A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem.

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At the beginning of the twentieth century, a homosexual subculture, uniquely Afro-American in substance, began to take shape in New York's Harlem. Throughout the so-called Harlem Renaissance period, roughly 1920 to 1935, black lesbians and gay men were meeting each other. street corners, socializing in cabarets and rent parties, and worshiping in church on Sundays, creating a language, a social structure, and a complex network of institutions. Some were discreet about their sexual identities; others openly expressed their personal feelings. The community they built attracted white homosexuals as well as black, creating friendships between people of disparate ethnic and economic backgrounds and building alliances for progressive social change. But the prosperity of the 1920s was short-lived, and the Harlem gay subculture quickly declined following the Stock Market crash of 1929 and the repeal of Prohibition, soon becoming only a shadow of its earlier self. Nevertheless, the traditions and institutions created by Harlem lesbians and gay men during the Jazz Age continue to this day.

The key historical factor in the development of the lesbian and gay subculture in Harlem was the massive migration of thousands of Afro-Americans to northern urban areas after the turn of the century. Since the beginning of American slavery, the vast majority of blacks had lived in rural southern states. American participation in World War I led to an increase in northern industrial production and brought an end to immigration, which resulted in thousands of openings in northern factories becoming available to blacks. Within two decades, large communities of black Americans had developed in most northern urban areas. So significant was this shift in population that it is now referred to as the "Great Migration." Black communities developed in Chicago, Detroit, and Buffalo, but the largest and most spectacular was Harlem, which became the mecca for Afro-Americans from all over the world. Nowhere else could you find a geographic area so large, so concentrated, really a city within a city, populated entirely by blacks. There were black schoolteachers, black entrepreneurs, black police officers, and even black millionaires. A spirit was in the air-of hope, progress, and possibilities- which proved particularly alluring to the young and unmarried. Harlem's streets soon filled with their music, their voices, and their laughter.

They called themselves "New Negroes," Harlem was their capital, and they manifested a new militancy and pride. Black servicemen had been treated with a degree of respect and given a taste of near-equality while in Europe during the World War; their experiences influenced their expectations when they returned home. Participation in the war effort had given the entire black community a sense of involvement in the American process and led them to demand their place in the mainstream of American life. Marcus Garvey, the charismatic West Indian orator, had thousands of followers in his enormous black nationalist "Back to Africa" movement. W. E. B. DuBois and his National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), with its radical integrationist position, generally appealed to a more educated, middle- class following, as did Charles W. Johnson's National Urban League, but were just as militant in their call for racial justice. A variety of individuals and organizations generated Afro-American pride and solidarity.

The New Negro movement created a new kind of art. Harlem, as the New Negro Capital, became a worldwide center for Afro-American jazz, literature, and the fine arts. Many black musicians, artists, writers, and entertainers were drawn to the vibrant black uptown neighborhood. Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Fats Waller, Cab Calloway, Bessie Smith, and Ethel Waters played in Harlem nightclubs. Langston Hughes, Zora Hurston, and Countee Cullen published in the local newspapers. Art galleries displayed the work of Aaron Douglas and Richmond Barthé. These creative talents incorporated the emerging black urban social con sciousness into their art. The resulting explosion of self-consciously AfroAmerican creativity, now known as the "Harlem Renaissance," had a profound impact on the subsequent development of American arts.

The social and sexual attitudes of Harlem's new immigrants were best reflected in the blues, a distinctly Afro-American folk music that had developed in rural southern black communities following the Civil War. Structurally simple, yet open to countless subtleties, the blues were immensely popular within American black communities throughout the 1920s. They told of loneliness, homesickness, and poverty, of love and good luck, and they provided a window into the difficult, often brutal. world of the New Negro immigrant.

Homosexuality was clearly part of this world. "There's two things got me puzzled, there's two things I don't understand," moaned blues great Bessie Smith, "that's a mannish-acting woman and a lisping, swishing, womanish-acting man." In "Sissy Blues," Ma Rainey complained of her husband's infidelity with a homosexual named "Miss Kate." Lucille Bogan, in her "B.D. Women Blues," warned that "B.D. [bulldagger] women sure is rough; they drink up many a whiskey and they sure can strut their stuff." The "sissies" and "bull daggers" mentioned in the blues were ridiculed for their cross-gender behavior, but neither shunned nor hated. "Boy in the Boat" for example, recorded in 1930 by George Hanna, counseled "When you see two women walking hand in hand, just shake your head and try to understand." In fact, the casualness toward sexuality, so common in the blues, sometimes extended to homosexual behavior. In "Sissy Man Blues," a traditional tune recorded by nurnerous male blues singers over the years, the singer demanded "if you can't bring me a woman, bring me a sissy man." George Hanna's "Freakish Blues," recorded in 1931, is even more explicit about potential sexual fludity. The blues reflected a culture that accepted sexuality, including homosexual behavior and identities, as a natural part of life.

