densmore and Ruth Latham, while their racial background is nonetheless ambiguous, stands as an exceptional narrative in the turn-of-the-century black press describing two young women’s love for each other, during an era in which representations of such relationships usually appeared in the context of crime and murder cases. The growing tendency to portray women who loved women as deviant, then, did not develop evenly on a national scale.

Indeed, by the time their story was published in 1898, sexologists had already begun to conflate representations of female inverts and lesbians as criminal and insane, bolstered by reports on the trials of women such as Alice Mitchell and Emma Williams

who killed the women they loved. These sensational newspaper stories, which became sexological case studies, hardened the association of female same-sex desire with masculinity and violence, which further distanced queer black women from the support of their community. The case of Emily Lee, however, suggests that the black press did not begin to utilize the language of pathology and criminality to describe same-sex desire until the early twentieth century, if we keep in mind that the 1898 story of Densmore and Latham may not have been written exclusively for the black press. Unlike white journalists, who were not concerned with how the actions of Alice Mitchell reflected on their race, there may have been more hesitancy in the black press to speak of black women as pathological, which further served to demonize such women during the height of Jim Crow and lynchings. This, then, is one of the central tensions regarding the emergence of cultural representations of African American women who loved women during the reign of sexology at the turn-of-the-century.

The conflation of emerging lesbian identity – whether viewed as inborn or environmentally acquired – with criminality could not in any way help further the aim of racial uplift through respectability which had emerged as a central strategy for claiming the full humanity of African Americans during the rise of Jim Crow. Yet at the same time, same-sex liaisons among club women such as Alice Dunbar-Nelson reveal that some of the women responsible for helping to further this agenda understood that it was strategic and that outward appearances counted more than private activities in the home. The beginnings of queer black women’s networks were slowly emerging at this time, both in the middle-class arena of club women and in the working-class site of reform schools and prisons, where same-sex behavior was common. Prison and reformatory authorities’

focus on banning interracial same-sex affairs allowed intraracial relationships to secretly flourish unabated, which also likely then contributed to changing sexual practices outside of institutions. In these settings, gendered behaviors emerged, such as assuming “mama” and “papa” roles, which later became codified into the “butch” and “femme” roles that predominated among working-class lesbian culture for much of the twentieth century.

While authorities found examples of black women who took part in institutional relationships and were proud of their masculine presentation, the trope of the “passing woman” was rarely a strategy used by black women in the post-Reconstruction era.

Historians have uncovered many cases of white women passing as men in order to access both work and women, but few sources reveal black women that sought to pass as men. I argue that this was not a safe technique for black women during the rise of Jim Crow, and while masquerading as a man may have allowed them to avoid sexual abuse, it made them more susceptible to racial violence and lynching. I have discovered that this is one of the main divergences between white and black women that arise from the central themes delineating lesbian history.

The following chapter will turn to a phenomenon that had no equivalent for white women in the 1920s: the trope of the murderous black lady lover in the urban North during the Great Migration. Despite the legacy of Alice Mitchell, the conflation of white lesbianism and criminality did not have the lasting power that the conflation of black lady lovers and criminality soon would, which became a common trope in New York and Chicago used to incriminate recent southern migrants for their immoral behavior. However, through these stories, knowledge emerged concerning a growing population of black women who lived and socialized with women. This revealed through multiple ways

the changing configurations of sexual behavior and identity that accompanied the mass migration of African Americans to the urban North.

**Chapter Two:**  
**“Woman Slain in Queer Love Brawl:” The Violent Emergence of Lady Lovers in the  
1920s Northern Black Press**

In 1926, the African American newspaper the *New York Age* published a front-page article with the graphic headline, “Woman Rivals for Affection of Another Woman[,] Battles With Knives, and One Has Head Almost Severed From Body.” The lengthy opening sentence read,

Crazed with gin and a wild and unnatural infatuation for another woman, Reba Stobtoff, in whose Manhattan apartment her friends and acquaintances had gathered for a Saturday night rent party, grabbed a keen-edged bread knife and with one fell swoop, severed the jugular vein in the throat of Louise Wright after a fierce quarrel in which Reba had accused Louise of showing too much interest in a woman named Clara, known to underworld dwellers as ‘Big Ben,’ the name coming from her unusual size and from her inclination to ape the masculine in dress and manner, and particularly in her attention to other women.”<sup>273</sup>

The article went on to note that, “When the police arrived, only women were present, and it is said that no men had attended the affair.”<sup>274</sup> As this text suggests, a full decade into the Great Migration, black women who desired women had forged social networks in the urban North that allowed them to socialize without men. While gatherings such as rent parties took place in residential apartments, an act of violence there could quickly bring a private event to the forefront of the community through a front-page story in the black

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<sup>273</sup> “Woman Rivals for Affection of Another Woman Battles With Knives, and One Has Head Almost Severed From Body,” *The New York Age*, November 27, 1926, p 1.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

press.<sup>275</sup> Articles such as this one illustrate the double-bind of the black middle class at this time: while stories about sex and violence were also popular fodder for white newspapers in the 1920s, the black press carried the burden of not merely reporting the news but setting aspirations and policing behavior as well. Thus, newspaper stories often read like lurid dime novels, drawing the reader in and then moralizing over the subjects' deviant behavior.

The area in which this murder occurred, Columbus Hill, also known as San Juan Hill before the First World War, had rapidly become the largest black neighborhood in Manhattan in the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>276</sup> However, by 1920, practically every major black institution had moved uptown to Harlem, and areas such as Columbus Hill had become "terrible rundown backwash communities" inhabited by poor and working class African Americans who "as a rule, desired to live in Harlem but could not afford to pay the high rents charged there."<sup>277</sup> By 1923, Columbus Hill was considered the second most crime-ridden area of New York City.<sup>278</sup> Given this, the murder at a women-only gathering in Columbus Hill was not that unique, aside from its queer aspect, as similar articles about men who attacked or killed women out of jealousy, and vice versa, were regular features in both the black and white press during this era.<sup>279</sup> The site of the murder suggests that some of the participants were recent southern migrants, as the

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<sup>275</sup> The phenomenon of the "rent party" will be discussed in detail in chapter four.

<sup>276</sup> Seth M. Scheiner, *Negro Mecca: A History of the Negro in New York City, 1865-1920*. New York: New York University Press, 1965, p. 19.

<sup>277</sup> Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto: Negro New York 1890-1930*. New York: Harper & Row, 1963, pp. 112-113, p. 120.

<sup>278</sup> "City's Crime Spots Shown By Survey," *The New York Times*, Dec. 14, 1923, p. 17.

<sup>279</sup> See for example, "Husband Finds Man in Pajama's in Wife's Apartment, Kills Through the Door," *The New York Age*, March 8, 1924, p. 1; "Gives Death to Deserving Lover: Jilter Woman Shoots Sheik Who Left Her," *The New York Age*, Nov. 20, 1926, p. 1.

neighborhood was one of three Manhattan locales in which black southerners settled in the early-twentieth century.<sup>280</sup>

“Old settler” black journalists whose families had lived in the North for generations were often the creators of such newspaper articles, and they critiqued what they perceived as the disrespectful leisure time behavior of recent migrants. Among the new settlers’ deviant behaviors, relationships between women were an increasingly visible disturbance in the black communities of the urban North, which *The New York Age* article described in vivid and sensationalistic language. This chapter will examine multiple newspaper articles in the black press describing attacks and acts of homicide that allegedly took place between black lady lovers that occurred between 1922 and 1928, against the backdrop of the Great Migration. While two of the cases can be tracked through criminal records, several of the others have not been located in official reports, and none of the available criminal records specifically mention same-sex love as a motivation for the murders.<sup>281</sup> Despite the multiple newspaper accounts in prior decades in the black and white press that revealed various instances in which black women engaged in sexual and romantic relationships with other women, many of the 1920s articles on this topic nonetheless expressed surprise at such behaviors and found these

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<sup>280</sup> The Tenderloin, San Juan Hill/Columbus Hill, and Harlem were the three neighborhoods where the majority of southern migrants settled between 1900 and 1920. See Osofsky, p. 34.

<sup>281</sup> Despite the lack of “official evidence” of these subjects’ queerness, they are still analyzed here as potential queer subjects. As lesbian historian Martha Vicinus notes, “lesbian history has always been characterized by a ‘not knowing’ which could be its defining core.” See Martha Vicinus, “Lesbian History: All Theory and No Facts or All Facts and No Theory?” *Radical History Review*. No. 60 (Fall 1994), p. 57. Further, it does not seem likely that death reports and court records from the 1920s would explicate women’s same-sex behavior; as Roderick Ferguson argues, “epistemology is an economy of information privileged and information excluded” and “canonical and national formations rarely disclose what they have rejected.” Hence, the absence of references to lesbianism should not infer an absence of such behaviors. See Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p. xi.

relationships novel. While this might reveal that such stories were not passed on from one generation to the next, or that the cases discussed in the prior chapter did not have the national reach that some articles suggested, lady lovers in the 1920s nonetheless varied from the women who came before them, which demonstrates that the Great Migration was critical to the development of queer networks in the urban North.<sup>282</sup>

While the murders in the 1890s and 1900s involved love triangles between two women and a male suitor, those in the following decades differ in two important ways: first, these love triangles involved jealous violence between three or more women, suggesting that queer networks were forming in black communities in cities such as New York and Chicago. Second, the young women examined in the first chapter committed crimes to protest their female sweethearts leaving them for more socially acceptable men. By the 1920s, in contrast, not only were African American women readily forming relationships with other women in the urban North, their romantic competitors were other women. In almost every case that will be examined here, women attacked or killed a female rival, not the woman they loved. While the pre-Great Migration murders show women struggling with the difficulties of desiring women in isolation, the 1920s murders reveal women negotiating emerging queer networks – now they could be with women romantically, but they had to compete with other women for partners.

This chapter will examine newspaper coverage describing one attack and three homicides concerning women only, and statistically speaking, these acts of violence make up a very small fraction of the murders in New York and Chicago throughout the

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<sup>282</sup> On queer black life in the urban North in the early-twentieth century, see: Garber, 1989; Heap; Mumford; Thorpe, 1996; Chauncey, 1994; James F. Wilson, *Bulldaggers Pansies and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010 and Cabello.

decade, yet they serve as important narratives describing the growing networks of African American women who loved women in the urban North at this time.<sup>283</sup> While the black press argued that queer desires were to blame for these acts of violence, many of the women involved in these cases were recent southern migrants, and were in most ways just like their neighbors in Harlem, midtown Manhattan's Columbus Hill and Chicago's Bronzeville: dealing with difficulties finding work, laboring long, hard hours for little pay, confronting the psychic toll of de facto segregation in the North, navigating overcrowded apartments and high rents, and dealing with problems caused by easy access to poorly made, highly intoxicating bootleg liquor during Prohibition.<sup>284</sup>

It was quite rare during the 1920s to come across similar articles about the violence of black or white gay men or white women, which makes these cases involving black lady lovers a unique site to explore.<sup>285</sup> Black women who were convicted of murder – of men or women – in the 1920s and 30s had typically killed lovers or husbands in the

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<sup>283</sup> For example, in the first half of 1928, out of thirty-four homicides in Harlem, half of which took place between whites and half between African Americans, only one occurred between “women lovers” according to the following article: “More Homicides in Harlem Than Down on Bowery,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, July 18, 1928, p 1. Similarly, in the state of Illinois in 1926, black men were charged with murdering 50 black men and sixteen black women, compared to white men who were charged with murdering 65 white men and 27 white women. Black women were charged with killing ten black men and two black women, compared to white women who were charged with killing nine white men and ten white women; black women thus killed women less than any other demographic. See Carl Zollmann, “Table 13: Color and Sex of Known Perpetrators,” *The Illinois Crime Survey*. Chicago: Blakely Printing Co., 1929, p. 624.

<sup>284</sup> On living conditions in Harlem and Bronzeville in the early Great Migration, see James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan*. New York: Da Capo, 1930; St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. New York: Harper and Row, 1945; Osofsky; Baldwin; Elaine Lewinnek, *The Working Man's Reward: Chicago's Early Suburbs and the Roots of American Sprawl*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 154.

<sup>285</sup> One exception was the infamous case of Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, gay white male students at the University of Chicago who kidnapped and killed a boy in 1924. I have only uncovered one similar narrative between two white women in Chicago in 1921. See: “Girl Victims of Queer Love Lie Near Death,” *The Chicago Evening News*, April 28, 1921, p. 1. No similar stories concerning gay black men have been found, which supports the common trope of effeminate yet innocuous gay men as “sissies” which was popular in the urban black North throughout the 1920s.

heat of passion. Such deaths usually occurred during the course of drunken arguments or physical fights, in momentary explosions of rage or jealousy, or in reaction to domestic violence, thus, few of these attacks were premeditated.<sup>286</sup> African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier saw such violence as indicative of the changing landscape wrought by the Great Migration. He wrote in 1928, “The mass which is being uprooted from the plantation system has been set adrift in a world without a moral order...in the city where most primary group relations are dissolved we find illegitimacy and sex delinquency as indices of this lack of social control.”<sup>287</sup> While female same-sex behavior represented a new “sex problem” to the black community, at the same time it was also a symptom of the larger issue of sex immorality among recent southern migrants, which the old settlers of the northern black press often railed against. Journalists told black migrant women not to be too friendly to white men, to abstain from “vile language,” and to learn to dress modestly for the theater and practice their “indoor voices” there.<sup>288</sup>

As the majority of the newspaper articles about lady lovers concentrated on their occasional violent acts, the dominant image that came to represent queer African American women in the urban North was that of a murderer – or a victim of one. Thus, the impossibility of black women’s relationships was underscored through these representations in the black press, and the pathological language of sexology that such texts often utilized reinforced this idea. Through their deft use of sexological theories,

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<sup>286</sup> Dodge, p. 103.

<sup>287</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, “Sex Morality Among Negroes,” *Religious Education*, No. 23, Dec./Jan. 1928, p. 450.

<sup>288</sup> “Things That Should Be Considered,” *The Chicago Defender*, October 20, 1917, p. 12; A.L. Jackson, “The Onlooker: Public Manners,” *The Chicago Defender*, December 3, 1921, p. 16; “Too Familiar,” *The Chicago Whip*, September 9, 1922, p. 8.

black male journalists were able to shore up their cultural capital by demonstrating their familiarity with such European intellectual and scientific language, while simultaneously using such discourse to moralize and distance themselves from the working-class southern migrants whom they singled out for taking part in such deviant behavior.<sup>289</sup> These articles were informed by concerns over single migrant women, the sensationalistic journalistic styles of the 1920s mass media, popular ideologies of Black Nationalism and respectability, and the changing gender and sex configurations in American culture after World War I. These issues will be now be further contextualized in the service of analyzing the articles on black lady lovers and violence.

### **Single Black Women in the Great Migration**

Between 1910 and 1920, one-and-a-half million African Americans left rural southern areas for the cities of the South, the North and the West.<sup>290</sup> Chicago's black population grew from over 44,000 to over 109,000 during this decade, and New York's black population grew from over 92,000 to over 152,000.<sup>291</sup> These northern cities offered hopes of freedom and equal citizenship for southern African Americans who had been disappointed and disenfranchised by the failed promises of Reconstruction. The institutionalization of "separate but equal" segregation in 1896 under *Plessy v. Ferguson* and increasing rates of lynching, along with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and racial

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<sup>289</sup> Kim T. Gallon, "Between Respectability and Modernity: Black Newspapers and Sexuality, 1925-1940," PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2009, p. 164.

<sup>290</sup> Phillips, pp. 39-40.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid; Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922, p. 80.

violence and intimidation provided further motivation to leave the South.<sup>292</sup> World War I also played a large role in this mass migration. As the military effort became U.S. industry's priority, the war in Europe became central to all aspects of the domestic front. Black and white soldiers fought abroad in segregated units. Immigration from Europe was shut down at the same time that more factory workers were needed to make ammunition and other supplies, which created even more of a need for black men to head North for industrial jobs, though black women were only able to secure such work temporarily in the case of drastic worker shortages.<sup>293</sup> African Americans had already begun to move from rural areas to southern cities to escape the exploitative sharecropping system, yet in the urban South they still had to negotiate repressive Jim Crow segregation laws and racial violence, which made the North look more attractive. While James Grossman argues that these compounded factors "pushed" African Americans away from the South and "pulled" them towards the hope of opportunity and freedom in the North, Isabel Wilkerson also emphasized the agency of the migrants, noting that the Great Migration was also "the first mass act of independence by a people who were in bondage in this country for far longer than they have been free."<sup>294</sup> Indeed, the Great Migration was a case of mass voluntary displacement.<sup>295</sup> However, many women who came north

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<sup>292</sup> On the factors that contributed to the early Great Migration, see Grossman; Marks; Griffin, 1995; Phillips, 1999; Hahn; Baldwin; Wilkerson; Hicks, 2010.

<sup>293</sup> For example, one 1922 Chicago study found that "labor shortage was given as the reason for employing Negro women and girls by all of the firms employing them in large numbers." Chicago Commission on Race Relations, 1922, p. 380.

<sup>294</sup> Grossman, p. 14; Wilkerson, p. 10.

<sup>295</sup> Leslie Brown, "African American Women and Migration," *The Practice of U.S. Women's History: Narratives, Intersections, and Dialogues*. S. Jay Kleinberg, Eileen Boris, Vicki L. Ruiz, Eds. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007, p. 210.

were soon disillusioned by the combination of exploitatively high rents in the segregated areas of the cities and limited work opportunities beyond domestic service.

Black women migrating north were not necessarily welcomed, either, by urban whites or the established black middle-class old settlers. As Hazel Carby argues, “the migrating black woman could be variously situated as a threat to the progress of the race; as a threat to the establishment of a respectable urban black middle class...and as a threat to the formation of black masculinity in an urban environment.”<sup>296</sup> The articles about murder we will examine can thus be read to serve as a warning to single female arrivals to northern cities, which were deemed an urban problem requiring intervention by reformers. Their alleged sexual availability, it was feared, would lead to disease, miscegenation, and prostitution. While many southern migrants had friends or family in the North, whom they often first visited before determining whether or not to move, the majority of African American women who left the South for the North in the early-twentieth century were single, divorced, separated or widowed.<sup>297</sup> As black women could easily find domestic work in towns and cities while black men had a better chance of securing agricultural work in rural areas, there were thus uneven ratios between the sexes in the urban North.<sup>298</sup> It was also difficult for new settlers to find work in black-owned businesses due to the biases of the old settlers, who often saw recent migrants as uneducated, lazy and untrustworthy.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Carby, 1992, p. 741.

<sup>297</sup> Grossman, p. 94; Danielle Taylor Phillips, “Moving with the Women: Tracing Racialization, Migration, and Domestic Workers in the Archive,” *Signs*, Vol. 38, No. 2, Winter 2013, p. 382; K. Phillips, p. 40.

<sup>298</sup> Kelly Miller, “Surplus Negro Women,” *The Southern Workman*, Vol. 34, Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (Va.), 1906, p. 524.

<sup>299</sup> Clark-Lewis, 1987, p. 198; Marcy S. Sacks, *Before Harlem: The Black Experience in New York City Before World War I*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006, p. 26.

In 1906, Howard University professor Kelly Miller wrote about the notion of “surplus women,” contending that there was an “enormous preponderance of colored females over males, especially in our large cities,” which he saw as “perhaps the most striking phenomenon of the urban Negro population” since a “preponderance of one sex over the other forebodes nothing but evil to society.”<sup>300</sup> While Miller was concerned primarily with how these uneven demographics would lead to “comely” women becoming “the easy prey of the evil designs of both races,” same-sex behavior and relationships were another possible outcome of such unequal populations.<sup>301</sup> It would not be until the 1920s that black leaders would also speak of women treating one another as “easy prey,” but how single black women would be received in the urban North, and the lecherous influences they might encounter, were of concern to white as well as black reformers before and during the early Great Migration.<sup>302</sup>

Another reason that single black women migrating North were focused on by reformers was because by WWI, vice districts in major cities were concentrated in the segregated areas also populated by African Americans. This occurred because black southern migrants were often forced to live in “the sections of least desirability in the city” in which “the disorganized condition” of neighborhoods “enabled white vice resorts to hide from law enforcement.”<sup>303</sup> Vice industries now had a more difficult time operating in white areas because reformers’ concerns in the 1910s over “white slavery,” or

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<sup>300</sup> Miller, 1906, pp. 523-524.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid, p. 524.

<sup>302</sup> Carby, 1992, p. 741; Hicks, 2010, p. 121.

<sup>303</sup> Walter Reckless, *Vice in Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933, p. 192.

prostitution and trafficking involving young white women, had led to increased surveillance and regulation of vice in white neighborhoods but often left communities of color to fend for themselves.<sup>304</sup> In Chicago, as the South Side's black population grew and spread southward, so too did commercial vice travel south "in consequence of the efforts at public suppression."<sup>305</sup> It was thus assumed that newly arriving black women were at a higher risk of falling into illegal activities than white women, the latter having more choices over where to reside in a new city. The structural inequalities in "black belts" – such as exorbitantly high rent prices issued by white landlords and a lack of police regulation in comparison to more heavily patrolled white neighborhoods – allowed such districts to emerge as central vice and leisure zones for burgeoning queer populations.<sup>306</sup> Hence, it was in part the disenfranchisement suffered by African Americans in areas like Harlem that created the freedom for "deviant" behaviors to flourish there. As journalist Edgar M. Grey noted in *The New York Amsterdam News* in 1927, "in the old days it was possible for many of the Negroes of the city to escape the contact and stigma" of vice districts, "but today this advantage of escape is not possible, for the colored population of the City of New York is almost canned up into a prescribed area – Harlem."<sup>307</sup> Similarly, in Chicago, the *Defender* complained in 1920 that "police wink at crime and immorality in South Side cabarets," but took little action against the

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<sup>304</sup> Mumford, p. 20.

<sup>305</sup> Reckless, p. 192.

<sup>306</sup> Mumford, p. 84.

<sup>307</sup> Edgar M. Grey, "The Devil's Playground: Harlem an Easy Prey for Depraved Joy-Seeking Whites," July 6, 1927, *The New York Amsterdam News*, p. 12.

problem.<sup>308</sup> As a result, the Chicago Committee of Race Relations conducted a poll that found that white Chicagoans believed that “Negroes willingly tolerate vice and vicious conditions in the midst of their residential districts” and also, notably, whites “saw recent migrants from the South as “more likely to offend than the Negro who has resided longer in the North.”<sup>309</sup> Thus, the racialized geography of the urban North that the early Great Migration cemented contributed to the black press’s concerns over black female migrants’ immorality.<sup>310</sup>

### **The African American Press and Sensationalist Journalism in the 1920s**

While black newspaper editors and journalists were concerned with the behavior of new settlers, the black press, and specifically *The Chicago Defender*, had played an important role in instigating and aiding the Great Migration.<sup>311</sup> Early in 1917, the paper announced that the editors had arranged to bring southern African Americans to Chicago at a discounted fee. Although the *Defender* did not follow through with their promise, their promotion of the plan caused such excitement that hundreds of black southerners boarded trains nonetheless and headed north to Chicago and other northern cities at their own expense. The *Defender* continued to publish editorials urging southern African Americans to come North for better work, pay, and housing conditions, thus contributing

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<sup>308</sup> “Vice Runs Unchecked in 2<sup>nd</sup> Ward,” *The Chicago Defender*, July 10, 1920, p. 1.

<sup>309</sup> Chicago Committee of Race Relations, p. 328.

<sup>310</sup> This issue and the relation of queer spaces to vice and Prohibition will be taken up in detail in chapter four.

<sup>311</sup> Alan D. DeSantis, “Selling the American Dream Myth to Black Southerners: The Chicago Defender and the Great Migration of 1915-1919,” *Western Journal of Communication*. Vol. 62, No. 2, 1997, pp. 63-71; Drake and Cayton, 145; Grossman, p. 16.

to the Great Migration.<sup>312</sup> The paper also took on the role of advising newly arrived migrants, with lengthy etiquette columns detailing the “do’s and don’ts” of how to behave amongst respectable black residents and whites.<sup>313</sup> While the influx of southern migrants brought a relatively unschooled black lower class to cities like Chicago, threatening the middle-class mores of old settlers, the changing urban demographics grew the clientele for black newspapers and the products they advertised.<sup>314</sup>

Although many newspapers and periodicals by and for African Americans were established at the turn-of-the-twentieth century, to conflate them all under the term “the black press” would homogenize a diverse group. Some of the periodicals that will be utilized here include the nationally read *Chicago Defender* and *Negro World*, Marcus Garvey and the United Negro Improvement Association’s publication, which was at the time the premier mouthpiece of the Black Nationalist movement. *Half-Century* was a Chicago publication for black women, and the *Inter-State Tattler*, based in Harlem, was a bi-weekly entertainment and society newspaper, competing with more conservative local publications, *The New York Age* and *The New York Amsterdam News*. Yet, one must not pigeonhole these periodicals, for black newspapers regularly served the needs of multiple demographics at once. Headlines about lynchings or racial discrimination were juxtaposed with images of beauty queens and celebrities. None of these publications

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<sup>312</sup> Patrick S. Washburn, *The African American Newspaper: Voices of Freedom*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006, p. 91.

<sup>313</sup> See for example, “Things That Should be Considered,” *The Chicago Defender*, Oct. 29, 1917, p. 12.

<sup>314</sup> Albert Kreiling, “The Commercialization of the Black Press and the Rise of Race News in Chicago,” in William S. Solomon and Robert W. McChesney, eds. *Ruthless Criticism: New Perspectives in U.S. Communication History*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp. 176-77.

could afford to segment markets; if they wished to stay in business they remained both “papers of record” as well as tabloids.<sup>315</sup>

The mode of journalism through which black women who loved women were presented to newspaper audiences was another crucial aspect of their textual representation during this era. Often referred to as “yellow journalism” and then “jazz journalism,” white and black newspapers in the 1920s utilized tabloid formats to draw in readers with provocative headlines, large images, and shocking pull quotes.<sup>316</sup> Sensationalism was used to sell papers in all markets, but particularly in the black press, where advertising dollars were harder to come by.<sup>317</sup> As ads were easier to sell when papers had larger quantities of readers, a focus on sex, vice, and violence became the key to greater profits from the growing masses in the urban North. Critics of this format were vocal about the harm of “jazz journalism.” As Kelly Miller wrote in the *New York Amsterdam News*, “murder, sex sins and theft are never failing sources of popular interest” yet their continued coverage led to blacks “gradually sinking in the estimation of the white race,” as “the white world” learned about African American life from the black press.<sup>318</sup> Given that Hearst publications and other white tabloids also took part in “jazz journalism,” there was little reason to single out the black press for focusing on sex and violence in the 1920s. Nonetheless, Miller conveyed a common idea here, that the onus

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<sup>315</sup> Gallon, p. 3.

<sup>316</sup> Simon Michael Bessie, *Jazz Journalism: The Story of Tabloid Newspapers*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1938.

<sup>317</sup> Gallon, p. 3.

<sup>318</sup> Kelly Miller, “Black ‘Yellow’ Journalism,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, July 18, 1928, p. 16.

was on African Americans to be virtuous given the racial prejudices of the dominant white culture.

Hayward Farrar offers a different theory on the cultural work done by sensationalistic reporting: “crime, love triangles, conjugal instability, and other subjects were pervasive features of urban black life.” Newspapers “made dramatic rituals out of central events in personal and community experience and thereby contributed to a kind of ‘urban folklore.’”<sup>319</sup> As stories of violent outbreaks at women’s gatherings became more common in the 1920s black press, such “dramatic rituals” became ingrained in urban black life. While it was much more common for newspapers to cover stories of jealous violence between heterosexual couples than same-sex couples, the fact that violence between women became the main trope used to present the very concept of lesbianism to readers was a “burden of representation” that lady lovers were forced to bear in this era.<sup>320</sup>

As Joy Wiltenberg argues in her study of modern sensationalism, representations of crime influence people’s conceptions of their lives and communities quite out of proportion to actual incidences of criminal activity. Thus, regardless of the veracity of the articles about violent women loving women, they had a separate function as cultural texts. This is an important point for this study since so many of the facts of the newspaper reports cannot be verified. Sensationalism employed the discourse of violent crime to address changing cultural needs and sociopolitical agendas. By linking illicit behavior and criminal justice procedures with a prescribed emotional response, both personal and

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<sup>319</sup> Hayward Farrar, *The Baltimore Afro-American, 1892–1950*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998, p. 187.

<sup>320</sup> Kobena Mercer, “Black Art and the Burden of Representation,” *Third Text*, 1990, Vol. 4, No. 10, pp. 61-78.

communal, these texts served as a powerful means of constructing both shared values and individual identity.<sup>321</sup> Thus, the rise of increasing representations of queer black women as violent “colored amazons” at the same moment when such identities and behaviors were becoming more visible served to make the greater community view such women suspiciously – regardless of whether or not they possessed a criminal past.<sup>322</sup> These articles thus helped shore up heterosexuality as the correct and less pathological form of sexuality through representing lesbianism as inherently violent and criminal.

### **The Changing Landscape of Gender and Sexuality in the Early-Twentieth Century**

Before turning specifically to the murder cases that the black press discussed in the 1920s, an overview on changing gender and sexuality in the post-World War I era more generally will help to further situate the newspaper articles. Lesbianism became a growing issue of concern within white communities as well during this decade, but white women who loved women were rarely conflated with violence and criminality in the same way that black women were, despite the turn-of-the-century discussions of the Alice Mitchell trial that highlighted “lesbian love murders” among white women only a few decades prior.<sup>323</sup> However, it is important to keep in mind that the murder cases I will discuss appeared almost entirely in the black press, hence, black lady lovers’ disruption of the social fabric of the urban North was a narrative primarily formulated by the black middle class.

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<sup>321</sup> Joy Wiltenburg, “True Crime: The Origins of Modern Sensationalism,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 109, No. 5, December 2004, p. 1377-80.

<sup>322</sup> Gross, p. 124.

<sup>323</sup> Simmons, 1979; Hart; Duggan.

As historians have demonstrated, the 1920s was a decade in which female same-sex desire became more visible than ever in American culture, and conceptions of same-sex identities continued to emerge.<sup>324</sup> This was rarely embraced by the dominant culture as a progressive or liberating occurrence but was met with suspicion and concern from many quarters, as well as intense ideological attacks on women's growing independence.<sup>325</sup> Many critics saw WWI as playing a crucial role in the changes in gender and sexuality that accompanied the inter-war period, yet even before the war, an American journalist famously announced in 1913 that it had become "sex o'clock in America," because of the increasingly common discussions of topics related to sexuality, from prostitution to birth control.<sup>326</sup> As American psychoanalyst Samuel D. Schmalhausen suggested in 1929, the war may have "provided the laboratory situation – out of the warm material of human life itself – for transforming in so brief an interval, in a most topsy-turvy manner, the morals of the modern mind." Schmalhausen, who argued he was writing in the midst of a "Sexual Revolution," thought that for the first time in "the history of life" the idea that "the sex relation is not to be dedicated primarily to procreation but quite naturally to recreation" was now generally accepted "among civilized men and women, accepted as it if were already axiomatic." He claimed that the separation of the sexes for long periods of time during the war effort

led to the sheer clandestine opportunity for promiscuity, homosexuality, autoeroticism, perversions, and novel stimulation-fulfilling experimentation; what have we here but a Freudian reaffirmation of the

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<sup>324</sup> Simmons, 1975, p. 56; Chauncey, 1983, p. 106; Faderman, 1991, pp. 62-63; Chauncey, 1994, p. 355.

<sup>325</sup> Simmons, 1975, p. 58; Terry, 1999, p. 125.

<sup>326</sup> May, 1995, p. 62.

polymorphous-perverse tendencies in human nature, where so-called normal object love and sweet heterosexuality and reproductive felicity are absent from the sexual scene.<sup>327</sup>

Here, Schmalhausen offers a common misconstruing of Sigmund Freud's theory of polymorphous perversity, which stipulated that in childhood, humans are open to all formations of bodily pleasure, a notion that offers evidence for Freud's argument of innate bisexuality prior to socialization into heterosexuality. This is an example of how American doctors "reversed Freud's ideas as well as his therapeutic practice." As Paul Robinson argues, medical experts "transformed homosexuality into a disease, and a curable one at that" and "categorically separated it from 'normal' heterosexuality by expressly rejecting Freud's universalizing notion of constitutional bisexuality."<sup>328</sup> This was part of the process of "othering" and separating sexual minorities instead of viewing sexuality as a complex spectrum. Eve Sedgwick offers the conception of a *minoritizing view* in which the emerging homosexual/heterosexual binary is only relevant to homosexuals, and a *universalizing view* in which this binary is relevant to people across a range of sexualities.<sup>329</sup> Thus the misuse of Freud in the U.S. contributed to the categorization and separation of those who desired the same-sex from the dominant

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<sup>327</sup> Samuel D. Schmalhausen, "The Sexual Revolution," *Sex in Civilization*. Victor Francis Calverton, Samuel Daniel Schmalhausen, eds. Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Pub. Co., 1929, pp. 355, 374.

<sup>328</sup> Paul Robinson, "Freud and Homosexuality," *Whose Freud?: The Place of Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture*. Peter Brooks and Alex Woloch, eds. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000, p. 148.

<sup>329</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, pp. 1-2.

culture, which led to increasing regulation of queer behaviors as they emerged onto the social landscape.<sup>330</sup>

As growing visibility led to the stigmatization of emerging homosexual identities, scholars have mixed views on the idea that the 1920s heralded a “sexual revolution.” Some see it instead as a “heterosexual counter-revolution infused with assertions of male sexual values.”<sup>331</sup> Pamela Haag argues that white middle-class women could be sex objects in the 1920s but never sexual subjects; pre-marital sex had to be couched in the language of romance in order for such women to distinguish themselves from the deviant and commercial sexuality that was ascribed to working-class women.<sup>332</sup> Heterosocial leisure time activities in the public sphere involving popular entertainments, from movies to amusement parks, became commonplace first for young working-class men and women and then for the middle class as well. Their association with the urban poor meant that middle-class women had to differentiate themselves from the working class in order to appear respectable. For white women, bohemian circles were one of few milieus where they could seek to resist the cultural double standards regarding men and women’s sexual activity.<sup>333</sup> As these examples show, the 1920s was not an era in which the white middle class was thus “liberated” from Victorian standards, and further, as Michel Foucault has

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<sup>330</sup> Regulation and criminalization of queer behaviors in the U.S. occurred in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, but as Margot Canaday shows, this policing did not reach a level of fervent repression until the post-World War II era. See Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

<sup>331</sup> D’Emilio and Freedman, 1988, p. vi.

<sup>332</sup> Pamela Haag, “In Search of the Real Thing: Ideologies of Love, Modern Romance, and Women’s Sexual Subjectivity in the US, 1920-40,” *American Sexual Politics: Sex, Gender and Race since the Civil War*. John C. Fout and Maura Shaw Tantillo, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, pp. 165, 170.

<sup>333</sup> Peiss, 1990; Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2001, p. 273.

shown, the Victorian era was not merely a regressive era of sexual repression.<sup>334</sup>

Changing sexual mores were always followed by techniques of regulation, all the more so for working-class and African American women.

The increase in consciousness and interest around homosexuality in the 1920s is usually attributed to multiple factors aside from the homosocial atmosphere of WWI, particularly for women, as the war played a larger role affecting European queer subcultures than American ones. As John D'Emilio argues, capitalism played a key role in the formation of queer urban subcultures, as individuals could now survive and thrive beyond the confines of the family. Kinfolk no longer formed the primary economic unit, which had been the case prior to the industrial revolution.<sup>335</sup> However, for the majority of women, there were still fewer opportunities than men to leave their families of origin and be economically independent.<sup>336</sup> Wages paid to women were low, as it was assumed they did not need to support themselves.<sup>337</sup> These factors led to divergent historical moments in which men's and women's queer networks and identities could solidify. Joanne Meyerowitz found that in Chicago, working-class lesbian subcultures in rooming house districts were visible by the 1920s, while similar subcultures for men had appeared in major northern cities by the 1890s, as George Chauncey has demonstrated.<sup>338</sup> As men and women's public behavior was regulated differently, it was not socially acceptable for women who were not prostitutes to gather in drinking establishments prior to the 1910s, nor did women often have queer liaisons in parks or the waterfront as gay men have

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<sup>334</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*. New York: Pantheon, 1978, pp. 27-35.

<sup>335</sup> D'Emilio, 1983, p. 104.

<sup>336</sup> Meyerowitz, 1988, p. 181.

<sup>337</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, *A Woman's Wage: Historical Meanings and Social Consequences*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1990.

