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**Harlem Undercover: Vice Investigators, Race, and Prostitution, 1910-1930.\***

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Just before midnight on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1928, Raymond Claymes walked up the stoop of number 245 West 122<sup>nd</sup> Street in Harlem and entered the Old Kid Morris Dance Hall. Once inside, he found “five colored women and nine colored men, including the piano player and Kid Morris.” Claymes introduced himself to one of the men, who in turn introduced him to two women, and before long he was sitting at a table drinking with this group. But he had come to do more than drink. An undercover investigator for the Committee of Fourteen (COF), the largest of the private anti-vice and social purity societies organized by whites to fight prostitution in New York City, he was looking for women who would offer him sex for money, and for the places in which such women were permitted to ply their trade.<sup>i</sup>

The following day, Claymes went to the COF’s offices and dictated to a clerk a short report on his evening’s work.<sup>ii</sup> After describing his arrival at the dance hall, he noted that, “While here a number of couples came into drink and to dance and “clown around.”” He then explained what had transpired during the course of his encounter with one of the girls to whom he had been introduced.

While seated at the table...one of the girls by the name of [Ruth Harris\*] invited me to dance, with her, which I did. While dancing she rubbed her body against mine in an indecent manner.

I said “oh baby, shake it.” She said, “I mean I can do it!” I said “Yes, you have such a little of

it you ought to be able to do it.” She said, “It may be little, but there is enough of it to snatch the come [sic?] from you.” I said, “Yes? I don't believe it.” She said, “Well I'll show you.” I said, “How much will it cost me?” She said “I charge white men \$5, but colored men only \$3.” I said “When and where?” She said, “Right here. Let me go and speak to the landlady.”

When Harris\* returned, with the information that the landlady would charge \$2 for the use of the room, Claymes put her off until another day, asking for her address and telephone number so that he could contact her. At the conclusion of his report he added a description of the girl: “5'2” tall; 107 lbs adm [sic]; 23 yrs adm [sic]; mulatto; rough skin; light brown eyes; wide spaced incisors; two bite scars on neck; wore blue felt hat; grey plaid coatsuit; white middy blouse.”<sup>iii</sup>

Claymes' report was one of one hundred and thirty he filed in the course of a five-month investigation of Harlem. The COF had not subjected Harlem to such sustained surveillance for almost ten years. Kevin Mumford has explained that inattention as the result of “sexual racism.” With the red light districts closed, white slavery defeated, and prostitution largely pushed into black neighbourhoods, white reformers, he argues, shifted their attention to single motherhood and child welfare, effectively abandoning African Americans.<sup>iv</sup> More recently, Elizabeth Clement has argued that the COF's “lack of interest in suppressing African American prostitution...derived from the difficulties it encountered in making alliances with leaders of the African American community.” W. E. B. Du Bois, editor of the NAACP journal *The Crisis*, protested that its policing of interracial sociability promoted segregation, raising fears in the COF that such efforts would alienate their

black allies and provoke a backlash against their broader anti-prostitution work. Consequently, Clement argues, the COF rethought its approach, and opted to ignore black prostitution.<sup>v</sup>

Another explanation for the COF's inattention to Harlem can be found in the identity of its investigators. In common with other scholars who have read the investigation reports, and with those who study surveillance in other contexts, Mumford and Clement pay little attention to the identity of the individuals who watched Harlem.<sup>vi</sup> In part, that is a product of the archive.

Although most reports include a signature, initials or a number indicating the author, they contain no information on the identity of that individual. But material scattered through another part of the collection, the files of correspondence, does identify them. Prior to 1920, when the COF used casual investigators, it sent both blacks and whites to Harlem.<sup>vii</sup> Only blacks were consistently served in Harlem's venues – in large part due to the COF's own efforts to prevent race mixing – but whites usually at least gained admittance and some information on conditions. From 1920, the Committee employed a single fulltime operative, Harry Kahan, who was white. So too were John Kirwin and Edwin Starook, the investigators the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA) loaned to the COF in 1927. They had less success in locating prostitutes than had white investigators prior to 1920. Only when the COF supplemented its staff with an African American investigator, Claymes, was it able to gather evidence about black prostitution. In effect, then, one reason that the COF did not subject Harlem to surveillance in the 1920s was because it could not.

That explanation highlights two broad transformations in the urban environment that have not been adequately accounted for in discussions of black prostitution. In the 1920s, Harlem morphed

from a neighborhood housing one of the city's concentrations of African Americans, numbering seventy-three thousand and encompassing forty-eight blocks, into the 'Negro Mecca,' populated by a diverse mix of African Americans and migrants from the West Indies, who numbered over two hundred thousand, and stretched over 184 blocks.<sup>viii</sup> Although this black metropolis retained a white population – if for no other reason than that most of its businesses remained in white hands -- its new scale did mean that its residents could create and protect spaces free of the presence of whites, and hence more difficult for white authorities to regulate.

Prohibition provided another impetus for the creation of black spaces in Harlem. Scholars have long recognized that once the Volstead Act became law, Harlem became awash in illegal liquor, and whites flocked to the neighborhood's clubs and cabarets, some of which were entirely given over to their patronage. Less attention has been given to the increasing numbers of blacks who took to drinking in private residences. Buffet flats, whose landladies had provided liquor on a small scale prior to Prohibition, exploded in number, and became a new site for black prostitution. They were less public than older sites of prostitution, and consequently less accessible to white slummers and investigators than were Harlem's other entertainment venues.

Both the congregation of blacks in Harlem and their retreat into private, unlicensed spaces made it increasingly difficult for the COF to effectively keep tabs on the neighborhood using white investigators.<sup>ix</sup> Nonetheless, until 1926 conditions in Harlem appeared to them to have changed little. That year, the new cultural prominence of the neighborhood, which spurred waves of white visitors, and new leadership led the COF to revise that view and employ a black investigator. A

sense of racial solidarity made many blacks unwilling to take on that job, but conservative middle-class blacks were willing to cooperate. The New York Urban League helped the COF recruit Raymond Claymes.

Claymes' educational background, occupation, and connections made him a member of the small black middle class. A native of Texas, the thirty-five-year-old Claymes had studied at Howard University and at Yale University's Divinity School. After completing a degree in sociology and a year of graduate study, Claymes worked first in the Post Office in New York City and then as a French and Spanish teacher in one of the city's junior high schools. In 1928, he was on leave from teaching pursuing a career as a baritone.<sup>x</sup> His application for the position of investigator included as referees, two physicians, an attorney, and Sgt. Samuel Battle, Manhattan's first African American police officer.<sup>xi</sup> Claymes succeeded in gathering information that revealed for the first time the central place buffet flats had assumed in Prohibition-era black prostitution and nightlife.

Considering the identity of the investigator also helps explain the disproportionate number of black women arrested for prostitution. As Mumford, Clement, and other scholars have pointed out, that pattern reflected black women's prominence in streetwalking, the form of prostitution most vulnerable to policing. But the work of Claymes, and the squad of black undercover police officers created to follow up his information, also contributed to the number of black women brought before the courts. Those men arrested many of those identified in his reports – including two women and

three men at the Old Kid Morris Dance Hall – and subsequently policed, as he had, Harlem’s buffet flats, as well as its streets and clubs.

White investigators’ increasing inability to participate in black nightlife to that extent hamstrung the efforts of the COF -- and subsequent historians who have relied on their records -- to find black prostitutes. By exploring the work of investigators, and the racial dynamics of undercover investigations, this article helps explain why black prostitutes were such a shadowy presence, and, using the rich snapshot offered by Claymes’ reports, reveals the new spaces in which black prostitution operated in the decade in which both migrants and illegal alcohol transformed Harlem.