Despite the relatively tolerant attitude shown toward homosexuality by Afro-American culture, black lesbians and gay men still had a difficult time. Like other black migrants, they soon learned that racism crossed the Mason-Dixon line. Economic problems, unemployment, and segregation plagued black communities across the North. High rents and housing shortages made privacy a luxury for Harlem's newcomers. Moreover black homosexuals, like their white counterparts, were continually under attack from the police and judicial systems. In 1920, young lesbian Mabel Hampton, recently arrived in Harlem from Winston- Salem, North Carolina, was arrested on trumped-up prostitution charges and spent two years in Bedford Hills Reformatory. Augustus Granville Dill, distinguished business editor of the NAACP's Crisis and personal protégé of DuBois, had his political career destroyed when he was arrested for soliciting sex in a public restroom. Black gay people were also under attack from the developing psychiatric institutions; Jonathan Katz cites a tragic case in which a young black gay man was incarcerated for most of the 1920s at the Worcester (Massachusetts) State Hospital. But in spite of racial oppression, economic hardship, and homophobic persecution, black lesbians and gay men were able to build a thriving community of their own within existing Afro- American institutions and traditions.

Private parties were the best place for Harlem lesbians and gay men to socialize, providing safety and privacy. "We used to go to parties every other night.... The girls all had the parties," remembered Mabel Hampton. Harlem parties were extremely varied; the most common kind was the "rent party." Like the blues, rent parties had been brought north in the Great Migration. Few of Harlem's new residents had much money, and sometimes rent was hard to come by. To raise funds, they sometimes threw enormous parties, inviting the public and charging admission. There would be dancing and jazz, and bootleg liquor for sale in the kitchen. It is about just such a party that Bessie Smith sang her famous "Gimme a Pigfoot and a Bottle of Beer." On any given Saturday night there were scores of these parties throughout Harlem, often with those in attendance not knowing their hosts. The dancing and merriment would continue until dawn, and by morning the landlord could be paid. Lesbians and gay men were active participants in rent parties. The New York Age, one of Harlem's newspapers, complained in 1926:

One of these rent parties a few weeks ago was the scene of a tragic crime in which one jealous woman cut the throat of another, because the two were rivals for the affections of a third woman. The whole situation was on a par with the recent Broadway play [about lesbianism, The Captive], imported from Paris, although the underworld tragedy took place in this locality. In the meantime, the combination of bad gin, jealous women, a carving knife, and a rent party is dangerous to the health of all concerned.

At another Harlem rent party, satirically depicted in Wallace Thurman's 1932 Harlem Renaissance novel *Infants of the Spring*, a flamboyantly bisexual Harlem artist proudly displayed his new protégé, a handsome, bootblack, to the "fanciful aggregation of Greenwich Village uranians" he had invited.

Gay men could always be found at the literary gatherings of Alexander Gumby. Gumby, who had arrived in Harlem near the turn of the century, immediately became entranced with the theatrical set and decided to open a salon to attract them. He worked as a postal clerk and acquired a patron, eventually renting a large studio on Fifth Avenue between 131st and 132nd streets. Known as Gumby's Bookstore because of the hundreds of books that lined the walls, the salon drew many theatrica and artistic luminaries. White author Samuel Steward remembers being taken to Gumby's one evening by a lesbian friend and enjoying a delightful evening of "reefer," bathtub gin, a game of truth, and homosexual exploits.

Certainly the most opulent parties in Harlem were thrown by the heiress A'Lelia Walker. Walker was a striking, tall, dark-skinned wondan who was rarely seen without her riding crop and her imposing, jeweled turban. She was the only daughter of Madame C. J. Walker, a former washerwoman who had made millions marketing her own hair-straightening process. When she died, Madame Walker left virtually her entire fortune to A'Lelia. Whereas Madame Walker had been civic-minded, donating thousands of dollars to charity, A'Lelia used most of her inheritance to throw lavish parties in her palatial Hudson River estate, Villa Lewaro. and at her Manhattan dwelling on 136th Street. Because A'Lelia adored the company of lesbians and gay men, her parties had a distinctly gay ambience. Elegant homosexuals such as Edward Perry, Edna Thomas. Harold Jackman, and Caska Bonds were her closest friends. So were scores of white celebrities. Novelist Marjorie Worthington would later remember:

We went several times that winter to Madame Allelia [sic] Walker's Thursday "at-homes" on a beautiful street in Harlem known as,Sugar Hill...." [Madame Walker's] lavishly furnished house was a gathering place not only for artists and authors and theatrical stars of her own race, but for celebrities from all over the world. Drinks and food were served, and there was always music, generously performed enthusiastically received.

