

“Bright and Good Looking Colored Girl”: Black Women’s Sexuality and “Harmful Intimacy” in Early-Twentieth-Century New York

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MABEL HAMPTON’S EXPERIENCES IN early-twentieth-century Harlem never quite measured up to the popular image that many New Yorkers (and later the world) held of the black neighborhood. In 1924, as a twenty-one-year-old resident, she knew that visitors from other parts of the city would go to “the night-clubs . . . and dance to such jazz music as [could] be heard nowhere else,” that the region’s major thoroughfares like Lenox and Seventh avenues were “never deserted,” while various “crowds skipp[ed] from one place of amusement to another.”¹ Those crowds of primarily middle-class white voyeurs, fulfilling their own ideas about the primitiveness and authenticity of black life, enjoyed and came to expect Harlem’s “‘hot’ and ‘barbaric’ jazz, the risqué lyrics and the ‘junglelike’ dancing of its cabaret floor shows, and all its other ‘wicked’ delights.”² As one black observer noted, after “a visit to Harlem at night,” partygoers believed that the town “never sle[pt] and that the inhabitants . . . jazz[ed] through existence.”³ Hampton’s everyday life, however, failed to coincide with these romanticized and essentialized stereotypes of black entertainment and urban life. A southern migrant, domestic worker, and occasional chorus

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¹ James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (1930; New York: Da Capo, 1991), 160–61.

² Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem: A Cultural Portrait, 1900–1950* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981), 139.

³ Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 160–61.

line dancer, she understood Harlem's social and cultural complexities as she faced its pleasures, hardships, and dangers. Her time in Harlem also coincided with the historical moment when the neighborhood was touted by white New Yorkers as being one of the most sexually liberated urban spaces in the city.

Like that of most working-class women, however, Hampton's social life, particularly her romantic attachments, faced more critical surveillance. With the increasing popularity of movies, dance halls, and amusement parks, community members and relatives became more concerned about how and with whom their young women spent their leisure time. Reformers and the police also attempted to regulate working-class women's social lives and especially their sexuality. During World War I the federal government showed particular concern because of its fear that young women would spread venereal disease to soldiers, thereby physically weakening the armed forces and thus endangering the country's war effort.⁴ General concerns about working-class women's sexual behavior influenced the passing of numerous state laws that were shaped by reformers, approved by legislators, and enforced by police officers.⁵ As such, young working-class women's interest in and pursuit of romance and sex caused various older adults unease not simply because such behavior rejected or ignored traditional courtship practices but also because evidence of sexual expression and behavior outside of marriage and outside the parameters of prostitution eventually constituted criminal activity.

Even though all working-class women were scrutinized for their pursuit of social autonomy and sexual expression, race and ethnicity influenced the nature of reformers' and criminal justice administrators' interactions with their charges. Immigrant and native-born white working-class women certainly were targeted by reformers and the police for questionable moral behavior, but generally authority figures believed these women could be reformed. Rehabilitative efforts were less of a guarantee for women who were characterized as innately promiscuous because of longstanding negative stigmas associated with their African ancestry and legacy of American enslavement. The fact that many African American women lived in Harlem, a neighborhood seen by white partygoers (and other New Yorkers) as a

⁴ See Allan M. Brandt, *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States since 1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Elizabeth Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), esp. chap. 4.

⁵ See Estelle Freedman, *Their Sister's Keepers: Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 109-42; Mary Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 1-7, 95-127; and Ruth Alexander, *The "Girl Problem": Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995), 1-7, 33-66.

center of social and sexual abandon, only reinforced the libidinous images of the neighborhood's residents and influenced how police officers and criminal justice administrators assessed black women's culpability in sexual offenses.

Young black women—incarcerated primarily for sex-related offenses on charges that included vagrancy, disorderly conduct, and prostitution—usually rejected reformers' concerns and often believed they were unfairly targeted.⁶ Mabel Hampton, for example, contended that her imprisonment at the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills (hereafter Bedford) for solicitation stemmed from a false arrest. Other inmates revealed their own problems with law enforcement and, like Hampton, disagreed with the contention that their social behavior—in New York and especially Harlem—was criminal. One hundred Bedford case files show that between 1917 and 1928 a range of black women—from southern migrants to native-born New Yorkers—negotiated the urban terrain as well as their sexual desire. In particular, forty-nine southern migrants' experiences showed how they encountered and embraced a social and political freedom unavailable to most black southerners. Yet many young working-class black women, regardless of their regional, religious, or familial background, grappled with the relentless surveillance by police officers, reformers, concerned relatives, and community members.

During admission interviews and throughout their association with Bedford, black women revealed how public perceptions of their sexual behavior failed to reveal the complexity of their personal experiences.⁷ Most importantly, their wide-ranging responses provide a lens through which we might understand how working-class black women whose imprisonment, in large part, stemmed from arrests for—alleged and admitted—sexual offenses dealt with urban sexuality. Like their white counterparts they experimented with courting, treating, and the sex trade, but the “metalanguage of race” and especially “racial constructions of sexuality” influenced the distinct reactions they received from many authority figures. In particular, the prevalence of racial stereotypes meant that the police and Bedford administrators primarily viewed young black women's “sexual delinquency” as natural rather than judging the independent conduct of individuals.⁸ Such essentialized renderings of their sexuality as well as black female reformers' concerted efforts to control such negative images by repressing discussions of sexual desire

⁶ Many women were also incarcerated for public order crimes such as drunkenness, petty larceny, and incorrigibility.