<sup>338</sup> Meyerowitz, 1988, p. 114; Chauncey, 1994, p. 44.

historically done.<sup>339</sup> Economics, safety, and social norms were therefore some of the factors that have differentiated lesbian subcultures' emergence from gay men's.

Another significant issue that contributed to specific concerns about female same-sex desires and identities was the rise of feminism and the fight for women's equality and the right to vote, which allowed more middle-class women to seek independence and autonomy from men, economically as well as emotionally. While in the nineteenth century, women who "stepped out of line" from Victorian gender norms were deemed sexually promiscuous, in the twentieth century, they were increasingly condemned as lesbians.<sup>340</sup> From newspaper editorials to medical case studies, connections were drawn between women's increasing entry into equal citizenship and a lack of femininity. Ivan Bloch, one of the first German sexologists, wrote that "there is no doubt that in the 'Woman's Movement'...homosexual women have played a notable part. Indeed, according to one author, the 'Woman's Question' is mainly the question regarding the destiny of virile homosexual women."<sup>341</sup> Havelock Ellis also connected sexual inversion to feminism, arguing that the latter was influencing the former.<sup>342</sup> A 1917 *New York Times* article consulted a doctor who noted that "men's fears that the vote might make women more mannish was scientifically groundless," yet concern about the future of the sexes due to women's changing role was nonetheless an issue for many at this time.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> Peiss, 1986, p. 28; Chauncey, 1994, p. 9. The lack of a public sex culture among queer women at this time also meant they were arrested less often than men were.

<sup>340</sup> Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987, p. 159.

<sup>341</sup> Ivan Bloch, *The Sexual Life of Our Time: In Its Relations to Modern Civilization*, 1906, p. 529.

<sup>342</sup> Faderman, 1991, p. 46.

<sup>343</sup> "Lectures Deluxe for Women Voters," *The New York Times*, Nov. 26, 1917, p. 13.

Also significant was the ubiquity of the theories of sexologists – and in particular, the theories of Freud – as they trickled down to the middle-class via popular cultural texts and productions. The concept of the “female invert” was slowly being replaced with the notion of a homosexual identity, which separated gender presentation from sexual preference or “sexual object choice.”<sup>344</sup> However, it was still common to associate masculine characteristics with lesbianism, and feminine women were still assumed to be “normal” and not queer – or if they were, they were likely influenced by their environment and could possibly be “set straight.” Indeed, Havelock Ellis often assumed feminine women were passively coaxed into relationships with more masculine women, as feminine female inverts were an impossibility under his rubric.<sup>345</sup>

This move from the “invert” to the “lesbian” or “homosexual” was an uneven development: the main character in the 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*, the most popular lesbian-themed book of the first half of the twentieth century, referred to herself as an invert, despite the fact that the term lesbian was entering the popular lexicon at this time.<sup>346</sup> Indeed, cultural productions dealing with lesbianism came into the forefront in this decade, influenced by the theories of sexual science, which further contributed to the mainstream knowledge of such behaviors and identities. In particular, the Broadway play *The Captive* (1926) and the novel *The Well of Loneliness* both greatly affected the increasing conversations about women loving women. Notably, both were European imports, the former written by French playwright Edouard Bourdet, and the latter by the

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<sup>344</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. 1905, p. 23; Chauncey, 1983, p. 106.

<sup>345</sup> Ellis, 1901, p. 133.

<sup>346</sup> Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2005 (1928), p. 167.

British author Radclyffe Hall. Both the Broadway play and the novel were charged with promoting immoral material which led to obscenity trials, further casting lesbianism as a taboo, deviant subject regardless of the popularity of both texts: *The Captive* had “the most anxiously awaited opening” on Broadway “in recent memory,” while *The Well of Loneliness* was a best seller, with over 20,000 copies sold in just the first month the book was available in the U.S.<sup>347</sup>

As public interest in homosexuality reached a high point, lesbianism was understood as a problem relating not only to lesbians themselves but also to the mass heterosexual audience. In 1928, Samuel Schmalhausen asked, “How does it happen that the world has suddenly awakened to the startlingly wide existence among persons of high and low degree of homosexual attachments?”<sup>348</sup> Sherie Inness argues that this increased popular interest in homosexuality was a logical outcome of the era's fascination with Freud and as well as sexuality in general; Schmalhausen further remarked that “Freud’s high-power emphasis on sex has persuaded a whole world to pay attention to obscure realities long denied as non-existent.”<sup>349</sup> Indeed, medical research utilizing interviews could no longer avoid these realities; one of the first American studies to poll a large group of white middle-class women on their sexuality was Katherine Bement Davis’ 1929 study *Factors in the Sex Life of Twenty-Two Hundred Women*, which found that feelings or actions of same-sex desire were not uncommon among white college-educated women.

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<sup>347</sup> Kaier Curtin, *We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians: The Emergence of Lesbians and Gay Men on the American Stage*. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987, p. 43; “Police Seize Novel By Radclyffe Hall,” *The New York Times*, January 12, 1929, p. 3.

<sup>348</sup> Samuel D. Schmalhausen, “The Freudian Emphasis on Sex,” *Why We Misbehave*. Macaulay Company, 1928, p. 23.

<sup>349</sup> Sherrie A. Inness, *The Lesbian Menace: Ideology, Identity, and the Representation of Lesbian Life*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997, pp. 16-18; Schmalhausen, 1928, p. 21.

Davis discovered that fifty percent of the women surveyed had at one time experienced “intense emotional relations with other women.” Of these, one-quarter said that their relationships had progressed to “overt homosexual behavior.”<sup>350</sup> Thus, 250 of the 2,200 women interviewed had admitted to experiencing same-sex behavior, demonstrating that the increasing visibility of lesbianism in this era was not just connected to a few sexologists’ case studies or a novel or play but reflected women’s actual behaviors.

Specific concerns over the increasing visibility of lesbians compared to that of gay men arose in part because the popular theories of Havelock Ellis and Freud saw relationships between women as “a retreat not only from adult female sexuality but from the maternal and marital roles and responsibilities conventionally attached to it.”<sup>351</sup> Indeed, in the first decade of the century, before this growing concern was regularly discussed in the press, a generation of economically privileged white women entered universities and the professions and went on to marry and have children at much lower rates than prior generations.<sup>352</sup> For example, 47 percent of the women who graduated from the University of Michigan between 1889 and 1908 did not get married.<sup>353</sup> Such statistics were much more troublesome given that men who attended college were still likely to marry and father children, thus placing women at the center of this

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<sup>350</sup> Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982, p. 64.

<sup>351</sup> Erin G. Carlston, “‘A Finer Differentiation:’ Female Homosexuality and the American Medical Community, 1926-1940,” *Science and Homosexualities*. Vernon A. Rosario, ed. New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 180.

<sup>352</sup> John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 95; Leila Rupp, *A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, pp. 88-93; Lillian Faderman, *To Believe in Women: What Lesbians Have Done For America - A History*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999, p. 183.

<sup>353</sup> D’Emilio and Freedman, p. 190.

controversy.<sup>354</sup> While African American women were much less likely to attend college at this time, anxieties over the future of “the race” for both blacks and whites came to a head in the early-twentieth century.<sup>355</sup>

### Concerns Over “Race Suicide” in White and Black Contexts

The changes in traditional gender roles which accompanied white women’s increased participation in the public sphere and decreased involvement in marriage and motherhood led President Theodore Roosevelt to proclaim in 1903 that that such choices could lead to “race suicide” for the white race, a concern that was always focused more so on women than men.<sup>356</sup> Proponents of the “race suicide theory” believed that birth control was sinful, for the nation needed steadily growing populations and families, specifically of “Yankee stock,” or else immigrants, people of color and the poor would become the majority.<sup>357</sup> Such ideas had a eugenic component, as they prescribed the notion that certain races or stocks ought to reproduce more than others.<sup>358</sup> Women were specifically singled out to blame for any decreases in the Anglo population, due to the belief that women had more influence in the domestic sphere than men. Since the early-nineteenth

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<sup>354</sup> Dr. William S. Sadler, “College Women and Race Suicide,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, April 1922, p. 63.

<sup>355</sup> While 40,000 American women attended college by 1880, only 54 African American women received bachelor degrees that year, and in 1910, when the number of American women attending had increased to 140,000, only 658 African American women graduated with bachelor degrees. See Stephanie Y. Evans, *Black Women in the Ivory Tower 1850-1954: An Intellectual History*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007, p. 38.

<sup>356</sup> Linda Gordon *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Right: Birth Control in America*. New York : Penguin Books, 1977, p. 136; Simmons, 1979, p. 56.

<sup>357</sup> Gordon, p. 136.

<sup>358</sup> Tyler May, p. 62.

century, notions such as “republican motherhood” had stressed white women’s role in raising the next generation of sons of the nation.<sup>359</sup> Thus, changes in family structures historically often accompanied blame towards women in particular.

In 1922, the popular women’s magazine *Ladies’ Home Journal* ran an article entitled “College Women and Race Suicide” that decried the low rates of childbirth by women who attended elite women’s colleges. The top suggestion for increasing the number of children born to college-educated white women was “improved sex instruction.” The author, Dr. William Sadler, noted that, “in our efforts to teach chastity and purity, care must be taken not to present sex as an evil thing in and of itself.” Like many texts from the 1920s, this article sought to balance gendered, traditional morals from the Victorian era with changing norms that posited sexual relations between married men and women as healthy and necessary for a dynamic relationship. He argued, “false ideas of sex and sex relations have undoubtedly directly contributed to increasing celibacy on the part of many sensitive young women. Especially this is true when they have been unfortunately taught by unhappy mothers on the one hand, or abnormal teachers on the other.”<sup>360</sup> While the article did not insinuate elsewhere that same-sex relationships were in part to blame, this nod to “abnormal teachers” suggested that the author was aware of the increase in such relationships among college-educated women. From a eugenic standpoint, educated white women’s reluctance to have children was a

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<sup>359</sup> Paula Baker, “The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 89, No. 3, June 1984, pp. 620-647.

<sup>360</sup> Dr. William S. Sadler, “College Women and Race Suicide,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, April 1922, p. 63.

disservice to the race, as such women were in the best position to reproduce their “good stock” and pass on their genes and intelligence to the next generation. However, these women who went on to enter the professions were now in an economic position to make a life independent from men, unlike the young women involved in nineteenth-century romantic friendships, who had had no choice but to marry men.<sup>361</sup> Thus, the low rate of marriage and children from the first generations of white women to enter college was of major concern as such changes in norms of gender and sexuality were feared to affect the future of the race.

At the same time, while large numbers of black women were not yet entering higher education and the professions, the use of birth control was altering African American birth rates. Due to advances in medical technology, social changes and the influence of feminism, African Americans practiced and advocated birth control in the early-twentieth century in increasing numbers, and birth rates among the race declined fifty percent between 1880 and 1940, with public support for birth control among blacks evident from the beginnings of birth control agitation in the 1910s.<sup>362</sup> However, many were also troubled by these decreasing birth rates, along with fluctuating infant mortality rates and black morbidity levels, all of which contributed to heightened concerns about the future of the race.<sup>363</sup>

One channel through which such concerns were aired was the Universal Negro Improvement Association’s (UNIA) newspaper *Negro World*, the official organ of the

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<sup>361</sup> Faderman, 1991, p. 12.

<sup>362</sup> Christina Simmons, “‘Modern Marriage’ for African Americans, 1920-1940,” *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 2000, pp. 277.

<sup>363</sup> Reynolds Farley, *Growth of the Negro Population*. Chicago: Markham Publishing, 1970; Mitchell, 2004. p. 10.

immensely popular Black Nationalist organization led by Caribbean born Marcus Garvey. At its peak in the early 1920s, the Garvey/UNIA movement was one of the most powerful black organizations in the world, with over 800 chapters on four continents and over one million members. Garveyism espoused the worldwide liberation and self-sufficiency of all people of the African diaspora and derived much of its support from the black working class.<sup>364</sup> Garveyism emerged as a mass social movement in the U.S. in the post-WWI environment of black radicalism and cultural revitalization, bolstered by the racial pride of black soldiers returning from military service.<sup>365</sup> Garveyism's proponents expressed particular concern over non-reproductive sexual practices in the black community, especially regarding the emergent queer networks in the urban North in the 1920s as well as the increasing use of birth control.<sup>366</sup> The popularity of Garvey's ideology showed that not only the black middle-class was concerned with respectability and traditional gender norms; working-class and immigrant communities also subscribed to such values.

Like many nationalist movements, notions of racial destiny and sexual comportment and practices were entwined in the ideology of Black Nationalism.<sup>367</sup> An important aspect of Garveyism was building strong families to sustain the future of the race, and thus the duty fell on women to take up maternal and wifely roles, which

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<sup>364</sup> Theodore G. Vincent, *Black Power and the Garvey Movement*. Berkeley: Ramparts, 1972, cited in Karen S. Adler, "'Always Leading Our Men in Service and Sacrifice': Amy Jacques Garvey, Feminist Black Nationalist," *Gender and Society*, Vol. 6, No. 3, Sept. 1992, p. 348.

<sup>365</sup> Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1995, p. 324.

<sup>366</sup> Martin Summers, "'This Immoral Practice:': The Prehistory of Homophobia in Black Nationalist Thought," *Gender Nonconformity, Race, and Sexuality*. Toni Lester, Editor. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002, p. 24.

<sup>367</sup> Mitchell, p. 80.

positioned non-reproductive sex practices such as lesbianism as the antithesis of such an agenda.<sup>368</sup> Journalist John Houghton made this clear in a 1923 article in the *Negro World* newspaper, in which he singled out the ways that “some of the older women of the race” were “doing much to facilitate the plans of the white man that aim at the destruction of the Negro race.”<sup>369</sup> Black women who loved women were taking part in behaviors that actively led to the downfall of the race, and further, Houghton suggested that such nefarious behavior was playing into the hands of white supremacists. This line of thinking precluded the possibility that queer black identities could ever align with racial uplift and racial progress for African Americans.

As Houghton’s article was entitled, “The Plight of Our Race in Harlem, Brooklyn and New Jersey,” he focused on the urban North as a particular site in which these practices were manifesting, which undergirds the argument that the Great Migration contributed to the spread of the “immoral practices” which he described. Houghton discussed the machinations of such women and their efforts to attract young women instead of their ideal partners, black men: “They have a way of discouraging the young girls, and endeavor to fill the places of the men,” as “most of them prefer that they die maidens.”<sup>370</sup> Here Houghton introduces another sinister trope commonly associated with women loving women: that of the devious, predatory older lesbian.<sup>371</sup> Houghton’s reference to young women seduced by older women who nonetheless would still die as

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<sup>368</sup> Clare Corbould, *Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919-1939*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009, p. 22-23.

<sup>369</sup> John Houghton, “The Plight of Our Race on Harlem, Brooklyn and New Jersey,” *Negro World*, April 21, 1923, p 8.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid.

<sup>371</sup> Gallon, p. 110.

“maidens” was similar to the popular Freudian theory of his era that suggests lesbianism was an immature, stunted form of development, and that only heterosexual relationships and sexuality permit a girl to become a woman.<sup>372</sup> The *Negro World* journalist again emphasized that if predatory older women seducing younger women were not stopped, they would “aid in” the “extinction” of the race “within a given period of time.”<sup>373</sup>

Houghton’s suggestion that black women’s desires for other women was a conspiracy spearheaded by whites spoke to another common misconception: that same-sex behavior was not indigenous to people of the African diaspora, but was a European import foisted upon them by whites in a concerted effort to decrease their population.<sup>374</sup> This theory was also noted several years later in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, by the black newspaper’s foreign correspondent J.A. Rogers. Discussing interracial queer relations in Africa, Rogers argued that white women in the U.S., Europe, and Africa “teach the Negro women Lesbian practices entirely unknown to them before.”<sup>375</sup> Rogers suggested that the very act of queer desire between women was thus not natural to the race, and conflated same-sex behavior with a conscious aim to degenerate and weaken the group, which was yet another type of violence borne out of lesbianism, along with women breaching their reproductive role.

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<sup>372</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 1905, p. 98-99.

<sup>373</sup> John Houghton, “The Plight of Our Race on Harlem, Brooklyn and New Jersey,” *Negro World*, April 21, 1923, p 8.

<sup>374</sup> Summers, p. 34.

<sup>375</sup> J.A. Rogers, “Books on Mingling of the Races Stir Paris,” *Pittsburgh Courier* July 14, 1928, p. B1. Scholarly works that refute such simplistic notions include: Gloria Wekker, *The Politics of Passion: Women’s Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006; Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2-3, 2008, pp. 191-215.

The rhetoric of Black Nationalism was a site through which not only African American women who loved women, but also all black women, were ostracized for their behaviors if they sought to prioritize their livelihoods over motherhood. The murder cases that will be discussed momentarily occurred against this larger context in which non-reproductive sex was suspect, therefore, even before the trope of the lady lover murderer reemerged in the context of the urban North. At the same time, as birth control became more accessible and popular for all women who had sex with men, reproductive sex was on the wane and sex for pleasure and recreation was becoming more common, which served to make heterosexual women and queer women more similar than different. Thus, concerns for queer black women's behaviors and their assumed predatory stance towards younger, innocent women became one of the most visible symptoms of a larger changing landscape of gender roles and sexuality in the urban northern black communities during the early-twentieth century. The black press made examples out of queer black women while queer black men did not commonly come under such harsh criticism.<sup>376</sup> This was in part due to men's supposed lesser relationship to reproduction as well as the ways lesbianism was linked to concerns over feminism and women's increasingly public role outside of the domestic sphere.

While the black press would highlight the rare instances of violence at women's gatherings, queer black women, as a disenfranchised population, were realistically much more likely to be victims of violence than its agents. However, same-sex desire and

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<sup>376</sup> The most common portrayals of gay men in the black press were the reports on the popular drag balls that happened annually in black districts in the urban North. While journalists sometimes made fun of the gay men and female impersonators at these events, Kim Gallon argues that interwar drag ball coverage in the black press revealed a "moment of unprecedented tolerance for homosexual culture and life among the masses of urbanized African Americans." See Gallon, p. 222.

gender transgression did not support the ideology of respectability, which was a crucial component of racial uplift ideology that placed great emphasis on proper deportment in hopes of achieving equal treatment from middle and upper class whites.<sup>377</sup> As Evelyn Higginbotham argues, “the politics of respectability equated nonconformity with the cause of racial inequality and injustice,” and discussions in the black press on the increasing visibility of black women who loved women undergirds this point.<sup>378</sup> Add to this a type of nonconformity that could potentially undermine the stability of the family and the race, and it become clear that for the black middle-class northern establishment as well as working- and middle-class Black Nationalists, black women who loved women did indeed constitute a potent “sex problem.”

### **“Woman Kills Woman for Love of Woman”**

#### **Black Newspaper Coverage of Violence Between Women Lovers**

One of the first newspaper articles discussing violence between African American women that highlighted their atypical identities appeared in the northern black press in 1922. *The Chicago Defender* ran a short front-page article concerning a “Women Only” party on the South Side that was broken up by the police on Thanksgiving Day when “the piercing screams of a woman had penetrated the street.” After Barney Campbell “felt the knife blade” of Verna Scales, they were each placed under arrest and were later fined one hundred dollars, along with four other women present, whose names and addresses were

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<sup>377</sup> Gaines, p.5.

<sup>378</sup> Higginbotham, 1993, p. 203.

all printed in the article.<sup>379</sup> The six police officers on hand stated that there were often complaints registered by the neighbors against this house, “as the women who congregated there were those of an unusual type.”<sup>380</sup>

While this particular gathering was broken up because of violence, past complaints against them may have occurred merely because they were deemed odd, perhaps for their visible gender transgression, public affection, or their predilection for socializing without men. In particular, their women-only Thanksgiving gathering pointed to their “unusualness,” as such holidays were most often celebrated with family and loved ones, making their homosocial assembly appear more suspect. The newspaper’s choice to include the names and addresses of the women in attendance – while a common technique in the black press when reporting neighborhood events – was potentially damaging to the reputations and livelihoods of the women involved. However, by casting them as women of an “unusual type,” the article ostracized them from the community, thus making them appear less sympathetic to the reader. Indeed, printing their names and addresses could serve as a form of community regulation, in which dangerous elements in the neighborhood were rooted out.

While the term “lesbian” was not yet used in the black press to signify same-sex identity for women in 1922, the terminology of “unusual type” highlighted not just the women’s odd behavior, but implied that their whole being was infused with a form of otherness. Despite the ways that this article suggested that violence was implicit in

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<sup>379</sup> “‘Unusual Type,’ Say Cops of Women Caught in Raid,” *The Chicago Defender*, December 9, 1922, p. 1.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*

gatherings of such odd women, the text also reveals that African American women who loved women had created their own networks and were fashioning their own counterpublics and rituals for major holidays in northern cities such as Chicago by the early 1920s. While newspaper coverage of isolated incidents of violence or romance between women had occurred in past decades, the prior events occurred amongst isolated same-sex couples, and were not situated within larger homosocial groups or spaces such as this 1922 South Side occurrence. Thus, through reportage on such acts of violence, the emerging queer black networks of the urban North began to be documented in newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender*. The appearance of no these longer rare incidences among African American women was thus met with concern and hostility by the black press as the mouthpiece of the larger black community in the urban North.

It was not until 1926 that another violent incident at a gathering of African American women was reported in the black press, this time in Columbus Hill, an African American neighborhood on Manhattan's west side. This case – whose provocative narrative opened this chapter – received more coverage not only because it involved a fatality, but also because it occurred during the run of the notorious Broadway play *The Captive*, which received much media attention for its discussion of lesbianism. This created an opportunity to discuss the murder in Columbus Hill together with other discourses on lesbianism in mainstream white culture, especially since the play had illuminated the issue for the first time for many Americans. A French import written by Edouard Bourdet, *The Captive* told the story of a young, married woman seduced by an older, married woman. Both were white, feminine, and upper class, a fact that gave lesbianism a very different face than the sexological literature did, with its focus on the

'primitiveness' of same-sex behavior. *The Captive* helped make lesbianism appear more realistic to the white middle class, which may well have increased its threat. Many reviewers of the play remarked that the production was the first of its kind to broach a rarely mentioned subject.<sup>381</sup> One journalist wrote, "Lesbian love walked out onto a New York stage for the first time last night."<sup>382</sup> Historian Frederick Lewis Allen argued that the play "revealed to thousands of innocents the fact that the world contained such a phenomenon as homosexuality."<sup>383</sup> Conceptions of lesbian and homosexual identity, not mere behavior, were now coming to the forefront of public understanding.

Some theater critics tried to educate their audiences by explaining to their readers what exactly a lesbian was in their reviews of *The Captive*. For example, the critic for the entertainment industry publication *Variety* began by noting that,

The most daring play of the season is *The Captive*. And one of the best written and acted in years. Its topic has never been previously used as a theme of the American stage...*The Captive* is a homosexual story, and in this instance the abnormal sex attraction is of one woman for another. 'Ladies' of this character are commonly referred to as Lesbians. Greenwich Village is full of them, but it is not a matter for household discussion or even mention. There are millions of women, sedate in nature, who never heard of a Lesbian, much less believing that such people exist. And many men, too...It is something new for those who have never heard of the topic and naturally feminine curiosity will be aroused.<sup>384</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> However, *The Captive* was not the first Broadway play to deal with lesbianism; the play *God of Vengeance*, which ran briefly on Broadway in 1923, also dealt with the topic but did not receive as much publicity, despite the fact that the production also led to an obscenity case. See Curtin, 1987.

<sup>382</sup> Burton Davies, "Much Talked Of 'Captive' Opens," *New York Morning Telegraph*, Sept. 30, 1926.

<sup>383</sup> Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday*. New York: Harper and Row, 1931, p. 113.

<sup>384</sup> "The Captive," *Variety*, October 6, 1926, p. 80.

As New Yorkers read about the play that brought the subject of lesbianism from the medical books to the Broadway stage, the African American newspaper *New York Age* published the article which opened this chapter: “Woman Rivals for Affection of Another Woman Battles With Knives, and One Has Head Almost Severed From Body.” The article recounted a gin-fueled fight at a women-only rent party in which Reba Stobtoff attempted to decapitate her rival Louise Wright, for paying too much attention to a woman known as “Big Ben,” who was apparently the object of Stobtoff’s affection.<sup>385</sup> This article put forth a representation of lesbianism that varied from the standard depiction of feminine women as passive and masculine women as aggressive. Most notably, “Big Ben,” described as a “‘man’ woman,” was not the aggressor but was the object of desire that was being fought over by two other women. Neither was masculine, apparently, unlike in similar murders in past decades, which were usually enacted by a woman deemed more masculine than the other. The feminine woman was often murdered because she had chosen a male partner. However, as this article demonstrates, feminine women could also actively pursue queer relationships. Such a notion was particularly disconcerting, for it meant that no one could necessarily know who was queer by their visible gender presentation and that masculine “bulldaggers” were not the only problem that lesbianism wrought.

The *New York Age* sought to connect this Columbus Hill murder to the plot of *The Captive* in an editorial the following week, entitled “A Rent Party Tragedy.” The column began by noting the recent “tragic crime, in which one jealous woman cut the throat of

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<sup>385</sup> “Woman Rivals for Affection of Another Woman Battles With Knives, and One Has Head Almost Severed From Body,” *The New York Age*, November 27, 1926, p 1.

another, because the two were rivals for the affections of a third woman.” The editor pointed out that, “the whole situation was on a par with the recent Broadway play, imported from Paris, although the underworld tragedy took place on Columbus Hill.” That “the story of ‘The Captive’ should have found its parallel in this locality is a revelation of the fact that the frailties of human nature are much alike, whether in Paris or New York, regardless of complexions.”<sup>386</sup> Unlike the discourse of white sexologists who often attempted to distance “civilized” Europeans from same-sex behavior while associating it with more “primitive” cultures, here the editors of the *New York Age* attempted to demonstrate how such “frailties of human nature” occurred amongst women of European as well as African ancestry. If this new sex problem was wreaking havoc on the black community, at least it was something white and European women and their families were struggling with as well, and it was not merely endemic to one race.

As the editors of the *New York Age* compared the murder of one African American woman by another to a European play, they demonstrated the rhetorical violence that lesbianism conjured at this time. Though *The Captive* did not deal with *literal* violence between women, same-sex desire and murder were perceived as equally tragic events. In the play, lesbianism was represented as a sickness powerful enough to overwhelm a young woman. In the end, after fighting against it, the young woman surrenders to her desires for the older woman: in the final scene of the play she leaves her husband for a new relationship with the older woman. While the play and the murder held

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<sup>386</sup> “A Rent Party Tragedy,” *The New York Age*, Dec. 11, 1926, p. 4.

little resemblance, both events represented lesbianism as a potent and dangerous force that women – especially, young, feminine women – were powerless against.



**Figure 2: image from *The Chicago Defender*, Dec. 12, 1928, pt. 2, p. 10.**

In 1928, another murder involving African American women, this time in Chicago, also offered a motive of romantic jealousy. The front-page *Chicago Defender* headline, "Woman Slain in Queer Love Brawl" ran on the first of December, with the sub-heading, "Bullets Stop Roomer Who Tried to Move." The article recounted the

shooting of Mrs. Revonía Kennedy (Figure 2), who was a boarder in the Bronzeville home of Pearl Anchrum. A photo of Kennedy appeared in the *Defender* where she appears stylish, with bobbed hair and jewelry. She also looks respectable, contrasting greatly with the stereotypes of women like her appearing in newspapers at this time. In the photo's caption, Kennedy was said to have been shot by the woman with whom she was living. But what did it mean for two women to share a home at this time? According to the *Defender*, Kennedy had announced to Anchrum that she would be moving out, and in response, Anchrum shot Kennedy in the legs while she "sat on a davenport in the dining room." Anchrum denied the charge and offered up a third woman, "Mrs. Azelia Leghorn," as the shooter. Both were arrested, but both Kennedy and Leghorn accused Anchrum of the crime. After Kennedy died from her wounds, the *Defender* noted that, "further investigation by the police...revealed a strange love affair between the three women."<sup>387</sup>

No further information was given and the police were never clear about who was involved in this romantic relationship. However, if indeed Anchrum loved Kennedy and shot her because she was leaving her, this would be the only known case in the decade where the object of affection was killed, instead of a romantic rival. If Anchrum did shoot Kennedy in the legs because she planned to move out of her home, the location of her wounds is telling. It is also possible that Anchrum was involved with Azelia Leghorn and did not want Kennedy to move in with her, but the article does not express this.

Interestingly, all three of the women involved were married and referenced as "Mrs." No

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<sup>387</sup> "Woman Slain in Queer Love Brawl," *The Chicago Defender*, Dec. 1, 1928, p. 1.

similar titles were used in articles about other such cases. This suggests that the sexual subjectivities emerging in the urban North at this time were even more complex than the binary terms 'heterosexual' or 'lesbian' can convey: married black women took part in same-sex relationships despite their legal ties to men.

Census information reveals that Revonia Kennedy was a southern migrant born Revonia Jones in Franklin County, Tennessee, 1897. Her parents, James, a day laborer, and Nora, who raised six children, were born at the end of the Civil War. Both of them could read and write.<sup>388</sup> In 1918, at the age of twenty-one, Revonia Jones married Lawrence Kennedy in Chicago.<sup>389</sup> No other information about their marriage is available, nor are divorce records extant, but Kennedy's death certificate lists her as single.<sup>390</sup> It describes her as fatally shot "by her landlady, Pearl Anchrum" during a quarrel.

Curiously, the case was also listed as "related to Prohibition" with no more details given.<sup>391</sup> Anchrum was acquitted of all charges in the shooting of Revonia Kennedy, for reasons not stated. Born Pearl Cornell, she was a Missouri native who had married George Anchrum in Chicago in 1922.<sup>392</sup> It is not clear whether she and her husband both lived with Revonia Kennedy at the time of the murder, but by 1930 she was living with him on the South Side.<sup>393</sup>

Though the Defender provided no specifics, they defined the incident between the three women as a "strange love affair." A police statement, thought brief, generated the

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<sup>388</sup> 1900 census for Franklin County, Tennessee, accessed through Ancestry.com.

<sup>389</sup> *Cook County Marriage Index, 1914-1942*, accessed through Ancestry.com.

<sup>390</sup> Illinois, Deaths and Stillbirths Index, 1916-1947, accessed through Ancestry.com.

<sup>391</sup> Accessed through "Homicide in Chicago 1870-1930" database, which compiled homicide cases from the Chicago Police Department. <http://homicide.northwestern.edu/database/9938/?page=Object%20id%20#28>

<sup>392</sup> *Cook County Marriage Index: Years 1914 Through 1942*.

<sup>393</sup> "Homicide in Chicago 1870-1930" database.

paper's headline, "Woman Slain in Queer Love Brawl." The word "queer" still generally meant "odd" in 1928, though it was gradually becoming a reference to homosexuality. For example, an article that year in the black newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier* reviewed a Los Angeles run of *The Captive*, commenting that "many 'queer' people from all over the world" lived in LA.<sup>394</sup> At the same time, two other stories in the black press about "queer love triangles" from 1928 referred to a married man who had a female lover on the side, and a man having an affair with his sister-in-law, respectively. Thus, "queer" events involving a range of departures from heterosexual monogamy, including same-sex relationships, particularly among women, which were requiring more specific language.

Also in 1928, Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* appeared in American bookstores. Similar in impact to *The Captive*, the story centered on elite white women struggling with "abnormal" feelings, focusing on a self-proclaimed masculine "invert." However, while *The Captive* was written by a man and focused primarily on the fear of married men losing their wives to women, Radclyffe Hall was in many ways fictionalizing her own story.<sup>395</sup> A sympathetic portrayal of female same-sex desire, the novel's short preface was written by sexologist Havelock Ellis, who validated the book's importance as a social, psychological and cultural intervention. While the book became the object of an obscenity trial in the U.K., and Hall was accused of corrupting minds "open to immoral influence," the publicity only further piqued American curiosity.<sup>396</sup> Not

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<sup>394</sup> George S. Schuyler, "Views and Reviews," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 21, 1928, p. A8.

<sup>395</sup> Esther Newton, "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman," *Signs*, Vol. 9, No. 4, Summer 1984, p. 559.

<sup>396</sup> "Police Seize Novel By Radclyffe Hall," *The New York Times*, January 12, 1929, p. 3.

to be outdone, the U.S. mounted its own obscenity trial, which eventually found the novel acceptable because it lacked sexually explicit passages.<sup>397</sup> It is not likely that either *The Captive* or *The Well of Loneliness* introduced the American public to the topic of lesbianism in the 1920s, but they certainly increased public knowledge and interest in the subject.

While Radclyffe Hall's characters were elite British women, her theme of lesbianism attracted the interest of some in New York's African American community. For example, in February 1929, Edgar M. Grey wrote an article for the Harlem-based *Inter-State Tattler* newspaper in the middle of *The Well of Loneliness* obscenity trial. "Are Women Lovers Harmful?" he asked his readers, noting that a new book pertained to "the love affairs between two women" without naming the novel in question. The book's author, Grey continued, argues that women "addicted to the habit" are "victims of a condition growing out of certain 'pre-natal' influences over which they have no control." Grey adds that he has "no quarrel" with her theory.<sup>398</sup> He then goes on to list other experts that also subscribe to this theory, including Freud, Havelock Ellis, and Krafft-Ebing, yet notably while he speaks of "perversion among women" he never uses the words "homosexuality" or "lesbianism." Grey demonstrates cultural capital by citing European thinkers and medical theories, but he also distances himself from the topic by expressing concern over the growing problem of "women lovers" in the black community. His comments are worth quoting at length:

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<sup>397</sup> Leslie A. Taylor, "I Made Up My Mind to Get It': The American Trial of 'The Well of Loneliness, New York City 1928-29," *The Journal of the History of Sexuality*. Vol. 10, No. 2, April 2001, pp. 251-53.

<sup>398</sup> Edgar M. Grey, "Are Women Lovers Harmful?" *Inter-State Tattler*, February 15, 1929, p. 3.

We do not agree with the author when she attempts to account for the practice in *all* the cases of known perversion among women by the fact of a general assumption of prenatal circumstances ...most of the women who are lady lovers developed the habit, either from association with persons who were addicted to the practice, or deliberately in search of a substitute for a man. The habit and practices were developed either by imitation, or from a desire to explore some new sexual region in search of a thrill. In many cases, women who have been fooled by men revert to this habit of loving other women, in order to salve their feelings, and get even, as it were, with the sex of the man who had wronged them.<sup>399</sup>

Here, lesbianism is framed as a choice women make, often as a more positive alternative after negative experiences with men. Havelock Ellis had a similar theory that women whom men “passed by” chose female partners because they were not attractive enough for normal heterosexual relations.<sup>400</sup> Notably, the idea that lesbianism was a nurturing choice for women had no similar corollary for gay men, further situating lesbian relationships as exercising female agency during a time of changing gender and sexuality configurations.

Nevertheless, Grey’s argument that it was common for “lady lovers” to “develop the habit,” presented a potential problem for the black community. Understanding this he declared himself ready to expose and discuss this “sex problem:” married men must protect their wives and daughters from “this practice,” opposing “this class of perverts to the bitter end.” The “sex function” was “devised by Nature for the purpose of procreation” so that “the race of mankind should live on.” Thus, anything that interfered with procreation “is a matter which society should stamp out.”<sup>401</sup> He added that nothing less than the future of mankind was at stake.

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<sup>399</sup> Ibid.

<sup>400</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion*. Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Co, 1901, p. 133.

<sup>401</sup> Grey, 1929.

Grey then turns to the question of how the problem has affected the local black community:

The most terrible consequences have grown out of women lovers in Harlem. We have seen more than five murders in the year 1928, which grew directly out of this practice between a single woman and a married woman. Men cannot approve of this practice; women cannot approve of this practice; society cannot approve of this practice.<sup>402</sup>

Love between women led to murder. No longer was it necessary to summon the decades-old Alice Mitchell trial to illustrate this; Harlem's black community was now a site in which such tragedies regularly occurred among "this class of perverts."

Grey's reference to five murders in Harlem was not detailed, but one such case is well documented in the press in 1928. In this year, Harlem surpassed the Bowery as the site of the most Manhattan murders.<sup>403</sup> The *New York Amsterdam News* reported that of the thirty-four homicides occurring in Harlem in the first six months, half occurred among African Americans and half among whites. Of the former, one took place between two women. The paper recounted, "Edna Washington, 25, [was] stabbed to death at 38 West 136<sup>th</sup> St on June 19th. Alberta Mitchell, said to have been the dead woman's 'woman lover,' was indicted yesterday by the Grand Jury on a charge of homicide following her alleged confession."<sup>404</sup> Although Grey stated that at least five such murders happened in Harlem in 1928 alone, no other similar cases were covered in the black press that year in New York aside from the Mitchell and Washington case. Washington's death

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<sup>402</sup> Ibid.