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The COF came into existence in 1905, as “The Committee of Fourteen to manage the campaign to abolish the Raines Law hotels.” With the Reverend John Peters, rector of St Michael’s Church as the driving force, it grew from the Anti-Saloon League and the City Club of New York, with a membership of white, middle class reformers, social workers, religious leaders, and businessmen. The Committee’s initial goal, as its original name made clear, was limited to reforming or repealing the Raines Law, which by requiring that a hotel have ten beds in order to open on Sunday, had created a new setting for prostitution. In 1911, however, having turned up evidence of prostitutes working in other settings, the COF reorganized itself to mount a broader campaign, with financial backing from John D. Rockefeller, Jr.. It investigated for itself conditions in the city’s saloons, bars,

cabarets, hotels, tenements, and department stores, and pressured proprietors to comply with both legal requirements and the COF's own standards. In addition, the COF monitored the activities of the Women's Court, where prostitutes were tried, including collecting its statistics, and lobbied the State Legislature in Albany for legislation, such as amendments to the vagrancy laws to make it easier to arrest and institutionalise prostitutes. During the time the United States was involved in WW1, the COF also took on the job of investigating demarcation camps and ports in New York City, and as far a field as Buffalo and Philadelphia, for the War Department's Commission on Training Camp Activities.<sup>xiii</sup>

In the years before Prohibition, the Committee's focus was on licensed premises, not private spaces, and on prostitutes who blended into the crowds at such venues, not those who announced their presence and plied their trade on the street, the targets of the earlier Committee of Fifteen. They created a blacklist of 'disorderly' venues, and secured the cooperation of brewers and surety companies to threaten that unless proprietors adhered to the conditions the Committee laid down they would either lose their license or supply of beer, or be denied the bond required to hold a license. Most of the COF's conditions related to the presence of women, and when and where they could be served, but the owners of establishments catering to blacks faced additional requirements.<sup>xiii</sup> To obtain a bond in 1909, for example, Barron Wilkins had to promise "that I will admit no women without male escorts after 10 P. M. and that I will at no time admit male whites to any part of the licensed premises to which colored women are admitted. That I will not admit at any time any white women."<sup>xiv</sup>

The most explicit statement of the COF's racial agenda came in correspondence between its General Secretary, Frederick Whitin, and W. E. B. Du Bois in 1912. DuBois challenged the Committee's efforts to separate the races, forcing Whitin to admit that the Committee's insistence that establishments in black neighbourhoods not serve white customers was in violation of New York's civil rights laws. Whitin contended, however, that such discrimination was necessary to prevent the greater evil of immorality. DuBois was of a different mind: "I do not believe that discrimination between races in places of public entertainment makes for morality, or even if it does, it is against the law and the laws are made by the legislature and not by individuals."<sup>xv</sup> But Whitin was unmoved; the COF continued to require those who catered to blacks to refuse to serve whites. Contrary to Elizabeth Clement's claim that the COF became "more cautious in its dealings with the African American community" after this exchange, and began to largely ignore Harlem, its investigators regularly visited the neighborhood between 1912 and August 1919.<sup>xvi</sup> They did so with the support of more conservative black leaders. In 1911, the Committee addressed itself to men of the "Booker T. Washington type," those it believed would support its efforts to separate blacks and whites. A meeting between the Committee's staff and a group of such men led to the formation of a "Colored Auxiliary" of the COF, headed by Fred Moore, the editor of the *New York Age*, which investigated and supervised black club owners.<sup>xvii</sup> But the following year, the COF's Executive Secretary insisted on reducing the Auxiliary's role to that of providing advice and aid.<sup>xviii</sup> Despite this slight, Moore continued to cooperate with the COF; in 1913, for example, he supplied a list of clubs in Harlem that served both whites and blacks.<sup>xix</sup>

COF investigators had the tasks of identifying which establishments required blacklisting, and tracking whether the condition of those places showed any improvement. Individual investigators sometimes also gave the police “personal assistance,” such as “introductions to probable law-breakers,” and help in securing evidence and making arrests.<sup>xx</sup> Whitin briefly undertook investigations himself, and then employed private detectives, before settling on the practice of relying on ‘amateurs,’ hired on a casual basis. “Men out of work could secure the necessary evidence with a little coaching,” Whitin asserted, because “the ability to investigate is largely a natural one, requiring powers of observation, deduction and ability to mix with men.”<sup>xxi</sup> But if surveillance was a natural ability, reporting its results proved not to be. Whitin had to dispense with the services of one man because of his “inability to write legible English,” highlighting that an investigator had to be sufficiently literate to narrate his or her findings in a form that fitted the requirements of the courts.<sup>xxii</sup> Not surprisingly, by the 1910s, many of the Committee’s casual staff were journalists or had experience working undercover for police, district attorneys, the Excise Department, or military intelligence.

It was also the COF’s practice to employ casual investigators from the ethnic group under surveillance. Such an approach was particularly necessary in the case of black communities. Just as the color of their skin made it difficult for white welfare workers and business people to operate in Harlem, Whitin noted that it was “impossible... to secure evidence where the violator refuses to deal with, or take into his confidence, men of the white race.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Cooperating with the police did not help. As Whitin explained, “what few colored officers are on the Force are well known to all

Negro resortkeepers.”<sup>xxiv</sup> The COF struggled to recruit investigators of its own. “The colored man has a rather keen sense of racial solidarity,” Whitin reported in 1916, “and objects to acting as a “stool pigeon” against his own race.”<sup>xxv</sup> Nonetheless, prior to 1920 at least five black men did conduct surveillance in Harlem for the COF: William Pogue (in 1911 and 1913); Edward S. Ford (in 1911); David F. White (in 1911); W. M. Franklin (in 1912); and Lucien White (in 1913 and 1914).<sup>xxvi</sup>

The COF relied on referrals to recruit those men, as was its general practice. In this case, they came from the group of African American leaders to whom the COF reached out. At least two of the black investigators have documented ties to Moore and his allies. Lawyer James Curtis, one of those who met the COF in 1911, sent D. F. White to Whitin, and Fred Moore employed Lucien White as an entertainment writer for the *Age*.<sup>xxvii</sup> W.M. Franklin was also almost certainly referred by a member of the Colored Auxillary. When Gilbert Stewart of the NAACP impugned the author of a report on Young’s Café on 135<sup>th</sup> Street, not knowing that it was Franklin, Whitin responded, “you are attacking a man whose course of life is one which we must all admire and who comes to us with references from a man of equal character.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

Rather than a man of unassailable character, as Franklin evidently was, Stewart had assumed the author of the report on Young’s Café was “the ordinary type of investigator,” “a colored man which you could hire to act as a stool pigeon.” The “class of colored men you might get to do this work,” Stewart complained, “either are broke or think a certain kind of evidence is necessary to the security of their employment.” He went on to warn, “The racial tendency to exaggeration in

everything would of course in a case of this kind run riot.<sup>xxix</sup> Moore and his black conservative colleagues shared the NAACP's anxiety about such informants. If by referring men to the COF they gave Whitin a defence against critics like Stewart, they also inserted respectable black voices into what they perceived to have been surveillance distorted by discrimination. That is not to say that those black investigators somehow subverted the COF's campaign against prostitution. They all reported interracial contacts and instances of women soliciting men. But only W.H. Franklin and Lucien White mentioned other behavior, such as dancing, that the COF adjudged disorderly.<sup>xxx</sup> Such information allowed a broad indictment of black nightlife; by limiting themselves to reporting apparent sexual commerce, most black investigators provided material only for a narrow attack on prostitution.