Everyone from chorus girls to artists to socialites to visiting royalty would come at least once to enjoy her hospitality.

Another Afro-American institution that tolerated, and frequenty encouraged, homosexual patronage was the "buffet flat." "Buffet flats were after-hours spots that were usually in someone's apartment," explained celebrated entertainer Bricktop, "the type of place where gin was poured out of milk pitchers." Essentially private apartments where rooms could be rented by the night, buffet flats had sprung up during the late 1800s to provide overnight accommodations to black travelers refused service in white-owned hotels. By the 1920s, buffet flats developed a wilder reputation. Some were raucous establishments where illegal activities such as drinking, gambling, and prostitution were available. Others offered a variety of sexual pleasures cafeteriastyle. A Detroit buffet flat of the latter sort, which Ruby Smith remembered visiting with her aunt, Bessie Smith, catered to all variety of sexual tastes. It was "an open house, everything goes on in that house":

They had a faggot there that was so great that people used to come there just to watch him make love to another man. He was that great. He'd give a tongue bath and everything. By the time he got to the front of that guy he was shaking like a leaf. People used to pay good just to go in there and see him do his act.... That same house had a woman that used to . . . take a cigarette, light it, and puff it with her pussy. A real educated pussy.

In Harlem, Hazel Valentine ran a similar sex circus on 140th Street. Called "The Daisy Chain" or the "101 Ranch," it catered to all varieties of sexual tastes, and featured entertainers such as "Sewing Machine Bertha" and an enormous transvestite named "Clarenz." The Daisy Chain became so notorious that both Fats Waller and Count Basie composed tunes commemorating it.

There were also buffet flats that particularly welcomed gay men. On Saturday nights pianist David Fontaine would regularly throw stylish flat parties for his many gay friends. Other noted hosts of gay male revelry were A'Lelia Walker's friend Caska Bonds, Eddie Manchester and the older Harlem couple, Jap and Saul. The most notorious such flat was run by Clinton Moore. Moore was an elegant, light-skinned homosexual, described as an "American version of the original ... Proust's Jupien." Moore had a fondness for celebrities, and his parties allegedly atracted luminaries like Cole Porter, Cary Grant, and society page columnist Maury Paul. Moore's entertainments were often low-down and dirty. According to Helen Lawrenson,

Clinton Moore's . . . boasted a young black entertainer named Joey, vho played the piano and sang but whose specialty was to remove his clothes and extinguish a lighted candle by sitting on it until it disappeared. I never saw this feat but everyone else seemed to have and I was told that he was often hired to perform at soirees of the elite. 'He sat on lighted candles at one of the Vanderbilts',' my informant said.

Somewhat more public-and therefore less abandoned-were Harlem's speakeasies, where gays were usually forced to hide their preferences and to blend in with the heterosexual patrons. Several Harlem speakeasies though, some little more than dives, catered specifically to the "pansy" trade. One such place, an "open" speakeasy since there was no doorman to keep the uninvited away, was located on the northwest corner of 126th Street and Seventh Avenue. It was a large, dimly lit place where gay men

could go to pick up "rough trade." Artist Bruce Nugent, who occasionelly visited the place, remembered it catering to "rough queers . . . the kind that fought better than truck drivers and swished better than Mae West." Ethel Waters remembered loaning her gowns to the transvestites who frequented Edmond's Cellar, a low-life saloon at 132nd Street and Fifth Avenue. Lulu Belle's on Lenox Avenue was another hangout for female impersonators, named after the famous Broadway melodrama of 1926 starring Leonore Ulric. A more sophisticated crowd of black gay men gathered nightly at the Hot Cha, at 132nd Street and Seventh Avenue, to listen to Jimmy Daniels sing and Garland Wilson play piano.

Perhaps the most famous gay-oriented club of the era was Harry Hansberry's Clam House, a narrow, smoky speakeasy on 133rd Street. The Clam House featured Gladys Bentley, a 250- pound, masculine, darkskinned lesbian, who performed all night long in a white tuxedo and top hat. Bentley, a talented pianist with a magnificent, growling voice, was celebrated for inventing obscene Iyrics to popular contemporary melodies. Langston Hughes called her "an amazing exhibition of musical energy." Eslanda Robeson, wife of actor Paul Robeson, gushed to a friend, "Gladys Bentley is grand. I've heard her three nights, and will never be the same!" Schoolteacher Harold Jackman wrote to his friend Countee Cullen, "When Gladys sings 'St. James Infirmary,' it makes you weep your heart out."