<sup>403</sup> "More Homicides in Harlem Than Down on Bowery," *The New York Amsterdam News*, July 18, 1928, p.

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<sup>404</sup> Ibid.

can be traced at the New York Municipal Archives, as can the trial of Alberta Mitchell, and notably, there is no mention in any of the official papers of love between women – only newspapers discussed this angle of the murder.

The case of Alberta Mitchell and Edna Washington was well covered in the black press not only locally but also in other northeast and Midwest cities. However, the initial coverage of the murder did not suggest that same-sex desire played any role in the attack. The *New York Age* first covered the incident but their reporter was not aware of the queer angle of the case. An article ran with the headline, “Woman Stabbed to Death, Man and Woman Held.” The text goes on to state, “Mrs. Washington was separated from her husband” and that Alberta Mitchell and Beatrice R. Irvin were both arrested and charged with homicide after “quarrelling over the affections of the man” which resulted in Washington being “stabbed to death with a small dirk.”<sup>405</sup> This article was the first one published about the case in the black press, which demonstrates that murders involving queer women were not singled out for publicity, rather, all such violent stories were fodder for newspapers. An even shorter article on the murder ran in the newspaper *The Brooklyn Eagle*, which was the only appearance of any of these murders in the white press. Again, the text did not mention anything about a relationship or jealousy between women over another woman; the headline “Negress Stabbed to Death” was followed by two sentences about Washington’s murder and the questioning of Mitchell and “Rae Irvis,” whose name was spelled differently in every article about the case.<sup>406</sup> However,

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<sup>405</sup> “Woman Stabbed to Death, Man and Woman Held,” *The New York Age*, June 23, 1928, p. 10.

<sup>406</sup> “Negress Stabbed to Death,” *The Brooklyn Eagle*, June 20, 1928, p. 22.

this case wasn't even provocative enough to warrant front-page coverage; the short story was buried in the back of both newspapers. The murder did not garner front-page headlines until it was revealed that it concerned an all-female love triangle.

One week later, a front-page article in the *New York Amsterdam News* blared the awkward headline, "Woman Kills Woman for Love of Woman," with the subheading, "Police Say This Condition Is All Too Prevalent in This Community." The article began, "A death struggle between two women for the love of another woman brought into the spotlight recently a condition, the police say, which is all too prevalent in this community."<sup>407</sup> Washington and her confessed killer, Mitchell, were both in their mid-twenties and lived together at the same address on West 136<sup>th</sup> Street in Harlem. The article stated that "their object of affection was said to be Beatrice Ray Arvis," who was also in her mid-twenties and living in Harlem. It is not clear whether the roommates were a couple and Washington also desired Arvis, or if the two were friends who both were involved with or romantically interested in Arvis. Considering that the police were positive that same-sex desire was a key to the case, it is odd that the reporter did not give more details. Since Mitchell also accused Arvis of killing Washington, perhaps Washington desired Arvis and Mitchell desired Washington. There is not enough information to make it clear whether Mitchell killed her lover or her rival.

The article also notes that their neighbors, "Zena Tate and Emma Barrett, both of 36 West 136<sup>th</sup> street, called at the house and learned of the tragedy" and went on to call the police, which suggests that Tate and Barrett may have also been a couple that was

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<sup>407</sup> "Woman Kills Woman for Love of Woman," *The New York Amsterdam News*, June 27, 1928, p. 1.

part of their social network. When they arrived, “the windows were broken, furniture smashed, dishes dashed to bits and everything” was “in a state of general disorder.” The murder and the description of how their “home” was “completely wrecked by the death struggle” suggest both the dangers as well as the impossibility of queer relationships and home making. Further, the emphasized moralizing line, “police say this condition is all too prevalent in this community” positioned this incident as part of a larger problem in the black community of Harlem, and underscored that the police legitimized this as a serious predicament that needs solving. This case became national news in the black press; the *Indianapolis Recorder* ran the same story from the *New York Amsterdam News* in early July with the headline, “Women Love Woman, One Kills Rival.”<sup>408</sup> This suggested that Mitchell and Washington both desired Arvis, and Mitchell killed Washington to remove her competition. If this was correct then the murder was similar to most of the 1920s incidents recounted here, in which a woman killed not her lover but a rival, further revealing the growing networks of queer black women in the urban North.

Several months later the case went to trial, and Alberta Mitchell was found guilty of manslaughter. The *New York Amsterdam News* declared that Mitchell would serve time for killing her “‘mate’ who proved faithless.” The article began dramatically by noting that this verdict was “the final chapter in the tale of an eternal triangle – this time one in which the lovers were women” and went on to state that, “in a jealous rage because of the abnormal attentions paid by Edna Washington...to Beatrice Ray Arvis,” Mitchell

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<sup>408</sup> “Women Love Woman, One Kills Rival,” *The Indianapolis Recorder*, July 7, 1928, p. 1.

“buried a knife blade in her ‘lover’s’ neck June 19 and left her cold in a pool of blood.”<sup>409</sup>

The *Pittsburg Courier* also covered the outcome with an article blaring the large headline, “Woman Gets Manslaughter Verdict in ‘Queer Love’ Case.” The subheadings of the *Courier* article stated, “Sordid Affair Bared” and “Alberta Mitchell Found Guilty of Slaying Girl of Whom She Was Jealous.” The *Courier* reporter described Mitchell as “insanely jealous of the attentions paid Beatrice Ray Arvis” by “her friend, Miss Washington.”<sup>410</sup> Mitchell was eventually sentenced to four to eight years in Auburn prison in upstate New York for the murder of Washington, while the *New York Amsterdam News* article reported that “perverted affection for Edna Washington, 25, who lives with her, is believed to have caused Miss Mitchell to kill her roommate.”<sup>411</sup>

Notably, most of these articles tell a different story about who loved whom; did Mitchell kill Washington because she loved her or because she was jealous of her? Were they mere roommates or lovers? The private sphere, long associated with women, could function as a site for homosocial as well as homosexual behavior, and these articles underscore the confusion over the ambiguity of what it meant for two women to share a home. The high rents of Harlem and Bronzeville led to the creation of various living situations, from the establishment of boarding houses to renting rooms out of one’s home, that straddled the lines between public and private space. Opposite sex guests were often not allowed in boarding houses, as a safety measure against boarders using their rooms

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<sup>409</sup> “Woman Slayer of Female Lover Found Guilty of Manslaughter,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, Oct. 24, 1928, p. 1.

<sup>410</sup> “Woman Gets Manslaughter Verdict in ‘Queer Love’ Case,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Nov. 3, 1928, p. 8.

<sup>411</sup> “Four to Eight Year Sentence for Woman,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, Nov. 14, 1928, p. 1.

for prostitution or other illegal activities.<sup>412</sup> However, women boarders could still invite one another over, and thus laws based on ideologies of respectability often overlooked the possibility of queerness – creating space for it to flourish, even.

The discrepancies in the various accounts of the Washington murder expose the confusion of reporters and detectives as they came to grips with the newly emerging types of living arrangements and relationships that black women were now practicing. The differing accounts in the various newspapers of who killed whom and why reveal the inscrutability of female romantic relationships and male journalists' inability to understand how such relationships functioned without the difference of sex. And yet, it is also possible that queer desire was not at the heart of some, or all, of these cases, and, the journalists simply utilized the growing interest in lesbianism, and its implicit connection to violence, to entice their readers. However, such a hypothesis puts the journalistic integrity of the black press into question, which is problematic as well. Editors' use of terms such as "mate" and "lover" in quotes shows that journalists did not want to suggest that these relationships paralleled heterosexual relationships, hence the "perverted affections," "insanity" and "jealous rage" of these women contributed to the violent outcomes of their story. Needless to say, similar stories in the black press about men who killed their female partners, or vice versa, rarely relied on terminology from sexology that suggested the perpetrators were pathological, though this epistemological leap was usually made when discussing such murders between women.

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<sup>412</sup> Meyerowitz, 1988, p. 112; John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle, *America's Main Street Hotels: Transiency and Community in the Early Auto Age*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2009, p. 112.

Through official records such as death certificates and census reports, it is possible to construct more of the details surrounding Edna Washington and Alberta Mitchell. Washington was twenty-four years old when she died, and while one newspaper article referred to her as separated from her husband, she is listed as “widowed” on her death certificate.<sup>413</sup> Both she and Mitchell worked as domestics, which was the most common occupation for African American women in the urban North at this time.<sup>414</sup> According to extant records from the murder trial, Mitchell had only lived at 38 West 136<sup>th</sup> Street with Edna Washington for five weeks before the murder occurred, while Washington had lived in New York for four years before her death. A 1930 census form finds Alberta Mitchell, born in Tennessee, listed as an inmate at Auburn State Prison for Women in upstate New York, where she worked as a laundress in the prison, and was also listed as divorced. Thus, Mitchell was indeed a southern migrant, while Washington may have also been one as well, for she was not born in New York either, although it is not possible to ascertain where she was from originally.<sup>415</sup> As the census information and death certificate reveal that both women were married to men at one point, this case further demonstrates that black women in the urban North who took part in same-sex relationships also had relationships with men. At the same time, the knowledge of their marriages and the lack of explicit mention in the official reports of the queer aspect of the murder suggests two things: such discourse was not acceptable in regards to women in

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<sup>413</sup> Edna Washington’s death certificate #17332, *1928 Deaths Reported in Borough of Manhattan*, New York Municipal Archives.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid*; District Attorney file, Alberta Mitchell murder trial, New York Municipal Archives. In 1930, sixty-three percent of African American women worked in domestic and personal service in the U.S., up from forty-two percent in 1910. See U.S. Department of Commerce, *The Social and Economic Status of the Black Population in the United States: An Historical View, 1790-1978*, 1980, p. 71.

<sup>415</sup> 1930 U.S. Census, New York State, Cayuga County, city of Auburn, District 8, page 33 of 34, accessed through Ancestry.com, 2/6/2013.

official state documentation, or that the queer angle of the murder was fictionalized or sensationalized in the black press in light of the established trope of the “murderous woman lover.”

Alberta Mitchell’s name did appear in a newspaper once more, right before her release from prison. A November 1931 article in Auburn’s *Citizen-Advertiser*, a local white newspaper, recounted a performance by “the ‘girls’ of woman’s prison” in which the “man killers, shoplifters,” and “gun women cavort[ed]” in a variety show entitled, “Jolly Minstrels.”<sup>416</sup> The article described the many talented women prisoners, including “dusky girls from Harlem,” who were “known now only by number,” and “came out of their shadow life” to sing and dance – several of whom were former vaudeville performers. Female prisoners packed the auditorium to its limit of one hundred audience members, and the crowd enjoyed jokes that were aimed at the male warden, physician, chaplain and dentist of the prison. The final section of the article bore the heading, “One Goes Free Today,” which noted, “One nimble young colored woman who was in the show last night will not grace the program this evening nor tomorrow evening. She is Alberta Mitchell, and she danced last night” in “high glee. For on those dancing feet she tripped today to freedom, her term in prison having come to an end. She carries with her the hearty ‘Godspeed’ of last night’s highly entertained audience.”<sup>417</sup> The article bore no mention of her crime, although the text included the histories of several other women prisoners who performed in the show.

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<sup>416</sup> “‘Girls’ of Woman’s Prison Blithe in Minstrels, Sing, Dance, Crack Jokes,” *The Citizen-Advertiser* (Auburn, NY), Nov. 24, 1931, p. 6.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid.

As the next chapter will turn to the black entertainment industry as an integral site of women's queer networks in the 1920s and 30s, this article offers a provocative moment where the homosocial, interracial space of the prison and the entertainment industry overlap. On stage, women prisoners were able to temporarily reverse the power dynamic in which male authority figures regulated their movements, by turning them into the object of jokes. Prisons and other reform-based institutions have functioned as an important site in the history of female same-sex desire, as the prior chapter demonstrated, as they offered a liminal space in which women were able to experiment with forms of sexual behavior and gender roles that were not acceptable in the outside world.

### **Conclusions**

Taken together, these multiple articles in the black press demonstrate that the discourse on African American "women lovers" and their emerging networks in the urban North primarily depicted such women as violent, jealous criminals. These articles served several purposes: they conflated queer female behavior with rhetorical violence against the black family as the popular Black Nationalist movement raised concerns about the future of the race. They further stigmatized southern migrants as unruly and immoral during the Great Migration. Lastly, they warned the black community about the increasing visibility and prevalence of this "condition." At the same time, coverage in the white and black press of popular cultural productions featuring lesbianism, such as the play *The Captive* and the novel *The Well of Loneliness* demonstrated that not only black women were romantically involved other women, which allowed black journalists to note

the commonalities among the races, and to take advantage of the popularity of the topic by discussing European sexologists, which was a way to present oneself as educated and knowledgeable about recent theories in modern science and medicine.

What these various newspaper articles do not reveal is the actual voices of the women involved, who are very rarely quoted. The articles do not describe how the women identified themselves or their relationships, nor do they offer many details about the women's lives outside of the acts of violence that made them newsworthy.

Nonetheless, certain facts can be extrapolated from them: black women gathered and celebrated together in their leisure time without men in New York and Chicago in the 1920s. Increased violence occurred during Prohibition, most likely due to the uneven and illicit nature of potent bootleg liquor. Women lived together as friends, roommates, and as lovers in Harlem and Bronzeville apartments and boarding houses. Black women who loved women no longer did so in isolation, but could form social groups with others who also shared their desires, and this led to increased competition for partners. Women were more likely by this time to commit a violent act against a rival than against their own lover, which was a change from the prior decades in which queer women were more likely to kill their former female lover who left them for a man. These changes reveal the growing networks of black women who loved women while insisting on approaching this issue without romanticization. Above all, these articles show that black male journalists, the primary authors of these texts, were troubled by the growing queer presence in the black communities of the urban North, despite the fact that such behaviors and identities were increasing in white communities during this era as well.

At the same time, aside from their use of sexological language to further pathologize their subjects, these articles were often no different from those detailing murders and violent crimes among working-class, northern, urban African Americans in general. Despite their differing objects of desire, these women shared many other experiences with their fellow southern migrants. However, the lack of similar articles about gay black men or white women and violence situates these subjects uniquely, positing that queer black women embodied a specific threat in the urban North at this time. Suffice to say, the majority of African American women who loved women in the 1920s did not enact violence towards their rivals, yet these newspaper articles offer an important window into how such women were represented in the black press. The articles that this chapter has focused on demonstrate that by the late 1920s, there was an oft-utilized trope depicting black women who loved women as violent and criminal, which did the cultural work of separating such subjects from the realm of the respectable and moral. Yet at the same time, read against the grain, these articles reveal that the Great Migration had brought an influx of women who loved women to the urban North, and thus a network of black women lovers were crafting relationships that may have not been possible in other times and locations. While the black press sought to show the impossibility of such a life for black women, and the irreparable harm such actions could bring about, women kept finding one another despite the growing social prescriptions against queer behavior.

**Chapter Three:  
“The Famous Lady Lovers”  
in the Early-Twentieth Century Black Popular Entertainment Industry**

In 1926, singer Bessie Smith, known as “the Empress of the Blues,” was one of the most successful African American performers and recording artists in the United States.<sup>418</sup> While touring regularly throughout the North and South, she had sexual and romantic relationships with her fellow female performers on the road that she hid from her husband, who served as her manager.<sup>419</sup> Tensions over the acceptability of female same-sex behavior in this milieu are revealed in an incident between Smith and Lillian Simpson, who was a dancer in her show and her lover at the time. When Simpson refused to kiss Smith backstage in the theater where they were performing, Smith threatened her lover by bragging, “I got twelve women on this show and I can have one every night if I want it!”<sup>420</sup> The touring circuits of the black popular entertainment industry, which were bolstered by the successful recording careers of women such as Smith, helped to constitute a queer black network in one of the few industries offering an alternative to domestic work for young working-class African American women.

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<sup>418</sup> While Smith was almost as popular with southern whites as she was with southern African Americans, northern whites did not embrace her “crude and simplistic” sound as much as their southern counterparts. Nonetheless, her biographer Chris Albertson states she “ascended to a level that no other African-American artist of her time and genre has reached.” See Chris Albertson, *Bessie*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 66, 7. Also on Smith see Paul Oliver, *The Story of the Blues*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1969; Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls; Blues Queens of the 1920s*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988; Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1998; Michelle R. Scott, *Blues Empress in Black Chattanooga: Bessie Smith and the Emerging Urban South*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008.

<sup>419</sup> Albertson, p. x.

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

By 1929, such networks were becoming visible to men who worked in the entertainment industry. They began to rail against the growing visibility of lesbianism in the urban North. That year, for example, pioneering African American theater producer and critic Salem Tutt Whitney penned a column for *The New York Amsterdam News* arguing that all queer women in the theater world should be fired. Whitney wrote, “I have been informed that several performers who are now employed will soon be without their jobs because of transgressions they have committed....The edict has gone forth that the Lesbians must go....There can be no reasonable excuse set forth in defense of the Lesbian.”<sup>421</sup> Whitney’s use of the word “lesbian” to connote female same-sex desire is especially noteworthy, as it was one of the earliest appearances of the term in the black press.<sup>422</sup> Though the budding networks of female entertainers enabled women to act on their desires and craft new relationships that suited their needs, producers like Whitney found such female same-sex attraction “abnormal” and “reprehensible.”<sup>423</sup>

This chapter examines the experiences of queer black performing women in the segregated U.S. entertainment industries of the early twentieth century. It focuses on the strategies they used to carry on relationships with other women while performing and touring and negotiate their queerness on stage and through song. I argue that this expanding set of industries facilitated the emergence of queer black women’s networks in two crucial ways: first, through the workplace of the theater, which functioned as a gathering space for lady lovers in theaters and on touring routes, and secondly, through

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<sup>421</sup> S.T. Whitney, “Watch Your Step!” *The New York Amsterdam News*, Dec 4, 1929, p. 9.

<sup>422</sup> Prior to the mid-1920s, the word “lesbian” rarely took on the connotation of female same-sex sexuality in the U.S., but was usually an innocuous term associated with the ancient Greek poet Sappho and matters of love in general. For example, in 1917, the black newspaper *The Chicago Defender* announced an Atlantic City performance at an African Methodist Episcopal church by the Lesbian Rose Trio of Wilberforce University, which was a choir made up of both men and women. See “Doings Down Along the Jersey Shore,” *The Chicago Defender*, March 17, 1917, p. 3.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid.

their live performances and the dissemination of phonograph records and advertisements that hailed and invited already curious and knowing audiences.

This chapter begins with an overview of the contours of the black popular entertainment industry and the opportunities it afforded African American women in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The individuals whose stories are recounted in this chapter began their careers in segregated vaudeville and minstrelsy circuits, following a path laid out for them by a previous generation of women performers, such as Sissieretta Jones and Aida Overton Walker. Same-sex relationships between African American women performers occurred prior to the early-twentieth century, perhaps not unlike the long term partnerships of nineteenth century middle and upper class white women, which became known as Boston marriages. However, unlike the latter, there are few sources that document such instances, which suggests again that the Great Migration played a central role in the formation of queer black women's networks.<sup>424</sup> Further, the growth of touring performing circuits created more mobility and interaction, which facilitated same-sex relationships and the growth of their networks, and led to further documentation and representation of such relationships in print media by the 1920s. After this overview on the interaction of race and gender in the black popular entertainment industries will be a brief examination of the historical association between queerness and the theatrical world. Here I argue that, while representations of queerness on the stage have long been discussed by scholars, there is a dearth of analysis examining how the

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<sup>424</sup> One rare documented example of a women's relationship in the black theatrical world prior to the 1920s is that of performers Daisy Tapley and Minnie Brown, who lived together for many years. According to music historian Tim Brooks, Tapley may have been the first African American woman to record commercially in the United States. The two women met while performing in Bert Williams and George Walker's troupe in 1906, and they later owned a summer home together. See Tim Brooks, *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890-1919*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004, pp. 254-255. On Boston marriages, see Smith-Rosenberg, 1985.

theatrical workplace functioned as a queer meeting place. In focusing on women's relationships and labor in the theatrical world, my work expands the scholarship of Jayna Brown, who argues that because "work and play were blurred for black artists" women performers "reclaimed their bodies *in*, as well as *from*, the world of work."<sup>425</sup> Though Brown examines black women performers' relationship to modernity through migration, travel and touring, she does not turn to examination of that other important new emblem of urban female modernity – the lesbian. In my section on "queering the chorus girl" I will demonstrate that not only blues singers came to be associated with same-sex desire in this period. The next three sections look at the strategies that individual performers used to constitute their networks and navigate and perform their desires: Bessie Smith pursued relationships on the road with women in her troupe that she hid from her husband, while Ethel Waters toured with her girlfriend, the dancer Ethel Williams, by her side. Though her employer, Black Swan Records, sought to represent her as highly desirable to men, the "two Ethels" relationship was not a secret to many in the industry. Lastly, I examine the lyrics and advertising of "Prove It on Me Blues" by Ma Rainey, which teased audiences with the possibility of Rainey's desires for women. Taken together, these sections demonstrate how queer black performing women negotiated their desires and relationships in an era when same-sex desire was still pathologized, despite its increasing visibility in American urban cultures and prevalence in the entertainment world.

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<sup>425</sup> Brown, 2008, p. 7.

## Race and Gender in Popular American Entertainment, 1830-1930

The beginnings of an organized U.S. popular entertainment industry beyond local markets can be traced to the advent of blackface minstrelsy, which arose in the early-nineteenth century. Minstrel shows were generally performed by and for white working-class men during the 1840s and beyond. Performances involved white men “blackening up” with burnt cork to mimic and caricature black men. Early minstrelsy combined a range of theatrical forms, including elements of parody and melodrama. By the 1850s, it had institutionalized into a format that featured three acts including an olio, or medley, and a scene set on a plantation. Such performances became large-scale entertainments featuring a variety of stock characters, which included the urban dandy Zip Coon and the “slow-witted rural slave,” Jim Crow.<sup>426</sup> Minstrelsy’s popularity and ubiquity – along with its ribald content – set it apart from high culture and the dramas and tragedies of the “legitimate” stage.<sup>427</sup> With the ascendancy of industrial modes of production, whites saw African Americans as representing qualities no longer useful in an industrial age of time management and self-control, such as overt eroticism and carefree leisure. These putatively primitive qualities were performed through blackface minstrelsy, which poked

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<sup>426</sup> Kevern Verney, *African Americans and U.S. Popular Culture*. New York and London, Routledge, 2013, pp. 3-4. On the history of blackface minstrelsy in the U.S. also see: Robert Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1974; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1993; Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997; Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998; W.T. Lhamon, Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.

<sup>427</sup> See Lott. However, as Lawrence Levine points out, Shakespeare was commonly quoted and burlesqued in nineteenth century minstrel shows. Despite their crudeness of content and audience, minstrel shows played with distinctions now perceived as delineating high and low culture, underscoring Levine’s argument that the bifurcation of high and low culture was not consolidated until the turn of the twentieth century. On the rise of the term “legitimate” see Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988, pp. 75-76.

fun at African Americans' innate "immaturity" and incapacity for modern forms of self-discipline while also providing a space for whites to feel momentarily free of such market-driven behavioral codes.<sup>428</sup> Minstrelsy also exerted a major influence on the growth of popular music at this time. Publishers made sheet music of songs from minstrel shows available to the public, and both black and white composers competed for the sheet music market.<sup>429</sup>

On the minstrel stage it was improper for white women to appear in such "lowbrow" performances, so white men impersonated both black and female characters. Minstrel songs about the relationships between men and women were called "wench songs," and the female impersonators who sang them were the "wenches." The songs warned women to behave or they would be sold or abandoned.<sup>430</sup> By the 1870s and 1880s, black men also began to star in minstrel shows, and several African American troupes such as Callender's Colored Minstrels and the Georgia Minstrels became popular. Female impersonation was notably absent from these troupes. Though a parallel history of African American actors in "highbrow" dramas and tragedies existed for much of the nineteenth century, not till the end of the century did significant numbers of black performers enter the culture industries; the majority did so through minstrel companies. Indeed, most of the 1,490 black performers listed in the 1890 U.S. census were part of

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<sup>428</sup> David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race & the Making of the American Working Class*. London and New York, Verso, 1991.

<sup>429</sup> Ken Emerson, *Doo-dah!: Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1998; Errol Hill and James V. Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 101.

<sup>430</sup> Annemarie Bean, "Black Minstrelsy and Double Inversion, Circa 1890," *African American Performance and Theater History*. Harry Justin Elam and David Krasner, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 173.

minstrel companies.<sup>431</sup>

The 1890s was a very important decade in the history of African American popular entertainment for multiple reasons: women finally became central players in performances, new theatrical and musical genres emerged, and different types of entertainment became institutionalized through newly national networks of theaters and touring syndicates.<sup>432</sup> 1890 witnessed the arrival of black musicals such as *The Creole Show*, which dispensed with the plantation-based humor of minstrelsy and instead featured female comedians and rows of beautiful chorus girls.<sup>433</sup> The most popular black minstrel act of the decade, the duo of Bert Williams and George Walker, used the stage not only as an artistic platform but a political one as well, garnering support for African Americans at the turn of the century. While most whites would not go see W.E.B. DuBois or Ida B. Wells speak about the struggle for black citizenship rights or the problem of lynching, they would listen to music and be entertained by African Americans, so these performers took advantage of their rapt attention. Williams and Walker utilized the stereotypes of minstrelsy to underscore the artifice and constructedness of the form, as well as to critique the system of Jim Crow segregation

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<sup>431</sup> Regarding the history of African American performers in “highbrow” dramas and tragedies, see Herbert Marshall, *Ira Aldridge: The African Tragedian*. Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1958; Samuel A. Hay, *African American Theatre: An Historical and Critical Analysis*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994; Errol Hill and James V. Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003; Bernth Lindfors, *Ira Aldridge: The Early Years 1807-1833*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011. For census statistics see Bogle, 2010, p. 37.

<sup>432</sup> As Richard Ohmann argues, the inauguration of national mass culture at the end of the nineteenth century was marked by increased use of advertising, the shaping of products and their markets, and the rise of industry associations, among other attributes. See Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century*. London and New York: Verso Books, 1996, pp. 23-24. Regarding the “massification” of culture across genres, also see James W. Cook, “The Return of the Culture Industry,” *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History*. James W. Cook, Lawrence B. Glickman and Michael O’Malley, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. Crucial to the emergence of these national touring networks was the rise of a national railroad system. See Janet Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the Big Top*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

<sup>433</sup> Brown, 2008, p. 93.

from the stage.<sup>434</sup> They did this by hailing their black audience, which was often segregated in the balcony, utilizing references they would understand but that would go literally and often times figuratively “over the heads” of white patrons seated below in the orchestra. Through this they hoped black audiences would read their performances as a critique of life in a racist society, and perhaps some white audience members would empathize with their plight as well.<sup>435</sup> Instead of employing female impersonation, black women such as George Walker’s wife, Aida Overton Walker, became crucial parts of the show.<sup>436</sup> Overton Walker was also a proponent of the dance style known as the cakewalk, and she brought this vernacular dance to both black and white middle-class audiences.<sup>437</sup> She championed the stage as a source of employment and self-actualization for young black women, extending her husband’s political usage of the theater beyond race to gender as well.<sup>438</sup>

Overton Walker was one of the first black women to enter into ongoing debates over women’s proper relationship to the theatrical field, which occurred just as African American women were becoming a larger part of commercial theater audiences. However, white women had been attending the theater in large numbers for much of the nineteenth century, so similar conversations about women’s relationship to the stage had been taking place for decades. In the early-nineteenth century, reformers began to be concerned about the increasing presence of prostitutes in urban settings, who often peddled their services in theaters, which were still dominated by male audiences at the

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<sup>434</sup> Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64, 6.

<sup>436</sup> Bean, p. 178.

<sup>437</sup> David Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997, p. 76.

<sup>438</sup> Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular of Race and Freedom 1850-1910*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, p. 284.

time. Concerns over the appearance of prostitutes in the theater was connected to larger anxieties about the growing visibility of working women and women in public.<sup>439</sup> However, as a growing number of female performers took to the stage throughout the century, they looked to middle-class female audiences as their main market, and these changing audiences brought more respectability to the field of acting for women and lessen the association between the stage and prostitution.<sup>440</sup> Expanding female audiences also led to the “feminization” of commercial amusements in general, as the tastes and values of female audiences came to constitute a large segment of the market for theatrical entertainment.<sup>441</sup> Overton Walker pushed against these still-relevant concerns at the end of the century – as well as enmeshed cultural stereotypes about black women’s specifically lascivious nature – and sought to bring respectability to her craft by positioning performance as part of “the uplift of all” and “the progress of all that is good and noble in life.”<sup>442</sup> Thus she infused the respectability of the stage for women with the language of racial uplift to further make her case and encourage black women to enter the profession.

Aida Overton Walker began her career in her youth with the troupe the Black Patti Troubadours, led by another important African American performing woman of the turn-of-the-century, Sissieretta Jones. A classically trained singer known as “the Black Patti” in reference to the famous white soprano Adelina Patti, Jones toured all over the

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<sup>439</sup> Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 1991; Sara Lampert, “Performing Women, Public Womanhood, and the Transformation of the Nineteenth-Century Cultural Marketplace,” PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2012, p. 105.

<sup>440</sup> Lampert, p. 8.

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>442</sup> Aida Overton Walker, *Colored American Magazine*, October 1905, p. 575.

Caribbean and the U.S. in the 1880s and 1890s.<sup>443</sup> Though first famous for operatic performances, her career was still connected to the popular music of her day.<sup>444</sup> By the mid-1890s, Jones often performed to segregated vaudeville audiences, despite her aversion to the separation of the races in theatrical venues. Vaudeville theaters were more available to Jones than concert opportunities, and likely paid better as well, as the popularity of the genre led to increased venues and smaller ticket prices allowed for larger audiences.<sup>445</sup> Both black and white music lovers were curious to see “the Black Patti” perform solo as well as with her troubadours.

With the formation of the Black Patti Troubadours in 1896, Jones’s troupe took on not only diverse vaudeville acts from dances to comedians and musical skits but also “coon songs.” The coon song craze had begun in the late 1890s, when ragtime music “made its stunning leap from African American underground culture into mainstream fashion.”<sup>446</sup> While the music industry and white audiences often did not differentiate between ragtime and coon songs, the former referred to a syncopated music style that became the basic for most popular American music of the twentieth century and the latter was a type of song set to ragtime. Coon songs were often sung by white women such as Mae Irwin and Sophie Tucker, known as “coon shouters.” These performances featured minstrel-based stereotypes and were vocalized with racial inflections mimicking southern

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<sup>443</sup> Brown, p. 118.

<sup>444</sup> John Graziano, “The Early Life and Career of the ‘Black Patti:’ The Odyssey of an African American Singer in the Late Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 53, No. 3, Autumn, 2000, pp. 543-96.

<sup>445</sup> Maureen D. Lee, *Sissieretta Jones: “The Greatest Singer of Her Race” 1868-1933*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2012, p. 95.

<sup>446</sup> Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged But Right: Black Traveling Shows, “Coon Songs,” and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007, p. 3.

African Americans.<sup>447</sup> Ironically, the white public's growing obsession with black vernacular music and dance emerged at the same time that scientific racism confirming black people's innate inferiority was on the rise, and Jim Crow segregation was being institutionalized in the South.<sup>448</sup> The desire for caricatured minstrel representations of African Americans as "coons" further dehumanized blacks, even as it opened up myriad professional opportunities for them in the expanding entertainment industries.<sup>449</sup>

In such a context, African Americans targeting the commercial stage had little choice but to take up racialized representations that had first been performed and vocalized by whites, which they complicated with layered meanings. The most famous examples were African American songwriter and performer Ernest Hogan's 1896 song, "All Coons Look Alike to Me," and the Williams and Walker show of that same year entitled, "Two Real Coons," both of which involved strategic forms of reinflection. These African American performers appropriated from whites the very right to perform and symbolically possess "the Negro" through demonstrating their superiority at portraying themselves.<sup>450</sup> The popular theater and sheet music industries had a symbiotic relationship at this time, and the coon song craze helped bolster the sheet music production of songs such as Hogan, Williams and Walker's, predominantly from the Tin Pan Alley district in New York City. These comedic, upbeat songs, while laden with racial stereotypes, were very popular in burlesque and vaudeville shows as well.<sup>451</sup>

By the 1890s, popular entertainments separated into circuits based on genre, and

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<sup>447</sup> Glenn; Pamela Brown Lavitt, "First of the Red Hot Mamas: 'Coon Shouting' and the Jewish Ziegfeld Girl," *American Jewish History*. Vol. 87, No. 4, Dec. 1999, pp. 253-290.

<sup>448</sup> Abbott and Seroff, 2007, p. 11-35.

<sup>449</sup> Ibid, pp. 11-12.

<sup>450</sup> Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last 'Darky': Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, p. 5, p. 28; Abbot and Seroff, p. 4.

<sup>451</sup> James Dormon, "Shaping the Popular Image of Post-Reconstruction American Blacks: The 'Coon Song' Phenomenon of the Gilded Age," *American Quarterly*. Vol. 40, No. 4, December 1988, p. 453.

national vaudeville circuits developed under the direction of white impresarios such as B.F. Keith and E.F. Albee.<sup>452</sup> These men turned vaudeville into an industry, first introducing the concept of continuous shows in which a cycle of variety acts performed continuously all day.<sup>453</sup> They created booking offices that arranged the acts and performers for the theaters they owned. This was part of a larger systemic change, as a genuinely “mass culture” began to take shape that replaced local markets with national markets and the first nationally circulating periodicals opened up possibilities for larger audiences than ever before.<sup>454</sup> Historian Robert Snyder argues that “vaudeville arose in the middle of this transition and helped it along.”<sup>455</sup>

Vaudeville shows took place in theater spaces without alcohol, and brought together a series of unrelated acts on a single bill without a unifying theme. Such shows usually featured white acts although they occasionally showcased exceptionally popular African American performers such as the Whitman Sisters troupe, who got their start performing in their minister father’s AME church and appealed to both white and black audiences via their respectable appearance as well as their talent. Audiences at Keith-Albee shows and others were usually segregated, with black audience members seated in the balcony, which thus became derogatorily nicknamed “nigger heaven.”<sup>456</sup> These shows were differentiated from variety saloon performances because their promoters sought to present them as family-friendly and respectable. Alongside vaudeville, other types of

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<sup>452</sup> Robert Snyder, *Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1989; David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

<sup>453</sup> Frank Cullen, *Vaudeville Old and New, Vol. 1*. New York: Routledge, 2007, p. xvii.

<sup>454</sup> Ohmann; Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990*. Cambridge and New York Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 108.

<sup>455</sup> Snyder, p. xv.

<sup>456</sup> Nadine George-Graves, *The Royalty of Negro Vaudeville: The Whitman Sisters and the Negotiation of Race, Gender, and Class in African American Theater, 1900-1940*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000, pp. 40-41.

performances were consolidated into circuits that focused on different classes of audience, such as variety and burlesque. Burlesque arose from the homosocial male working-class concert saloon in the mid-nineteenth century, and became consolidated as a separate popular entertainment in the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>457</sup> While the troupe the British Blondes brought Americans a burlesque tradition that featured women mocking men through wearing pants and critiquing current events, by the time the genre transitioned into erotic entertainment via striptease at the turn of the century, women performers no longer spoke on stage.<sup>458</sup>

While erotic burlesque was not part of the new African American traveling shows that emerged at the dawn of the twentieth century, but the legacy of minstrelsy was inextricably tied to these southern shows. These troupes – especially the already mentioned Black Patti Troubadours – were springboards for some of the most talented acts of the next several decades, from pioneering recording artist Mamie Smith to Ma Rainey to popular blues singer Clara Smith. Ernest Hogan of “All Coons Look Alike to Me” fame started a traveling revue called *The Smart Set* in 1902, which was later managed by Salem Tutt Whitney. A review of their Philadelphia show that year in the *Indianapolis Freeman* declared, “It is generally conceded by all who saw the show that it is the greatest Negro show ever seen in this country. The scenery, costumes, pretty girls and up-to-date musical numbers put the ‘Smart Set’ in the front rank of all colored shows.”<sup>459</sup> *The Smart Set* featured comedy acts where the performers spoke directly to the audience, which helped increase their popularity by making the viewers connect and

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<sup>457</sup> Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991, p. 178.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>459</sup> “Smart Set Captivates Philadelphia,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, Nov. 8, 1902, p. 5.

relate to the performers.<sup>460</sup>

In 1914, another African American touring troupe, Alexander Tolliver's Smart Set, began to gain notoriety for their talented performers who combined minstrelsy, blues, and early jazz in their performances, which usually took place under canvas tents that they brought with them on the road. Such southern vaudeville touring acts thus became known as "tent shows." These shows usually performed to segregated audiences; in 1917, South Carolina even legally required separate entrances at tent shows for white and black customers.<sup>461</sup> Notably, while most black vaudevillians performed in large revues in this era, white vaudevillians usually performed and travelled as solo acts, duets or quartets. Traveling through the South in large groups created safety in numbers for blacks, and as most black theaters were in the South it was also cheaper to travel as a unit.<sup>462</sup> Vaudeville entrepreneur Alexander Tolliver's blatant appropriation of the established name "the Smart Set" from Hogan shows that African American performers and producers were not always allies, but competitors for audiences and dollars. The most important performer to use this show as a springboard to greater fame was singer Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, who first came to prominence in Tolliver's show along with her husband Pa Rainey – together they were known as the "Assassinator of the Blues."<sup>463</sup>

Traveling vaudeville and minstrel shows brought new musical forms, such as ragtime, blues, and jazz, to black and white audiences in the South as well as the North. Women such as Rainey and Bessie Smith became known as performers of "the classic

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<sup>460</sup> Abbott and Seroff, 2007, p. 6.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid, p. 210; Gregory J. Renoff, *The Big Tent: The Traveling Circus in Georgia, 1820-1930*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008, p. 184, fn. 18.