White investigators were also regular visitors to Harlem, and from 1915 to 1919 the COF sent only whites to conduct surveillance. Thanks to the COF's own requirements, proprietors often refused whites entry to premises; more often, in the absence of a doorman, a white investigator could enter and sit down before a waiter informed him he would not be served. Such visits provided evidence of whether an establishment was preventing race mixing, only a glimpse of conditions inside, and no opportunity to gather information about the identities of any prostitutes who might be soliciting there. One white investigator did succeed in establishing relationships with blacks that allowed him to spend longer in saloons and to identify their patrons, an achievement that coincided with the period in which the COF stopped employing black investigators. He was a Jewish clothing salesman named David Oppenheim, who when undercover went by the name David

Ogden and took on the identity of a travelling salesman. Prior to starting work for the COF in 1915, Oppenheim had some experience investigating for police. He also possessed “a memory for facts and details” that Whitin described as “quite remarkable,” and which enabled him to produce unusually long and detailed reports. Oppenheim was “a ‘glad hand artist’ and consequently an easy and fluent talker,” Whitin explained, an approach “which calls for a larger amount of expenditure than where the investigator is simply observing conditions.” The COF was happy to pay those expenses, but several of the other groups for whom Oppenheim worked complained that they were excessive. He also had a weakness for gambling. For all the difficulties that his freedom with money caused him, it also contributed to his success.<sup>xxxix</sup>

The keys to Oppenheim’s ability to conduct surveillance in Harlem were on display when he visited Jesse Wynn’s, on the corner of Seventh Avenue and 133<sup>rd</sup> Street, in the early hours of March 4, 1916. Noticing that “Kid Griffio (the manager) was in the room all the time and kept watch, I asked him to have drink on me and got him into conversation....”<sup>xxxix</sup> Oppenheim liberally bought drinks for doormen, waiters, bartenders, performers, and managers in the black establishments he visited. He gained a reputation, as one of his black acquaintances put it, as “a guy that had lots of money and a good spender.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Oppenheim used the opportunity offered by buying drinks to initiate conversations. In that way he made himself better known than other free-spending whites, so much so that in the midst of a police crackdown in March, 1916, he reported that Tom Diggs still admitted him to his café, saying “he knows me to [sic] well to bar me.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Staff talked to him about how their establishments were being run, how their employers paid off police, and their

efforts to beat prosecutions, as well as what was happening in the neighbourhood's other saloons and cabarets. His contacts also introduced him to prostitutes, helping him overcome the women's suspicion of white men. By acquainting himself in this way with fifteen staff from twelve different establishments, Oppenheim was able to gain entry to many of Harlem's saloons and cabarets even as their proprietors increasingly barred white patrons. That entree to black nightlife lasted for two years, until, in mid-March, 1916, a waiter whom he knew saw him leaving the building that housed the COF's office. The resulting rumours that he worked for the COF caused Oppenheim to be barred from most of Harlem's saloons.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Even when successfully immersed in Harlem, Oppenheim still did not enjoy the access that black investigators did, being turned away from saloons and clubs where he was not known.<sup>xxxvi</sup> If he and other white investigators experienced a narrower slice of Harlem than their black counterparts, they consistently offered a more expansive picture of what they encountered. Although they did occasionally report that establishments were orderly, the men generally saw disorder even when found no evidence of soliciting. Recalling the scene in the Crescent Café on 135<sup>th</sup> Street early on the morning of March 5, 1916, Oppenheim wrote that "most of the women were smoking cigarettes, a very noisy and disorderly crowd, shouting to one another across the tables, using profane language, also while dancing making very suggestive motions with their partners." The café's three female entertainers, backed by a pianist and drummer, sang and danced "with their clothes raised over their knees, exposing their limbs and making very suggestive motions."<sup>xxxvii</sup> Other white investigators' perception of black establishments as disorderly is more

obviously shaped by concepts of race. Five of the other fifteen whites employed by the Committee prior to 1920 identified blacks not as “colored” or “negro,” but as “niggers” and “coons.” Some employed those terms as shorthand for the conditions they found; one unidentified white man felt it was enough, for example, to simply report that Schneider’s on 133<sup>rd</sup> was “a nigger dump.” The language also conveyed their distaste for blacks. Reporting on Dan Williams Old Lavender Saloon, another unidentified investigator wrote, “Place full of niggers and the odour is like anything but lavender.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> It was such evidence that could spur the discriminatory policing that black leaders feared, and which they intended cooperation with the COF, and the referral of black investigators, to mitigate.

Proprietors were acutely aware of the presence of investigators, and that black establishments were being closed by police action or pressure from brewers and surety companies. Oppenheim reported conversations dominated by concerns about COF agents, excise agents, and undercover police, and accounts of raids and of clubs closed down by the authorities.<sup>xxxix</sup> In some of this talk, the COF was credited with almost superhuman powers. In 1916, Frank Nolan, manager of the Snug Café on Madison Avenue and 133<sup>rd</sup> Street, told Oppenheim, of whose identity as a COF investigator he was at that stage unaware, that the COF “know everything that goes on.” According to Nolan, three or four times a year he was summoned to the Committee’s offices, where he was made to realize that the Committee was aware of things that had happened at the Snug and precisely when they had happened. “[O]nly the boss and 1 or 2 of the waiters know these things,” Nolan said

despairingly, “but still the committee finds it out the next day and even tells [me] the name of the waiter that served these investigators.”<sup>xl</sup>

The anxiety evident in such stories led to more than just talk. In March 1916, for example, John McGlary, who ran a café on the corner of Lenox Avenue and 137<sup>th</sup> Street became so worried about undercover agents that he stopped serving women in the back rooms of his café (where couples drank, apart from the single men who drank at the bar), barred unescorted women, and ordered his staff to prevent women patrons from changing tables. He also let his pianist go, and stopped providing entertainment. McGlary even considered refusing to serve any women, a decision that one of his waiters described as likely to “kill business altogether.”<sup>xli</sup> Although few clubs adopted the full range of changes made by McGlary, many made one or more of them, in the process altering the leisure patterns of working-class blacks.<sup>xlii</sup> Many establishments also made efforts to keep white men and black women apart. In March 1916, a waiter in the New Bridge Café, on Fifth Avenue and 138<sup>th</sup> Street, told Oppenheim that, “if there is a new face around they don’t let [a] white man sit with [a] colored woman.”<sup>xliii</sup> Even that precaution was insufficient for the owners of most of the major clubs, who simply refused to serve white men at the same table as black women or to serve white men in the sitting room, where women drank.

Lucien White made clear one consequence of such changes in a report on conditions in Harlem on July 18, 1914. In all the places he visited, White found conditions “generally fair and unobjectionable,” with “the proprietors and patrons...restraining themselves, as compared with past conditions” and “no visible signs of soliciting in any of the places.” However, he also noted, “there

was plenty of [soliciting] on the street, especially on Fifth Avenue.” Making saloons and cabarets “orderly” involved pushing black prostitutes out on to street. Streetwalking required prostitutes to announce their presence – made them “bold to the extreme,” as Lucien White put it – allowing them to be more easily policed.<sup>xliv</sup> As a result, black women were charged with prostitution in numbers far in excess of their presence in the population.<sup>xlv</sup>

For all the success of their policing efforts, the COF could not entirely prevent whites and blacks from mixing in the nightlife of the city’s black neighbourhoods. The races came together in marginal venues, smaller, less prominent ‘black and tans’ that did not draw the attention of the COF, and on the margins of larger venues, which accommodated white men they knew not to be undercover investigators. But the COF was able to keep race mixing circumscribed in that way until 1920, even after it no longer sent black investigators or Oppenheim to Harlem. None of its investigators got inside black nightlife to the extent that those men had, but thanks to the public location of licensed premises, white investigators could still find them, and, even though they were generally refused service, briefly observe conditions.<sup>xlvi</sup> They could only rarely do any more because proprietors remained very conscious that, as one told a white investigator, “the law was very strict regarding [having white people in the place].”<sup>xlvii</sup> That attitude was a lasting result of the undercover work done by black investigators and Oppenheim. Vice persisted in Harlem, but the COF policed and to some extent controlled its location and form.