A glimpse into a speakeasy, based in part on the Clam House. is provided in Blair Niles' 1931 gay novel Strange Brother. The Lobster Pot is a smoky room in Harlem, simply furnished with a couple of tables, a piano, and a kitchen, where white heterosexual journalist June Westwood, Strange Brother's female protagonist, is first introduced to Manhattan's gay subculture. The Lobster Pot features a predominantly gay male clientel and an openly lesbian entertainer named Sybil. "What rhythm!" June comments to her companions. "And the way she's dressed!" Westbrook finds the atmosphere intoxicating, but abruptly ends her visit when she steps outside and witnesses the entrapment of an effeminate black gay man by the police.

Decidedly safer were the frequent Harlem costume balls, where both men and women could dress as they pleased and dance with whom they wished. Called "spectacles in color" by poet La Igston Hughes, they were attended by thousands. Several cities hosted similar functions, but the Harlem balls were anticipated with particular excitement. "This dance has been going on a long time," observed Hughes, "and . . . is very famous among the male masqueraders of the eastern seaboard, who come from Boston and Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Atlantic City to attend." Taylor Gordon, a noted concert singer, wrote in 1929:

The last big ball I attended where these men got the most of the prizes for acting and looking more like ladies than the ladies did themselves, was at the Savoy in Harlem.... The show that was put on that night for a dollar admission, including the privilege to dance, would have made a twenty-five dollar George White's "Scandals" opening look like a side show in a circus.

The largest balls were the annual events held by the Hamilton Lodge at the regal Rockland Palace, which could accommodate up to six thousand people. Only slightly smaller were the balls given irregularly at the dazzling Savoy Ballroom, with its crystal chandeliers and elegant marble staircase. The organizers would obtain a police permit making the ball, and its participants, legal for the evening. The highlight of the event was the beauty contest, in which the fashionably dressed drags would vie for the title of Queen of the Ball.

Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler's classic 1933 gay novel *The Young and Evil* suggests that these balls were just as popular with white gays as with black. Julian, the white protagonist, dons a little makeup (just enough to be "considered in costume and so get in for a dollar less"), leaves his Greenwich Village apartment, and sets off to a Harlem ball. Once there he greets his friends, dances to the jazz music, gets exceedingly drunk, flirts with the band leader, and eventually exchanges phone numbers with a handsome stranger.

But drag balls lacked the primary allure of the buffet flat: privacy. These cross-dressing celebrations were enormous events and many of those who attended were spectators, there to observe rather than participate. It was not unusual to see the cream of Harlem society, as well as much of the white avant-garde, in the ballroom's balconies, straining their necks to view the contestants.

The costume balls, parties, speakeasies and buffet flats of Harlem provided an arena for homosexual interaction, but not for the development of homosocial networks. One area where black lesbians and gay men found particular bonds of friendship was within Harlem's predominantly heterosexual entertainment world. While some entertainers, like popular composer Porter Grainger and choir leader Hall Johnson, kept their homosexual activities private, others were open with their audiences. Female impersonator Phil Black, entertainer Frankie "Half Pint" Jaxon, and singer George Hanna used elements of homosexuality in their professional acts and were still highly respected within the entertainment community. Both Black and Jaxon wore women's clothing while on stage and Hanna even recorded his "Freakish Blues" without fear of censure.

For black lesbians, whose social options were more limited than those of their male counterparts, the support offered by the black entertainment world for nontraditional lifestyles was especially important. After leaving her family home in North Carolina, Mabel Hampton worked with her lover as a dancer in a Coney Island show before landing a position at Harlem's famed Lafayette Theatre. By entering the show business life, Hampton was able to earn a good income, limit her social contact with men and move within a predominantly female social world. Many bisexual and lesbian black women, including Bessie Smith, Gladys Bently, Jackie "Moms" Mabley, Alberta Hunter, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Josephine Baker and Ethel Waters found similar advantages in the show business life.

Nearly all these women adopted a heterosexual public persona, most favoring a "red hot mama" style, and kept their love affairs with women a secret, but a few acknowledged their sexuality openly. Gladys Bentley, of course, was one exception. Another was Ma Rainey. Rainey was a short, squat, dark-skinned woman with a deep, earthy voice and a warm, friendly smile. She was the first vaudeville entertainer to incorporate the blues into her performance and has justifiably become known as the "Mother of the Blues." Though married, the flamboyant entertainer was known to take women as lovers. Her extraordinary song, "Prove It on Me Blues," speaks directly to the issue of lesbianism. In it she admits to her preference for male attire and female companionship, yet dares her audience to "prove it" on her. Rainey's defense of her lesbian life was quite remarkable in its day, and has lost little of its immediacy through the years.

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