<sup>462</sup> Frank Cullen, Florence Hackman, and Donald McNeilly, *Vaudeville Old and New: an Encyclopedia of Variety Performances in America, Volume 1*. New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 12

<sup>463</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

blues,” a style grounded in folk blues and the minstrel show tradition connected to southern working-class African American culture that extended back to the nineteenth century. Rainey’s style was more “down home” and less sophisticated than Bessie Smith’s became by the 1920s; Rainey was often accompanied by a jug band, while Smith preferred backing from performers such as Louis Armstrong who were more associated with urbane polish.<sup>464</sup> The classic blues was a genre sometimes referred to as “vaudeville blues” since singers drew on the stylistic exaggeration, comedic timing and extravagant costumes and accessories that performers cultivated on the southern vaudeville stage throughout the 1910s.<sup>465</sup> These travelling African American troupes were still associated with minstrelsy, and many black performers still “darkened up” for the stage into the twentieth century. While the popularity of blackface minstrel shows as a genre had begun to fade, minstrelsy which had evolved from “narrative dramas to chopped pastiche,” was highly influential on variety and vaudeville, genres that specialized in shorts skits, acts, songs and dancing by large troupes of performers.<sup>466</sup> The legacy of minstrelsy and its racial caricatures made a strong impact on the newer forms of popular performance.

While vaudeville entertainment by black performers and for black audience had been becoming more and more popular and successful since the turn of the century, a booking association specifically for black performers and actors did not emerge until 1921 with the creation of the Theater Owners’ Booking Association (TOBA).<sup>467</sup> One of

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<sup>464</sup> Sandra R. Lieb, *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981, p. xii-xiii.

<sup>465</sup> Duval Harrison, p. 11.

<sup>466</sup> Lhamon, p. 32.

<sup>467</sup> Scholars have often incorrectly stated the birth of TOBA as 1909 or 1910. Preston Lauterbach argues that January 1921 was the actual birth of TOBA, as this *Chicago Defender* article asserts that the association was a “new organization” in the following article: “New Organization,” *The Chicago Defender*. January 29, 1921, p. 5. See Preston Lauterbach, *The Chitlin’ Circuit and the Road to Rock ‘n’ Roll*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2011, p. 304.

the reasons TOBA came about was due to the emergence in the 1910s of a growing networks of smaller black-owned theaters supported black vaudeville performers, and some of these southern theaters became anchors of TOBA.<sup>468</sup> However, these theaters preferred to book smaller acts than the 40 to 60 person large troupes of the travelling black tent shows.<sup>469</sup> Vaudeville had “taken the day” and “the houses and the public demand[ed] quick shows” and “cheap prices.”<sup>470</sup> Thus, the rise of TOBA represented a modernizing of the black popular performance industry, as shows became more fast paced and southern performers toured the urban North as well as the South. The emergence of TOBA also represented a politicization of black theater owners and producers as well, as the association was founded to ward off impending disaster to the “colored theatrical industry” as it was “threatened by the gross mismanagement and unfair dealings of the booking agents” who controlled the industry.<sup>471</sup> This association of theater owners – who were not all African American, but were of “decidedly ethnic origins” including Italians and Jews as well as blacks.<sup>472</sup> Their central offices were in Nashville and Chattanooga and were managed by Milton Starr and Sam Reevin, both of whom were white.<sup>473</sup> Some of more well-known theaters on the circuit included the Monogram on the South Side of Chicago, the 81 Theater in Atlanta, and the Monogram in Washington D.C. Musician Count Basie recalled that on the TOBA circuit, “audiences were strictly colored, but sometimes where was a special little section for a few white

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<sup>468</sup> Abbott and Seroff, 2007, p. 80.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid, p. 79.

<sup>470</sup> Juli Jones Jr., *The Indianapolis Freeman*, September 10, 1910.

<sup>471</sup> “New Organization,” *The Chicago Defender*, January 29, 1921, p. 5; Athelia Knight, “He Paved the Way for T.O.B.A.,” *The Black Perspective in Music*. Vol. 15, No. 2, Autumn, 1987, p. 171.

<sup>472</sup> Lauterbach, p. 304.

<sup>473</sup> Clovis E. Semmes, *The Regal Theater and Black Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 67-68.

people.”<sup>474</sup> Ma Rainey’s biographer claimed that while TOBA shows were aimed at black audiences, Thursday nights there were separate shows for whites.<sup>475</sup> The association clearly focused on black audiences but was aware that curious white audiences could be lucrative as well.

TOBA shows featured a variety of acts from dancers and comedians to ventriloquists and usually featured a headlining female blues singer performing with a small orchestra. Headlining acts that were always popular on the TOBA circuit throughout the 1920s included Ma Rainey – who was known for hawking her own records in the lobby post-show – as well as Bessie Smith, the Whitman Sisters, and husband and wife singing comedy team Butterbeans and Susie, among others.<sup>476</sup> While headliners were treated and paid well, supporting acts received low wages and poor accommodations backstage, had to put up with racist white theater owners and were not allowed to spend the night in hotels or boarding houses that accommodated white acts inadequacies that helped the association earn the nickname “Tough On Black Asses.”<sup>477</sup> At the same time, securing a spot on a TOBA circuit meant that one did not have to do their own booking and could be part a community of black performers where they could also receive mentorship from more experienced performers.<sup>478</sup> TOBA was also an important alternative site for black labor; jazz performer Mary Lou Williams grew up attending TOBA shows in Pittsburgh that allowed her to see “the possibilities of life

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<sup>474</sup> Count Basie with Albert Murray, *Good Morning Blues: The Autobiography of Count Basie*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1985, p. 92.

<sup>475</sup> Lieb, p. 27.

<sup>476</sup> Jay Joslin, “Chair Firm Turned to Recording and Helped Launch Black Artists,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, December 11, 1984, p. 1, pt. 3, John Steiner Collection [Box 30, Folder 6: History of Paramount, 1917-1989], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

<sup>477</sup> Duval Harrison, pp. 24-25; Albertson, p. 142.

<sup>478</sup> George-Graves, pp. 106-108.

beyond industrial or domestic work and poverty.”<sup>479</sup>

While TOBA dominated the South, in the North, the 1910s saw the emergence of cabarets, which were crucial incubators for many performers, such as Ethel Waters, who went on to greater success in the record industry, Broadway, and film. Cabarets rose to popularity as heterosocial dancing and public drinking became more respectable and acceptable among middle-class and elite audiences.<sup>480</sup> These venues did not have stages but featured singers who performed – in Ethel Waters’ case – on “a handkerchief-sized dance floor” while the audience “sat at tables jammed close together.”<sup>481</sup> Cabarets were known for their intimate performances, where singers walked around and through the audience while singing, often accepting tips as well. The large space of the cabaret, holding up to several hundred people in an era prior to the microphone, necessitated that singers walk around the venue so all could hear them. Some cabarets had a more sexually charged atmosphere than others, where singing women revealed their legs or underwear to the audience or certain audience members, and performers picked up tips with other parts of their bodies aside from their hands.<sup>482</sup> Waters earned a reputation as a talented singer as well as shimmy dancer in New York cabarets in the 1910s just before she broke into the record industry.<sup>483</sup> She performed with other black acts for mixed audiences, which became increasingly white throughout the decade.<sup>484</sup> At the same time, cabarets were also becoming more socially acceptable, as they spread from segregated vice

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<sup>479</sup> Tammy Lynn Kernodle, *Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004, p. 28.

<sup>480</sup> Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin’ Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, pp. 75-76.

<sup>481</sup> Ethel Waters (with Charles Samuels), *His Eye Is on the Sparrow*. New York: Doubleday, 1951, p. 124.

<sup>482</sup> Bricktop interview, Delilah Jackson papers, Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

<sup>483</sup> Waters and Samuels, p. 136.

<sup>484</sup> Bogle, 2010, p. 69.

districts to major theater districts such as Broadway.<sup>485</sup>

Before black women began recording the blues for what was known by 1923 as the “race records” segment of the recorded music industry, white women such as Marion Harris had been singing the blues for companies such as Columbia Records.<sup>486</sup> W.C. Handy, known as “the father of the blues,” even said of Harris, “she sang blues songs so well” that people hearing her records sometimes thought she “was colored.”<sup>487</sup> Thus white-run record companies were able to take advantage of the growing popularity of genres of music associated with African Americans without actually having to interact with black people themselves. While ragtime and coon songs had become central to American music culture by the turn of the century, by the 1910s they were often appropriated by white performers who enacted versions of styles African Americans had originated.<sup>488</sup> However, the blues as a genre had become primarily associated with African Americans by the early 1910s, and “authentic” blues were presumed to be sung by black artists.<sup>489</sup> A quite telling example of this belief is a 1919 Chicago newspaper article in which a man of ambiguous race was forced to sing a blues song to “prove” that he was black.<sup>490</sup>

Despite the association of “authentic” blues with African Americans in the 1910s, the white-dominated record industry had not yet ventured into recording blues sung by black women, assuming there was not a large enough audience of African Americans

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<sup>485</sup> Erenberg, p. 75.

<sup>486</sup> “Race records” was the category used to denote the record company subsidiaries created to sell recorded blues, spirituals, sermons and novelty songs to African American audiences; the term was used throughout the 1920s and 1930s and was eventually replaced by the category “rhythm and blues.”

<sup>487</sup> W. C. Handy, author of the song “St. Louis Blues,” is often described as “the father of the blues” for his pioneering songwriting and was also one of the founders of Black Swan Records. Peter C. Muir, *Long Lost Blues: Popular Blues in America, 1850-1920*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010, p. 20, p. 96.

<sup>488</sup> Suisman, p. 209.

<sup>489</sup> Hagstrom Miller, pp. 147-50.

<sup>490</sup> “Sings ‘Blues’ to Prove He Is Colored,” *The Chicago Whip*, Aug. 21, 1919, p. 2.

who owned phonographs to buy such records. While a “Negro novelty” section appeared in the catalog for Columbia Records featuring comedic skits and songs by dozens of black performers since 1891, middle-class African Americans wanted something more uplifting, and by the early 1900s some record companies featured songs by African American concert and jubilee singers, although their sales were often meager.<sup>491</sup> The recorded music industry had thus half-heartedly focused on spiritual and novelty records for African Americans at the beginning of the century, but there was a large untapped black audience that was satiated until the classic blues women were recorded.

1920 is generally regarded as the year that the blues record industry exploded, with the groundswell of interest in African American blues singer and vaudeville performer Mamie Smith’s immensely popular Okeh record, “Crazy Blues.” The dearth of blues recordings by African Americans did not change until World War I, in part because black participation in the war effort led to an increased racial consciousness and a politicization of race relations and inequities in the national discourse. In 1916, *The Chicago Defender* launched a campaign to get an African American woman to record popular songs for a major white record company, while simultaneously, black songwriter Perry Bradshaw approached record companies with a similar proposition.<sup>492</sup> By 1920 Bradshaw had succeeded in this endeavor when he secured the recording of Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues,” which sold hundreds of thousands of copies.<sup>493</sup> With this record,

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<sup>491</sup> Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Down Home Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994, pp. 196- 198; T. Brooks, p. vii; 257.

<sup>492</sup> “Demands Records of Our Artists,” *The Chicago Defender*, November 11, 1916, p. 4; Perry Bradford, *Born With the Blues*. New York: Oak Publications, 1965, p. 115.

<sup>493</sup> Samuel Charters and Leonard Kunstadt have argued that the record sold over a million copies in less than a year, but recently Adam Gussow has discredited this number, stating that this sales number is unreliable and may have been combined with sales of other formats, such as sheet music and piano rolls. See Samuel Charters and Leonard Kunstadt, *Jazz: A History of the New York Scene*. Garden City, NY:

the floodgates broke: white-run record companies now realized there was indeed an African American consumer market for blues records, and many labels hired black talent scouts to head South from their northern offices to find other female blues singers to sign to their race record sectors. And so, beginning in the early 1920s women such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters and Alberta Hunter – who were seasoned performers and veterans of the road from years of singing in tent shows, small theaters and cabarets – also became highly successful recording artists.

Therefore it was ironic when various white and black men in the music industry claimed that they had “discovered” these female blues singers, although by signing them to record companies they became more widely known and were able to make more money on tour as they attracted larger crowds than ever. Their visibility as successful performers with a large black following gave them credibility and convinced the white-run record industry that through marketing them via the established black press they could be commercially viable as recording artists. Furthermore, the myths that emerged of their “discovery” by the record industry became part of their legacy and celebrity and made them more in demand. It was, however, rare that the classic blues women made a substantial profit from their records; they were often taken advantage of through industry conventions such as stringent contracts that overlooked royalty fees and copyrights that placed song ownership with the companies and not the singers.<sup>494</sup> Alberta Hunter, for example, wrote the song “Down Hearted Blues” which was her first recorded hit; soon after Bessie Smith also recorded the song and her version was highly successful as

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Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1962, p. 91; Adam Gussow, “‘Shoot Myself a Cop’: Mamie Smith’s ‘Crazy Blues’ as Social Text,” *Callaloo*. Vol. 25, No. 1, Winter 2002, p. 40.

<sup>494</sup> Albertson, p. 37.

well.<sup>495</sup> In fact, Smith's record of "Down Hearted Blues" sold over 780,000 copies in the first six months it was on sale, but Hunter never saw a penny of royalties as her song was the first to be copyrighted by the company that owned her label, Paramount Records.<sup>496</sup> With the exception of Black Swan Records, which will be discussed later in this chapter, all of the record companies that developed "race records" divisions were owned by white men, but some of them, such as Paramount and Okeh, hired African American singers, songwriters and businessmen to help them select blues singers and develop their talents. While these companies were white-owned, African American artists and producers still played a large role in selecting musicians and recording them. Paramount's Mayo Williams, for example, only chose singers who were popular in South Side black vaudeville houses, and artists who did not sell at least 250 copies of a record were not invited back to make another.<sup>497</sup> For these reasons, veteran performers such as Rainey and Smith were obvious and profitable choices due to both their proven success from years of touring and the wide repertoire of songs they already had written and sung that they were ready to record in the urban North.

The process of recording for the race records companies brought the classic blues women into the North often for longer periods of time than they had spent there on the road. While they were spared some of the indignities they suffered in the South, the de facto segregation of the North was often more surreal than the explicit de jure segregation of the South. For example, when Ma Rainey came to Chicago to record for Paramount,

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<sup>495</sup> It was quite common for popular classic blues songs to be recorded and released in different versions by multiple singers.

<sup>496</sup> Alex Van Der Tuuk, *Paramount's Rise and Fall: A History of the Wisconsin Chair Company and its Recording Activities*. Denver: Mainspring Press, 2003, p. 65.

<sup>497</sup> William Howland Kenney, *Chicago Jazz: A Cultural History, 1904-1930*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 126.

she would arrive in her personal car with a chauffeur that would park behind the studio. Rainey then had to enter through the back door of the building.<sup>498</sup> Bessie Smith tried out for black-run Black Swan Records before signing to Columbia in 1923, but when she announced, “Hold on, let me spit” prior to a recording take, Harry Pace, the company president turned down Smith, finding her behavior too unrefined for their northern urban(e) middle-class tastes.<sup>499</sup> When Frank Walker of Columbia Records had his African American talent scout Clarence Williams bring Smith to his New York recording studio for the first time, he recalled that “no more than fifty people up North” had heard Bessie Smith before he signed her to her label. He went on to say, when she arrived she was “so gosh-darn country – real southern. She looked like anything *but* a singer, she looked about seventeen, tall and fat and scared to death.”<sup>500</sup> However, as her biographer notes, Smith was a seasoned performer by this point – who was closer to 27 than 17 in 1923 as well – and her cousin Ruby Walker argued that nothing about the process of singing could make Smith scared.<sup>501</sup> It seems as though Frank Walker wanted to create a “before and after” myth around Smith, as if years of touring in the segregated South would not have given her polish and vast experience along with a good dose of street smarts, yet perhaps to him the greater difference was the sophistication and technological advancement of the North which he contrasted to the immaturity of the primitive South. Blues musician Zutty Singleton recalled an anecdote that suggests Smith’s dexterity with recording once she had a little experience with it: she once had a stage set that recreated a

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<sup>498</sup> John Steiner Collection [Box 31, Folder 3: History of Paramount, Interview, Fred Boerner, undated], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

<sup>499</sup> W.C. Handy, Handy Brothers Music Co., Inc. press release, February 7, 1948, Box H-HD, Carl Van Vechten Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

<sup>500</sup> Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya: The Story of Jazz as Told by the Men Who Made It*. New York: Dover Books, 1955, pp. 239-40.

<sup>501</sup> Albertson, pp. 33-34.

recording studio, and she would tell her audience about the process of how she recorded her songs before singing them.<sup>502</sup> Through this modern process, the classic blues women forged a connection to technology and industry unlike few black women who had come before them.

While women had dominated the classic blues genre via phonographs beginning in 1920, by mid-decade the country blues, primarily featuring male singer-guitar players, began to supersede their popularity, beginning with Blind Lemon Jefferson in 1926. The two gendered genres were often pitted against one another by music fans, as one recent blues history notes in the book's opening sentence, "while female blues stars such as Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith were box office and record catalog hits, playing in big-audience venues with large instrumental ensembles, lesser-known male musicians traveled up and down the Mississippi Valley attempting to escape sharecropping and hoping to 'make it' as professional musicians."<sup>503</sup> However, within the genre of the country blues, there were also some women who sung and played instruments as well, and at least one of them was recently discovered to have likely had a long-term female partner. L.V. Thomas lived in Houston her whole life when she was not recording for Paramount in Wisconsin or performing on the road, although she "didn't like to be away" from home.<sup>504</sup>

While white-owned Paramount had hired African American talent scout Mayo Williams to bring classic blues women who could fill Chicago's TOBA theater, the

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<sup>502</sup> Lieb, p. 28; Zutty Singleton, "I Remember the Queen," *Selections From the Gutter: Portraits From the "Jazz Record."* Art Hodes and Chadwick Hansen, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977, p. 65.

<sup>503</sup> R.A. Lawson, *Jim Crow's Counterculture: : The Blues and Black Southerners 1890-1945*. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2010, p. 1.

<sup>504</sup> John Jeremiah Sullivan, "The Ballad of Geeshie and Elvie," *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, April 13, 2014.

Monogram, and other black vaudeville houses to their record company, when it came to the country blues, these northern businessmen were at more of a loss.<sup>505</sup> As the country blues were not part of the minstrel and vaudeville inflected classic blues that had come North with the Great Migration, record executives and even black northern talent scouts were unable to discriminate and “became frankly speculative.” As one Paramount field agent noted, “they figured they got one hit in ten.”<sup>506</sup> Thus, women such as L.V. Thomas and her musical partner, Geeshie Wiley, recorded their country blues for Paramount in 1930 without having established a reputation far beyond their Houston home, as field agents would come to town and ask music store owners about promising local talent. They were known not through playing tent show or vaudeville theaters but “country suppers,” Saturday picnics that would last from the day into the night.<sup>507</sup> While Thomas appears to likely have had a long-term female partner, and may have also been involved with her musical partner, Wiley, it is unclear if a city such as Houston in the 1930s allowed them to take part in queer black networks or if their relationships were as isolated as other women’s appeared to be in the decades prior to the Great Migration. While country blues artists primarily performed as solo artists, the classic blues women’s experience on the tent show and TOBA circuits put them into contact with many other women, which helped them form connections with not only partners but also friends and counterpublics of women loving women. Thomas and Wiley demonstrate that such relationships could also form in the South, but a lack of sources makes it unclear whether queer black networks were able to form for southern lady lovers at this time.

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<sup>505</sup> Stephen Calt, “The Anatomy of a ‘Race’ Label – part 2,” *78 Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 1989, pp. 9-30.

<sup>506</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>507</sup> Sullivan, *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, April 13, 2014.

In the span of a century, then, from the era of slavery to the era of Jim Crow, African American women's work on the stage changed drastically. In early-nineteenth century minstrel performances black "wenches" were performed by white men but by the end of the century, pioneering entertainers such as Sissieretta Jones and Aida Overton Walker emerged and paved the way for other talented black women performers. The emergence of national vaudeville circuits created a demand for more performers, and their northern urban headquarters were ideal locations to find new talent culled from populations of recent southern migrants. Once female blues singers began recording for the race records industry, the need for new talent became increasingly urgent as newcomers were recruited from the vaudeville stage and tent show circuit. In the theaters and on the road, black women performers created networks of friends, competitors, and lovers, enabling the emergence of queer black urban networks. The next section will examine the intersection of queerness and the theatrical world, a phenomenon has been examined by theater scholars but rarely with a focus on African American women.

### **The Historical Connections between Queer Identities and the Theatrical World**

There is much existing scholarship on the queer history of American performance and music, but most of it focuses on queer representations, though many biographies have examined the private lives of queer performers.<sup>508</sup> What is severely lacking is an

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<sup>508</sup> For historical scholarship on queer theater see Curtin; D. A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998; Alan Sinfield, *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999; Kim Marra and Robert A. Schanke, eds. *Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theater History*. Ann Arbor: University of

understanding of the significance of the entertainment industry's role in the creation of queer networks. Queer theater scholars have long maintained that this world was reputed to be a "haven for homosexuality" as well as for the "formation of dissident sexual identities" but few investigate why this has been so.<sup>509</sup> At the same time, these "dissident" identities have taken many forms beyond just same-sex relations, as the theatrical world has historically served as fertile ground for the emergence of a variety of new social behaviors.<sup>510</sup> Thus queerness has been but one of the threads of threatening or pioneering – depending on one's outlook – behaviors and attitudes that have emerged from the performance realm.

One explanation for the long-standing associations between same-sex love and the stage is the essentializing notion that "theatricality" itself is an innate part of having a queer "nature."<sup>511</sup> Such assumptions were rife in the works of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century sexologists.<sup>512</sup> Havelock Ellis noted that among sexual inverts of both sexes there was often "a tendency toward dramatic aptitude."<sup>513</sup> In the decades to come, there would more understanding of the "double consciousness" and "code switching" that

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Michigan Press, 2002; *The Gay and Lesbian Theatrical Legacy: A Biographical Dictionary of Major A Biographical Dictionary of Major Figures in American Stage History in the Pre-Stonewall Era*. Billy J. Harbin, Kim Marra and Robert A. Schanke, editors. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007. On queer popular music scholarship, see: John Gill, *Queer Noises: Male and Female Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Music*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995; *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity*. Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell, eds. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002; *The Queer Encyclopedia of Music, Dance, and Musical Theater*. San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2004; *Queering the Popular Pitch*. Sheila Whitely and Jennifer Rycenga, eds. New York and London: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>509</sup> Harbin, Marra and Schanke, p. 1; Sinfield, p. 6.

<sup>510</sup> Interracial love, for example, was another taboo topic that actors navigated on stage and in real life in an era when most were opposed to such relationships. For example, Ira Aldridge had trouble finding venues that would employ him in nineteenth-century London because many theater managers were shocked that he performed on stage with white women and was married to a white woman as well. See Lindfors, p. 176-77.

<sup>511</sup> Sinfield, p. 8.

<sup>512</sup> Perry Lichtenstein, "The Fairy and the Lady Lover," *Medical Review of Reviews*, Vol. 27, 1921, p. 372; Havelock Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*. London: A. Bonner, 1897, p. 123.

<sup>513</sup> Ellis, p. 123.

was required of those who loved the same sex and sought to hide this fact. But turn-of-the-century sexologists specifically viewed these dramatic “tendencies” as biological evidence of the invert’s innate difference.

While both same-sex loving men and women have been linked with the theatrical world, the stereotype has been connected to men and women for different reasons. Gay men have long been accused of being dramatic, overly emotional and woman-like, whereas characteristics associated with both actresses and queer women include emotional intensity, unconventionality, independence, and deviation from norms of femininity, especially those pertaining to the domestic, maternal realm.<sup>514</sup> Stereotypes aside, the history of the systemic censure and repression of queerness, and the possibility of social ostracization that shadows visible queerness, has led many same-sex loving individuals to perform artificial heterosexuality as a survival mechanism in their daily lives. As Alan Sinfield claims, “the actor’s work requires emotional flexibility and queers are used to pretending to be someone else.”<sup>515</sup> While this is true for both men and women, he also argues that “until the rise of feminist troupes in the 1970s,” lesbians have not “claimed theater in quite the same way as gay men,” who have enacted “their experience of themselves” as queer “specially through their experience of theater.”<sup>516</sup>

While Sinfield appears to be referring here to the relationship between queer spectators and the performing arts, and not the relationship of performers to the industry, various historical sources on queer female spectatorship conflict with his assertion. For

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<sup>514</sup> Susan Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000; Kristen Pullen, *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and in Society*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2005; Jody Medd, *Lesbian Scandal and the Culture of Modernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

<sup>515</sup> Sinfield, p. 9.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid. p. 12.

example, Lisa Merrill's book on the popular nineteenth-century dramatic actress Charlotte Cushman, *When Romeo Was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators*, looks at the artist's reception by female audience members, including some who became her lovers, and argues that Cushman's performances constructed a "virtual community" of women who were "empowered by her example."<sup>517</sup> African American performer and domestic worker Mabel Hampton recalled going to see the lesbian-themed play *The Captive* on Broadway in 1927. She "fell in love – not only with *The Captive* but the lady who was the head actress in it." Hampton repeatedly went back to watch Helen Mencken in the role of a young society woman who began an affair with an older married woman. She even found her way backstage to meet Mencken, who asked her why she liked the production. Hampton recalled answering, "because it seems like a part of my life and what I am and what I hope to be."<sup>518</sup> These examples refute Sinfield's claim that, prior to the late-twentieth century, women who loved women did not connect to the theater or experience it as an integral aspect of their lives that helped them discover their desires.

This chapter does not focus explicitly on the spectatorship of queer black women, in part because sources such as Hampton's account are quite rare. But it is notable that some of the women whose lives will be discussed, such as Ethel Waters and Alberta Hunter, met their female romantic partners through a performer/audience member

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<sup>517</sup> Lisa Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006, p. xix. Regarding white actresses in the early-twentieth century, while women such as Beatrice Lillie, Tallulah Bankhead and Libby Holman had relationships with women both inside and outside of marriage to men, historians have not analyzed their networks at length. See Faderman, 1991, p. 71; Watson, p. 136; James F. Wilson, "'That's the Kind of Gal I Am': Drag Balls, Lulu Belles, and 'Sexual Perversion' in the Harlem Renaissance," *Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theater History*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002, p. 281.

<sup>518</sup> Joan Nestle, "'I Lift My Eyes to the Hill': The Life of Mabel Hampton as Told by a White Woman," *Queer Representations: Reading Lives, Reading Cultures* (Center for Gay and Lesbian Studies). Martin Duberman, ed. New York: New York University Press, 1997, pp. 267-68.

relationship. Hunter's long term partner Lottie Tyler, for example, first came to see the blues singer perform at Chicago's Panama Inn and caught her eye, and Waters encountered her partner Ethel Williams for the first time when the latter was dancing at the Alhambra Theater in Harlem. These examples demonstrate that prior to the establishment of explicitly queer bars and venues – which were not available to women in many regions until the mid-twentieth century – nightclubs, cabarets and theaters were important meeting spaces in the urban North. Queer theater historian Bud Coleman suggests that cabarets and nightclubs have historically been more welcoming of queer patrons than the “legitimate” theater, where same-sex desire aroused more suspicion.<sup>519</sup> Most of the scholarship on queer performance history focuses on the “legitimate” stage of dramas, tragedies and large-scale productions that often attracted elite, moneyed audiences.<sup>520</sup> By shifting registers from “the theatrical world” to “the entertainment industry,” this chapter examines how black lady lovers lived and worked within expanding networks of an emerging mass culture industry that encompassed the recorded blues and touring vaudeville circuits in theaters, nightclubs, and cabarets in the South and North.

### **Black Women Performers Escaping Domesticity and Domestic Labor**

While many African American women became successful performers in the early-twentieth century, for working-class women and southern migrants without extensive formal education, the entertainment industry was often their only alternative to low-paid

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<sup>519</sup> Bud Coleman, “Cabarets and Revues,” *The Queer Encyclopedia of Music, Dance, and Musical Theater*. San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2004, p. 39.

<sup>520</sup> Important exceptions include Heap; Vogel; Wilson, 2010.

domestic work performed in isolation in white homes. The theatrical world, in contrast, was more interconnected although competition for work and romantic partners could be fierce. Domestic workers could meet other women-loving women in boarding houses, speakeasies and rent parties, as well as more conventional spaces, but theatrical work gave women access to social networks of like-minded, artistically-inclined, talented and hard-working colleagues.<sup>521</sup> As Phil Tiemeyer notes in his recent book on the history of male flight attendants, the subfield of queer history has not yet paid close attention to the role of the workplace in what he terms “gay community building.”<sup>522</sup> With few exceptions, such as Allan Bérubé’s work on gay and lesbian soldiers and marine stewards in World War II, and David K. Johnson’s study of the purge of federal gay workers during the Cold War, there has been little interest in the relationship between queer communities and the workplace.<sup>523</sup> I differentiate here between queer histories of “the workplace” and queer “labor history” because the latter has focused on industrial work and unions which have featured, but not concentrated on, the contributions of women.<sup>524</sup> This dissertation also draws on and expands on work by scholars such as John D’Emilio and Margot Canaday that examine how mobility and migration served as catalysts for queer world making.<sup>525</sup>

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<sup>521</sup> Clark-Lewis, 1987, p. 205.

<sup>522</sup> Phil Tiemeyer, *Plane Queer: Labor, Sexuality, and AIDS in the History of Male Flight Attendants*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013, p. 6.

<sup>523</sup> Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two*. New York: The Free Press, 1990; Allan Bérubé, *My Desire for History: Essays in Gay, Community and Labor History*. John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, editors. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2011; David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

<sup>524</sup> On queer labor history, see Miriam Frank, *Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014. A current example of this work that focuses on traditional industrial labor through a lens of gender and sexuality is Anne Balay, *Steel Closets: Voices of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Steelworkers*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

<sup>525</sup> John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, eds., *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983, pp. 100-113;

While the number of black women working in the entertainment industry is difficult to determine, the 1930 U.S. census counted 1,299 African American women working as actors, an increase from 521 in 1920.<sup>526</sup> This number was divided evenly between single and married women.<sup>527</sup> Considering the transient nature of this work, it is likely that there were more black performing women at the time than the official census numbers reflect. While there were no separate occupational categories for dancers or singers in the 1930 census, there was one for “musicians and music teachers,” numbering 2,836 black women. Over 7,000 black men also fell into this category, but numbers suggest that the total for women either included singers as well as musicians, or that the majority of these women were indeed music teachers.<sup>528</sup> Comparatively, the other occupations black women took up in the largest numbers outside of domestic work in the 1930 census included, teaching (over 45,000) and nursing (over 5,000), both of which involved formal training and education.<sup>529</sup>

The work that thousands of African American women carried out in the early-twentieth century entertainment industry was significant because as Elizabeth Clark-Lewis argues, during this period, black women were generally forced into a “servant caste” on a national level.<sup>530</sup> In this era, more occupations opened up for white women:

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Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

<sup>526</sup> “Actors of Race Show Huge Gain,” *Atlanta Daily World*, Sept. 25, 1932, p. 5A.

<sup>527</sup> “Table 13: Gainfully Occupied Negro Women 15 Years Old and Over, By Occupation and Marital Condition, With a Distribution of the Single and Unknown and of the Married by Age, for the United States: 1930,” 1930 U.S. Census, p. 313.

<sup>528</sup> “Table 9: Negro Gainful Workers Ten Years Old and Over by Occupation,” 1930 U.S. Census, p. 192. According to the 1930 census, U.S. women were four times as likely to work as teachers than men, and among African Americans there were five times as many female teachers as male. See 1930 census pp. 20, 192.

<sup>529</sup> “Table 9: Negro Gainful Workers Ten Years Old and Over by Occupation,” 1930 U.S. Census Report, p. 192.

<sup>530</sup> Clark-Lewis, 1987, p. 198.

native-born women moved into sales and clerical work, and immigrant women left domestic service for factory work. Restrictions placed on European immigration after World War I increased the need for African American women to take up the domestic positions that has previously gone to immigrant women.<sup>531</sup> Sociologist Enobong Hannah Branch argues that the assumption that the large proportion of African American women in domestic work is a historical legacy of slavery is incorrect, as eighty-five percent of enslaved women worked in the fields.<sup>532</sup> Free black women, however, were more likely to work as domestic servants; close to seventy percent worked as domestics in 1860. In the South, it was still common for black women to do agricultural work until 1920, when new mechanized technology allowed for less manual labor. At that point, domestic work became more common for black women in the South as well as the North, where it was commonly the only work open to black women.<sup>533</sup> Branch argues that the restriction of black women to domestic service was “not a product of happenstance.” During WWI, southern city councils manipulated “work or fight” laws to punish black women who left domestic work, and the Housewives League of Richmond, Virginia even launched an attacked against black women seeking employment as waitresses or in retail stores.<sup>534</sup> In the North, domestic work was often the only occupation available to recent southern migrants. While small, black-owned businesses thrived in limited numbers in areas such as Harlem and Bronzeville, it was rare for recent southern migrants to procure work in these shops and offices. This was because established northern African American

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<sup>531</sup> Ibid, p. 197.

<sup>532</sup> Angela Davis, *Women, Race, & Class*. New York: Vintage Books, 1983, p. 5 cited in Enobong Hannah Branch, *Opportunity Denied: Limiting Black Women to Devalued Work*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011, p. 49.

<sup>533</sup> Branch, pp. 49-56.

<sup>534</sup> Ibid, p. 60; Hunter, pp. 230-32.

communities were generally suspicious of newly arrived southerners, viewing them as “undesirables” who lacked qualities such as manners, restraint and modesty.<sup>535</sup>

While working in the entertainment industry was more lucrative than domestic work, it still had its own difficulties.<sup>536</sup> The TOBA circuit was legendary for its poor work conditions: artists performed in run-down theaters that sometimes lacked backstage areas and restrooms, and they were often verbally abused by white theater managers who paid them as little as possible.<sup>537</sup> Alberta Hunter refused to play on the southern TOBA circuit and greatly preferred to perform in the North.<sup>538</sup> Indeed, when highly successful singers such as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, who were more popular in the South than the North, purchased private tour buses and train cars, this was in part a tactic to avoid the segregated southern transportation system.<sup>539</sup> During a 1922 southern tour, several of singer Ethel Waters’ backup musicians abandoned her due to their unwillingness to put up with the treatment African Americans endured in the South.<sup>540</sup> One of her musicians later recalled, “you went South at the risk of your life... You weren’t even treated as a human being.”<sup>541</sup> Indeed, Waters noted that during that tour she performed in a Macon, Georgia theater where a young African American boy’s lifeless body had recently been thrown after he was lynched for allegedly talking back to a white man.<sup>542</sup> Bessie Smith’s

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<sup>535</sup> Clark-Lewis, pp. 197-98; Baldwin, pp. 9, 44.