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In 1923, Whitin acknowledged to Dr. James Pederson that the COF had lost the “degree of control” over Harlem that it had achieved in the previous decade. Thanks to the adoption of National Prohibition, the means by which the Committee had been “able to keep more or less a strong hand on the places,” excise licenses and cooperation with brewers, no longer existed. The only option left to them was to work with the police. Sending complaints and reports to police inspectors and the commissioner did not produce results, so Whitin arranged for direct co-operation between COF investigators and police officers. In Harlem, this method proved ineffective. “Unknown white men” provoked suspicion, Whitin lamented, and were “either refused admission to the resort or, while [they were] present, care [was] taken to prevent violations of the law.” “[F]ew colored officers are on the Force,” leaving the police “seriously handicapped in their efforts to suppress vice among the Negroes.”<sup>xlvi</sup>

The COF itself no longer employed any black investigators. In 1920, Whitin abandoned the practice of employing casuals and opted instead to employ a single fulltime investigator. The man he chose, Harry Kahan, being fluent in French, German and Russian, was equipped to conduct surveillance in many parts of New York City.<sup>xlix</sup> But he was also white. After a fruitless evening “scouting around” Harlem in the company of two white undercover officers in 1922, Kahan reported, “it is very hard for a white man to operate around here, because he is always suspected.”<sup>1</sup> As a full-time investigator, Kahan filed only eight reports on Harlem in the seven years from 1920 to 1926, fewer than Oppenheim and his part-time colleagues filed in any single year prior to 1920. In 1926, Whitin’s successor, George Worthington, was forced to acknowledge that in the decade

since Oppenheim had been exposed, none of the COF's white staff had been "particularly successful" investigating cases involving blacks.<sup>li</sup>

But if the COF had lost control of Harlem, it did not appear that vice was out of control as a result. Black women continued to be arrested for prostitution in numbers disproportionate to their presence in the population, regulation that the COF supported with a special appropriation to a "particularly efficient police inspector" who had begun work in Harlem in 1923.<sup>lii</sup> A six-day investigation of Harlem organized by the New York Urban League, supported by the COF, and undertaken by James E. Fladger, a black man of "some education, but whose only experience in law enforcement was as a commissioned officer assigned to military police work," found disorderly conditions in one group of cabarets. Those that drew patrons from the "lower type of colored and whites" featured race mixing, disorderly dancing, and unrestricted interaction between men and women. But Fladger found little evidence of prostitution. He was told that white men came to these places to find black prostitutes, but he did not confirm that soliciting was taking place, and was unable to identify any rooms where prostitutes went, or get access to the buffet flats that operated after the cabarets closed. Nor did he observe any black women soliciting on the street. Reporting those findings in the Bulletin sent to the COF's Board of Directors, Whitin noted that they "did not disclose as serious a condition as [he] feared," given that it was "many months since the Committee had an investigator particularly adapted to the 135<sup>th</sup> Street conditions."<sup>liii</sup> Instead, Fladger's report gave the appearance that, although the COF no longer watched Harlem, prostitution in the neighborhood nevertheless remained under a measure of control.

A combination of events spurred the COF to seek more information about vice in the neighborhood. The mid-1920s saw an upsurge in the cultural prominence of Harlem. “White people are beginning to discover this section, moved by the witnessing of plays such as “Miss Lulu Bell,” and the influence of novels such as ‘Nigger Heaven’,” the COF’s *Annual Report* for 1926 explained. “This curiosity is rapidly being capitalized upon by exploiters of both races....There seems to be exploitation in this area of both white and colored girls for prostitution.”<sup>liv</sup> Not only did the growing allure of Harlem for whites reignite the COF’s anxiety about the “moral hazards” of white women having sex with black men, with memories of postwar riots still fresh, it also stirred new concerns about possible wider consequences. COF fundraising letters in 1927 warned of the “probability” of “serious race riots” unless some action was taken.<sup>lv</sup>

At the same time, the leadership of the COF passed to a new Secretary, with a different approach to investigation and fundraising. After the sudden death of Frederick Whitin in July 1926, the COF appointed as Secretary, George Worthington, a lawyer and author of several studies of vice control, who had previously worked in the Law Enforcement Division of the ASHA.<sup>lvi</sup> Worthington inaugurated a new period of co-operation with black leaders, reaching out to the New York Urban League, and appointing Dr. Ernest Alexander, of Harlem Hospital, as the first black member of the Board of Directors. He also sought funding for large research projects -- an examination of nightclubs and speakeasies, and a special investigation of Harlem. When Rockefeller’s Bureau of Social Hygiene provided \$10,000 for that investigation in December 1927, for the first time in over ten years, the COF sought to hire a black investigator.<sup>lvii</sup> Worthington

turned to the New York Urban League; William Baldwin, one of COF's directors, served on the League's executive board, as did the COF's old ally, Fred Moore. With the League's help, he recruited Raymond Claymes.

Claymes fulfilled the COF's need for an investigator who could circumvent racial barriers, but his class identity was very different from that of most of those he watched. Just what class persona Claymes adopted when he went undercover is not evident in any of his reports. As can be seen in the example that opens this article, they do reveal a concern to show he spoke the language of those he encountered, and was part of the world he had under surveillance. The COF helped ensure that he did not attract suspicion by retaining all his reports until the end of his five-month investigation, rather than following their normal practice of turning each over to the police immediately after it was submitted.<sup>lviii</sup> That decision ensured that a police raid did not follow a visit by Claymes. Many prostitutes he encountered did display some wariness in dealing with him. He occasionally found his efforts to obtain a woman's address and telephone number rebuffed, or the details that she gave him to be false.<sup>lix</sup> But in so doing they were simply practicing their trade. While his race made Claymes a less threatening figure to black women than a white male, he nonetheless was a man, possessed of a social and physical power from which women sought to protect themselves.

Claymes' opportunity to interact with prostitutes to the extent that he did owed much to his ability to strike up acquaintances with black men. His informants were not staff, as Oppenheim's had been, but fellow patrons, who he labelled 'casuals.' Sixty of his one hundred and thirty reports featured casuals, who took him to venues throughout the neighborhood and introduced him to staff

and female patrons, or sought out for him prostitutes they knew. Claymes never identifies these men by name, and rarely provides any details of his interactions with them, effectively protecting his sources in a way that none of the COF's other investigators did.

While Claymes visited eighty-five cabarets and speakeasies located at street level during his five months of surveillance, three out of every four of his reports dealt with residences to which casuals took him. He identified sixty-one apartments used by prostitutes, fifty of which also sold alcohol.<sup>lx</sup> “Fully 90%,” Claymes reported, “were located in the well kept neighbourhoods and in the most elaborately appointed dwellings and apartment houses,” which he surmised was part of what attracted their patrons.<sup>lxi</sup> Other sources suggest these venues, known as buffet flats, were more widespread. In 1929, police officials told a reporter for *Variety* that there was “an average of two [buffet flats] for every apartment building” in Harlem.<sup>lxii</sup> Even that estimate might be too conservative. A reporter for the *Amsterdam News* found a buffet flat on every floor of a five-story tenement in Brooklyn.<sup>lxiii</sup>

Paul Bryant's\* buffet flat, apartment three in 304 West 147<sup>th</sup> Street, was typical of those visited by Claymes. When a male acquaintance took him there one evening in May 1928, they found, in addition to Bryant, only one man and one woman. Once the acquaintance introduced Claymes, and they had ordered drinks, however, “[Bryant\*] left the apt. [sic] to get some more girls and about 15 minutes later several girls came in from some other apt. in the same building.” On their arrival, Claymes reported, “other drinks were served and a general conversation and dancing ensued and I was solicited by one girl called [Ruby\*].” Speaking privately to Bryant\* later,

Claymes sought information as to his relationship to those women. He asked whether Bryant “regulate[d] the prices here” – if he were a pimp – to which Bryant\* replied, “No, I only collect \$2 for the room, and of course I sell my liquor.”<sup>lxiv</sup>

The variety of amusements offered by Bryant\* was a feature of buffet flats: drinks, music, dancing, prostitutes, and rooms obtainable, at a cost, to which a couple could go. Gambling was also commonly to be had. Such a range was not always readily available in nightclubs; police and licensing laws compelled their proprietors to be more circumspect about hosting illegal activities, and to close in the early hours of the morning. The patrons of buffet flats could enjoy those amusements more openly and after hours. They also partook of a more sexually charged atmosphere, with prostitutes a more prominent presence in buffet flats than in nightclubs and speakeasies. Claymes filed the vast majority of his reports on buffet flats because these establishments were more often than not where his efforts to locate sex workers delivered him.<sup>lxv</sup> Bryant\*’s response to Claymes makes clear that buffet flats were not simply brothels or call flats under another name. Groups of women from a single address, such as those located by Bryant\*, may have come from call flats, but individual prostitutes were just as likely to have come from their residences or even from the street.<sup>lxvi</sup> Other proprietors made clear that it was safer to run a flat in the way that Bryant\* had described. “I never keep any [women] here,” Irene Morrison\* explained to Claymes when he visited her apartment in 42 West 138<sup>th</sup> Street, “It’s a risky business.”<sup>lxvii</sup> Women in residence attracted attention that threatened the “cloak of assumed respectability” that flats gained from their location in more expensive dwellings and apartments and which Claymes

surmised offered “a form of protection.”<sup>lxviii</sup> Should the authorities discover the flat, housing women exposed its proprietor to more severe penalties. In the case of white women, many buffet flat operators opted to not even allow them to visit their premises. When Claymes asked Jean Lamb\* whether she could get him an “ofay” [white] girl, she replied, “I do not like to bother with them because they often get you in trouble.”<sup>lxix</sup> Claymes did meet ten white women in buffet flats in the course of his investigation, including two proprietors, both married to black men. Overwhelmingly, however, it was black prostitutes who plied their trade in these apartments.