⁷ Danielle L. McGuire's work provides another example of black women's testimony when she addresses their experiences of rape and sexual violence during the post-World War II era. “‘It Was like All of Us Had Been Raped’: Sexual Violence, Community Mobilization, and the African American Freedom Struggle,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 3 (2004): 906–31. I want to thank Nancy Hewitt for encouraging me to think about these connections.

⁸ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race,” *Signs* 17, no. 2 (1992): 262–66. Higginbotham contends that the “metalanguage of race signifies . . . the imbrications of race within the representation of sexuality” (262).

have obscured ordinary black women's complicated decisions and dilemmas regarding sex. While they enjoyed a greater range of choices regarding the conduct of their social lives, they also dealt with more restrictive treatment from both public officials and their own community. Their broader range of leisure options forced them to make difficult choices about how they would deal with their sexual desires as well as the consequences of their decisions and actions. Thus, black women's responses can offer a window into how they remembered past sexual encounters or, rather, how they chose to characterize them. This study privileges the ways in which working-class black women constructed their own narratives and the kinds of stories they chose to reveal about their sexual behavior. Focusing on early-twentieth-century New York, where moral panics about working-class female sexuality shaped urban reform and criminal justice initiatives, this work also shows how local and state officials' racialized conceptions of black women's sexual behavior influenced the dynamics of reform efforts in black communities as well as the tenor of Bedford's institutional policies.

WHAT CAN BEDFORD'S PRISON RECORDS TELL US ABOUT BLACK WOMEN'S SEXUALITY?

Incarcerated women offer a perspective that places black working-class women's ideas about and experiences with sexuality at the center of discussions regarding early-twentieth-century urban life.⁹ Using the cases of female offenders to address this issue, however, does not suggest that black working women were linked with criminality. Rather, this approach reflects the encounters of a particular segment of women who grew up and lived in certain black communities. Their experiences coincided with as well as diverged from those of other women but also vividly underscore the complexity of the black working class.¹⁰

⁹ My thinking about working-class women's sexuality has been influenced by Kathy Peiss, "Charity Girls' and City Pleasures: Historical Notes on Working-Class Sexuality, 1880-1920," in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, ed. Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 57-69; Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*; Alexander, *The "Girl Problem"*; and Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987). Some examples of black working-class women expressing same-sex desire are found in Karen V. Hansen, "No Kisses Is Like Youres': An Erotic Friendship between Two African-American Women during the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Gender and History* 7, no. 2 (1995): 153-82; Farah Jasmine Griffin, ed., *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends: Letters from Rebecca Primus of Royal Oak, Maryland, and Addie Brown of Hartford, Connecticut, 1854-1868* (New York: Knopf, 1999); and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁰ My thinking about the complexity of the black working class has been influenced by the work of Nell Irvin Painter, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: The Life and Times of a Black Radical* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994); Nell Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996); Tera Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's*

Such an inquiry emphasizes how some black women understood, experienced, and expressed heterosexual and same-sex desire while simultaneously dealing with how others perceived their sexuality, including police officers, prison administrators, black reformers, relatives, and white Americans generally.

Addressing black women's sexuality—which usually appears in literature or through the figure of the 1920s blues woman—from the perspective of a specific group of working-class women takes into account scholar Evelyn Hammonds's directive to consider “how differently located black women engage[d] in reclaiming the body and expressing desire.”¹¹ Hammonds notes that scholarship on black women's sexuality typically focuses on how black women at the turn of the twentieth century refrained from discussing sexual desire and instead advocated behavior that rejected those stereotypes that defined them as representatives of deviant sexuality. Black female activists, in particular, promoted what scholar Evelyn Higginbotham has termed a “politics of respectability” in which appropriate behavior and decorum provided a defensive response to immoral images as well as corresponding civil and political inequalities.¹² Black women also

Lives and Labors after the Civil War (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); Tera Hunter, “The Brotherly Love for Which this City is Proverbial Should Extend to All: The Everyday Lives of Working-Class Women in Philadelphia and Atlanta in the 1890s,” in *W. E. B. DuBois, Race, and the City*, ed. Michael B. Katz and Thomas Sugrue (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 127–51; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working-Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Robin D. G. Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (1993): 75–112; and Elsa Barkley Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom,” *Public Culture* 7, no. 1 (1994): 107–46.