<sup>536</sup> Wages are difficult to track, but one study found that domestic servants in 1932 Philadelphia made \$5 to \$12 per week. Comparatively, a 1929 *New York Amsterdam News* article stated that New York dancers made from \$17.50 to \$45 a week. Later into the Great Depression, a 1937 article stated that “bronze chorus girls” earned only seven to twelve dollars a week. See: Jones, pp. 206-207; S.T. Whitney, “How Long?” *New York Amsterdam News*, Nov 13, 1929, p. 9; Peggy Galloway, “Who Set the Standard for Chorines’ Salaries?” *Asks Peggy Galloway*, *The Chicago Defender*, Feb. 6, 1937, p. 20.

<sup>537</sup> Albertson, p. 66; Waters and Samuels, pp. 73, 166.

<sup>538</sup> Taylor and Cook, p. 68.

<sup>539</sup> Lieb, p. 39.

<sup>540</sup> “Musicians Quit; Ethel Waters Goes South,” *The Chicago Defender*, February 11, 1922, p. 7.

<sup>541</sup> Bogle, 2010, p. 81.

<sup>542</sup> Waters and Samuels, p. 159.

biographer even describes an evening in 1927 North Carolina where she and her troupe had to chase the Ku Klux Klan away from her tent show.<sup>543</sup> Thus, while women working in the entertainment industry avoided the indignities of domestic service, they still encountered discrimination, poor working conditions, and the threat of racial violence in the South.

Touring and performing also made it difficult for women in this milieu to take up traditional feminine domestic roles of wife and mother. However, many black performing women either did not want such lives or were open to fashioning new versions of family life. These ranged from taking younger performers under their wing in mentor/mothering roles, to having consensually or non-consensually open marriages where they had relationships with women and men other than their husbands. In some cases, public relationships with men were carried out primarily to evade public suspicions of same-sex desires. For example, blues singer Alberta Hunter, a southern migrant who lived and performed in Chicago for much of the 1910s, was involved with women at the time she married waiter Willard Townsend in 1919, right after he had returned from serving in WWI. Hunter's biographers claim that this marriage occurred in part to silence the growing rumors of her lesbianism.<sup>544</sup> The couple only lived together for two months following their wedding. During this time, Hunter was performing regularly in Bronzeville's Dreamland Theater and then singing in after-hours venues when the theater closed. Townsend was not working, but Hunter insisted he find employment. Even though she was making more money than he was, her husband thought she should stay

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<sup>543</sup> Albertson, p. 156-158.

<sup>544</sup> Taylor and Cook, pp. 42-43.

home; he was frustrated that “she insisted on going on entertaining at cabarets.”<sup>545</sup> This traditionally gendered family model did not fit their lives, and Hunter eventually grew tired of being told not to work and left him. She knew she could make money more than he did, and admitted in divorce court that she “did not like domestic life” and “would rather stay single.”<sup>546</sup> Her husband accused her of having “willfully deserted, abandoned and absented herself” from him, and he claimed that he tried to be a “true and affectionate husband” who “faithfully performed all of his duties and obligations.”<sup>547</sup>

For some women, the lure of making a living as a performer was connected to not having to rely on men for economic or romantic relationships. However, for performers like Hunter, who cared deeply about appearing respectable, marriage was also important to create the illusion of heterosexuality. Despite this, while Hunter did not sing any explicitly queer songs, songs such as “You Can Have My Man if He Comes to See You Too” and “You Can Take My Man but You Can’t Keep Him Long” address relationship configurations that were not normative either. While same-sex desire was beyond the pale and was rarely discussed openly, even on race records, Hunter was comfortable singing songs that challenged monogamy.<sup>548</sup> The classic blues women’s overall lack of attention to domestic themes such as marriage and family in their songs appears to be a conscious decision. Angela Davis sees this absence of allusion to family life in classic blues songs as highly significant, since at this time, women were generally supposed to

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<sup>545</sup> Willard Townsend vs. Alberta Townsend, Alberta Hunter Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

<sup>546</sup> Ibid.

<sup>547</sup> Ibid.

<sup>548</sup> I say “even on race records” because most popular music recorded by whites in this era was not nearly as sexually explicit as blues songs were, although these songs usually relied on double-entendres to make them clean enough for public consumption. While white blues singers such as Marion Harris also appropriated such techniques, no other music genre aside from the blues was as overtly sexual in the early-twentieth century. See Hagstrom Miller, p. 79.

seek fulfillment through marriage, with a husband as provider and children as evidence of their worth as women. While this idealization of female domesticity was based on the social reality of middle-class white women's lives, it was nonetheless applied to all women regardless of race or class.<sup>549</sup> Davis rightfully argues that sexual freedom was an important aspect of black women's changing lives in the post-slavery era, yet with the rise of mass culture it is also important to consider how themes of sexuality were highlighted by record companies in order to sell records of a titillating nature. Indeed, the sexual objectification of black women's bodies was a contested part of this growing consumer culture, as the next section will discuss.

### **Queering the Chorus Girl**

Musical spectacles included a variety of acts, performers, and, above all, lines and lines of chorus girls dressed in various scant and novel costumes that exemplified "the sex/race marketplace" and highlighted the black female body on stage as a commodity offered for the pleasure for black and white audiences.<sup>550</sup> Elaborate displays of black female beauty, for example, originated with *The Creole Show* in 1890: such presentations increased in popularity and inventiveness by the 1910s, especially with the advent of the Ziegfeld Follies.<sup>551</sup> Erin Chapman argues that "the logic of primitivism made blackness itself a spectacle" as attractive black women became big business.<sup>552</sup> Similar to minstrelsy's emergence during the rise of industrial capitalism, elite whites' love affair

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<sup>549</sup> A. Davis, 1998, p. 11.

<sup>550</sup> Chapman, p. 82.

<sup>551</sup> Brown, 2008, p. 93; Linda Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.

<sup>552</sup> Chapman, p. 82.

with “the primitive” reached new heights in the early-twentieth century as an antidote to urbanization, technology and mass culture. Burlesque historian Robert C. Allen sees the chorus girl as burlesque’s “more generic sister,” arguing that in the 1910s, Florenz Ziegfeld made her over to be palatable to middle-class audiences who preferred a less-voluptuous image than the burlesque dancer.<sup>553</sup> The chorus girl came to be seen as safe and non-threatening – a girl-next-door type. However, vice reports from 1920s Harlem testify that African American chorus girls were quite sexualized at this time, perhaps highlighting the differences between midtown Ziegfeld performances and uptown shows that were generally geared for white slumming audiences. A vice investigator with the Committee of Fourteen citizen’s reform group recounted a cabaret-nightclub show at Barron’s Exclusive Club on W. 134<sup>th</sup> Street that catered largely to a white clientele. There, “the colored chorus” performed “a number in which the girls are clad only in brassieres and very short trunks, no stockings.” They then launched into “a very wild and suggestive dance, imitating the act of sexual intercourse in which each one in turn tries to out do the other.”<sup>554</sup>

While the theatrical world was not a homosocial space to the same degree as a prison or reform school, the success of female blues singers and the popularity of black musical revues with crowded chorus lines created a female-centric zone within which women formed close friendships and experienced jealousies and romance inside and outside of marriage to men. The format of the chorus line also created a homosocial space in which young women who were open to sexualized presentations of themselves onstage could meet one another. Many were recent southern migrants, living in boarding houses

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<sup>553</sup> Allen, pp. 204, 272.

<sup>554</sup> Committee of Fourteen Records, Box 37, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library.

without parental surveillance for the first time. Chorus girls worked very long hours, often for little pay, thus the relationships and intimacies that formed between them functioned as a type of resistance to the bodily struggles their labor required. The intimacies they experienced were not unlike the relationships formed between women in reform and penal settings: same-sex couplings flourished in both environments and authorities, whether reformatory overseers, social workers or theatrical directors and producers, sought to disrupt them even while acknowledging their ubiquity. Of course, not all performing women were open to such activities. A 1935 theatrical column in *The Baltimore Afro-American* recalled that when “a certain female star” played the black Alhambra theater in Harlem, all of the chorus girls locked their doors because they were “deathly afraid of the lesbian, who just chased them all over the stage.”<sup>555</sup>

Two types of male authorities, sexologists and theater critics, were concerned in the 1920s and 30s with the figure of the queer chorus girl. Whether she represented a male fantasy as a stereotypical sex object for the male gaze who nonetheless desired women, or stood for anxieties over changing norms of gender and sexuality, the trope of the lady-loving chorus girl often appeared when discussions turned to homosexuality in the theatrical world. In 1921, American sexologist Perry Lichtenstein noted that within the “class of female who abhors the company of man and gains sexual satisfaction from association with other females,” it was “quite common” to find such women “among actresses, more particularly of the chorus girl type.”<sup>556</sup> Here Lichtenstein may have been influenced by Havelock Ellis, whose turn-of-the-century work on the psychology of sex argued that, “in theaters the abnormal sexuality stimulated by association in work is

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<sup>555</sup> “Where Are the Chorus Girls of Yester-Year?” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, July 6, 1935, p. 8.

<sup>556</sup> Perry Lichtenstein, “The Fairy and the Lady Lover,” *Medical Review of Reviews*, Vol. 27, 1921, p. 372.

complicated by the general tendency for homosexuality to be connected with dramatic aptitude.”<sup>557</sup> Ellis’ claim was bolstered by a note from a friend that he printed in this volume:

Passionate friendships among girls, from the most innocent to the most elaborate excursions in the direction of Lesbos, are extremely common in the theaters, both among actresses and, even more, among chorus- and ballet- girls. Here the pell-mell of the dressing-rooms, the wait of perhaps two hours between performances, during which all the girls are cooped up, in a state of inaction and excitement, in a few crowded dressing rooms, afford every opportunity for the growth of this particular kind of sentiment. In most of the theaters there is a little circle of girls, somewhat avoided by the others, or themselves careless of further acquaintanceship, who profess the most unbounded devotion to one another.<sup>558</sup>

Many sexologists viewed the popular theater in an era of increasingly sexualized commercial entertainments as a potentially sexualized homosocial site for actresses, and particularly chorus girls who performed intimately close to one another.

The conflation of lesbianism and chorus girls is not odd considering both symbolized a new type of modern urban woman in the early-twentieth century. As an independent working woman, the chorus girl represented both newly visible issues of lesbianism and heterosexual female desire.<sup>559</sup> As Jayna Brown argues, the synchronized routines of chorus girls embodied “the experience of modernity” via the tensions of “industrial capitalism’s disciplinary claims on the (white) body’s time and energies and the potential freedom and pleasures technological innovation was making possible” in the urban North.<sup>560</sup> The spectacular musical numbers with elaborate settings, staging and

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<sup>557</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Volume Two: Sexual Inversion*. Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Co., 1897, p. 215.

<sup>558</sup> Ibid.

<sup>559</sup> Mizejewski, p. 32.

<sup>560</sup> Brown, p. 16.

costumes that chorus girls performed incorporated “luxurious goods in a scenic world of material opulence,” which Susan Glenn claims “objectified the female body in a distinctly modern way.”<sup>561</sup> Lesbianism, while generally represented in a negative light in the black press, was also deemed “supermodern,” particularly for its superior birth control methods.<sup>562</sup> Columnist Geraldyn Dismond, one of seemingly few African American women journalists to comment on the subject in print, noted in 1927 that “one is considered archaic and extremely naïve these days if one has not at least a reading acquaintance with Lesbians.”<sup>563</sup> Nonetheless, the same-sex dalliances of chorus girls were not documented in the black press as delightful charades but as “grim and revolutionary.”<sup>564</sup>

Theater critic Ralph Matthews wrote many articles in the 1920s and 30s about the infiltration of a queer presence in the black entertainment industry, and in particular, the problem of innocent young southern migrant women being seduced by experienced, hardened, and vicious women. In 1933, Matthews published an exposé on the depraved lives of black performers in New York, entitled, “Love Laughs at Life in Harlem,” subheaded, “Savage Romances Suffer No Depression As Queer Attachments Keep Show Folks Chuckling. Women Love Women and Men Love Men, and Occasionally the Jig Saw of Sex Gets Mixed.” He began by suggesting that “theatrical and night club performers” were “a very peculiar lot.” It was their “home life, if you can call it that,” that he disapproved of, whereas “ordinary folk” were mostly respectable, but everything about performers lives made them different: their “irregular” work hours, their “morals,”

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<sup>561</sup> Glenn, p. 156.

<sup>562</sup> S.T. Whitney, “Timely Topics,” *The Chicago Defender*, Aug. 18, 1928, p. 7.

<sup>563</sup> Geraldyn Dismond, “New York Society,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Jan. 29, 1927, p. 6.

<sup>564</sup> Ralph Matthews, “Love Laughs at Life in Harlem,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, March 11, 1933, p. 18.

and especially their love lives.<sup>565</sup> After recounting stories of sadomasochistic and interracial love among African American entertainers, Matthews then turned to the topic of same-sex Harlem romances, which sometimes took on “the aspect of freakishness” yet were “so common” and took on so “many queer forms that Harlem merely winks and passes on accepting them for what they are.” Most disturbing, he continued, was that “the most violent attachments are those between women. Young girls newly inducted into show life may find themselves face to face with the grim and revolutionary problems of being squired with all the artfulness of a male admirer by their dancing partners in the chorus.”<sup>566</sup>

Matthews most likely exaggerated the acceptance of such relationships in Harlem, which is odd because he began by noting the distance between performers and “ordinary folk,” which made up the majority of the district’s inhabitants. Still, Matthew’s “report” titillated his readers, even as he scolded such behavior and recounted it in voyeuristic detail. He depicted “attachments” between women as “violent” without offering any insight into why such a descriptor was warranted, suggesting that the violence was merely rhetorical. The figure of the predatory lesbian that Matthews described was threatening, even in chorus girl form, especially because she usurped a traditional male privilege. Her presence meant that heterosexual men would have to compete with both women and men for young, inexperienced female companions in the entertainment industry.

Biographies and oral histories of performing women offer a more realistic picture of the contours of the queer networks that ran through the chorus lines of the black

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<sup>565</sup> Ibid.

<sup>566</sup> Ibid.

popular entertainment industry. Ruby Walker, Bessie Smith's cousin, recounted a story in Smith's biography that shows that some women performers adapted quite easily to the new experience of same-sex relationships. One of Bessie Smith's lovers in the 1920s, dancer Lillian Simpson, had never been with a woman before she was seduced by Smith, yet soon she was encouraging her friend Ruby Walker to "try it" herself. Simpson suggested that she connect with the wife of the musical director of their current show, despite the fact that Walker only "liked boys."<sup>567</sup> Sexuality in the black entertainment industry was more fluid than a heterosexual/homosexual binary suggests or the monogamous marital relations of the period would allow. Such ambiguity made the performance world even more threatening, with its social codes that threatened the boundaries of respectable and appropriate behavior, yet it also created new opportunities for black women to take part in different types of relationships that were suited to their specific desires.

Popular performer Maud Russell also testified to the ways women actively pursued and fashioned relationships that met their needs:

often we girls would share a room because of the cost. Well, many of us had been kind of abused by producers, directors, leading men – if they liked girls. In those days, men only wanted what they wanted, they didn't care about pleasing a girl. And girls needed tenderness, so we had girl friendships, the famous lady lovers, but lesbians weren't well accepted in show business, they were called bull dykers. I guess we were bisexual, is what you could call it today.<sup>568</sup>

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<sup>567</sup> Albertson, p. 135.

<sup>568</sup> Jean-Claude Baker, *Josephine Baker: The Hungry Heart*. Lanham, MD: Cooper Square Press, 2001, pp. 63-64.

Russell's reminiscences underscore the fact that affairs between women did occur in this milieu, but also suggests that they occurred quite often among women who were nominally heterosexual. Interestingly, Russell suggests that male lovemaking skills were pretty primitive at this moment in history, and that women took a great deal more care with the female lovers than men did.<sup>569</sup>

Mabel Hampton, a southern migrant from North Carolina who moved to New York as a young girl, found work as a teenager dancing in an all-female company that performed in Coney Island.<sup>570</sup> She met many women there who were also sexually and romantically interested in other women, and she fell "hook, line and sinker" in love with a fellow dancer from Philadelphia. Throughout the 1920s and 30s, Hampton was able to socialize exclusively with other women and while working as a performer she "had so many girlfriends it wasn't funny." Hampton also performed in Greenwich Village, at the Cherry Hill Theater, and socialized and dated queer white women as well.<sup>571</sup> While she settled down with an African American life partner in the early 1930s, Hampton's portrayal of an interracial queer women's network in the 1920s is rather rare. With the exception of Gladys Bentley, who married a white woman performer, queer female interracial relationships were not common. Social taboos may be part of the explanation, but because productions tended to be either all-white or all-black the opportunities for interracial relationships on the job were limited. Interestingly, Hampton performed at the

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<sup>569</sup> This evidence gives us an interesting perspective on the state of heterosexual lovemaking during this period, which predated or was coterminous with early sex manuals distributed by Margaret Sanger's marriage clinic in New York City. and highlights the fact that they often took place between women who also desired men but found those relationships unfulfilling sexually and emotionally. See Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America*. New York: Anchor Books, 1992; Kristin Celello, *Making Marriage Work: A History of Marriage and Divorce in the Twentieth Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009, pp. 37-38.

<sup>570</sup> Nestle, 1997, p. 265.

<sup>571</sup> Mabel Hampton (Interviewee), "Mabel H. / Mabel Hampton (Tape 1)," *Herstories: A Digital Collection*, accessed April 23, 2014, <http://herstories.prattsils.org/omeka/items/show/78>.

Lafayette Theater and the Garden of Joy in Harlem in the 1920s, but she along with her chorus work she did domestic work for white families as well. When her biographer asked her why she replied simply, “because I like to eat.”<sup>572</sup> Also important in this interview was Hampton’s suggestion that men in the entertainment industry constantly pressured female performers into sexual liaisons. Had she had been open to such relationships, she speculated, she might have found the stage more lucrative.<sup>573</sup>

Romance inside the chorus line was not exclusive to the black theatrical world. White actress Barbara Stanwyck, long rumored to be a lesbian, was a Ziegfeld chorus girl as a teen, and silent film star Louise Brooks claimed that actress Peggy Fears, also a Ziegfeld Follies performer, was “a lesbian legend, running through the Follies beauties like the well-known doses of salt.”<sup>574</sup> For white women, the chorus girl was one of multiple spaces claimed by the new young working woman in the public sphere, which included “modern shop girls, clerks and secretaries.” However, as black women were barred “by the custom of the country” from most occupations associated with women’s visibility in the public sphere, the theater was often the only such path imaginable aside from domestic work for women without college educations.<sup>575</sup> That the theatrical world held dangers – lecherous men and women, drug and alcohol abuse, and other vices – seemed to authors such as Ralph Matthews to be an impediment to the prosperity and growth of the race; such behavior was the antithesis of respectable.

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<sup>572</sup> Ibid, p. 266, p. 268.

<sup>573</sup> Transcription of Mabel Hampton tapes by Joan Nestle, 1999, part 2, pp. 9-8, Box 1, The Mabel Hampton Special Collection/Lesbian Herstory Archives/Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation, Inc.

<sup>574</sup> Axel Madsen, *The Sewing Circle: Sappho’s Leading Ladies*. New York: Kensington Books, 2002, p. 108; Mizejewski, p. 86.

<sup>575</sup> Brown, p. 169.

## **“Ethel Must Not Marry:”**

### **Ethel Waters, Black Swan Records and Tensions over Racial Uplift**

Queer black women, in other words, had little choice but to negotiate an industry in which same-sex behavior was common yet still looked down upon. Some of the classic blues women may have gotten their start in the chorus or as a supporting act, but by the early 1920s they were celebrities. This meant they had to pay attention to how they presented themselves and their queer relationships to the men of the record companies and theaters they worked with, as well as with their audiences and fans. Ethel Waters used her sophisticated, urbane image and publicity via the black press to present herself as desirable to men despite that fact that she brought her girlfriend, dancer Ethel Waters, on her Black Swan records tour with her. Waters was one of the first African American women to take the race records industry by storm in the early 1920s and reached a celebrity status available to few black women at this time. Within this industry, Black Swan records was the most successful African American owned record company of the early 1920s, and Waters was their first break-through star, selling enough records to keep the company afloat for several years.<sup>576</sup>

Tall and lithe, Ethel Waters was a sophisticated singer from Philadelphia who became famous for singing blues songs about southern migrants in the North who missed life back home, a feeling that resonated with many during the Great Migration. So popular was her rendition of “Down Home Blues” that Black Swan sent her on a nationwide tour to support its record sales. Unbeknownst to many of her fans, the talented

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<sup>576</sup> “Correspondence with Harry H. Pace, Nov. 17, 1939,” in *The Negro in New York: An Informal Social History*. Roi Ottley and William J. Weatherby, eds. New York: The New York Public Library, 1967, p. 133.

dancer who accompanied Waters on tour – and performed a dance number to warm up the crowd before the singer appeared – was her girlfriend, Ethel Williams.<sup>577</sup> Waters and Williams lived together in Harlem. Their relationship was such common knowledge in the African American popular entertainment world that friends referred to them as “the two Ethels,” recalled Mabel Hampton.<sup>578</sup> Hampton described their relationship as “stormy” recalling, “they used to fight up and down Seventh Avenue [in Harlem], ‘cause Ethel was after somebody else and Ethel Waters didn’t like it...Men couldn’t do nothing ‘cause they were good...they were money makers.”<sup>579</sup>

When the two met, Williams was recovering from an injury and had not been able to work, so Waters suggested she try cabaret work, and asked her boss to give Williams a job. Waters, who was making thirty-five dollars a week, asked him to take ten dollars from her weekly pay and give it to Williams along with an additional ten dollars. He responded, “Ethel, you’re the damnedest fool I ever heard of...but I’ll put her on weekends.”<sup>580</sup> It is unclear if this occurred after the two had entered into a relationship, or if the arrangement was part of Waters’ courtship and seduction of Williams. Whatever the sequence, it worked; soon “the two Ethels” were inseparable.<sup>581</sup> This example demonstrates the economic sacrifices Waters was willing to make in order to support and work with the woman she loved. If they were already a couple by this point, they may have been pooling their resources and Waters might not have even suffered much

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<sup>577</sup> Bogle, 2010, pp. 84-85.

<sup>578</sup> Personal correspondence between Joan Nestle and Stephen Bourne, February 10, 1994, cited in Stephen Bourne, *Ethel Waters: Stormy Weather*. Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2007, p. 26.

<sup>579</sup> Joan Nestle interview with Mabel Hampton, n.d., p. 9, Eric Garber papers, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

<sup>580</sup> Waters and Samuels, p. 137.

<sup>581</sup> Waters discusses her friendship with Williams in her autobiography but does not reveal the intimate nature of their relationship. Personal correspondence between Joan Nestle and Stephen Bourne, February 10, 1994, cited in Bourne, p. 26.

financially from the consequence of cutting her salary. This story also solidifies the fact that Waters and Williams were indeed a couple by the time Waters signed to Black Swan Records, as she stopped working in cabarets after she began recording for the record company, and moved on to bigger venues.

The question of whether or not the men who ran Black Swan records were aware of the relationship between “the two Ethels” is difficult to answer for a variety of reasons. Black Swan’s commitment to racial uplift through the ideology of respectability contributed to their silence regarding the sexuality of their recording artists, as sexual liberation was not conducive with the fight for racial justice at this time, despite the loosening of sexual mores associated with the 1920s.<sup>582</sup> At the very least, notions of racial uplift supported the propagation of the race which same-sex behavior did not supply, and most people of all races saw same-sex desire as criminal and pathological at this time. Indeed, silence on the subject of homosexuality could imply ignorance of the matter, disinterest, tolerance, or a conscious desire to distance oneself from the topic. However, while Black Swan’s president Harry Pace remained quiet on the subject of Ethel Waters’ relationship with Ethel Williams, he did not have a problem discussing other aspects of her personal life, as long as such discourse would help sell records. To this end, Black Swan’s marketing department crafted an article that was published in several black newspapers which was merely a work of sensationalized fiction.<sup>583</sup>

The article, with the bold headline, “Ethel Must Not Marry” stated:

Ethel Waters, star of the Black Swan Troubadours, has signed a unique

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<sup>582</sup> Gaines, p. 76; Mitchell, p. 79.

<sup>583</sup> This contract that supposedly kept Waters from marrying was never mentioned in her autobiography and her biographer Donald Bogle doubts its existence.

contract with Harry H. Pace which stipulates that she is not to marry for at least a year, and that during this period she is to devote her time largely to singing for Black Swan Records and appearing with the Troubadours. It was due to numerous offers of marriage, many of her suitors suggesting that she give up her professional life at once for one of domesticity, that Mr. Pace was prompted to take this step.

Some lovesick swains have fallen in love with Miss Waters' picture appearing in the newspapers, while others have been captivated by her voice and personal charm. Although she travels with a maid, it will be necessary for her to employ a private social secretary to attend to her mail if the endearing communications continue on the increase.

While playing recently in Wheeling, W. Va., one promising young physician almost broke up the tour of the Black Swan Troubadours so convincing was his picture of the delights of connubial bliss. When the incident was reported to the New York office Harry H. Pace lost no time in sending Miss Waters a new contract containing the no-marriage proviso and a salary agreement representing a figure for each night's engagement and each record that most people would be glad to earn in a month, along with a detailed account on his reasons for desiring such an agreement, and the singer promptly signed the papers and returned them to New York. Miss Waters' contract with the Black Swan interests makes her now the highest salaried colored phonograph star in the country.<sup>584</sup>

While it is unlikely that this contract was ever produced, the article shows how Black Swan marketed Waters to African American newspaper readers. It suggests that, in 1921, a woman who was both married and had a career challenged the pretenses of middle-class respectability, even if she was as successful and popular as Waters. A wife's place was in the home, despite the fact that this expectation was totally unrealistic for the majority of married African American women in the early-twentieth century. Their husband's wages were invariably too meager to make ends meet with only one income.<sup>585</sup> As fears of increasing numbers of unmarried women had begun to pose a "lesbian threat" by the 1920s, Waters' single status had to be clarified for her public. Black Swan explained that her obligation to please her fans was behind the respectable sacrifice a

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<sup>584</sup> "Ethel Must Not Marry," *The Chicago Defender*, Dec 24, 1921, p. 7.

<sup>585</sup> Jones, p. 73.

successful female performer was obliged to make.<sup>586</sup> Of course, in reality, she had no plans at the time to marry any man.

In 1921 there was less awareness of the theory or practice of lesbianism than even a few years later, when cultural productions such as *The Captive* and *The Well of Loneliness* increased public awareness of female same-sex desire. Waters and Williams were therefore able to take advantage of the fact that in the early 1920s, their relationship was not yet visible as romantic to the majority of their audiences, despite the rumors that swirled around them at home in Harlem, as Mabel Hampton demonstrated. In 1922, Waters received top billing in a touring revue entitled *Oh! Joy!* and she made sure to secure a part in the production for Ethel Williams as well. The two of them created an amusing and memorable entrance for Waters that entailed publicly naming the two Ethels as “partners.” Waters recounted in her autobiography,

When I planned my routines for *Oh! Joy!* I wanted to make a different kind of entrance than other well-known record singers were using. Just before my first entrance in *Oh! Joy!* Ethel Williams would go out on the stage.

“Where’s that partner of mine?” she’d ask the orchestra leader. “Where’s that Ethel Waters? What can be keeping her?” And she’d look all over the stage for me, behind the curtain, in the wings, and, for a laugh, under the rug. She’d mutter, “How can I start our act without that gal?”

After all that build-up I’d come out – in a funny hat and gingham apron that was a gem. I was slim, and when Ethel would ask, “Are you Ethel Waters?” I’d answer, “I ain’t Bessie Smith.”

Those two lines would wow the audience. Then I’d sing the plaintive and heartbreaking song, “Georgia Blues.” Ethel Williams would come out then and dance – and she was always a brilliant performer.<sup>587</sup>

In this act, they referred to each other as partners to emphasize their artistic collaboration, but they were also privately referring to their romantic relationship. The

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<sup>586</sup> Simmons, 1979.

<sup>587</sup> Waters and Samuels, p. 151.

format of vaudeville, in which acts of different genres played back to back without sharing a connecting theme, was well-suited to Waters and Williams' relationship. They were able to tour together without raising suspicion over the status of their relationship since their different art forms were complementary with the popular style of entertainment at the time. For those in the audience that did not know they were a couple – which was most likely the majority – this went “over their heads” yet was still amusing, while those who had heard about their lovers' quarrels on the streets of Harlem were in on the hidden meaning. Thus, through their performances, Waters and Williams were able to work together and even hail audience members who also took part in or were sympathetic to same-sex relationships, while not offending those who were not aware of their relationship. In this way, queer performers utilized “knowingness,” the bond between performer and audience created over the knowledge of double *entendres* that serve as “hidden transcripts” inside the “public transcripts” of their songs and variety skits.<sup>588</sup> Similarly to William and Walker hailing black audience members by speaking their lines “over the heads” of white audiences, the queer blues women engaged longstanding strategies honed by black performers on the stage to communicate with multiple audiences while prioritizing those – whether black and/or queer – with whom they felt an alliance. Cultural historian Peter Bailey argues that knowingness enables “the skilled performer” to “mobilize the latent collective identity of an audience,” and their connection to the performer strengthened over their shared competency in decoding hidden meanings.<sup>589</sup> Such analytic tools shed light on how subordinated subjects such as

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<sup>588</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990, p. x-xii.

<sup>589</sup> Peter Bailey, “Conspiracies of Meaning: Music-Hall and the Knowingness of Popular Culture,” *Past & Present*, No. 144, August 1994, pp. 138-171.

queer black female performers navigated their identities in the entertainment industry and also suggest that through such performances, Waters and Williams further validated the growing queer black counterpublics of the urban North.<sup>590</sup>

### **On the Road with the Empress of the Blues**

This chapter began with the indomitable Bessie Smith, who never hesitated to take part in same-sex relationships within the black popular entertainment industry's generally tolerant milieu. Her prodigious talent brought her huge popularity, particularly among black and white southern audiences. Her success and fame afforded her the luxury of caring little what others thought, yet she still kept her queer liaisons within her circle of performing friends and colleagues. Born at the turn-of-the-century and raised in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in her youth Smith began performing with her brother on the city streets. Her professional career began in Atlanta during the 1910s.<sup>591</sup>

After many years of performing in travelling tent shows throughout the South, Smith auditioned for Black Swan Records in the early 1920s. During her test recording she reportedly said at one point, "hold on, let me spit," which so disgusted the company's president, Harry Pace, that he did not offer her a contract.<sup>592</sup> Even if she had not carried out this apparently scandalous and vulgar faux pas in front of Pace, Smith's "unmistakable nitty-grittiness" and her "very black sound" made her an inappropriate choice for Black Swan records due to their commitment to racial uplift through

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<sup>590</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books, 2002.

<sup>591</sup> Albertson, pp. 7-8.

<sup>592</sup> W.C. Handy, Handy Brothers Music Co., Inc. press release, February 7, 1948, Box H-HD, Carl Van Vechten Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

respectability.<sup>593</sup> Pace could not see how someone as uncouth as Smith could assist in Black Swan's efforts to fight for social justice, even if she would have no doubt helped them towards their other goal of economic self-determination through capital accumulation.<sup>594</sup> The northern company was more interested in the sophisticated, jazz-inflected cabaret blues of Ethel Waters than Smith's southern vaudeville blues. Her dark skin and voluptuous figure may have also been held against her, as advertisements were starting to rely heavily on images of attractive female performers and a slender build was associated with modernity and social status. Smith soon after signed to white-owned Columbia, for whom she sold millions of records, and by 1925 she was touring the North and South in her own custom railroad car.<sup>595</sup>

By 1926, Smith began to pursue relationships with women in her troupe, which she strategically hid from her husband, Jack Gee, whom she had married in 1922. Gee served as her manager and also took part in affairs with other women himself. Both of them were quite jealous of one another and instead of agreeing to an open relationship they regularly fought, often violently, over each other's dalliances. For Gee, the money his wife brought in was too lucrative to enact a separation or divorce, and Smith claimed to love Gee despite his violence and indiscretions, although they eventually separated in 1930. Once Smith became romantically active with her fellow female performers, the large troupe of musicians and dancers she toured with learned it was part of their job to keep her queer relationships a secret from both the public, in general, and her husband, in particular.<sup>596</sup>

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<sup>593</sup> Albertson, p. 25, p.174.

<sup>594</sup> Suisman, p. 208.

<sup>595</sup> Albertson, p. 102.

<sup>596</sup> Ibid, p. 145.

The transient nature of touring and the liminal space of the sleeping train car and the out-of-town boarding house, where performers often spent the night, further enabled same-sex behavior and relationships for women in the entertainment industry. When traveling through Detroit, Bessie Smith and her large revue would often stay at Kate's boardinghouse. Kate's was typical of the small guesthouses adjoining black vaudeville theaters that catered to traveling entertainers. In an era of legal racial discrimination, these small hotels filled an important need, not just in the South. African Americans were not always welcomed by northern hotels and guesthouses either. The amenities were minimal: there was no lobby, simply three floors of long, narrow corridors with rows of sparsely furnished rooms.<sup>597</sup> Despite having no frills, these accommodations offered touring revues such as Smith's a safe haven and respite from the road. Indeed, guesthouses favored by entertainers were usually familiar with the queer antics that many of the classic blues women enjoyed.

It had become a tradition on Smith's tours to follow up the final show of an extended engagement with a night of relaxation. Ruby Walker, Bessie Smith's niece recalled, "We used to put on our nicest pajamas and nightgowns, and go to each other's rooms and show off and drink and have a good time."<sup>598</sup> One particular night, most of the revue ended up in Smith's room on the first floor of Kate's guesthouse. Marie, a young dancer in the show, wore a pair of bright red pajamas that had been a gift from Smith, and eager to show them off, she performed a few comic steps that had everybody in stitches. Nobody laughed harder than Smith, who called out, "C'mon Marie, show your stuff," encouraging the young woman to escalate her twists and turns. Smith had found her

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<sup>597</sup> Ibid, p. 142.

<sup>598</sup> Ibid.

newest romantic interest on her tour, but unfortunately for the new lovers, a few hours later, everyone in the guesthouse awoke to the sound of screams. Smith's husband Jack Gee had made one of his surprise returns and caught his wife in bed with Marie.<sup>599</sup> Luckily, both women along with the entire revue were somehow able to quickly leave Kate's boardinghouse, board their train car and leave town without facing any violent repercussions from Gee.

Bessie Smith, one of the most successful African American women of the early-twentieth century, found strategic ways to carry on relationships with women that without hindering her career, although they most certainly threatened her marriage. She surrounded herself with performers whom she trusted, utilized a private train car that allowed her to maintain her privacy once her shows were over, or stayed at black-owned guesthouses that were not shocked by the queer behaviors of Smith and her coterie. Her openness within the world of performers demonstrates that fellow theatrical types implicitly understood the culture of their milieu and rarely felt the need to inform the larger public. Either Smith's fans never knew about her sexual preferences, or they understood and did not care.

Indeed, liminality and ambiguity suffuse Smith's life in several ways: the spaces of entertainment world and the perpetual movement of touring circuits allowed queer behaviors to exist separate from "everyday life" and the prying eyes of the public. Smith's bisexuality led her to marry a man while pursuing relationships with women. And within the context of the blues, performers such as Smith became stars in part because they spoke to the lived experiences of African Americans during the Great Migration. As

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<sup>599</sup> Ibid, pp. 142-143.

Houston Baker argues about what he terms the “blues matrix,” blues singers and their performances “serve as codifiers, absorbing and transforming discontinuous experience into formal expressive instances that bear only the trace of origins, refusing to be pinned down to any final, dualistic significance.”<sup>600</sup> This matrix defines itself as a “network mediating poverty and abundance in much the same manner that it reconciles durative and kinetic.” The blues women came from poverty but performed in sumptuous expensive dress on stage, and the blues continued to be associated with the rural South despite being produced by a commercial industry in the north. Baker thinks this further suggests that the blues matrix avoids simple dualities, and “perpetually achieves its effects as a fluid and multivalent network.”<sup>601</sup> Smith and her cohort were part of a queer blues matrix in which women enjoyed relationships with women as well as men, took part in both queer and “normal” social worlds, and performed their songs to mixed audiences (in terms of race and sexuality) that interpreted the queer blues women’s lyrics in different ways depending on their subject position.

Baker’s concept of a multivalent network is enhanced by Marxist linguist V. N. Volosinov’s influential theory of how language is interpreted. Since different social classes use the same language, all signs – or objects of discourse – are “multi-accentual,” which means they are open to interpretation and may take on a different meaning based on one’s subject position and experience. They can also be layered with meanings that one group may not understand.<sup>602</sup> For example, in the song “Foolish Man Blues,” which

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<sup>600</sup> Houston Baker, *Blues Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 8.