The proprietors and patrons of buffet flats were also overwhelmingly black, in contrast to Harlem’s speakeasies, where Claymes “found no evidence that color was a bar to entrance.” Fifty-six of the sixty-one tenement places (92%) Claymes visited were black enterprises, most run by women.<sup>lxx</sup> In only eight of the sixty-one apartments (13%) he visited did he encounter white patrons.<sup>lxxi</sup> The appearance of these black spaces reflected the transformation of Harlem into a larger, more expansive, more densely populated and more solidly black community. Between 1920 and 1930, more than eight-seven thousand blacks arrived, from northern states, throughout the South, and the West Indies, spreading black settlement below 130th Street as far south as 110<sup>th</sup> Street, above 145<sup>th</sup> Street to 155<sup>th</sup> Street, and west across Fifth Avenue. Notwithstanding that expansion, the neighborhood became more densely populated. By 1925, when an average of 223 people occupied each acre in Manhattan, Harlem held 336 per acre. Fewer and fewer of those inhabitants were white, as 118,792 whites left the neighborhood in the 1920s.<sup>lxxii</sup> As a result, Harlem’s tenements became solidly black spaces – and thanks to Prohibition, new sites of black

leisure and prostitution. Throughout the United States, the enforcement of Prohibition pushed drinking into the relative safety and privacy of residences, but in Harlem there was an additional impetus for that shift. If fewer whites resided in the neighborhood in the 1920s, Prohibition brought greater numbers of white visitors to its speakeasies and cabarets. Black patrons consequently faced a white audience. Yet “non-theatrical, non-intellectual Harlem,” poet Langston Hughes recorded, “didn’t like to be stared at by white folks.”<sup>lxxiii</sup> To free themselves from the gaze of whites, many blacks seeking leisure turned from the commercial spaces of Harlem to its residences. Prohibition thus did not, as Michael Lerner has recently argued, simply lessen the segregation of nightlife. While blacks and whites mixed to an unprecedented extent in nightclubs and speakeasies, in buffet flats blacks partied apart from whites.<sup>lxxiv</sup>

Although rent parties have become the most famous entertainment that took place in Harlem’s apartments in the 1920s, buffet flats were more widespread and central to black nightlife. The variety of activities offered at buffet flats could also be found at rent parties, but the buffet flat proprietors did not charge admission, as did the hosts of parties who raised money for rent. Nor did they follow those who ran rent parties in widely advertising and admitting all comers. Buffet flats were also on-going concerns, unlike the irregularly staged rent parties.<sup>lxxv</sup> The majority, however, were not like the most widely cited example, the buffet flat in Detroit frequented by Bessie Smith, which is mentioned in her niece Ruby’s recollections. That buffet flat was “a real open house,” in which, according to Ruby, “everything went on”, with a different show in each room so as to “satisfy every known sexual inclination.”<sup>lxxvi</sup> In the more typical Prohibition-era buffet flats visited

by Claymes, sexual activity only occurred behind closed doors, in the rooms rented to couples. The availability of rooms was an extension of the privacy offered by buffet flats. Situated within residential buildings, these establishments were almost impossible to find unless one had a correct address. That location ensured that their clientele would be made up of individuals known to the operator, as well as whoever such individuals invited. Avoiding attracting the attention of anyone else was the biggest concern of proprietors, as the novelist Claude McKay captured. When a fight started behind the “heavily and carefully shaded” windows of a fictitious flat on 140<sup>th</sup> Street, “The proprietress fell upon [one of the fighters] and clawed at him. “Wha’s the matter all you bums trying to ruin mah place?”” she cried. The mutterings of her customers elaborated her fears about the attention that an assault or murder would have attracted: “Soon as this heah kind a business stahts, the dicks will sartain sure git on to us.”<sup>lxxvii</sup>

Such care to keep buffet flats a black space was a further reason why the COF had been unaware of their proliferation, or of the extent of the black prostitution they supported. That was no longer the case after Claymes submitted a summary report of his investigation. So much “more open, flagrant, and rampant in Harlem than in any other section of the city” was prostitution that working five days a week he discovered more violations than the combined efforts of four other investigators working six days a week in other parts of the city. Claymes’ conclusions exposed more than the scale of prostitution in Harlem; they are revealing of the differing views the black middle class and the COF held of conditions in Harlem. In addition to mapping vice in the neighborhood, he discussed its origins. A lack of economic opportunities and an absence of moral

influences provided part of the explanation, but it is lax and corrupt law enforcement -- the longstanding complaint of Harlem's leaders -- that Claymes saw as largely to blame. Black owned speakeasies were "watched and hounded by police while the 95% owned and operated by whites are molested." A black federal agent who took action against Italian owned speakeasies was "shaken down" by his superiors. White police on the beat turn a blind eye to buffet flats in return for money and free liquor. "The existence of such conditions without question," he concluded, "tends to break down the general morale of Harlem and encourages tolerance for the public speakeasies and the evils they do."

Very little of Claymes' summary survives in the account of his investigation that Worthington wrote for the COF's *Annual Report*. Not surprisingly, it retains the emphasis on the scale of prostitution, but augmented with few details. Worthington explained the origins of that situation with a broader "history and background of Harlem life," but when it came to discussing the contribution of whites, he omitted any reference to discriminatory law enforcement, focusing instead on slumming and ownership of resorts and speakeasies.<sup>lxxviii</sup> If in the *Annual Report* Worthington slighted longstanding black complaints of racist policing, prior to its publication the COF had made it a priority to consult with their allies in the black community about Claymes' investigation. After the directors received Claymes' summary in November 1928, they contacted not the police, but the New York Urban League. Worthington and Dr Ernest Alexander, the COF's black director, also "interviewed various important residents of Harlem," who Alexander later brought together for a meeting at his home. The purpose was to form a group to support the COF,

but the only apparent outcome was a call for more black undercover police officers, which Worthington took up in the *Annual Report*. Six months after Claymes' report, Alexander was still arranging meetings with blacks for Worthington, in order for him to attempt to raise funds to employ a fulltime black investigator. In taking this approach, the COF prioritised building support and fundraising over policing. No evident concrete gains were made in either area, but, notwithstanding Worthington's elision of Claymes' complaints about lax law enforcement, that strategy does appear to have spared the COF from the accusations of racism that had bedevilled its earlier investigations of black prostitution.<sup>lxxix</sup>

It was in April 1929, five months after Claymes submitted his report, that the COF finally turned the evidence he gathered over to the police, at the same time passing on black leaders' call for the creation of a new squad of black undercover police officers. The Commissioner took up that suggestion, Claymes himself helped train the new officers, and they used his information to create what the COF described in its *Annual Report* for 1929 as "vastly improved conditions" in Harlem.<sup>lxxx</sup> They did so by making 1239 arrests, which led to 463 convictions, and the closing of fifty-nine cabarets, speakeasies, and buffet flats. Among those arrested was fourteen-year-old Billie Holiday. She was caught in a raid on an apartment in 151 West 140<sup>th</sup> Street, where she was staying with her mother, and sent to the hospital on Welfare Island for five months, a sentence that indicates that she was suffering from venereal disease.<sup>lxxxii</sup> However, only twelve percent of those arrested and eighteen percent of those convicted were women charged, like Holiday, with prostitution; the rest were men charged with either violating Prohibition or with disorderly conduct, usually

gambling. As had been the case prior to Prohibition, the COF's investigations touched not just prostitutes, but all those who participated in Harlem's nightlife, threatening black leisure.