<sup>601</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>602</sup> V. N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973 (1929), p. 3.

Bessie Smith wrote in 1927 while she was actively involved with women romantically, she sings:

Men sure deceitful, they getting worse every day  
Men sure deceitful, they getting worse every day  
Actin' like a bunch of women, they just gabbin', gabbin,' gabbin' away

There's two things got me puzzled, there's two things I can't stand  
There's two things got me puzzled, there's two things I can't stand  
That's a mannish actin' woman and a skippin' twistin' woman actin' man<sup>603</sup>

In this song, Bessie Smith appears to describe the subject as a lover of men but is frustrated by their emasculation, while also making visible a queer underworld of gender inversion that was not often alluded to through song. As queer music scholar John Gill notes, “the refrain may have been a mischievous diversion, a hint at her own ambiguous sexuality, or an ironic tease for her audience, who most certainly knew what Smith was talking about.”<sup>604</sup> Further, it was common in the blues to present a controversial subject and defuse its threat by introducing it with a line about something the singer “can’t understand.” In a live performance, the accompanying delivery of the lines, and body and facial gestures could complicate the words themselves. In a song such as this, she might use gesture to distance herself from the character who “does not understand” deviant gender roles.

Compare this to the song, “Big Boy Blues” written by Ma Rainey:

Oh, run here, daddy, tell me what’s on your mind  
Oh, run here, daddy, tell me what’s on your mind  
Oh, keeps me worried, grieving all the time

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<sup>603</sup> Lyrics transcribed by A. Davis, 1998, p. 280.

<sup>604</sup> Gill, p. 36.

There's two things I can't understand  
There's two thing I can't understand  
Why these married women crazy 'bout their backdoor man

Lord, Tie it, big boy, toot it  
Lord, that's my back door man<sup>605</sup>

In this song, Rainey appears to take pleasure in the topic she does not understand, and the meanings are further layered with “back door man” serving as a double entendre for having an affair as well as for anal sex. “There’s two things I can’t understand” was an oft-used blues trope that allowed the singer to name something taboo, that perhaps she herself indulged in. Different audiences and listeners could thus interpret these lyrics differently; hence, they are “multi-accented.” For those who were confused or disgusted by the growing number of drag queens and bull daggers on the streets, the song was sympathetic to their confusion over changing conceptions of gender and sexuality in the urban North.<sup>606</sup> For those who were part of this milieu, the song merely served as a knowing wink.

While Smith’s songs generally referred to heterosexual romance, which was likely her own choice as well as that of Columbia Records, occasionally she alluded to queerness or gender deviance in her lyrics, in ways which could both hail her fellow queer audience members through hidden transcripts of “knowingness” yet would not shock or disgust her less savvy or more conservative listeners. Smith relied on the spaces that touring opened up for same-sex behavior, from the privacy of rented boarding house rooms to her personal train car, and even the space of the theater itself when amongst her troupe members. Yet she also found relationships with men to be important to her life,

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<sup>605</sup> Lyrics transcribed by A. Davis, 1998, p. 201.

<sup>606</sup> Chauncey, 1994, p. 249.

which led to difficulties negotiating multiple partners. She preferred to keep her queer relationships within the theatrical world, and her touring troupes functioned as meeting spaces for women, married or single, who were interested in other women romantically.

### **Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and the Emergence of Queer Black Popular Cultural Productions**

The subtleness with which Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters alluded to their queerness on stage and in song was not the only available technique for blues women in this era. Gertrude “Ma” Rainey’s 1928 song “Prove It on Me Blues” and the print advertisement produced by her record company that accompanied its record release left little to the imagination concerning her status as a woman who loved women. However, she still preferred to tease her audience regarding her sexuality. Born in Georgia in 1886, Rainey, known as “the Mother of the Blues,” began performing in southern minstrel and vaudeville shows as a young teen. She did not record her songs until the white-owned Paramount Record company “discovered” her in 1923 at the age of thirty-seven, when she had already been performing for close to twenty-five years.<sup>607</sup> By the mid-1920s she had become a successful recording artist who sold thousands of copies of her records for Paramount. Rainey married men twice, first a fellow performer, William “Pa” Rainey, at age eighteen, and later in life a much younger man, but she was known to enjoy the company of women as well.<sup>608</sup> According to Bessie Smith’s niece, Ruby Smith, Rainey

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<sup>607</sup> Lieb, p. xii; van der Tuuk, p. 73; Hazel Carby, *Culture in Babylon: Black Britain and African America*. London & New York: Verso, 1999, p. 16; Duval Harrison, p. 35.

<sup>608</sup> Lieb, pp. 17-18.

once attempted to instigate a sexual situation with a group of women from her show in 1926 Chicago, only to have the evening interrupted abruptly:

It seems that Ma had found herself in an embarrassing tangle with the Chicago police. She and a group of young women had been drinking, and they made so much noise that a neighbor summoned the police. The impromptu party was getting intimate, and as bad luck would have it, the law showed up just as everyone began to let their hair down. Pandemonium broke loose as girls madly scrambled for their clothes and ran out the back door, leaving Ma, clutching someone else's dress, to exit last. Ma did not get away, however, for she had a nasty fall down a staircase and practically into the arms of the law. Accused of running an indecent party, she was thrown in jail, where she stayed until Bessie bailed her out the following morning.<sup>609</sup>

This story appears to have informed the marketing of "Prove It on Me Blues," which featured an ad created by Paramount that also included a policeman, echoing the rumor of Rainey's arrest.

Turning to the song itself, first the lyrics should be examined:

Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Prove It on Me Blues (1928)

Went out last night, had a great big fight  
Everything seemed to go on wrong  
I looked up, to my surprise  
The gal I was with was gone.

Where she went, I don't know  
I mean to follow everywhere she goes;  
Folks say I'm crooked. I didn't know where she took it  
I want the whole world to know.

They say I do it, ain't nobody caught me  
Sure got to prove it on me;  
Went out last night with a crowd of my friends,  
They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men.

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<sup>609</sup> Albertson, p. 116.

It's true I wear a collar and a tie,  
Makes the wind blow  
all the while<sup>610</sup>  
They say I do it, ain't nobody caught me  
You sure got to prove it on me.

Wear my clothes just like a fan  
Talk to the gals just like any old man  
Cause they say I do it, ain't nobody caught me  
Sure got to prove it on me.

In “Prove It on Me Blues,” the line “I want the whole world to know” could be characterized as a type of proto-outing, as it declares the singer’s lack of shame for her desires.<sup>611</sup> And yet, this line is tempered by the couplet, “They say I do it, ain’t nobody caught me/You sure got to prove it on me” which brings back the ambiguity with a teasing playfulness. While some historical accounts of Rainey suggest that she took advantage of the rumor of her Chicago arrest by writing this song about the topic of same-sex desire, in the rumor she did indeed get caught, unlike in her song.<sup>612</sup> To write a song in which she got “caught in the act” would not allow for the ambiguity that Rainey favors here, in which she hints at a taboo subject only to dance around the issue of whether she actually took part in same-sex behavior. The line “Makes the wind blow all the while” referred to the rumors swirling around her, implying that she enjoyed being in the center of them. However, this line replaced the original lyric Rainey wrote, “Likes to

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<sup>610</sup> This is the line that Rainey recorded, but her biographer Sandra Lieb points out that the lead sheet for the song contained the alternative line, “Like to watch while the women pass by,” Lieb p. 207.

<sup>611</sup> As queer theorist Eve Sedgwick notes, the modern conception of “coming out of the closet” did not exist until after the Stonewall riots in 1969, which are generally hailed as initiating the modern gay rights movement in the U.S, so to speak of this act taking place in the 1920s is ahistorical, hence the term “proto-outing.” See Sedgwick, p. 14.

<sup>612</sup> For example, Valerie Boyd writes that, “Rainey parlayed the scandal into a hit record.” There are also no accounts of how many copies “Prove It on Me Blues” sold, so to refer to it as a “hit” record may also be inaccurate. See Valerie Boyd, *Wrapped In Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003.

watch while the women pass by,” which was a much more blatantly queer phrase describing active female desire for other women.

This song is representative of a time in which the image of the mannish woman, or the “bulldagger,” was becoming more popular in American culture, which is further demonstrated by examining the print advertisement that helped promote the song in the black press. The image [see Figure 3], which ignores the joy Rainey expressed in her song and instead depicts her desires as suspect and deviant, was informed by the discourse in the black press at this time which represented queer black women as criminally suspect and violent. As the prior chapter has shown, many of the discussions of lesbianism in black newspapers in the 1920s referred to “women only” parties where jealous lovers assaulted their competitors, and such incidents were plastered on the front page with outlandish headlines in order to help sell newspapers.

This ad, which ran in *The Chicago Defender* in September 1928, highlights the tensions at play between queer black performing women and the entertainment industry, as Paramount Records took the ambiguity over lesbianism in Rainey’s song and heightened the controversy by inserting the image of a police officer. Was this done for mere sensationalism or to insert their own negative opinion of lesbian desire? The format of this ad is similar to many others that showcased Rainey over the years: an illustrated image of Rainey interacting with other characters was juxtaposed with a few sentences of narrative and tailored to fit her latest song. In this case, Rainey is shown wearing a suit jacket and tie, just as she describes herself in the song, which is out of the ordinary as she usually dressed quite femininely in promotional photographs and when performing, in gowns, jewels, feathers and furs. However, since very few images of

Rainey have been preserved, and most of them were constructed by the recording industry, there is a possibility that she may have preferred to wear a suit and tie when she was out of the limelight. Freelance illustrators or advertising companies whom the record companies hired were usually responsible for such ads, and black consultants were often brought in by white record companies to make the images and ad copy read “authentically” in hopes that black audiences would feel that they were being hailed specifically. These ads revealed whites’ anxieties over the increased presence of African Americans in the North, and such a reading corresponds with the image for “Prove It on Me Blues.”<sup>613</sup> Hazel Carby has discussed the fears that white reformers had towards single African American women traveling to the North. Reformers saw such women as a social problem due to their assumed sexual degeneracy, stemming from their race, class and region, and their unmarried or unattached status.<sup>614</sup> This degeneracy could take the form of prostitution, interracial sex and miscegenation, or, by the late 1920s, the newly visible image of the lesbian or mannish woman, who offered yet another option for how assumedly hypersexual single black women could threaten the social stability of the urban North.

Given this context, what is the *Chicago Defender* reader to make of the text in this ad and the specific reference to the policeman? He not only appears in the image, but the text points to him to make sure the reader notices his appearance. While an image of several women loitering on a corner under a street lamp with an officer in the background usually symbolizes prostitution, the appearance of women in masculine attire, such as ties, jackets and fedoras, is here used instead to signify lesbianism. This choice to insert

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<sup>613</sup> Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Down Home Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994, p. 201.

<sup>614</sup> Carby, 1992, pp. 738-755.

# "PROVE IT ON ME BLUES"



**"Ma" Rainey**

What's all this? Scandal? Maybe so, but you wouldn't have thought it of "Ma" Rainey. But look at that cop watching her! What does it all mean? But "Ma" just sings "Prove It On Me" in this great new Paramount Blues No. 12668, with a bang-up accompaniment by the Tub Jug Washboard Band. Don't fail to get this record from your dealer, or send us the coupon.

**[12668—Prove It On Me Blues and Hear Me Talking To You, "Ma" Rainey and the Tub Jug Washboard Band.]**

12666—Fountainbury Blues and Long Lashes' Lavin', Blind Lemon Jefferson and His Quintet.	12666—Ash Tray Blues and We Wood of Kansas' On the Hill, "Papa Charlie" Jackson and His Blind Banjo.
12664—Bess Crawford Blues and Western Helen Humes, Ida Cox, Piano, Banjo and Cornet Acc.	12661—Subst Louis Man and Kentucky Strong, Dixie Four.
12662—Low Down Mississippi Bottom and Tom Cat Blues, "Mr. Freddie" Spruell, Guitar Acc.	12657—Kamatta's And Kamatta's Ben Copps' Blues and Detroit Red Hot Blues, Blind Blake and His Guitar.
12663—Swan Boat Blues and Big Bill Blues, Big Bill and Yocom, Guitar Acc.	12665—Larkin Chair Blues and See That My Groove Is Kept Clean, Blind Lemon Jefferson and His Quintet.
12660—Larkin Chair Blues and See That My Groove Is Kept Clean, Blind Lemon Jefferson and His Quintet.	12659—Johnny Rodgers' How Yodel and Way Out On The Mountain, Louis Warfield, Guitar Acc.

**Favorite Spirituals**

12669—Like Me, King James and Our Father, Nellie Jubilee Quartette.  
 12668—The Eyes See The Spoken and I Wouldn't Mind Dying In Spring Was All, Marjorie Miller, Quartette.

**SEND NO MONEY!** If you desire any of the records you want, send us the coupon below. Pay postman 75 cents for each record, plus small C. O. D. fee which by all means accept. We pay postage on shipments of two or more records.

**Electrically Recorded!**  
 Paramount Records are recorded by the latest new electric method. Greater volume, amazingly clear tone. Always the best sound -- first on Paramount!

The New York  
 Laboratory  
 has examined this  
 and pronounced it  
 the best  
 sound on the records  
 standard. (5) Below  
 75 cents each.

12668	12667	12669
12666	12661	12660
12664	12657	12665
12663	12659	12662

**Paramount**  
 The Popular Race Record

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address \_\_\_\_\_  
 City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

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Figure 3: 1928 Chicago Defender advertisement.

The text reads: "What's all this? Scandal? Maybe so, but you wouldn't have thought it of "Ma" Rainey. But look at that cop watching her? What does it all mean?"

the figure of the policeman in the ad may have been done to allude to the lesbian orgy rumor from a few years prior, to represent lesbianism as an illicit vice, akin to prostitution, or to merely create sensationalism and build curiosity in the readers in order to increase record sales. Such melodrama was common in race records ads; by 1925, the major ads for women's blues songs read like cliffhangers: readers were encouraged to buy a record to find out the outcome of the climactic situations created through text and images in the ads.<sup>615</sup> Paramount Records tended to run their ads exclusively in the *Chicago Defender*, which was read nationally by African Americans yet still had a solid base in Chicago, where some readers may have understood the connection between the image of the policeman and the rumors of Rainey's arrest in the same city several years earlier.

Ma Rainey's ability to keep her audience unsure of her sexuality and to never declare her desire for women forthright may have contributed to her popularity. The sexual fluidity and ambiguity of Rainey – married to men, rumored to have had female lovers, and provocatively self-representing as a bulldagger in song – offers many fascinating inroads to understanding constructions of African American women's sexual subjectivity at this time. The record and advertisement for "Prove It on Me Blues" are cultural products that could be said to demarcate one of the first representations of queer black popular culture, and it is particularly notable that such creations came from a woman who was not known beyond mere rumor to have had romantic relationships with women. For women such as Alberta Hunter, Ethel Waters and Bessie Smith, who did partake of queer relationships, such an explicit message was not deemed a possibility.

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<sup>615</sup> Mark K. Dolan, "Extra! Chicago Defender Race Records Ads Show South from Afar," *Southern Cultures*, Vol. 13, No. 3, Fall 2007, p. 114.

However, as there was no particular female lover who could be “caught in the act” with Rainey, aside from the rumors of her indecent party, she was free to boast and tease her audience, and she brought conceptions of female same-sex desire further into the public realm as she did so.

## Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated how the black popular entertainment industry served as a meeting place that not only helped queer women build social networks but also functioned economically as an important site of work and livelihood. In this milieu, many women performers were sexually fluid and held an aversion to the “domestic” in all of its historical senses for black women. While some had relationships with women, others did not, but neither did they take part in normative monogamous marriage; the classic blues women sang many songs about women and men with multiple partners, some that even discussed two women coming to an agreement over sharing the same man.<sup>616</sup> While same-sex desire was generally an open secret in the industry, it was occasionally named as a larger disturbance. Beginning in the late 1920s and into the following decade, the black press ran sensational articles describing the deviant lives of Harlem performers and innocent southern migrant women who dreamt of becoming chorus girls that fell into the lecherous arms of hardened performing women. As such articles did reflect the views of many in the black communities of the urban North, very

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<sup>616</sup> The song “My Man Blues,” (1925) for example, is a duet by Bessie Smith and Clara Smith where they resolve the issue of fighting over a man by agreeing to share him. See Deborah F. Atwater, *African American Women's Rhetoric: The Search for Dignity, Personhood, and Honor*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009, p. 77.

few women performers outright claimed a queer identity in this era. Those who did, such as Gladys Bentley, were not part of the mainstream entertainment industry so much as the Prohibition-era milieu of the illicit speakeasy.<sup>617</sup>

Since same-sex desire was accepted among the world of performers, if not outside of it, performing women developed strategies to broach this issue in their work. “The famous lady lovers” labor on the stage and in recording studios produced cultural texts that referenced queerness in layered ways, often naming queer behaviors and identities while distancing themselves from them at the same time, or referring to them through double entendres that only some would understand. In this way they could hail audience members and listeners who welcomed such depictions and even identified with them, which helped strengthen and make visible the queer black networks of the urban North. At the same time, techniques such as Rainey’s teasing call to “prove it on me” and Smith’s naming of queer identities she claimed not to understand helped affirm their popularity with a majority who still found such concepts immoral, pathological, criminal, or just odd.

While many women who became successful performers had come from the South, and furthered their popularity through songs that reminisced about the South, performing women had an exceptional relationship to mobility at this time, which facilitated their queer relationships. Although touring during Jim Crow could be dangerous for African Americans, traveling together en masse brought safety in numbers, and the extraordinary mobility afforded performing women widened their horizons and exposed them to various regions and customs of the country. Further, while many southern migrants

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<sup>617</sup> Bentley will be examined separately in the following chapter.

settled down in the northern city they selected as their original destination, or moved back home dissatisfied within months or years of their arrival, performing women were much more mobile for greater lengths of time.<sup>618</sup> Through their touring they met new people and accessed the private world of queer performers every night in boarding houses, train cars, and, as the next chapter will describe, late night buffet flats and other illicit gatherings that flourished in the Prohibition era. Thus queer performing women were able to create a world not only on stage but also off-stage that challenged accepted norms and allowed for behaviors not generally accepted in society. The theater industry and the music industry symbiotically created a system in which classic blues singers regularly toured circuits of black theaters and theaters open to black audiences to support their latest records. Women such as Smith, Rainey, and Waters did not tour solo but performed with ever-changing revues of dancing women, comedians and singers. Within these touring troupes queer liaisons and networks emerged that sustained performers on long trips away from home. It was not merely the convergence of performers in theaters that were crucial to these growing queer counterpublics, but relationships forged in the liminal activity of touring as well.

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<sup>618</sup> Here are three accounts that suggest performing women were much more mobile than regular southern migrants: Isabel Wilkerson describes several women of the Great Migration with similar trajectories as Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, who moved with her family from Mississippi to Chicago. While they moved within the Windy City multiple times over the years, they did not move elsewhere than their original destination city. See Wilkerson, p. 394. Similarly, Elizabeth Clark-Lewis interviewed dozens of elderly African American women in Washington D.C. who had migrated there from the South in the early Great Migration to work as domestics and subsequently spent their lives in the capital city. See Clark-Lewis, 1994. In 1950, the *New York Age* asked passersby, “Why do you live in Harlem?” Four of the five men and women who responded had all moved there with their families from various southern locales, from New Orleans to Macon, and had lived there from 17 to 25 years. One sixty year old woman said she’d prefer to move to a small town for her children, but all of them appear to have generally moved from point A to point B and settled down. See Robert Fentress, “Camera Quiz: Why Do You Live in Harlem?” *The New York Age*, May 6, 1950, p. 13.

Performers such as Bessie Smith demonstrated that some married women also took part in relationships with women. She took advantage of her cultural capital and economic and social power by entering into relationships with other women employed in her traveling shows, but her marriage limited her ability to fully enjoy such relationships. Ma Rainey's "Prove It on Me Blues" epitomized the reigning attitude of this era towards lesbianism. Rainey understood that queerness was a topic that could titillate audiences but she chose to tease them with ambiguity, which was a more provocative and lucrative approach than blatantly admitting to same-sex relationships. Whereas the white-owned Columbia Records did not mind representing Rainey as a bull dagger in their print ads, black-owned Black Swan Records tried to draw attention to Ethel Waters' desirability to men while she toured the country with her girlfriend Ethel Williams. Waters and Williams' onstage performance, like the songs of the classic blues women, employed "knowingness" to connect with both queer-friendly and queer-ignorant or hostile audiences at the same time. Utilizing these various strategies, the famous lady lovers enjoyed exceptional success in the black popular entertainment industry and took part in forming the queer networks of the urban North. These working-class southern migrant women had become icons of urban female modernity.

**Chapter Four:**  
**“A Freakish Party:” Queer African American Women, Vice and Space in the  
Prohibition-Era Urban North**

In 1928, the New York City vice commission the Committee of Fourteen (COF) hired an African American male investigator named Raymond Claymes to visit, record, and evaluate the state of Harlem’s nightlife underworld. In the early morning hours of May 25<sup>th</sup>, Claymes was brought to a “woman’s party” in a tenement apartment on West 137<sup>th</sup> Street, where a married woman, who he referred to in his notes as a “madam,” was in charge. When he arrived, he counted fifteen African American women and five men. All those who were dancing were couples of the same sex. Queer behavior and prostitution intermingled and overlapped and Claymes noted that some women dancing together were “going through the motions of copulation,” with “their dresses pulled up to their thighs.” He asked the madam what type of party this was, and he wrote that she replied, “A freakish party, everybody in here is supposed to be a bull dagger or a c\_\_\_\_\_.”<sup>619</sup> He replied that he “was neither,” and that his sexual preferences ran “the normal way.” While the madam was unsure if anyone else present felt similarly, she encouraged Claymes to approach women nonetheless. He introduced himself to a female partygoer with the memorable pickup line, “Are you one of these so-called things here or are you a normal, regular girl?” She replied without missing a beat, “Everybody here is

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<sup>619</sup> Committee of Fourteen records, Box 82, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library. “C\_\_\_\_\_” might stand for “cocksucker,” but this was not a term necessarily used in relation to gay men in African American communities of the 1920s yet, as “cock” often referred to female genitalia as well.

either a bull dagger or faggot and I am here.”<sup>620</sup> Notably, Claymes then wrote, “after further conversation with her she agreed to commit an act of prostitution for \$5, at this place in her room.”<sup>621</sup> He then left the premises.

Such parties took place in vice districts that emerged in the urban North after World War I and grew exponentially during the Great Migration and Prohibition.<sup>622</sup> In these zones one could find bootleg alcohol, commercialized sex and nightlife spaces that welcomed same-sex and interracial mingling. These districts encompassed black neighborhoods in most cities, despite the fact that whites dominated much of these illicit industries.<sup>623</sup> As this 1928 vice report shows, in these spaces various types of non-reproductive sex, from queer behaviors to prostitution, mingled. These overlaps and the geographic proximity of such practices contributed further to the conflation of emerging queer black identities with prostitution and the vice-ridden “underworld.” This was yet another reason that the larger black community did not embrace African American women who loved women in this era.

During Prohibition, these black neighborhoods in the urban North became increasingly popular destinations for adventure-seeking white middle-class and elite “slummers.” These white thrill-seekers were interested in momentarily sampling illicit

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<sup>620</sup> This is notable because she reveals that black women self-identified with the term “bull dagger” during the era; it wasn’t merely a negative label used by heterosexuals to denigrate queer women or specifically queer masculine women. As the woman in question was likely feminine in appearance, since the investigator asked her if she was a “normal, regular girl” this also reveals that “bull dagger” was a colloquial term that some working-class queer African American women utilized regardless of their gender presentation.

<sup>621</sup> Committee of Fourteen records, Box 82, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library.

<sup>622</sup> Mumford; Heap.

<sup>623</sup> Michael Lerner, *Dry Manhattan: Prohibition in New York City*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2007. While Shane White and Stephen Robertson demonstrate how difficult it was for African Americans to make headway into already white-established illicit industries, the gambling system known as “the numbers” was actually one of the few black-dominated industries that whites sought to break into. They argue that numbers was the most successful black business of the interwar era. See Shane White and Stephen Robertson, *Playing the Numbers: Gambling in Harlem between the Wars*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010, p. 24-25.

pleasures such as bootleg liquor, interracial dancing and same-sex behavior.<sup>624</sup> This constant stream of curious whites led poet Langston Hughes to declare this the era when “the Negro was in vogue.”<sup>625</sup> This craze for a taste of the exotic made church-going and family-focused working-class and middle-class African Americans, community leaders and reformers more concerned over the immoral displays and activities that elite whites witnessed in districts such as Harlem and Chicago’s South Side. White slummers primarily felt comfortable venturing into establishments that featured black performers for white audiences, such as the famous Cotton Club. But another side of the black urban North existed where whites rarely tread: the world of African American-centered rent parties, speakeasies and buffet flats. Many of these spaces were created by entrepreneurial African Americans to socialize in their own neighborhoods away from the white gaze of slummers as well as profit off the lucrative Prohibition industry of bootleg alcohol.<sup>626</sup> This chapter will explore these liminal spaces that crossed boundaries of legality, commercial and residential space, and issues of privacy, as some venues were open to the public and other required personal connections to venture inside.

Vivid descriptions of this milieu have been preserved in – among other sources – the notes of the Committee of Fourteen (COF), which was one of the country’s leading private citizen reform associations. New York’s City Club and the Anti-Saloon League, which played a large role in the passing of Prohibition laws, founded this Progressive Era group in 1905.<sup>627</sup> Curbing prostitution was the COF’s central concern, yet as their investigators documented the establishments they entered while scouting out illegal sex

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<sup>624</sup> Chauncey, 1994; Mumford; Heap.

<sup>625</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1940, p. 228.

<sup>626</sup> Langston Hughes noted of the Prohibition era, “Non-theatrical, non-intellectual Harlem was an unwilling victim of its own vogue. It didn’t like to be stared at by white folks.” See Hughes, 1940, p. 229.

<sup>627</sup> Mumford, p. 21.

economies, they also came upon queer gatherings and non-normative gender behaviors which they described in detail, creating an important archive for historians interested in “everyday life” among working-class African Americans. Autobiographies, biographies, and oral histories will supplement the COF records to flesh out these queer worlds.

Investigator Claymes’s report raises a number of questions about historical topics implicit in his description of a “women’s party:” what were the pleasures and restrictions of queer black women’s social gatherings in residential and illicit spaces and what was the relationship between black nightlife’s illicit sexual economies to ordinary black women’s labor and leisure? These spaces were crucial sites in the formation of black queer sexual subjectivities. As this chapter will demonstrate, music, dancing, performance, gathering spaces and non-reproductive sexuality, along with the presence of illegal alcohol during Prohibition were some of the various ingredients that helped produce the queer worlds of the urban North that was home to many working-class African American women in cities across the Northeast and the Midwest.<sup>628</sup> Queer black women took advantage of the spaces opened up by Prohibition to socialize and work, yet freedom in such illicit and often temporary spaces could be fleeting, and lady lovers’ implicit association with the *demi monde* contributed to their further marginalization in the eyes of the race leaders, journalists and others concerned with the social ills the world of vice brought into the community.

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<sup>628</sup> The emergence of queer black networks on the West Coast took longer than in the East, as African Americans did not migrate to California en masse until WWII. For example, the black population of San Francisco grew over 600% between 1940 and 1960. See Alamilla Boyd, p. 112. Donald Bogle notes that a “gay black Hollywood” subculture did not emerge until the 1940s. In general, little work has been done on west coast working-class queer black networks for the first half of the twentieth century. See Donald Bogle, *Bright Boulevards, Bold Dreams: The Story of Black Hollywood*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2006, p. 123.

The gathering spaces this chapter will focus on either came into existence or drastically increased in popularity due to Prohibition while the Volstead Act, which inaugurated Prohibition, was influenced by the work of the Committee of Fourteen. Therefore, an overview on the COF and its relationship to Prohibition will first offer historical context for the emergence of different sites of Prohibition leisure, which will then be discussed in more detail. I will then turn to additional accounts of queer black women's gatherings using vice reports and oral histories, followed by a section on the music and performance of queer liminal Prohibition spaces. Next, I examine the different ways queer black women were associated with prostitution in this era before ending with a discussion of how the Great Depression and the repeal of Prohibition affected queer nightlife in the urban North.

### **The Anti-Saloon League, The Committee of Fourteen and Prohibition**

The passing of the 1919 Volstead Act was a victory for Progressive era reformers concerned with the integration of recent immigrants and their effect on urban life – in particular, activists wanted to reform the drinking habits of men, and obliterate their leisure site of choice: the saloon.<sup>629</sup> An early-nineteenth century male-dominated temperance movement that did not support women agitating in the public sphere later

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<sup>629</sup> On Prohibition see: Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*. New York: Noonday, 1995; Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1995; Catherine Gilbert Murdock, *Domesticating Drink: Women, Men and Alcohol in America, 1870-1940*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998; David J. Goldberg, *Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999; Michael Lerner, *Dry Manhattan: Prohibition in New York City*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007; Daniel Okrent, *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010.

gave way to a female-led anti-alcohol crusade that reached its apogee in the 1870s.<sup>630</sup>

Utilizing the discourse of maternal moral influence, female temperance activists sought to combat the “evils” of the homosocial male saloon drinking culture that emerged with the advent of industrial capitalism and spread as European immigration to the U.S. increased. Women took up the cause of temperance in part because working men, distressed by their low earnings and alienated by their new wage work, found solace in saloon culture. In the U.S. there were close to 100,000 saloons in 1870, which ballooned to nearly 300,000 by 1900, most of which were opened and run by recent immigrants.<sup>631</sup> Heavy drinking led to domestic abuse and drained men’s wages, which adversely affected women and children. This led to the creation of organizations that sang the praises of abstaining from alcohol, most famously Frances Willard’s Women’s Christian Temperance Union which formed in 1873. Temperance leaders sought to use the female moral influence garnered in the private sphere to outwardly better their communities and, ideally, the entire nation. By the 1910s, the women’s temperance movement had grown so strong that liquor and brewing companies actively campaigned against women’s suffrage for fear that if women achieved the vote they would force Prohibition on the nation.<sup>632</sup>

However, the organization that played the largest role in passing the Volstead Act was the male-led Anti-Saloon League (ASL). Founded in 1895, the ASL was not only concerned about over-dependence on alcohol by working-class and immigrant men, but also with other nefarious activities associated with saloon culture: prostitution, gambling, and the corrupt political machines that often used saloons as their central meeting

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<sup>630</sup> Gilbert Murdock, p. 18.

<sup>631</sup> Ibid, p. 3; Okrent, p. 27.

<sup>632</sup> Lerner, p. 174.

places.<sup>633</sup> The Committee of Fourteen was created out of the ASL at the turn-of-the-century in New York over concerns related to the relationship of prostitution to saloons. Specifically, the COF was formed in response to the 1896 Raines law, which inadvertently allowed New York City saloons to function as brothels.<sup>634</sup> The COF was comprised of settlement house workers, temperance advocates, clerics, housing reformers, and businessmen. The commission included well-known progressive reformers like Frances Kellor, an expert on immigrants with a law degree from Cornell, and was funded by wealthy New Yorkers including Andrew Carnegie. In the 1910s, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. became the COF's most important fundraiser.<sup>635</sup>

The Raines law was originally passed to prohibit the sale of alcohol on Sundays in all commercial institutions with the exception of hotels. However, if an accommodation had at least ten beds it could be considered a hotel and was exempted. Many saloons quickly assembled bedrooms upstairs from their bars in an effort to escape the prohibition on Sunday sales, as most working-class men worked six days a week and drank on Sundays. While in the past, prostitutes who found clients in saloons had to bring them to a hotel or boarding house this change allowed them to take their johns upstairs. Saloons with newly established bedrooms were known as "Raines law hotels."<sup>636</sup>

Much to the chagrin of anti-vice reformers and religious authorities, this genre of commercial sex establishments had come into existence quite rapidly. At the dawn of the twentieth century, Raines law hotels were the leading institutions of prostitution in all of

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<sup>633</sup> Goldberg, p. 54.

<sup>634</sup> In fact the group's original name was The Committee of Fourteen for the Suppression of Raines Law Hotels in New York City. See Committee of Fourteen, *The Social Evil in New York City: A Study of Law Enforcement by the Research Committee of the Committee of Fourteen*. New York: 1910, pp. xi, 1.

<sup>635</sup> Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1992, p. 303.

<sup>636</sup> Chauncey, 1994, pp. 160-62.

New York City. While the law was supposed to repress prostitution and regulate liquor sales it actually accomplished the reverse.<sup>637</sup> The rise of Raines law hotels served as the COF's impetus to uncover illegal activities related to prostitution, although they understood that commercial sex was a part of city life and could likely never be fully eliminated.<sup>638</sup> Prior to Prohibition, the COF focused their investigations on institutions with alcohol licenses; it was not until after 1920 that they began to investigate private accommodations and tenements as well.<sup>639</sup> While decreasing the number of houses of prostitution was their central concern, they also attacked the problems presented by new forms of entertainment, as Progressive-era reformers were particularly concerned about the effect on urban youth of vice and popular amusements.<sup>640</sup>

In the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, sex for sale was never far out of reach for patrons of urban nightlife. As Cynthia Blair argues in her study of prostitution in Chicago, the nineteenth-century sex industry was separated from other forms of leisure, but by the beginning of the twentieth century, a vibrant leisure economy was expanding to offer recreation to Chicago's growing black population.<sup>641</sup> Concert saloons were the first modern nightclubs, which tolerated and even promoted prostitution, allowing female waitresses and performers to double as sex workers, who would solicit clients as they served refreshments and passed through audiences.<sup>642</sup> Differing relationships to prostitution separated the most popular type of nightlife institution of the

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<sup>637</sup> Gilfoyle, pp. 245-247, p. 303.

<sup>638</sup> Ibid, p. 304.

<sup>639</sup> Stephen Robertson, "Harlem Undercover: Vice Investigators, Race, and Prostitution, 1910-1930," *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 35, no. 4, May 2009, p. 489.

<sup>640</sup> Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, pp. 63-64.

<sup>641</sup> 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, pp. 15, 164.

<sup>642</sup> Gilfoyle, p. 224-225.

early-twentieth century – the cabaret – from the concert saloon. While both involved risqué performance by women who stood not on a stage but on the same floor that held the audience, prostitutes were not allowed to actively solicit customers in cabarets. This helped make the venues comfortable for female audience members to enjoy themselves as well, thus creating a welcoming zone for heterosociality.<sup>643</sup>

A night out on the town for drinking, dancing and entertainment was no longer a privilege reserved for men. Now even middle-class women could even take part in such activities, although such pastimes were still considered rather off limits to older, religious and conservative minds. To this end, the COF was instrumental in the creation of censorship boards for movies, installing policewomen to work at amusement parks and dance halls, and the separation of liquor from dancing, which were all measures taken to safeguard newly emerging heterosocial forms of leisure from immorality.<sup>644</sup> By the 1910s, women increasingly frequented urban saloons, especially those that served food as well as alcohol. In 1917, a Committee of Fourteen investigator found a midtown saloon patronized by prostitutes as well as two seemingly respectable women carrying shopping bags who “been out marketing.” In another nearby saloon, the investigator found four German couples enjoying beers.<sup>645</sup> However, most women who wanted to avoid the connotation of prostitution would buy alcohol in saloons and take it home to drink instead of sitting down without a male escort.<sup>646</sup>

The Anti-Saloon League was concerned with these growing public drinking cultures and fought them by bringing political sophistication to the movement to curb

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<sup>643</sup> Ibid, p. 247-248.

<sup>644</sup> Erenberg p. 65.

<sup>645</sup> Peiss, 1986, p. 28.

<sup>646</sup> Ibid.

alcohol.<sup>647</sup> The organization had spent twenty years orchestrating state campaigns against the alcohol industry before turning to change at the national level. During an era of increasing urbanization they were successful by gaining the support of rural religious leaders and politicians, which was their strategy for passing state-level prohibition laws in regions many thought could never become “dry,” like New York State.<sup>648</sup> While the nineteenth-century female-led temperance movement had focused on morals and changing individual habits, the twentieth century version of the movement sought to shut down the liquor trade through political lobbying.<sup>649</sup> As Prohibition historian Michael Lerner argues, the ASL’s ability to win over at least 36 states in order to ratify the constitutional amendment for Prohibition was “less an expression of popular will than the product of political opportunism” and “aggressive lobbying.”<sup>650</sup>

The sway in popular opinion towards Prohibition was also fueled by fears of America’s rapidly growing urban centers and their expanding immigrant populations, which were bolstered by anti-immigrant sentiments. The nation’s entry into World War I was crucial to the support of Prohibition for two reasons. First, at the encouragement of the ASL, Congress passed a Wartime Prohibition in order to conserve grain and barley as essential foods instead of using them for intoxicating beverages.<sup>651</sup> Second, WWI led to an increased anti-German hysteria, and in particular, suspicion of the national and political loyalties of the German-dominated beer industry.<sup>652</sup> The ASL capitalized on these anxieties, arguing, “German brewers in this country have rendered thousands of

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<sup>647</sup> Dumenil, p. 229.