That police supervision fell most heavily on clubs and speakeasies: police closed forty-four percent of the clubs (30 of 67) investigated by Claymes, and made arrests in ninety-two percent of clubs, or all but five. Although police also closed forty-two percent of the buffet flats (29 of 69) they investigated, many more buffet flats escaped regulation than did clubs. Seventeen, or almost one quarter, were gone by the time police officers sought them out, their proprietors having moved to a new address, as many blacks in Harlem did several times a year. In sixteen other apartments police failed to find the evidence of prostitution and violations of Prohibition that Claymes had reported and made no arrests. Thus only just over half of the buffet flats were subject to some regulation, compared with nine out of ten nightclubs and speakeasies.<sup>lxxxii</sup> While Claymes' surveillance extended further into the black community than did the surveillance of white investigators, it still fell short of destroying the privacy offered by buffet flats.

The regulatory consequences of Claymes' surveillance extended beyond the police activity that immediately followed his investigation. By mid-1929, although he no was longer working undercover – the COF's plan to continue employing him having fallen victim to the organization's declining financial situation – the black officers that he had helped to train were able to replicate and extend the invasive surveillance he had conducted. More black women were arrested than ever before, even as the number of white women brought before the courts dropped dramatically: in 1931, for the first time, black women were arrested in greater numbers than white women, and by

1932 two black women were arrested for every one white, the exact opposite of the ratio in 1928.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Claymes' investigation made possible this period of intensified regulation.

After 1932, those arrests were made without the help of the COF. That year the Committee, in debt and unable to raise the funds it needed to operate, dissolved itself. Its leaders blamed the Depression for the collapse of their financial support, but the COF had also been caught up in a scandal that overtook the city's Magistrate's Courts and exposed corruption among its undercover police.<sup>lxxxiv</sup> But even had it survived those events, the COF would have soon have been overtaken by a broader transformation. Beginning in the 1930s, as the New Deal expanded the size of the American state and reformers professionalised the police force and legal system, government agencies supplanted the private organizations that had kept watch on working-class neighbourhoods.<sup>lxxxv</sup> In the mid-1930s, the agency most associated with that shift, the FBI, targeted prostitution. They did so relying on their own personnel, cutting out local police. In New York City, as prostitution came under the sway of organized crime, it also drew new attention from the District Attorney's office. Thomas Dewey used evidence gathered from prostitutes and madams to convict gangster Lucky Luciano in 1936, in the process helping propel himself into the office of Governor.<sup>lxxxvi</sup> In this emerging culture of state surveillance, investigators were specially trained employees of state and federal government.

Raymond Claymes was thus one of the last amateur, untrained vice investigators – or more accurately, given his training as a sociologist, a transitional figure between the two regimes. His employment had brought to the end a decade in which private white anti-vice organizations had not

sustained the surveillance of Harlem that they had pursued in the first twenty years of the century. A lack of concern for the situation of African Americans undoubtedly contributed to that fall off, an attitude that reversed once Prohibition and a new fascination with black culture drew large numbers of whites to the neighborhood, threatening the de facto segregation that the COF favoured. But white reformers had also faced a new obstacle, the increasing inability of white investigators to gather information in the new black spaces being created by Prohibition and the migration that was transforming Harlem. They had not been watching Harlem because they could not. When the COF did recruit a black man who could investigate the neighborhood, he revealed that buffet flats, and the prostitutes who patronised them, had spread throughout Harlem's residential buildings and streets. While the COF's investigators had been unable to go undercover in Harlem, many black prostitutes had successfully blended into the neighborhood's new black spaces.

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Raymond Claymes, June 22, 1928, Folder "Dance Halls 1927-30 [2]," Box 37, Committee of Fourteen Papers (Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library, New York) (COF Papers). Many of the folders in this collection share the same label or are not labelled at all, precluding precise and consistent citations.

<sup>ii</sup> For this procedure, see "Suggestions to Investigators for Reporting, January 12, 1928," Folder "Investigators," Box 82, COF Papers.

<sup>iii</sup> Raymond Claymes, June 22, 1928, Folder "Dance Halls 1927-30 [2]," Box 37, COF Papers. Names marked with an \* are pseudonyms in accordance with restrictions preventing the use of personal names boxes 35-37 of the COF papers.

<sup>iv</sup> Kevin Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York City in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York, 1997).

<sup>v</sup> Elizabeth Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945* (Chapel Hill, 2006), 81-84. As I discuss below, there is little evidence to support this argument.

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<sup>vi</sup> Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1986); George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World* (New York, 1994); Chap Heap, “‘Slumming’: Sexuality, Race and Urban Commercial Leisure, 1900-1940” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2000); and Thomas Mackey, *Pursuing Johns: Criminal Law Reform, Defending Character, and New York City’s Committee of Fourteen, 1920-1930* (Columbus, 2005). One exception is Jennifer Fronc’s “‘I Led Him On’: Undercover Investigation and the Politics of Social Reform in New York City, 1900-1919” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2005), but she does not discuss any of the COF’s black investigators or the COF’s activities after 1920.

<sup>vii</sup> In recognition of the diverse origins of the people of color who lived in Harlem of Harlem, I identify only those born in the United States as African American. When an individual’s origins are not specified, I identify them as black. I also employ black when referring to the community as a whole.

<sup>viii</sup> In 1920, black Harlem was bounded by 130<sup>th</sup> Street to the south, 145<sup>th</sup> Street to the north, Fifth Avenue to the east and Eighth Avenue to the west. By 1930, the boundaries stretched from 110<sup>th</sup> Street to 155<sup>th</sup> Street, and from Fifth Avenue to Amsterdam Avenue. Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York, 1971), 123, 127, 130.

<sup>ix</sup> In this way, the black neighbourhoods emerging in northern cities replicated black communities in the segregated south. There too, Robin Kelley notes, white authorities “actively cultivated black stool pigeons to maintain tabs on the black community.” Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *Journal of American History* 80, 1 (1993), 80.

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<sup>x</sup> ‘Application for Position as Investigator for the Committee of Fourteen,’ and Flyer for ‘Second Song Recital by Raymond Claymes,’ March 11, 1928, Folder “1928,” Box 7, COF Papers; Alumni File for Raymond Claymes, Alumni Records, RU 830, Box 1020, Special Collections, Yale University (New Haven, Conn.).

<sup>xi</sup> See “Application for Position as Investigator for the Committee of Fourteen,” Folder “1928,” Box 7, COF Papers.

<sup>xii</sup> For overviews of the COF, see Mackey, 15-34; and Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York, 1992), 303-6.

<sup>xiii</sup> The best discussion of this aspect of the COF’s work is Mara Keire, “The Committee of Fourteen and Saloon Reform in New York City, 1905-1920,” *Business and Economic History*, 26, 2 (Winter 1997), 573-82.

<sup>xiv</sup> “Form,” September 23, 1909, enclosed with Whitin to Mrs William Baldwin, 10 August 1910, Folder “Baldwin, Mrs,” Box 10, COF Papers.

<sup>xv</sup> DuBois to Whitin, October 29, 1912, Folder “General Correspondence 1912 October 21-31,” Box 2, COF Papers. For discussions of this correspondence, see Jennifer Fronc, “The Horns of the Dilemma: Race Mixing and the Enforcement of Jim Crow in New York City,” *Journal of Urban History* 33, 1 (November 2006): 14-18; and Clement, 83-84.

<sup>xvi</sup> Clement, 84.

<sup>xvii</sup> For Whitin’s use of the term “Booker T. Washington type,” see Whitin to Baldwin, August 31, 1909, Folder “General Correspondence, August 1909,” Box 1, COF Papers. For the formation and work of the Colored Auxiliary, see Fronc, “Horns of the Dilemma,” 9-14.

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<sup>xviii</sup> Bulletin: Executive Committee Meeting, September 28, 1912, Box 87, COF Papers.