<sup>648</sup> Lerner, p. 10.

<sup>649</sup> Ibid, pp. 7-8.

<sup>650</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>651</sup> Garrett Peck, *The Prohibition Hangover: Alcohol in American from Demon Rum to Cult Cabernet*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009, p. 11; Goldberg, p. 55.

<sup>652</sup> Ibid, p.13.

men inefficient and are thus crippling the Republic in its war on Prussian militarism.”<sup>653</sup>

By highlighting the patriotism of the Prohibition movement, it was not difficult to pass the Eighteenth Amendment through Congress, and it was then quickly ratified by the states.

The Eighteenth Amendment took effect in January 1920, prohibiting the manufacturing, sale and transportation of alcohol. This was the first constitutional amendment to limit individual rights rather than government actions, which played a large role in its eventual repeal in 1933. The Volstead Act of 1919 established the federal Prohibition Bureau to enforce this amendment, but the bureau’s agents soon realized the extreme difficulty in enforcing the alcohol ban. Illegal alcohol bootleggers, the rise of the speakeasy, and the willingness of police officials to accept bribes from law-breaking entrepreneurs made overseeing the ban practically impossible. By the early 1920s, many eastern states, including New York, had basically given up on trying to enforce Prohibition. While many critics found the ban to constitute a massive infringement of personal liberties, there were multiple factors and interests that led to the initial passing of Prohibition. Most of these factors shared an underlying belief in promoting morality and sobriety as specifically white, nativist Protestant cultural values in a time when northern cities were rapidly filling with European immigrants and black southern migrants. While African American leaders did not agree with these sentiments they nonetheless saw Prohibition as an important opportunity for the black community to demonstrate respectability through the restraint of temperance.<sup>654</sup>

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<sup>653</sup> Dumenil, p. 230.

<sup>654</sup> Lerner, pp. 201-202.

However, temperance was more difficult to maintain in African American neighborhoods because they were filled with white-owned speakeasies. In 1923, *The New York Age* ran a series of articles, “Hootch Hell Holes,” which noted that Jewish numbers runner and bootlegger Hyman Kassell had a monopoly on Harlem’s illicit liquor industry.<sup>655</sup> In the aftermath of successful Progressive-led national campaigns against red-light districts in white neighborhoods during the 1910s, many observers noted that city officials had become lax about increasing crime in black communities. One 1922 Chicago study claimed that the “protests of colored neighborhoods” against “disorderly houses” and “the painted women in their neighborhood are usually ignored by the police.”<sup>656</sup> If police turned a blind eye to crime and illegal activities in black districts, there was no reason for such operations to relocate.<sup>657</sup> Thus, the Great Migration, along with Prohibition, created new opportunities for white vice owners and corrupt politicians to hide their illegal activities under “a cover of blackness” in neighborhoods such as Harlem and Bronzeville.<sup>658</sup>

As speakeasies rapidly multiplied in the 1920s to take advantage of urban dwellers’ desire for the forbidden, prostitution also flourished in these covert spaces. Such venues were particularly important to African American prostitutes, who were less likely to work in upscale settings and often had to ply their trade on the streets.<sup>659</sup> By 1927, the COF found speakeasies to account for 78% of all the prostitution violations discovered in their investigations, and they claimed such sites were the “greatest source

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<sup>655</sup> Marni Davis, *Jews and Booze: Becoming American in the Age of Prohibition*. New York: New York University Press, 2012, pp. 161-62.

<sup>656</sup> Chicago Commission on Race Relations, 1922, p. 202.

<sup>657</sup> Kenneth Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870-1930*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976, p.50.

<sup>658</sup> Muhammad, p. 226.

<sup>659</sup> Blair, p. 2.

for the making of new prostitutes.”<sup>660</sup> However, while the committee was well aware that Harlem had become a central site for vice and needed further patrolling, they had had trouble penetrating the district for several reasons. Though COF was long supported by Fred Moore, editor of the black newspaper the *New York Age* and president of the “Colored Auxiliary” of the COF in 1911-12, finding black investigators was a constant problem. The organization’s white male secretary noted in 1916 that “the colored man has a rather keen sense of racial solidarity” and “objects to acting as a ‘stool pigeon’ against his own race.”<sup>661</sup> Undaunted, the COF occasionally sent white investigators to Harlem, but with little success; a 1923 report notes that an agent could not gain any access to buffet flats.<sup>662</sup>

Harlem speakeasies and buffet flats were increasingly associated with prostitution into the 1920s, which brought larger crowds of white slummers into the black district. As a result, the COF redoubled their efforts to recruit an African American investigator and hired teacher Raymond Claymes in 1928 to conduct a five-month undercover investigation of Harlem nightlife.<sup>663</sup> Claymes was a Texas native who studied sociology at Howard University and later attended Yale divinity school.<sup>664</sup> His COF reports reveal that despite his respectable, middle-class background, he was able to secure the trust of working-class African American men and women who showed him speakeasies and apartment buffet flats. He filed 130 reports on Harlem, which comprised the first in-depth

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<sup>660</sup> *Annual Report of the Committee of Fourteen*, 1929, p. 13, cited in Mumford, p. 35.

<sup>661</sup> Whitin to Philip Payton, May 29, 1916, folder “135th St to 213th Street,” box 23, COF Papers, cited in Robertson, 2009, p. 490.

<sup>662</sup> Robertson, 2009, p. 494.

<sup>663</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 486.

<sup>664</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 488.

archive of the district's vice activities in a decade.<sup>665</sup> Claymes's reports demonstrated that by 1928, buffet flats became even more crucial to prostitution than Harlem speakeasies – a discovery that surprised white COF investigators who would not have as easily accessed that information.<sup>666</sup>

### **Rent Parties, Buffet Flats, and Speakeasies**

The thousands of southern African Americans who relocated to the urban North in the early-twentieth century brought the tradition of the rent party with them. Sociologist Ira De A. Reid explained in 1927 that “it has been the custom of certain portions of the Negro group living in Southern cities to give some form of party when money was needed to supplement the family income.” Such parties were particularly necessary for “many families of a low economic status who sought to confine their troubles with a little joy.”<sup>667</sup> *The New York Age* explicated, “the rent party has become a recognized means of meeting the demands of extortionate landlords in Harlem, as well as in other sections, since the era of high rents set in and became a permanent condition.”<sup>668</sup> This social gathering was a form of communal support for recently arrived new settlers. In the face of the poor-paying jobs and high rents that made upward mobility in the urban North hard to come by for recent migrants, friends and neighbors banded together and pooled their funds. The rent party was also imbricated in the social fabric of Prohibition, *The New York Age* explained: “booze of dubious origin can be secured from the nearest

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<sup>665</sup> Ibid, p. 487.

<sup>666</sup> Stephen Robertson, Shane White, Stephen Garton, and Graham White, “Disorderly Houses: Residences, Privacy, and the Surveillance of Sexuality in 1920s Harlem,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 21, No. 3, September 2012, p. 461.

<sup>667</sup> Ira De A. Reid, “Mrs. Bailey Pays the Rent,” *Ebony and Topaz; A Collectanea*. Charles S. Johnson, Ed. New York: National Urban League, 1927, p. 144.

<sup>668</sup> “A Rent Party Tragedy,” *The New York Age*, Dec. 11, 1926, p. 4.

delicatessen, and under its enlivening influence the guests can indulge in the energetic dance movements of the day, until the floor threatens to give way or the neighbors summon the police.”<sup>669</sup>

Unfortunately, rent parties could be, and were eventually, coopted. A 1938 Works Progress Administration report on Harlem noted that such events, “like any other universally popular diversion, soon fell into the hands of the racketeers. Many small-time pimps and madames who, up to that time, had operated under-cover buffet flats, came out into the open and staged nightly so-called Rent Parties.”<sup>670</sup> Similarly, as rent parties became more popular, they also began attracting slumming whites from downtown, who thought it “quite the thing” to “chisel” in on Harlem “stomping sessions held ostensibly for the purpose of collecting a kitty to pay off the landlord.”<sup>671</sup> Notably, both rent parties and buffet flats were usually managed by women, some of who were former (or current) madams or entertainers. Their knowledge of theatrical circles and the world of commercial sex meant they could easily tap their networks to bring patrons in for an evening. They were able to secure up and coming musical acts, as performers saw buffet flats as ideal spaces to unwind, develop their skills and make decent tips.<sup>672</sup> Musical performances then served as both the main act as well as background for dancing between friends, lovers, and sex workers with their soon-to-be clients.<sup>673</sup>

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<sup>669</sup> “A Rent Party Tragedy,” *The New York Age*, Dec. 11, 1926, p 4.

<sup>670</sup> Frank Byrd, “Harlem Rent Parties,” 1938, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, WPA Federal Writers' Project Collection.

<sup>671</sup> “Rent Parties in Harlem Attract White Patrons,” *The Atlanta Daily World*, Oct. 26, 1932, p. 1.

<sup>672</sup> Blair, p. 180.

<sup>673</sup> Wilson, 2010, p. 12.

Rent parties were advertised through calling cards, which could be found “stuck in the grille of apartment house elevators.”<sup>674</sup> Sometimes they were also promoted through placing a sign on the building holding the event at street level.<sup>675</sup> The day that Mabel Hampton met Lillian Foster, who became her partner for over forty years, her to-be lover gave her a card for a rent party she was throwing. The two women met at a bus stop and struck up a conversation, which shows that sometimes women met in public on the street, which has historically been a form of social behavior more associated with gay men. The card (Figure 4) Foster presented to Hampton was common of the genre, which enticed readers to attend with rhymes and short narratives describing the festivities. This one in particular conjures the financial difficulties of the Depression as a reason for camaraderie.

Buffet flats were more notorious than rent parties, because they offered not only food and illegal alcohol but also gambling, drugs, commercial sex and sexual entertainments. Marijuana, opium, cocaine and heroin were an increasingly popular part of the milieu of black music and dance in the 1920s and 30s, and blackjack, poker and other games were common ways to make extra money in one’s leisure time at social gatherings.<sup>676</sup> Indeed, George Haynes of the National Urban League claimed that buffet

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<sup>674</sup> White and Robertson, p. 229.

<sup>675</sup> Bill Graves, “House-Rent Parties,” *Encyclopedia of the Blues, Volume One*. Edward Komara, ed. New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 468.

<sup>676</sup> William H. James, *Doin’ Drugs: Patterns of African American Addiction*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996, p. 38. Drugs were also part of the allure for white slummers in black districts; *Variety* helpfully noted in an article on Harlem that the district between 132<sup>nd</sup> and 138<sup>th</sup> on Fifth Avenue was known as “Coke Village” and many of the “white gentry” there were looking for “hop.” See “Black Belts Nite Life,” *Variety*, October 16, 1929, pp. 1, 12.



**Figure 4: Rent party advertisement given to Mabel Hampton by Lillian Foster on the day they met.**

**(Mabel Hampton Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archives)**

flats were merely a combination of “gambling parlors” and “apartments of prostitution.”<sup>677</sup> Usually welcoming of queers, blues singer Bessie Smith’s niece Ruby Walker recalled that buffet flats serviced “nothing but faggots and bulldykers, a real open house. Everything went on in that house – tongue baths, you name it. They called them buffet flats because buffet meant everything, everything that was in the life.”<sup>678</sup> While not all buffet flats catered to queer clients, the ones that Walker attended while touring in Bessie Smith’s entourage were clearly chosen for their acceptance of same-sex activities, as Smith was known for taking part in relationships with women that she kept hidden

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<sup>677</sup> Wolcott, p. 108.

<sup>678</sup> Albertson, p. 140. As will be further discussed later in this chapter, “in the life” was an expression that referred both to queer African American life as well as to the underworld of prostitution, gambling, drugs and other illicit activities.

from her husband.<sup>679</sup> While she tried not to participate in scandalous behavior in the open because of her fame, she nonetheless enjoyed watching performances. One featured at an infamous Detroit buffet flat particularly captivated Smith. A fat woman performed “an amazing trick with a lighted cigarette, then repeated it in the old-fashioned way with a Coca-Cola bottle.” Walker noted that “she could do all them things with her pussy – a real educated pussy.”<sup>680</sup> While rent parties only occasionally featured commercial sex, buffet flats usually did.<sup>681</sup> The “freakish party” witnessed by Raymond Claymes that opened this chapter likely took place at a buffet flat.

Many women ran buffet flats on their own, or with the help of a few friends who would pool their funds to purchase bootleg liquor that could be sold by the glass or the pint at a high markup to party goers. A Harlem woman who identified herself to a WPA interviewer as “Bernice” began opening her home to strangers every weekend after her husband left her in 1926, when she had to find a way to afford her high rent on a domestic worker’s salary. She noted, “when I first came to New York from Bermuda, I thought rent parties were disgraceful. I couldn’t understand how any self-respecting person could bear them,” but that changed when she became unexpectedly single. She first began taking in roomers to make extra money, and they introduced her to the idea of throwing regular parties. One of them helped her buy corn liquor by the gallon and the other ran a poker and blackjack game during the gatherings. Soon, her female housemate began having sex with men for money during the parties and eventually Bernice began working as a prostitute as well. She recalled, “I was a fool to go out and break my back scrubbing floors, washing, ironing, and cooking, when I could earn three day’s pay, or

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<sup>679</sup> Albertson.

<sup>680</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 141-42.

<sup>681</sup> Blair, p. 176.

more, in fifteen minutes.” Interviewed in 1938 during the Depression, she sighed, “it was a good racket while it lasted, but it’s shot to pieces now.”<sup>682</sup> Women such as Bernice used the illicit industries of Prohibition to support themselves while they could. Although she had once found such behaviors immoral, economic circumstances forced her to reevaluate her options and she took advantage of the demand for such parties to pay her expensive rent.

While buffet flats were crucial to the Prohibition era, they actually had a longer history: sometimes known as “good-time flats,” they evolved out of services created for Pullman train porters. These relatively well paid African American men worked on sleeping car Pullman trains beginning in the nineteenth century and this respected and sought after job was seen as an important entryway into the black middle class. However, while Pullman porters were crucial to the national transportation system, they were not able to stay in white-only accommodations while on the road.<sup>683</sup> Buffet flats first emerged as hybrid institutions for train porters that borrowed from brothels, whose main service was to “excite, satisfy and make money from male sexual curiosity.” But they also shared commonalities with the cabaret culture that arose in the 1910s that gave “non-monetary heterosocial interchange” a musical backdrop.<sup>684</sup> Buffet flats became even more popular during Prohibition for making alcohol available for purchase alongside erotic entertainments and live music. While brothels had rarely catered to queer women aside from employing them and making money catering to male sexual fantasies of women

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<sup>682</sup> Frank Byrd, “Buffet Flat,” *A Renaissance in Harlem: Lost Voices of an American Community*. Lionel C. Bascom, ed. New York: William Morrow, 1999, pp. 68-71.

<sup>683</sup> Larry Tye, *Rising From the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class*. New York: Henry Holt, 2004. See Albertson, p. 140; Michael W. Harris, *Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1992, p 51.

<sup>684</sup> Blair, p. 176.

having sex together, the space of the buffet flat allowed women to be sexual spectators and, in some settings, take part in flirtations and sexual behavior with other women. The Harlem “woman’s party” that opened this chapter and the buffet flats that Bessie Smith and her entourage attended in Detroit reveal that queer black women took part in and enjoyed such gatherings. While some of the women who threw regular buffet flats in their homes may have received financial backing from others, the few available accounts suggest that in New York, Chicago, Detroit, and other northern cities, black women ran the show and made a living on their profits.<sup>685</sup> At the same time, they also supported the white liquor traders who supplied the alcohol for such gatherings.<sup>686</sup> While some white slummers discovered the world of buffet flats in black districts, most parties were “underground community spaces” for local African Americans.<sup>687</sup>

While rent parties and buffet flats also featured bootleg liquor during Prohibition, selling and serving alcohol was the primary function of speakeasies, which were primarily white-owned spaces that quickly spread through less-policed black neighborhoods. There were over 20,000 of them in 1920s New York, and Chicago and Detroit each claimed to be “wetter” than the Big Apple during this supposedly “dry” era from 1920 to 1933.<sup>688</sup> Performer Ada “Bricktop” Smith recalled that, “Prohibition made a lot of people *start* drinking, and it didn’t make anybody stop.”<sup>689</sup> Speakeasies could open, close, and reopen “virtually overnight” and could appear anywhere from “abandoned

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<sup>685</sup> The following accounts of black women running buffet flats do not mention any outside parties that helped run or fund the events: Frank Byrd, “Buffet Flat,” *A Renaissance in Harlem: Lost Voices of an American Community*. Lionel C. Bascom, ed. New York: William, Morrow, 1999, pp. 68-71; Wolcott, pp. 118, 194; Blair, pp. 175-185.

<sup>686</sup> James, p. 36.

<sup>687</sup> A white newspaper noted of the buffet flat, “it’s peculiar to Harlem, yet few white visitors to that Negro haven in New York City ever hear of it and practically none get into one.” See *Evening Recorder* (Amsterdam, NY), December 11, 1933, p. 6; Blair, p. 281, fn. 85.

<sup>688</sup> Lerner, p. 3.

<sup>689</sup> Bricktop with James Haskins, *Bricktop*. New York: Atheneum, 1983, p. 70.

storefronts, tenement apartments, or basements.”<sup>690</sup> As police increasingly relied on undercover investigation to entrap speakeasies’ owners, those who ran them became more secretive and tended to only let in known customers. This clandestine environment made speakeasies even more conducive to queer customers and behaviors because such clients often wished to remain anonymous.<sup>691</sup> One 1928 COF report noted they had come across “fourteen homo-sexuals of both sexes” in thirteen Harlem speakeasies and nightclubs.<sup>692</sup>

Bricktop described her experiences working as a singer in a speakeasy during Prohibition:

You’d be on the floor singing, a buzzer would sound, and you’d quickly sit down at the table nearest you. The piano top would be closed, the drinks whisked away. When the police came downstairs to look around, all they’d see was some slightly happy people drinking ginger ale or Coca-Cola and talking about the weather. When the police left, things went back to normal. The booze would appear on the tables and the piano player would get busy at the keyboard.<sup>693</sup>

While both the possibility and the actuality of a police raid could put a damper on one’s evening, some nightlife goers found such a potential disruption thrilling. Fights and robberies were very common in speakeasies as well; as one Prohibition era musician recalled, bootleg liquor “made the people wild and out of control – they’d fight and shoot and cut and break the place up.”<sup>694</sup> A 1930 *Variety* article on the increasing popularity of speakeasies noted, “there is a congenial yet semi-forbidden atmosphere” in such venues that “people seem[ed] to crave.” The same article supports Bricktop’s previous statement,

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<sup>690</sup> Mumford, pp. 33-34.

<sup>691</sup> Ibid, p. 34.

<sup>692</sup> Committee of Fourteen, Investigator Report, box 37, 1928, cited in Mumford, p. 80.

<sup>693</sup> Bricktop, p. 67.

<sup>694</sup> Garvin Bushell quoted in Adam Gussow, *Seems Like Murder in Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 220.

commenting, “almost everybody” had “gotten into the habit of drinking rather heavily” in the Prohibition era.<sup>695</sup> Thus, the aim of Prohibition – curbing drinking through regulating the selling of alcohol – was a spectacular failure. However, socially, the Volstead Act functioned to connect heterogeneous people – both in class and race – who bonded together in their hatred of the law and their desire to outwit its censure.

### **Queer Black Women’s Socializing in the Prohibition Era Urban North**

Turning to the spaces within which specifically queer black women felt comfortable socializing in the 1920s, scholars have debated the question of how to characterize these liminal, often temporary venues. Kevin Mumford argues that, “the majority of Harlem clubs that tolerated homosexuality were deeply marginalized” as they were located in tenement apartments; “the more visible and accessible a Harlem club became, the more heterosexual its patrons” were.<sup>696</sup> While Mumford seems to use “marginalized” to refer to their lack of accessibility to outsiders and existence outside of legal commercial enterprise, residential speakeasies and buffet flats were in fact quite central to the social life of working-class African Americans during Prohibition, and their secrecy contributed to their survival.<sup>697</sup> Indeed, as whites primarily owned the real estate in black districts at this time, it was common to find black enterprises, whether buffet flats or beauty salons, in apartments on residential streets.<sup>698</sup> While gathering spaces for gay men that were primarily if not completely men-only had emerged by the 1920s, for

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<sup>695</sup> “Speakeasy Fad Spreading Fast; Expensive Nite Clubs Belted by It”, *Variety*, Jan 15, 1930, pp. 1, 61.

<sup>696</sup> Mumford, p. 84.

<sup>697</sup> I am thankful to my colleagues at the American History Workshop at the University of Michigan for helping to elaborate this important point, especially David Green and Lauren Gutterman.

<sup>698</sup> White and Robertson, p. 16.

African American women, only private house parties could offer a safe environment.<sup>699</sup> Same-sex couples visited mainstream nightclubs and theaters and queer flirtations often occurred there, but these interactions were intentionally subtle and might not have been visible to everyone present. Relationships were negotiated among individuals who were accustomed to socializing in mixed spaces.

Eric Garber argues that “gays were usually forced to hide their preferences” in Harlem speakeasies, but vice reports tell a different story.<sup>700</sup> For example, after visiting the Elks Speakeasy on 2454 7<sup>th</sup> Ave at 1:45am, Raymond Claymes wrote, “While visiting here, eight colored women entered, all intoxicated, and ordered drinks which were served to them. They played the automatic Victrola and danced among themselves, doing eccentric dancing, and ballroom dancing, which was very indecent. They patted one another on the buttocks, and went through the motions of copulation.”<sup>701</sup> While Claymes does not describe who, if anyone else, was in the speakeasy at this time, the Elks was white-owned and both black and white men and women patronized the venue. This report describes what thus may have been an ordinary scene, in which queer couples could enjoy each other’s company out at a local speakeasy, just like any of their neighbors. That Claymes does not describe any men interrupting the female couples might have been significant, as contemporary Mabel Hampton recalled that going out in public meant tolerating attention from men who either did not know or care that she preferred women. For this reason, she much preferred private parties to spaces like the Elks.<sup>702</sup>

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<sup>699</sup> Thorpe; Chauncey, 1994.

<sup>700</sup> Garber, 1989, p. 323.

<sup>701</sup> Committee of 14 records, Box 82, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library.

<sup>702</sup> “LFL Coming out Stories,” 21 June 1981, p. 9, Box 3, Mabel Hampton Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archives.

Recorded music was another element that created the moment, adding to the jovial air and generating an atmosphere that enabled women to sensuously engage with one another. At the Elks, one could “put a nickel in the electric phonograph.”<sup>703</sup> By playing a song, customers helped the venue make additional profits, which gave the owners another reason to ignore the type of dancing or the make-up of the couples that took to the floor. While patrons could not select their own song prior to the creation of jukeboxes in the 1930s, Harlem speakeasy phonographs were filled with popular blues records, and as such music was rarely played on the radio in the 1920s, going out on the town to drink and dance to the blues was another reason for local queer women to venture to a speakeasy.<sup>704</sup>

The phonograph created the opportunity for dancing. “Eccentric dancing” was a popular early twentieth-century term referring to genres of dance associated with African American vernacular style, from the buck and wing to the cakewalk. Vaudeville performers noted for this specialty often performed gymnastically spectacular dances involving high kicks, twirls and flips. In the 1910s eccentric dancing was described as a mixture of “careless gaiety and ultra self-consciousness” and “freakish vivacity with solemnity of self-importance.”<sup>705</sup> Though Claymes made an effort to use detached, scientific language to describe the “ballroom dancing” that went “through the motions of copulation,” in all likelihood the women were dancing “the slow drag.” This popular speakeasy dance to slow blues song was very sensual, according to historian Peter

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<sup>703</sup> Ibid.

<sup>704</sup> Kerry Segrave, *Jukeboxes: An American Social History*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2002, p. 39, pp. 45-46.

<sup>705</sup> Caroline and Charles C. Caffin, *Dancing and Dancers of Today*. New York: Todd Meade and Co., 1912, p. 255.

Buckman: “partners would embrace and move to and fro in the same spot for hours.”<sup>706</sup> When this dance was performed in the 1929 Broadway musical *Harlem*, one white critic referred to the actors as “writhing lustily through their barbaric dances.”<sup>707</sup> Thus, female couples were acting no differently than straight couples usually did in this environment, and no one seemed to care. Like the majority of Harlem speakeasies, white proprietors ran the Elks, but unlike the larger and more established nightclubs, here black and queer patrons could claim a presence.<sup>708</sup>

During another 1928 investigation, Claymes visited another Harlem speakeasy in a basement on 109<sup>th</sup> street at 1 a.m. This unnamed location was filled with African American men and women, “drinking, laughing and talking.” In the rear of the basement there was a room dedicated dancing with music coming from an electric piano. There was a diversity of couples: the investigator described two men dancing who “kissed each other, and one sucked the other’s tongue” while two of the women were “going through the motions of copulation” while swaying to the music. When a male patron propositioned Claymes for a dance, he declined.<sup>709</sup> He also noted that, “two of the women appeared very drunk” and one woman dancing with a man “pulled her clothes up very high, exposing her buttocks, as she did not wear bloomers.”<sup>710</sup> Both the illicit alcohol and the electric piano music contributed to the atmosphere, enabling a scene in which controlling one’s inhibitions and socially sanctioned behavior was not necessary.

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<sup>706</sup> Peter Buckman, *Let’s Dance: Social, Ballroom and Folk Dancing*. New York: Penguin, 1979, pp. 213-215.

<sup>707</sup> Marshall and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*. New York: Macmillan, 1968, p. 153.

<sup>708</sup> “Bandits Hold Up Elks’ Speakeasy: \$138 Taken in Seventh Avenue Resort-Man Shot,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, Oct 12, 1927, p. 2. This article notes that the bartender was “Frank Autullo, white.” Another article noted that both black men and white women were socializing at Elks during a robbery. See, “Two Negros Rob Café,” *New York Sun*, Oct. 5, 1927, p. 5.

<sup>709</sup> Committee of 14 records, Box 82, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library.

<sup>710</sup> Ibid.

Notably, this venue also did not appear to attract white “slummers,” but was more likely patronized by locals.

The COF was focused on commercial sex, not specifically queer spaces, and they used male investigators to function as potential johns, hence, any spaces they could access were spaces open to doing business with men. Thus, Claymes had no access to women’s only parties. For insights into women’s house parties and rent parties we turn to the oral history of Mabel Hampton. In the 1920s, Hampton lived at 120 West 122<sup>nd</sup> Street in Harlem and her neighbors “were all lesbians; they had four rooms in the basement and they gave parties all the time.” Sometimes they would have “pay parties.” For these, Mabel and her neighbors brought food, and partygoers contributed cash for a plate of chicken and potato salad. Hampton distinguished between “pay parties” and “rent parties,” recalling that “we also went to ‘rent parties,’ where you go in and pay a couple dollars. You buy your drinks and meet other women and dance and have fun.” Rent parties were open to the larger community while pay parties were just for “close friends” living in her building. These smaller parties entertained up to twelve or fourteen women.<sup>711</sup>

The difficulties that could arise in traveling to these parties affected black women’s preference for socializing in private homes. Appearing on the streets and public transportation without male escorts and looking like a same-sex couple – which was often connected to visible gender transgression – could lead to unwanted attention. Hampton recalled,

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<sup>711</sup> Nestle, 1997, p. 267.

Most of the women wore suits. Very seldom did any of them have slacks [on]...because they had to come through the street. Of course, if they were in a car, they wore the slacks. And most of them had short hair. And most of them was good-lookin' women too. The bulldyers would come and bring their women with them. And you weren't supposed to jive with them, you know. They danced up a breeze. They did the Charleston; they did a little bit of everything. They were all colored women. Sometimes we ran into someone who had a white woman with them. But me, I'd venture out with any of them. I just had a ball... I didn't have to go to bars because I would go to women's houses. Like Jackie Mabley would have a big party and all the girls from the show would go – she had all the women there.<sup>712</sup>

This passage describes how crucial relationships within the entertainment industry were to queer black women's social lives. Jackie Mabley was a popular comedienne who got her start in vaudeville and went on to greater success later in life as “Moms” Mabley. Her skits often depicted an elderly women obsessed with younger men. It was well known within the theatrical world, however, that Mabley was a “bulldyer,” who favored wearing men's suits offstage. One theatrical reviewer referred to her style as “the inimitable-mannish-Mabley-manner.”<sup>713</sup> As a successful performer and a hostess she played an important role in sustaining local queer networks and introducing women to one another.

### **Music and Performance in the Liminal Spaces of Prohibition**

Another significant element in many of women's gathering spaces was live music and performance; one of the most popular and notorious performers to emerge from this milieu was Gladys Bentley. Bentley began her career in New York in the late 1920s as a “transient piano player and performer” who appeared at rent parties and speakeasies. She

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<sup>712</sup> Ibid.

<sup>713</sup> Ted Yates, “Around the Town,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, Sept. 8, 1934, p. 9.

first became famous for singing naughty versions of popular songs. According to her WPA biographer, when encouraged the audience to sing along with her on the chorus, “it was just a matter of time before the house got raided.”<sup>714</sup> The illicit themes of her songs complemented the atmosphere of Prohibition. Such queer and/or titillating performances in speakeasies bolstered the taboo atmosphere in which bootleg liquor was served. Clubs that remained lawful and did not serve alcohol relied on talented and mesmerizing performers such as Bentley to attract audiences. When she began to perform at larger clubs and theaters, she toned down her more risqué lyrics, even though they had contributed to the popularity that gave her access to legitimate venues. Bentley became a feature at the larger Harlem clubs like Connie’s Inn and the Ubangi Club, well-known for their talented black performers and enthusiastic white audiences. Some of these clubs even allowed light skinned African Americans patrons, but others did not, much to the locals’ chagrin. Bentley performed in men’s clothing and flirted with female audience members, taking advantage of the curiosity people had about her modern new persona of the swaggering bulldagger; a confident and talented large African American woman with a nimbleness on the keys and an ability to quickly turn popular songs into dirty ditties. As her biographer noted, “she seemed to thrive on the fact that her odd habits was the subject of much tongue wagging.”<sup>715</sup>

Langston Hughes described Bentley as “an amazing exhibition of musical energy” who would perform all night long with “scarcely a break between the notes, sliding from one song to another, with a powerful continuous underbeat of jungle rhythm.” She was “a large, dark, masculine lady, whose feet pounded the floor while her fingers pounded the

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<sup>714</sup> Wilbur Young, “Sketches of Colorful Harlem Characters: Gladys Bentley,” *Negroes of New York* WPA Writers project, 1939, microfilm reel 1, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

<sup>715</sup> Ibid.

keyboard – a perfect piece of African sculpture, animated by her own rhythm.”<sup>716</sup> Hughes described Bentley in the language of “primitivism,” one of the interwar period’s favorite concepts, used especially in conjunction with the interest in music and art influenced by the “Negro vogue” and white slumming. This racial essentialism was fundamental to rebellious culture makers among white urban elites, such as Carl Van Vechten and Nancy Cunard, who embraced African American and African cultures as pure, exotic and spiritual.<sup>717</sup> African American folk culture, including the blues, was of great interest to them. Certainly an interest in African American culture qua primitive/folk culture marked whites as socially liberal, and to a large degree it was sincere. However, in retrospect it is clear that it was a doubled-edged sword – patrons of the African American arts also objectified and denigrate black performers. As historian Chad Heap argues, slumming in black neighborhoods enabled whites and heterosexuals to take part in cross-racial and taboo sexual behaviors even as it solidified their privilege over locals and performers.<sup>718</sup>

Explicitly sexual and/or queer music was a large part of the atmosphere in speakeasies, buffet flats and rent parties. While recorded music usually relied on subtle double entendres in order to be decorous enough for a mass market, live music could take more risks. For example, Gladys Bentley lampooned the popular Broadway show tunes “Sweet Georgia Brown” and “My Alice Blue Gown” with a version that included the verse, “And he said, ‘Dearie, please turn around/ And he shoved that big thing up my brown/ He tore it. I bored it. Lord, how I adored it/ My sweet little Alice Blue Gown.”<sup>719</sup> Harlem Renaissance author Claude McKay captured the queer musical atmosphere of

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<sup>716</sup> Hughes, 1940, pp. 225-26.

<sup>717</sup> Douglas, pp. 282-283.

<sup>718</sup> Heap, p. 102.

<sup>719</sup> Garber, 1988, p. 55.

speakeasies and buffet flats in his 1928 novel *Home to Harlem*. In one passage, the African American male protagonist ventures out to a Harlem club called the Congo, where a drummer and saxophonist were playing “the wonderful ‘drag’ blues that was the favorite of all the low-down dance halls. In all the better places it was banned.” Patrons were “giggling and wriggling” to the song, whose lyrics followed:

And it is ashes to ashes and dust to dust  
Can you show me a woman that a man can trust?

Oh, baby, how are you?  
Oh, baby, what are you?  
Oh, can I have you now,  
Or have I got to wait?  
Oh, let me have a date,  
Why do you hesitate?

And there is two things in Harlem I don't understand  
It is a bulldycking woman and a faggoty man.

Oh, baby, how are you?  
Oh, baby, what are you?<sup>720</sup>

Here, McKay combines and alters the lyrics of two well-known blues songs of the era, W.C. Handy's "Hesitation Blues" and Bessie Smith's "Foolish Man Blues." While he does not explicitly mention or describe the vocalist who utters these verses, the lyrics suggest a male protagonist, who is potentially open to a sexual encounter with a feminine man. Female blues singers such as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey commonly used the line "There are two things I don't understand" to introduce social taboos that they nonetheless were well versed in, suggesting that this was a strategy that allowed them to make visible topics and behaviors that were not socially condoned. The sentiment behind this pastiche

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<sup>720</sup> Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1928, (Northwestern University Press edition, 1987), pp. 36-37.

of lyrics McKay constructed is also reminiscent of another song that was not released on record until 1935 but may have been performed for years prior, Kokomo Arnold's "Sissy Man Blues." This song contained the line, "Lord, if you can't send me no woman, please send me some sissy man."<sup>721</sup> Both McKay's fabricated song and Arnold's suggest a flexibility in working-class African American male sexuality, which the space of the buffet flat and some speakeasies condoned. Indeed, the white author and Harlem Renaissance benefactor Carl Van Vechten kept a diary that described trips to multiple Harlem buffet flats and speakeasies that catered to gay men, featuring male prostitutes and sex shows.<sup>722</sup>

Notably, when it came to live musical performances of female same-sex desire, the available historical sources focus on female masculinity and masculine women desiring women, from tuxedo-clad Gladys Bentley to Ma Rainey's "Prove It on Me Blues." Once turning to the realm of queer feminine performance, however, the male gaze must be further taken into consideration, as conventionally feminine women taking part in sexual behavior with one another is not a new fantasy for heterosexual men.

### **Queer African American Women and Prostitution**

In the early-twentieth century, sexualized performances in buffet flats were often billed as "sex circuses," which functioned as a prelude to the performers being selected

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<sup>721</sup> Kokomo Arnold, "Sissy Man Blues," Decca Records, 1935.

<sup>722</sup> Carl Van Vechten, *The Splendid Drunken Twenties: Selections from the Day Books, 1922-30*. Bruce Kellner, ed. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003, pp. 76, 78, 108.

by male clients and retiring to a backroom or nearby boarding house for more sexual activity and the exchange of money. One New York theatrical tabloid reported on a Harlem buffet flat which featured a performance that “Sappho in her most daring moments never imagined,” involving “little yellow girls, little black girls” and “little white girls” who were “all writhing around together on the dark blue velvet carpet under the white glare of the spot light.” Notably, the journalist also described “the high peel of laughter” during the performance coming from the audience, which revealed “the presence of women” watching the spectacle as well as men.<sup>723</sup> Thus, sex circuses in Harlem at this time were not merely for the male gaze, but attracted females as well. The laughter may have signified the women’s discomfort or embarrassment in witnessing such a performance, and/or the unexpected feelings generated by the scene itself.

As in any performance, the proclivities of the actors on stage should not be assumed to resemble their desires off-stage. Nonetheless, an account given by a young prostitute in New Orleans who took part in sex circuses with a female colleague was likely not exceptional: “neither one of us was afraid to do them things the johns liked...we came on with everything we could think of, includin’ the dyke act,” and “we got to like it so much” that “we’d lot of times do it when we was by ourselves.”<sup>724</sup> This quote suggests that some sex workers learned about queer behaviors on the job and owned them as well as performed them to please men. While these performances did not necessarily mimic the sexual behavior of female couples outside of the audience’s gaze,

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<sup>723</sup> Jack Moore, “Harlem Browns Busy!” *Broadway Brevities*, September 19, 1932, p. 14, 16, cited in Heap, p. 259.

<sup>724</sup> Katy Coyle and Nadiene Van Dyke, “Sex, Smashing, and Storyville,” *Carryin’ On in the Gay and Lesbian South*, John Howard, ed. New York: New York University Press, 1997, p. 65.

such experiences were also an opportunity to transmit sexual knowledge about lesbian desire.

While this chapter's opening story suggests that some of the patrons at the "freakish" "women's party" investigated by the Committee of Fourteen may have also been sex workers, Claymes's other reports also detail queer women out on the town with friends and partners. It is probable that any space investigated included the presence of prostitutes, because knowledge of queer women's spaces without commercial sex would not have necessarily been available to vice agents. However, as prostitution usually paid more than domestic work, which was the most common form of labor for black women in the urban North in the early Great Migration, sex work was an option for women regardless of sexual preference.<sup>725</sup>

Prostitution was on the rise during Prohibition, and speakeasies and buffet flats were often filled with women available for sex in exchange for payment. Black women became more suspect during this era in New York and other cities, where many working-class women who would never have taken part in the world's oldest profession were nonetheless framed and arrested for doing so.<sup>726</sup> Young unmarried black women were often assumed to be prostitutes because of their single status and because they lived in neighborhoods near sex work in boarding houses and other spaces associated with vice.<sup>727</sup> In the eyes of reformers, vice committees, judges, and religious authorities, black urban

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<sup>725</sup> George Jackson Kneeland with Katherine Bement Davis, *Commercialized Prostitution in New York City*. Bureau of Social Hygiene, NY: The Century Co., 1913, p. 15; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*. New York: Basic Books, 2010 (1985), p. 2.

<sup>726</sup> Hicks, 2010, p. 211.

<sup>727</sup> Cheryl D. Hicks, "'Bright and Good Looking Colored Girl': Black Women's Sexuality and 'Harmful Intimacy' in Early-Twentieth-Century New York," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 18, No. 3, September 2009, p. 419.

life was often viewed as intimately tied to commercialized vice. This was in part because black migrants were forced to live in or adjacent to red-light districts due to segregation, as well as due to longstanding racial ideologies that imbued African Americans with lesser morals and values than whites.<sup>728</sup> Working-class black women who took part in sex work during Prohibition were individuals who had few other avenues to support themselves. At the same time, many women who were not prostitutes were viewed as capable of such work and were even arrested under false pretenses.

In 1924, for example, twenty-two year old Mabel Hampton was imprisoned at New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills for three years under false charges for solicitation.<sup>729</sup> Hampton was a southern migrant and made a living alternatively as a performer and a domestic worker. She had been involved in romantic relationships with women since she was seventeen.<sup>730</sup> According to Hampton, on the night of her arrest she and a female friend were waiting for their male dates, “who promised to take them to a cabaret.” The family she kept house for was currently out of the country, and the two women were waiting to be picked up at the home where she did domestic work. When their dates arrived, policemen raided the employer’s home, arresting Hampton and her female friend.<sup>731</sup> She explained to the Bedford prison parole board that she had never worked as a prostitute and had been dating the young man for a month, noting that he “wanted to marry her.” She eventually realized that her date worked as a “stool pigeon,” or a police accomplice, who had arranged her arrest.<sup>732</sup>

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<sup>728</sup> Ibid; Carby, 1992pp. 740, 751-52.

<sup>729</sup> Hicks, 2009. p. 420.

<sup>730</sup> Transcription of Mabel Hampton tapes by Joan Nestle, 1999, part 2, Mabel Hampton papers, Box 1, Lesbian Herstory Archives.

<sup>731</sup> Nestle, 1997, p. 265.

<sup>732</sup> Inmate #3696, Recommendation for Parole, 13 January 1925, Bedford Hills, cited in Hicks, 2009, p.

Interestingly, when recounting her arrest many years later to Joan Nestle, the founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, Hampton added, “I hadn’t been with a man no time.”<sup>733</sup> It appears that Hampton strategically presented herself as heterosexual to the prison authorities, allowing them to believe that she was romantically involved with the man who had come to take her and her female friend to a cabaret. Concurrently, it is possible that Hampton may have taken part in prostitution or “treating” with men to compliment her wages as a domestic worker and a chorus girl, but did not want to reveal this to Nestle, who was specifically interested in historical narratives concerning lesbian identity.<sup>734</sup> Hampton served a thirteen-month sentence at Bedford and was then released early after promising under oath that she would not return to New York City and “its bad influences.” However, when Hampton nonetheless began attending social events in Manhattan again, a neighbor reported her activities to authorities and she was forced to return to the prison and complete her sentence.<sup>735</sup> While some historians have argued that privacy existed in black tenement apartments in the urban North in part because of “the willingness of those not bound by familial ties to look the other way,” this example shows that neighbors also sought to regulate the suspect behavior of those in their immediate surroundings as well.<sup>736</sup>

Mabel Hampton’s likely false arrest under solicitation charges was not an isolated incident; reading the black press reveals this to have been a very common practice in

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<sup>733</sup> Nestle, 1997, p. 256-266.

<sup>734</sup> The practice of “treating,” which historians Kathy Peiss and Elizabeth Clement have detailed, involved working-class women exchanging sexual favors with male companions—possibly but not necessarily including sexual intercourse—for an evening out on the town. See Peiss, 1986; Elizabeth Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900–1945*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

<sup>735</sup> Nestle, pp. 266-67.

<sup>736</sup> Robertson, White, Garton, and White, p. 444.

1920s New York. This situation casts light both on the corruption of the police force during Prohibition as well as the threat that single black migrant women posed to northern cities. *The New York Age* ran multiple articles and editorials the very year Hampton was arrested about the “notorious” Charles Dancey, “stool pigeon and police ‘pimp,’” who had framed “innocent and unsuspecting girls and women” so that “certain rookies, and ambitious, but conscienceless officers, might make ‘records.’”<sup>737</sup> The articles blatantly warned readers, sometimes in all capital letters, that “ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS ARE WARNED AGAINST PERMITTING DANCEY OR ANY OF HIS ASSOCIATES INVEIGLING INTO COMPROMISING SITUATIONS THAT WILL PROBABLY LEAD TO THEIR UNDOING.”<sup>738</sup> False arrests were likely sought by the police to meet quotas, however they victimized the innocent with a criminal record that could rarely be expunged. Many African American women were guilty until proven innocent in the eyes of the court, and were assumed by whites to be naturally drawn to crime and deviance.<sup>739</sup>

The problem did not end with the arrest of Dancey; in 1930, the *New York Age* ran a lengthy editorial entitled, “Framing Women in Harlem.” An inquiry had recently been conducted by the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court into the corruption of New York’s lower courts, which found “a sordid system of vicious oppression, which made as its prey defenseless women, regardless of the fact whether they were guilty of crime or not.” The editors noted, “many of the judges refused to believe that women could be framed in such manner by the police and the stool pigeons.” They then

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<sup>737</sup> “Stool Pigeon Dancey, Out on Bail on Serious Charge Still Perniciously Active,” *The New York Age*, Aug. 23, 1924, p. 1.

<sup>738</sup> “Dancey Out Again and at His Old Tricks; Girls Are Warned,” *The New York Age*, Oct. 11, 1924, p. 1.

<sup>739</sup> Hicks; Muhammad.

discussed the earlier case of Charles Dancey, describing his technique for targeting innocent women in Harlem: “The stool pigeon would seek entrance to some apartment occupied by one woman or more, on some specious excuse, and soon after the police would follow and arrest the inmates on the charge of keeping a disorderly house or plain prostitution.”<sup>740</sup> Thus, both single women and women who lived with other women were sought out by men working for the police, which shows the overlapping ways that queer women, single women, and prostitutes were conflated and deemed suspect for their lack of heteronormative living arrangements.

Single women living in apartments or boarding houses often had to work to maintain the appearance of respectability that an unmarried status could bring into question, as the case of Dancey shows. In addition, heterosexuality was usually presumed during this era by anyone not appearing to transgress gender norms; living with another woman was more likely to raise suspicions of sex work, not homosexuality. Two women who actually did live together as a couple in New York from 1926 to 1928, Olivia Walton and Margaret Mason, attempted to pass as heterosexual by claiming to be married to two men with whom they also lived. However, their neighbors thought they were prostitutes, and the men their pimps. One neighbor claimed to have seen Walton “indulging in normal and abnormal sexual acts” and others were said to be aware of the women’s relationship.<sup>741</sup> Thus, women known to be queer could also be conceived of as prostitutes; both types of deviance were compatible forms of “outlaw” identity.<sup>742</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>740</sup> “Framing Women in Harlem.” *The New York Age*, December 6, 1930, p. 4.

<sup>741</sup> Court of General Sessions Probation Department Case File # 10900 (1928), New York City Municipal Archives, cited in Robertson, White, Garton and White, p. 455.

<sup>742</sup> Joan Nestle argues that as prostitutes were the first “policed community of outlaw women, they were forced to develop a subculture of survival and resistance” similar to the policing that queer women would

by the early twentieth-century, homosexuality, promiscuity, and prostitution all fell under the umbrella category of “sex delinquency” for social workers.<sup>743</sup>

When discussing the social problems of the lower classes in the urban North, African American critics often referred to queers and prostitutes in the same breath. George Schuyler, one of the founders of the black socialist periodical *The Messenger*, noted in a long 1923 screed on “the underworld” that “there are certain distinct types among the folks the farthest down: the prostitute, the pimp who lives off her earnings, [and] the sexual perverts” all of whom “feed upon the social organism” and “infest the places of recreation, amusement and refreshment, both proletarian and bourgeois.” Schuyler then argued, “homosexual practices and heterosexual perversions are almost universal amongst the folks farthest down.” Then turning specifically to women, Schuyler observed,

The female pervert who takes the aggressive role in homosexual practices affects and exaggerates the mannerisms of the masculine; bass voice, mannish walk, etc. Often they are maintained by a prostitute. They boast of their ability ‘to take any woman away from her man.’ A pimp generally becomes uneasy when one of these ‘bulls’ engages his girl in conversation. The female homosexual pervert strives for the companionship of young, unsophisticated girls.<sup>744</sup>

Here, Schuyler seemed to rely on nineteenth century sexological categories that only identified “a female pervert” as masculine, or inverted, while her assumedly feminine partner, whether a prostitute or, paradoxically, a “young, unsophisticated girl” is not

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endure by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. See Joan Nestle, “Lesbians and Prostitutes: An Historical Sisterhood,” *A Restricted Country*. San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003, p. 169.

<sup>743</sup> Regina Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, p. 195, fn. 102.

<sup>744</sup> George Schuyler, “Lights and Shadows of the Underworld,” *The Messenger*, August 1923, p. 798.

labeled as such. Later in the article Schuyler commented that there were disproportionate numbers of African Americans in the underworld because they were paid less than whites while being forced to pay higher rents, and further, more black women than men lived in urban areas.<sup>745</sup> These skewed ratios were often attributed to the fact that while black men had difficulties finding factory work in cities, black women had no problem finding domestic work. While disproportionate populations of the sexes in the urban North had been commented on in earlier decades by authors such as Kelly Miller, before the 1920s this fact was not explicitly tied to fears of women's same-sex relationships as it was now.

Another black middle-class authority who critiqued the troublesome visibility of lesbians and prostitutes in Harlem was theatrical producer and columnist Salem Tutt Whitney. He wrote a musical entitled *Deep Harlem* that was performed uptown at the Lafayette Theater in 1928 as well as briefly on Broadway in 1929. According to a white *Variety* critic, the play featured "all the dusky Harlem types" that one encountered on Seventh Avenue, including "Brown skin prosties, nances, [and] lesbians." He added, these characters were only included in the performance "for comedic effects, while the better classes inhabiting the section are also worked in."<sup>746</sup> In one of his *New York Amsterdam News* theatrical columns, Whitney listed the cast of characters of the music, which included "the Lesbian," "The Lesbian's Pal," and "The Sissy."<sup>747</sup> While Whitney did not approve of queer behavior, particularly in the entertainment industry, he acknowledged that queer men and women had established a presence in Harlem.<sup>748</sup>

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<sup>745</sup> Schuyler, p. 799.

<sup>746</sup> "Deep Harlem," *Variety*, October 10, 1928, p. 49.

<sup>747</sup> S.T. Whitney, "Timely Topics," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 6, 1928; p. 7.

<sup>748</sup> See my discussion of Whitney's 1929 column that condones kicking known "Lesbians" out of the entertainment industry in chapter three.

Willie “the Lion” Smith, a popular pianist in the early-twentieth century, wrote an autobiography which offers details of the daily life and social networks of the New York music underworld, strongly linking the associated worlds of vice, queer sexuality, and music and entertainment. While working at a club in Newark, New Jersey in the 1910s, he “got a real bad crush” on a “delicate beauty” named Maude who “all the Newark pimps” were trying to get “in their stables.” While attempting to court her he “discovered she was a lesbian,” which was “quite a shock” because he’d “never run into one before.” After this realization he “left her alone and let the pimps battle over her to their heart’s content.”<sup>749</sup> Later in his memoir Smith remarks that, “history gets made in the night clubs and cafes, anyplace where alcohol is present. It is there that one runs into all kinds – nags, fags, lesbians, pimps and hustlers.”<sup>750</sup> Thus, in Smith’s experience, lesbians and prostitutes were mentioned in the same breath not only because they deviated from norms of feminine comportment, but because his first experience with lesbianism was through a woman who was associated with the milieu of sex work. Notably, however, Smith does not say whether or not Maude, the object of his affection, ended up working in “the life” or was merely pursued by men who made a living there.

In the early-twentieth century, similar assumptions aligning prostitution and queer sociality emerged. A 1921 report carried out by sociologist Howard Woolston for the Bureau of Social Hygiene, *Prostitution in the United States*, discussed women who had “entered the life” of prostitution, or had even “grown up in the life.”<sup>751</sup> But not long after, the phrase “in the life” also came to mean either “queer” or participating in queer social

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<sup>749</sup> Willie “The Lion” Smith, *Music On My Mind: The Memoirs of an American Pianist*. New York: Doubleday, 1964, p. 32.

<sup>750</sup> Ibid, p.192.

<sup>751</sup> Howard B. Woolston, *Prostitution in the United State, Vol. I*. New York: The Century Co., 1921, p. 49, 94.

life. According to Joseph Beam, editor of *In The Life: A Black Gay Anthology*, “‘in the life,’ a phrase used to describe ‘street life’ (the lifestyle of pimps, prostitutes, hustlers, and drug dealers) is also the phrase used to describe the ‘gay life’ (the lives of Black homosexual men and women). Street life and gay life, at times, embrace and entwine, yet at other times, are precise opposites.”<sup>752</sup>

The illicit spaces that emerged during Prohibition contributed to emerging queer networks while also offering new audiences for prostitutes to seek clients. It should not be surprising that these activities overlapped for some women, especially as the 1920s gave way to the decade of the Great Depression. In 1936 a *Nation* editorial noted that, “since the depression there has been a marked increase in the number of Negro prostitutes. This, despite superstition to the contrary, is not because Negro women are more gifted and hence more popular, but because they are cheaper...Prices range from twenty-five cents to \$2 for Negroes, and from \$1 to \$5 for whites.”<sup>753</sup> Black women turned to prostitution because they had fewer work options, as the Depression meant new competition for domestic service positions from white women who were out of work.<sup>754</sup> Once they entered into sex work, they discovered the going rates for their demographic and had no choice but to accept similar wages from their clients. As Cynthia Blair argues, sex work embodied the failure of a modernizing economy to incorporate African Americans.<sup>755</sup> Disproportionate numbers of black sex workers revealed the lack of work opportunities in the urban North for black women, which became even more dire during the Depression.

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<sup>752</sup> Joseph Beam, *In The Life: A Black Gay Anthology*. Boston: Alyson Publication, 1986, p. 12.

<sup>753</sup> “Prostitution in New York City,” *The Nation*, March 25, 1936, p. 369.

<sup>754</sup> Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, “*Or Does it Explode?*” *Black Harlem in the Great Depression*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 77-78.

<sup>755</sup> Blair, p. 12.

## The Great Depression and the End of Prohibition in the Urban North

The stock market crash of October 1929 and the advent of the Great Depression led to the collapse of many large nightclubs and other entertainment venues, but the Repeal of 1933 and other New Deal measures “gave them a new lease on life.”<sup>756</sup> While Republicans continued to identify with the “dry” constituents, who had demanded Prohibition in the first place, Democrats hoped that its repeal would lead to increased liquor taxes, which would help stimulate the economy.<sup>757</sup> Lewis Erenberg argues that Repeal was part of the New Deal’s attempt to “integrate the two halves of American society into one nation capable of overcoming its grave economic problems.”<sup>758</sup> While Repeal helped resuscitate mainstream entertainment centers, it did not help speakeasies or the many clubs in black districts.<sup>759</sup>

Prohibition played an important role in increasing the visibility of queer urban identities, but the Depression that followed helped precipitate “a revolt against gay life in the 1930s.” This was connected to both a “crisis in gender arrangements” as men lost their jobs, and the repeal of Prohibition, which was replaced by new restrictions on queer nightlife spaces.<sup>760</sup> According to George Chauncey, speakeasies had “eroded the boundaries between respectability and criminality,” so Repeal ushered in an era of

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<sup>756</sup> Lewis Erenberg, “From New York to Middletown: Repeal and the Legitimization of Nightlife in the Great Depression,” *American Quarterly*. Vol. 38, No. 5 (Winter 1986), p. 762.

<sup>757</sup> *Ibid*, p. 764.

<sup>758</sup> *Ibid*, p. 775.

<sup>759</sup> David Freeland, *Automats, Taxi Dances, and Vaudeville: Excavating Manhattan’s Lost Places of Leisure*. New York: New York University Press, 2009, p. 210.

<sup>760</sup> Chauncey, 1994, pp. 301, 353-54.

increased surveillance and control of the sexuality of nightlife patrons.<sup>761</sup> This occurred in part because by the early 1930s, a general revulsion had set in against the material “excesses” of Prohibition. George Chauncey argues that as more Americans came to believe that such excesses should not be tolerated, a campaign against “the visibility of the gay world was launched in New York and cities throughout the nation.” This began with the repeal of Prohibition, which reinstated acceptable levels of drinking linked to entertainment and nightlife but also redrew “the boundaries of acceptable sociability” which were “obliterated” in the 1920s and demonized homosexuality in the process.<sup>762</sup>

Following the repeal came new state laws to control the consumption of liquor and to regulate the spaces in which it was consumed. In New York, the State Liquor Authority (SLA) was the exclusive authority to license the sale of liquor and was thus the final arbiter in condoning which venues were legitimate and worthy of a liquor license. Those seeking to serve alcohol were required to not “suffer or permit such premises to become disorderly.”<sup>763</sup> While “disorderly” was not defined, the State Liquor Authority took this to imply that the presence of queer patrons, prostitutes, gamblers and other “undesirables” made a venue disorderly. Thus, proprietors who allowed such clients into their establishments risked losing their liquor license.<sup>764</sup> In the two and a half decades following Repeal, the SLA closed hundreds of bars that “welcomed, tolerated, or simply failed to notice” the patronage of queer men and women.<sup>765</sup>

While queer African American women gathered in the liminal spaces opened up by Prohibition, they also often socialized in their own apartments, and had fewer

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<sup>761</sup> Ibid, p. 308.

<sup>762</sup> Ibid, p. 334-35.

<sup>763</sup> Ibid, p 337.

<sup>764</sup> Ibid.

<sup>765</sup> Ibid, p. 339.

expectations than George Chauncey's white male subjects of finding public spaces that they could call their own. So while Repeal brought most of the illicit venues of Prohibition to an end, black women's lack of reliance on established commercial venues for socializing may not have been as devastating for them in the 1930s and onward as it was for white gay men. Black women had never been able to rely on legitimate commercial venues to provide them with a welcoming environment.

Similarly, regarding the larger affects of the Great Depression, the journalist George Schuyler noted that "the Depression did not have the impact on the Negroes that it had on whites" because blacks had been in a "Depression all the time."<sup>766</sup> Economic disparities always plagued areas like Harlem in the 1920s, with high rents, low wages, and poor housing conditions straining area residents for years prior to the crash.<sup>767</sup> In fact, the *Chicago Defender* sounded an alarm in January 1929, months before the October stock market crash when they announced that firms had been discharging employees for months, "many of whom have been faithful workers at these places for years."<sup>768</sup> The Urban League also noted that "Race workers" were being replaced "by workers of other races," leading the *Defender* for the first time to warn its southern readers to stay in the South and dispense with plans to migrate north.<sup>769</sup> During the Depression, African Americans in the urban North got by on a measly "subsistence budget" with little opportunity to save for the future or splurge on "culture."<sup>770</sup>

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<sup>766</sup> "The Reminiscences of George S. Schuyler," Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, 1960, p 232, cited in Osofsky, p. 149.

<sup>767</sup> Osofsky, p. 14.

<sup>768</sup> *The Chicago Defender*, January 29, 1929, cited in Drake and Cayton, p. 83.

<sup>769</sup> Drake and Cayton, p. 83.

<sup>770</sup> *Ibid*, p. 517.

As economic relief came to some Americans in the form of New Deal legislation, domestic workers and farm workers, two occupations held by the majority of working-class African Americans in the North and South, were not included.<sup>771</sup> Southern Democrats created New Deal reforms – such as the GI Bill and Social Security – to benefit the white working-class and help them access the middle class. However, southern Democrats did not want African Americans to make such a climb; blacks needed to stay a service class that the white middle class could utilize through domestic servants, farm help, and custodial work to maintain their new status. Exempting African Americans from New Deal reform sent the explicit message that the government did not see these workers as essential to economic recovery and the implicit suggestion that they were not full citizens worthy of assistance during a difficult time.<sup>772</sup>

After the stock market crash, some popular theaters were no longer able to afford expensive, elaborate stage shows, so they shut down or became movie theaters.<sup>773</sup> Yet, despite the economic crisis, queer performances continued in places like Harlem, emerging from speakeasies into more legitimate clubs. However, in these venues they received more negative critiques in the black press than ever before. In 1934, Gladys Bentley starred in a new show at the Lafayette Theater, one of the biggest black theaters in Harlem, where she performed with a “pansy chorus.” *The New York Age*’s theater critic, Vere Johns, described Bentley as “a large and ungainly woman” who “cuts her

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<sup>771</sup> Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth Century America*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005.

<sup>772</sup> Brenda Clegg Gray, *Black Female Domestic Workers During the Depression in New York*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1993, p. 109.

<sup>773</sup> Albertson, p. 219; Christopher Robert Reed, “African American Cultural Expression in Chicago before the Renaissance: The Performing, Visual, and Literary Arts, 1893-1933,” *The Black Chicago Renaissance*. Darlene Clark Hine and John McCluskey, eds. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012, p. 16.

hair” short and “dresses in tuxedos.”<sup>774</sup> While she had appeared in smaller venues in Harlem for at least five years, Johns had never come across her before this performance, suggesting he did not frequent the cabarets and speakeasies of Harlem, but only the respectable theatrical venues. Bentley, whom the chorus line of six male dancers referred to as a “gorgeous man,” disgusted him. Johns wrote of her backup men, if “put into dresses” they “would be indistinguishable from chorines.” He admitted that he “could not enjoy their part of the show as I had a burning desire to rush out and get an ambulance backed up against the stage door to take them all to Bellevue for the alienists to work on.”<sup>775</sup> Several weeks later, Johns took note again of Bentley and her troupe, which he reported

gave first class portrayals of sex perversion, and I have it on the printed word of the dramatic editor of the *Amsterdam News* that theirs was no play-acting, but the real thing. Be that as it may, the effect on me was a feeling akin to that of seeing some hideous deformed cripple, and a case for an expert alienist only. Persons who can find humorous entertainment in such things, I must regretfully place in the category of morons and moral imbeciles.<sup>776</sup>

While the most well known medical authority on homosexuality in this era was Sigmund Freud, who argued that most individuals who desired the same sex did not need or want medical treatment, the notion that queer people were mentally ill prevailed for much of the twentieth century.<sup>777</sup> Vere Johns’s overreaction to gender transgression he witness on the stage suggests that he was concerned not only with the acceptability of

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<sup>774</sup> Vere E. Johns, “Lafayette Theatre,” *The New York Age*, April 14, 1934, p. 5.

<sup>775</sup> Ibid; Bellevue was an infamous New York mental hospital and “alienist” was an early-twentieth century term for psychiatrist.

<sup>776</sup> Vere E. Johns, “In the Name of Art,” *The New York Age*, April 28, 1934, p. 4.

<sup>777</sup> Chauncey, 1989, p. 102.

such performances but feared they might disrupt the notion that high-minded theater was art, which, for him was constantly in the service of racial uplift.

Thus, in the post-Prohibition era, queer black performance emerged from basement speakeasies into the more respectable theaters of black districts, and cultural critics reacted in horror. At the same time, theater critics for other black newspapers, such as Ralph Matthews of the *Baltimore Afro-American*, ran a series of articles that argued the entertainment world was full of female predators who leached on to innocent newcomers and lured them into an underworld of perversion.<sup>778</sup> Another *New York Age* columnist, Marcus Wright, denounced “sophisticated ladies and their boyish bobs” who strolled down Seventh Avenue in Harlem, “serving death warrants on all women lovers.” He warned the “fellows” to “keep their eyes open and watch their women. If you don’t you might lose Susie.”<sup>779</sup> Similarly, a 1934 front page article in the black newspaper *The Philadelphia Tribune* called attention to the prevalence of queer women in vice districts, who sought to seduce high school girls at local rent parties and even “watch[ed] their every move” when they left for school in the morning. Such women, who “ruin” girls, often appeared normal and self-respecting, yet were actually “sex perverts” who “arrange for orgies with persons of their own sex.”<sup>780</sup>

Many others in the black community agreed. A 1936 article in the *Baltimore Afro-American* cited statistics that 400,000 male and female inverters lived in the U.S., and

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<sup>778</sup> Ralph Matthews, “Love Laughs at Life in Harlem,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, March 11, 1933, p. 18; Ralph Matthews, “She Wolf: She had Charm and Beauty But She Preyed on Her Own Sex, Part One” *Afro-American*, Nov. 17, 1934, p. 24; Ralph Matthews, “She Wolf: She had Charm and Beauty But She Preyed on Her Own Sex, Part Two” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, Nov. 24, 1934, p. 24.

<sup>779</sup> Marcus Wright, “The Talk of the Town,” *The New York Age*, May 26, 1934, p. 5. Also see Marcus Wright, “The Talk of the Town,” *The New York Age*, August 11, 1934, p. 4; Marcus Wright, *The New York Age*, “The Talk of the Town,” Nov. 10, 1934, p. 5.

<sup>780</sup> Kenton Jackson, “Queers’ Big Factor in Commercialized Vice Ring,” *The Philadelphia Tribune*, Aug. 23, 1934, p. 1.

while this was an “amazing total” what was even worse was that the country also held “almost five million” perverts, which they defined as “people who might be normal but are corrupted by inverts.”<sup>781</sup> Throughout the Great Depression, concerns about the visibility of queer black women were growing more prevalent. Such women threatened decent society and sought to bring “normal” girls and women down to their depths. Usurping the male privilege of sexual access to women, this social threat was especially unsettling in an era of precarious financial stability when men’s social and economic power as head of households was being emphatically called in question.

## Conclusions

This chapter has described a variety of spaces found in Prohibition-era northern cities, where black women who loved women socialized and worked. Such gathering sites were backdrops for experimenting with a variety of queer behaviors and cultural inventions, which resulted in making queer behaviors and identities more visible to heterosexuals.<sup>782</sup> Such sites also stimulated the emergence of queer black networks. These, however, were renowned for their lack of respectability due to their geographic proximity and involvement with urban underworlds: prostitution, illicit Prohibition activities, and immoral behaviors and identities among city dwellers and slummers.

Buffet flats, which mixed queer behavior and commercial sex, had begun to flourish prior to Prohibition and became even more popular during this era as locals

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<sup>781</sup> “Raphael Picture for Women Only,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, Nov. 14, 1936, p. 13.

<sup>782</sup> While it is difficult to trace the emergence of new identity categories, the fact that COF investigators spoke to self-identified as “bulldaggers” in these spaces serves as important evidence that some black women claimed queer identities by the late 1920s.

sought to distance themselves from the racial voyeurism of whites and black neighborhoods became vice districts. Rent parties were historically connected to the economic circumstances of segregation and racial inequality and arose as a communal solution to high rents. These parties were “recommended to newly arrived single gals as the place to go get acquainted.”<sup>783</sup> Prohibition also created entrepreneurial opportunities for black women, which was very important during an era when men ran most commercial recreations.<sup>784</sup> Queer women – particularly entertainers – threw these parties and frequented speakeasies and buffet flats. While parties thrown in private residences relied on the white-run bootleg liquor industries for much of their profits, buffet flats were primarily autonomous black operations. While some rent parties and buffet flats catered to queer women, more commonly they socialized amongst working-class African Americans regardless of their sexuality. Speakeasies were most often white-run spaces yet many earned reputations for being welcoming to same-sex loving African Americans. Here women who wished to go out on the town could congregate, drink and dance in an illicit setting that accepted a range of deviant behaviors, from same-sex dancing to sexual songs and queer performers.

None of these Prohibition-era spatial interventions were created by, or only affected, black women who loved women, but they helped sustain their queer networks within a larger, northern urban black community. As other historians have pointed out, queer whites were much more likely than people of color to leave their own neighborhoods to socialize in commercial spaces.<sup>785</sup> This meant that there was less

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<sup>783</sup> Willie “The Lion” Smith, p. 156.

<sup>784</sup> Mary Murphy, “Bootlegging Mothers and Drinking Daughters: Gender and Prohibition in Butte, Montana,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 2, June 1994, p. 176.

<sup>785</sup> Thorpe; Mumford.

anonymity within segregated African American districts than in other urban locations, although the transient nature of many recent migrants' lives may have affected the situation as well.

Aside from queerness, the other most visible illicit sexuality in these spaces was sex for sale. Lesbianism and prostitution have historically been conflated, because non-reproductive sexuality was often associated with criminality. Racialized stereotypes about black women's immorality and licentiousness, coupled with economic inequalities that have affected black women's lack of employment opportunities and their proximity to vice districts have further connected black women to sex work. Black women who loved women in the urban North worked as erotic performers and prostitutes, and at the same time, many women who did not work in these fields were assumed to do so, by corrupt white policemen looking to meet their quotas and by neighbors who saw single black women as suspect.

While the Prohibition era's permissive air helped usher in a period of increasing visibility for queer behaviors and identities, the onset of the Depression and then repeal of the Volstead Act, caused a backlash that further demonized queer women for rejecting traditional maternal femininity and usurping male privileges. However, during Prohibition, women were able to experiment with new identities and relationships outside of the zone of respectability, and, while the cultural institutions of the era may not have withstood the Depression, social networks that had emerged could continue to be maintained. From Mabel Hampton's women-only house parties to female couples dancing the slow drag in speakeasies, the mass rebellion against Prohibition planted the

seeds for outlaw queer counterpublics. These emerged in the new spaces that southern migrants carved out of a segregated city that sought to delimit them.

## Epilogue

The networks black lady lovers formed in the interwar era, the spaces they fashioned, and the cultural productions created by and about them established a queer black subculture that gave recent southern migrants the option of crafting new types of lives for themselves in the urban North. Relationships with women offered an escape from male violence, let them prioritize their own sexual needs, and connected them to a growing network of similar women. While the larger black community was concerned that the visibility of black women blatantly transgressing gender roles and sexual norms would stall the progress of equality and citizenship, some lady lovers went as far as to hold marriage ceremonies with ministers in the 1930s. Through such acts they demonstrated that loving the same sex should in no way bar them from the rights of citizenship.

These marriage rituals remind us that black women have always fashioned their own families despite legal strictures against them. During Reconstruction, “freedom” for most black women had little to do with individual opportunity or independence in the modern sense, instead, freedom primarily had a family context.<sup>786</sup> Along these lines, reconnecting with separated family members was the initial task of most newly freed

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<sup>786</sup> Jones, 2010 (1985), p. 58.

people.<sup>787</sup> At the same time, while many free couples sought the legal marriages they were not allowed to have under slavery, there was also a “broad understanding of kinship” among women, who often looked after and helped raise children other than their own.<sup>788</sup> By the late-nineteenth century, changing conceptions of family and kinship were becoming visible through sexology texts and newspaper articles that introduced these medical terms to the masses. While young black women may not have sought freedom from biological family as often as white women due to their economic need to depend on – or help support – their relatives, by the early twentieth century, the Great Migration and the growing black popular entertainment industry offered two overlapping routes to economic and romantic autonomy.

In the same spirit that many men and women crafted their own meaningful wedding rituals such as “jumping the broom” during the era of chattel slavery, black women in 1930s New York and Chicago, and no doubt elsewhere, held marriage ceremonies.<sup>789</sup> While they understood that their marriages were not legal in the eyes of the state, they saw their relationships and commitments to one another as deserving of celebration among their friends and even their families. Their self-worth and belief in their full humanity and right to love and be loved trumped the marginal or disenfranchised status that others had endowed them with. Mabel Hampton described two different tactics for such weddings, which depended on the gender presentation of the brides. If one of them was masculine, they would further masculinize their first name

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<sup>787</sup> Heather Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

<sup>788</sup> Hunter, p. 37.

<sup>789</sup> On the wedding tradition of “jumping the broom” during the slavery era see Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 228-229.

when applying for their marriage license, and if neither bride wanted to do so, they would ask a gay male friend to obtain the license with one of the women.<sup>790</sup> These women strategically navigated the rules in place through gender transgression, falsification of information, and the help of male friends who supported their relationships.

In 1938, Hampton attended a wedding between two women in Harlem that took place in a friend's home. The couple was married by the Reverend Monroe, who was known to be gay himself and specialized in marrying same-sex couples. About thirty-five women attended the wedding and some of them wore white tuxedos. The bride wore a white dress with a veil and her groom wore white pants. Hampton noted that the groom was so masculine that she passed as a man at City Hall, where they went to take a blood test, and during the ceremony the groom was referred to as "man" and "husband."<sup>791</sup> She also recalled that the couple, along with one of their mothers, went together to obtain their marriage certificate, which implies that some of their family members approved and had given their blessings to the union.<sup>792</sup>

Such ceremonies displayed fascinating tensions over race, gender, class and sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance era. Hampton, who spent much of her life as a domestic worker, moved in working-class circles made up primarily of women, and this wedding was no exception; the Reverend was the only man present. She remembered that on this special day, she wore a white suit and put waves in her long hair, and her partner Lillian "looked like a fashion plate" as usual. The wedding also featured bridesmaids with flowers and music was playing; in short, it was quite similar to the special festivities

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<sup>790</sup> Luvenia Pinson, "The Black Lesbian: Times Past-Time Present," *Womanews*, May 1980 p. 8.

<sup>791</sup> Joan Nestle, "Excerpts from the Oral History of Mabel Hampton," *Signs*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Theorizing Lesbian Experience, Summer 1993, p. 934.

<sup>792</sup> *Ibid.*

thrown regularly in honor of heterosexual marriages. Yet the image of a masculine African American woman in a suit, kissing her traditionally feminine bride, in 1938, breaks drastically with such traditions.

And yet, perhaps this wedding is connected to a different set of traditions – recall the women who lovingly referred to each other as “mama” and “papa” in turn-of-the-century prison and reformatory settings, their love letters confiscated by correctional authorities. In their notes, which displayed bold narratives of active female sexual desire, and later utilized the language of “jazz” and blues to flirt and bide their time, they were building the beginning of a queer blues matrix that would spread across the North and South in the unfolding decades. Despite their imprisonment, often for minor infractions due to racial discrimination, they would not let their humanity be taken away, and they turned to same-sex relationships as resistance and for intimacy. The drive such for intimacies helped forge new counterpublics that challenged the organization of race, class, gender and sexuality in the United States, as lady lovers crafted the new modern relationships that they desired.

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### **Dissertations**

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