<sup>xix</sup> Folder “1913 June-July,” Box 28, COF Papers. For further examples of Moore’s cooperation with the COF, in the form of reports on establishments in Harlem and work as an intermediary between the COF and black proprietors; see Moore to Hooke, February 5, 1915, Folder “1917” [5], Box 4, COF Papers; Moore to Whitin, October 1, 1917, Folder “1917” [7], Box 4, COF Papers; Moore to Whitin, March 18, 1918, Folder “1918” [1], Box 4, COF Papers; *COF Annual Report for 1916*, 85-86, Box 86, COF Papers; Bulletin, October 11, 1915; Bulletin, November 9, 1916, Box 87, COF Papers. Chandler Owen, writing in *The Messenger* in 1922, complained of the continuation of those practices, noting that “certain Negro leaders” were colluding with the COF to keep the races from drinking and dancing together. Cited in Michael Lerner, *Dry Manhattan: Prohibition in New York City* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), 214-15.

<sup>xx</sup> *COF Annual Report for 1925*, 11, Box 86, COF Papers; Bulletin 2026, December 9, 1930, Box 88, COF Papers.

<sup>xxi</sup> Whitin to Peters, November 17, 1906, Folder 2, Box 1, COF Papers; and Whitin to Washington Railway and Electric Co., May 6, 1918, Folder “References,” Box 13, COF Papers.

<sup>xxii</sup> Reference for Charles H. Cooper, May 4, 1922, Folder “References,” Box 13, COF Papers.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Whitin to Philip Payton, May 29, 1916, Folder “135<sup>th</sup> St to 213<sup>th</sup> Street,” Box 23, COF Papers.

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<sup>xxiv</sup> Whitin to Dr. James Pederson, March 27, 1923, Folder “1923,” Box 5, COF Papers. The first black officer was not appointed until 1911, and there were only fifteen employed by 1916. James Lardner and Thomas Reppetto, *NYPD: A City and its Police* (New York, 2000), 240-41

<sup>xxv</sup> Whitin to Philip Payton, May 29, 1916, Folder “135<sup>th</sup> St to 213<sup>th</sup> Street,” Box 23, COF Papers.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Pogue, April 5, 1911, Folder “1910-1912”; June 14, 1913; June 21, 1913, Folder “1913 June-July,” Box 28, COF Papers; Ford, June 17-19, 1911; August 26, 1911, Folder “1910-1912,” Box 28, COF Papers; D. J. White, August 24-26, 1911; September 2, 1911; Folder “1910-1912,” Box 28, COF Papers; Franklin, September 22, 1912, Folder “Investigators Reports 1912,” Box 28, COF Papers; Lucien White, August 23, 1913, Folder “1913”; January 9, 1914; January 31, 1914; July 18, 1914, Folder “1914,” Box 28, COF Papers.

There may have been more; a number of reports on Harlem are unsigned. Another black investigator, Edward H. Woods, worked for the COF in Brooklyn in 1913 and 1914. Whitin to William Beilenberg, September 10, 1913, Folder “1913,” Box 3, COF Papers; and Whitin to Woods, September 24, 1914, Folder “Wi-Wy,” Box 16, COF Papers.

<sup>xxvii</sup> James Curtis to Whitin, August 22, 1911, Folder “June-July 1911,” Box 1, COF Papers.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Whitin to Stewart, September 30, 1912, Folder “St-Sz,” Box 14, COF Papers. Whitin does not identify the investigator as Franklin, but he refers to him visiting Young’s on September 22, 1912. Franklin’s signature appears at the bottom of that report. Franklin had at least a high school education, and had enrolled a course at a ‘Training School’ in Springfield and aspired to study at Columbia University, but was compelled to work to support his mother. In 1912 he was employed as a process server and investigator for detective agencies. See Franklin to

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Whitin, September 26, 1912, Folder “Bklyn – Inv Reports and related materials, 1913,” Box 29, COF Papers.

<sup>xxix</sup> Stewart to Whitin, September 28, 1912, Folder “St-Sz,” Box 14, COF Papers.

<sup>xxx</sup> For example, see W.M. Franklin, September 22, 1912, Folder “Investigators Reports 1912,” Box 28, COF Papers; L.H. White, “Report of Investigation, Saturday night, January 31[, 1914],” Folder “1914,” Box 28, COF Papers.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Whitin to Edward Gantt, May 13, 1914, Folder “1920,” Box 5, COF Papers; Whitin to Paul Poponoe, February 3, 1920, Folder “ASHA 1920,” Box 9, COF Papers; P. M. Kinsie to Whitin, March 3, 1921, Folder “ASHA 1921-2,” Box 9, COF Papers.

<sup>xxxii</sup> David Oppenheim, March 4, 1916, Box 31, COF Papers.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> David Oppenheim, December 31, 1915, Box 31, COF Papers.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> David Oppenheim, March 5, 1916, Box 31, COF Papers.

<sup>xxxv</sup> David Oppenheim, March 18-19, 1916, Box 31, COF Papers; and Whitin to George Kneeland, January 13, 1920, Folder “1920,” Box 5, COF Papers. Oppenheim continued to work for the COF in other parts of New York City and in the surrounding states until 1920, when he went to work for the ASHA.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> For example, on March 18, 1916, Oppenheim, on the basis of his color, was refused service in the back rooms of half of the fourteen bars and clubs he visited.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> David Oppenheim, March 5, 1916, Box 31, COF Papers.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> “Disorderly Hotels,” Folder “1910-1912,” Box 28, COF Papers; “Dan Williams Old Lavender Saloon,” Folder “1910-1912,” Box 28, COF Papers. For other examples, see PJM

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[Peter Mallon], October 15, 1918, Box 33, COF Papers; Jackman Stockdale, April 4, 1918, Box 33, COF Papers.

<sup>xxxix</sup> David Oppenheim, November 1915, Box 31, COF Papers; David Oppenheim, March 4, 1916, Box 31, COF Papers; David Oppenheim, March 4-5, 1916, Box 31, COF Papers; David Oppenheim, May 7, 1916, Box 31, COF Papers.

<sup>xi</sup> David Oppenheim, March 4-5, 1916, Box 31, COF Papers.

<sup>xli</sup> David Oppenheim, March 18, 1916, Box 31, COF Papers.

<sup>xlii</sup> For examples of establishments that refused to serve unaccompanied women in their rear rooms, see David Oppenheim, March 4, 1916, Box 31, COF Papers; and David Oppenheim, March 18, 1916, Box 31, COF Papers. For examples of establishments that closed their cabarets, see David Oppenheim, March 4, 1916, Box 31, COF Papers; David Oppenheim, March 10-11, 1916, Box 31, COF Papers; and David Oppenheim, May 13-14, 1916, Box 31, COF Papers. For examples of establishments that prevented patrons from changing tables, see David Oppenheim, March 10-11, 1916, Box 31, COF Papers; David Oppenheim, August 27, 1916, Box 31, COF Papers.

<sup>xliii</sup> David Oppenheim, March 4-5, 1916, Box 31, COF Papers.

<sup>xliv</sup> L.H. White, "Report – Saturday Evening, July 18 [1914], Harlem," Folder "1914," Box 28, COF Papers.

<sup>xlv</sup> Bulletin, April 13, 1914, Box 87, COF Papers; *COF Annual Report for 1922*, 16, Box 86, COF Papers; *COF Annual Report for 1925*, 45, Box 86, COF Papers; Willoughby Waterman, *Prostitution and its Repression in New York City, 1900-1931* (New York, 1932, 1968), 126-27, 130.

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<sup>xlvi</sup> For examples, see Jackman Stockdale, April 4, 1918, Box 33, COF Papers; Harry Kahan, August 16, 1918, Box 33, COF Papers

<sup>xlvii</sup> Jackman Stockdale, February 5, 1918, Box 33, COF Papers. A visit by Peter Mallon, the COF's Assistant Secretary, openly identifying himself as a COF agent, later in 1918 confirmed that most of Harlem's saloon owners continued to prevent race mixing. See PJM [Peter Mallon], October 15, 1918, Box 33, COF Papers.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Bulletin, August 8, 1921, Box 88, COF Papers; Whitin to Dr James Pederson, March 27, 1923, Folder "1923," Box 5, COF Papers.

<sup>xlix</sup> Worthington to Bascom Johnson, June 26, 1928, Folder "ASHA 1928-1929," Box 9, COF Papers. Kahan continued to work for the COF until it shut down in 1932.

<sup>l</sup> Harry Kahan, March 18, 1922, Folder "1922," Box 34, COF Papers.

<sup>li</sup> Worthington to James Hubert, April 21, 1926, Box 15, COF Papers. In the years after 1926, when the Kirwin and Starook joined Kahan as full-time investigators, white investigators filed only twenty-two reports on Harlem.

<sup>lii</sup> Whitin to Dr James Pederson, March 27, 1923, Folder "1923," Box 5, COF Papers. In the 1920s, black women generally constituted between twenty-five percent and forty percent of the women charged with prostitution in New York City's Women's Court. See Bulletins, Box 87, COF Papers.

<sup>liii</sup> Minutes, Directors' Meeting, February, 1, 1923, 2, Box 86, COF Papers; Bulletin 1809, June 18, 1923, Box 88, COF Papers; J. Fladger, "Report of Investigation of Vice Conditions in Harlem," enclosed in James Hubert to Whitin, July 9, 1923, Box 15, COF Papers.

<sup>liv</sup> *COF Annual Report for 1926*, 31, Box 86, COF Papers.

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<sup>lv</sup> William Baldwin to The New York Foundation, October 28, 1927, Folder “1927,” Box 6, COF Papers.

<sup>lvi</sup> Bulletin 1944, July 22, 1926, Box 89, COF Papers.

<sup>lvii</sup> For the addition of Dr. Alexander to the Board, see Minutes, Directors’ Meeting, January 27, 1927, 3, Box 86, COF Papers. For the grant from Rockefeller’s Bureau of Social Hygiene, see Minutes, Directors’ Meeting, January 27, 1927, 1, Box 86, COF Papers; Minutes, Directors’ Meeting, December 1, 1927, 1, Box 86, COF Papers.

<sup>lviii</sup> Worthington to Bascom Johnson, October 6, 1928, Folder “1928,” Box 6, COF Papers.

<sup>lix</sup> Raymond Claymes, April 21, 1928, Folder “135th-207th St,” Box 36, COF Papers.

<sup>lx</sup> Ninety-eight of the 130 reports Claymes filed (including four reports filed after the completion of his five-month investigation of Harlem) concerned residences; the remaining thirty-two reports dealt with dance halls, clubs and cabarets.

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

<sup>lxii</sup> *Amsterdam News*, October 23, 1929, cited in Allon Schoener, *Harlem on My Mind* (New York, 1979), 80.

<sup>lxiii</sup> *Amsterdam News*, June 8, 1927, 16.

<sup>lxiv</sup> Raymond Claymes, May 3, 1928, Folder “135th-207th St,” Box 36, COF Papers.

<sup>lxv</sup> The arrests made by police following up Claymes’ reports confirmed the prominent place of prostitutes in buffet flats. A far greater proportion of arrests in buffet flats were for prostitution or related offenses than in clubs. See note 82 below.

<sup>lxvi</sup> Mackey, 40; Clement, 198-204.

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

<sup>lxviii</sup> Claymes, “A Brief Summary.”

<sup>lxix</sup> Raymond Claymes, March 20, 1928, Folder “135th-207th St,” Box 36, COF Papers.

<sup>lxx</sup> *COF Annual Report for 1928*, 33-4, Box 86, COF Papers. The predominance of women among buffet flat operators reflected the way that Prohibition opened up opportunities for women to engage in commercial enterprises. Mary Murphy, “Bootlegging Mothers and Drinking Daughters: Gender and Prohibition in Butte, Montana,” *American Quarterly* 46, 2 (June 1994), 174-94.

<sup>lxxi</sup> Worthington made the misleading claim in his summary of Claymes’ investigation that buffet flats catered for “both white and colored patronage.” *COF Annual Report for 1928*, 34, Box 86, COF Papers.

<sup>lxxii</sup> Osofsky, 130.

<sup>lxxiii</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York, 1963 (1940)), 228.

<sup>lxxiv</sup> Lerner, 213-223.

<sup>lxxv</sup> On rent parties, see Eric Garber, “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey (New York, 1989), 321-23; Summers, 177-78.

<sup>lxxvi</sup> Chris Albertson, *Bessie* (New Haven, 2003), 140-42. For analyses of buffet flats that rely on Ruby’s account, see Garber, 322-23; Chauncey, 250-51; and Wolcott, 106-8. A richer analysis of Chicago buffet flats in line with that offered here is contained in Cynthia Blair’s unpublished dissertation. See Blair, “Vicious Commerce: African American Women’s Sex

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Work and the Transformation of Urban Space in Chicago, 1850-1915,” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1999), 369-76. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for the *Journal of Urban History* for making me aware of Blair’s work.

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

<sup>lxxviii</sup> *COF Annual Report for 1928*, 31-34, Box 86, COF Papers.

<sup>lxxix</sup> Minutes, Directors’ Meeting, November 22, 1928, 2; Minutes, Directors’ Meeting, December 27, 1928, 4; Minutes, Directors’ Meeting, January 24, 1929, 2; Minutes, Directors’ Meeting, April 26, 1929, 1-2; Minutes, Directors’ Meeting, May 24, 1929, 2, Box 86, COF Papers; Alexander to Worthington, May 17, 1929, Folder “1929,” Box 7, COF Papers.

<sup>lxxx</sup> The COF did not publish a summary of his investigation, as part of their Annual Report for 1928, until October 14, 1929, a delay resulting from Worthington falling ill. “Night Clubs Found Chief Vice Centres,” *New York Times*, Oct. 14, 1929, 1, 14. *New York Times*, May 21, 1930, 23; Minutes, Directors’ Meeting, April 26, 1929, 2; Minutes, Directors’ Meeting, May 24, 1929, 2, Box 86, COF Papers.

<sup>lxxxi</sup> For Billie Holiday’s arrest, see Julia Blackburn, *With Billie* (New York, 2005), 61-62.

Holiday gave her name as Eleanor Fagan, which is the name that appears on a list of women charged with prostitution on a police card in the COF Papers. See Box 52, COF Papers.

<sup>lxxxii</sup> A far greater proportion of arrests in buffet flats were for prostitution or related offenses than in clubs; thirty-seven percent (84 of 226) compared to six percent (70 of 1013). The vast majority of arrests in clubs were for violations of the Volstead Act (Prohibition) (forty-one percent) or disorderly conduct, usually gambling (fifty-two percent). The sentences given to the women convicted of prostitution ranged from ten days to 180 days, with very few placed

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on probation or sent to the hospital. “Police Action in Harlem, 1929,” Box 37, COF Papers; and “Police Cards,” Box 52, COF Papers.

<sup>lxxxiii</sup> In 1932, 497 white women and 928 black women were charged with prostitution. Bulletin 2037, Women’s Courts, Manhattan and Bronx, November 1931, Box 89, COF Papers; Sophia Robison, *An Inquiry into the Present Functioning of the Women’s Court in Relation to the Problem of Prostitution* (New York, 1935), 22-27. This shift also owed something to the aftermath of the Seabury investigation, which highlighted the corrupt practices of the city’s police vice squads and, as Worthington put it, “stimulated a public emotionalism that is effectively discouraging the police from making arrests (March 5, 1931, Box 89, COF Papers).”

<sup>lxxxiv</sup> For the collapse of the COF, see Bulletin 2038, Directors Meeting, Dec. 2, 1931, Box 89, COF Papers; *New York Times*, Nov. 25, 1932, 17.

<sup>lxxxv</sup> Chauncey, 347; Frank Morn, “*The Eye That Never Sleeps*”: *A History of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 185-92; Stephen Robertson, *Crimes against Children: Sexual Violence and Legal Culture in New York City, 1880-1960* (Chapel Hill, 2005), 140-41, 195-97, 235.

<sup>lxxxvi</sup> Clement, 198, 205.