¹¹ Evelyn Hammonds, “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, nos. 2–3 (1994): 138. For discussions of black women's sexuality in literature see Carol Batker, “‘Love Me like I Like to Be’: The Sexual Politics of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the Classic Blues, and the Black Women's Club Movement,” *African American Review* 32, no. 2 (1998): 199–213; Farah Jasmine Griffin, “Textual Healing: Claiming Black Women's Bodies, the Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery,” *Callaloo* 19, no. 2 (1996): 519–36; Deborah E. McDowell, “‘It's Not Safe. Not Safe at All’: Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Passing*,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 616–25; and Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); see also Deborah E. McDowell's introduction to Nella Larsen, *Quicksand and Passing* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986), ix–xxxv.

¹² Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 185–229. Elsa Barkley Brown raises a critical point regarding the problems associated with the entire community following a politics of respectability when she notes that “the struggle to present Black women and the Black community as ‘respectable’ eventually led to repression within the community” (“Imaging Lynching: African American Women, Communities of Struggle, and Collective Memory,” in *African American Women Speak out on Anita Hill—Clarence Thomas*, ed. Geneva Smitherman [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995], 108).

enacted what scholar Darlene Clark Hine calls a "culture of dissemblance." In this sense they "created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually" fashioned a protective silence "from their oppressors" as it related to their personal and sexual lives.¹³ While acknowledging the power of such theoretical concepts, Hammonds argues that using the "politics of silence" as a defensive strategy worked so successfully that black women eventually "lost the ability to articulate any conception of their sexuality"—with one exception: women performing the blues.¹⁴ This scholarship, then, suggests that the most prominent and public articulation of black women's sexuality appeared through the experiences of early-twentieth-century blues singers who expressed sexual desire through explicit lyrics and performance.¹⁵ Discussions about female entertainers, however, present one particular viewpoint on how black women addressed sexual desire.

¹³ Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, ed. Ellen Carole DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 342–47. See also Hazel V. Carby, "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (1992): 738–55; and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes toward Black Women, 1880–1920* (New York: Carlson, 1990). For scholarly work that explores black women's responses to negative stereotypes see Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives"; Dorothy Salem, *To Better Our World* (New York: Carlson, 1990); Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy A Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999); Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

¹⁴ Evelyn Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohantray (New York: Routledge, 1997), 175. Hazel V. Carby addresses the heroine in Harlem Renaissance literary texts: "The duty of the black heroine toward the black community was made coterminous with her desire as a woman, a desire which was expressed as a dedication to uplift the race. This displacement from female desire to female duty enabled the negotiation of racist constructions of black female sexuality but denied sensuality and in this denial lies the class character of its cultural politics" ("It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime": The Sexual Politics of Black Women's Blues," in DuBois and Ruiz, *Unequal Sisters*, 332). See also Michele Mitchell's discussion of this issue in her "Silences Broken, Silences Kept: Gender and Sexuality in African-American History," *Gender and History* 11, no. 3 (1999): 440.

¹⁵ For a discussion of black women's sexuality and its relationship to blues see Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime," 330–41; and Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998). Davis argues that the "blues songs recorded by Gertrude Rainey and Bessie Smith offer us a privileged glimpse of the prevailing perceptions of love and sexuality in postslavery black communities in the United States. . . . The blues women openly challenged the gender politics implicit in traditional cultural representations of marriage and heterosexual love relationships" (41). See also Ann Ducille, "Blue Notes on Black Sexuality: Sex and the Texts of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no. 3 (1993): 418–44; and Hortense J. Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 74.

Not solely representing black women enacting a "politics of silence" or blues women expressing a public identity as sexual beings, imprisoned Bedford women provide examples of both perspectives. Answering the explicit questions that Bedford administrators asked all women during the admissions process, black domestics, laundresses, factory workers, and children's nurses between the ages of sixteen and twenty-eight revealed sexual experiences that exemplified a variety of behaviors, including desire, ignorance, and abuse.¹⁶ Yet there were instances when administrators became frustrated because some black women acknowledged their involvement in the sex trade but were reticent about conveying further details. For example, one twenty-year-old Virginia native was characterized as "pleasant" and "truthful," but she was also said to have provided officials with "little information about herself."¹⁷ Thus, white female administrators (and one white male superintendent) also documented black women's sense of propriety when they, as inmates, refused to talk about their sexual experiences or indicated how they attended to traditional moral proscriptions by rejecting premarital sex.

Female offenders' responses to prison administrators might be seen as evidence of the state's continued intrusion into black women's lives as well as its attempt to construct and promote derogatory images.¹⁸ No doubt, black women understood administrators' skepticism when what they recounted failed to coincide with longstanding racial and sexual stereotypes. Consider, for instance, the sexual history of one inmate who revealed the complex parameters of a life that included being raped, her revelation that she prostituted herself twice, and her adamant stance that she was not promiscuous. The administrator seemed to dismiss the woman's difficult circumstances by focusing solely on her interview demeanor. The official concluded, in part, that the woman's "better education [had given] . . . her [a] superior manner" so that she did not have an "attractive personality" because she seemed "distant and haughty."¹⁹ Indeed, what administrators thought as well as how they documented what they observed and chose to hear from black women shaped the information within all case files.²⁰

¹⁶ On a practical level, all women who entered Bedford were queried about who told them about sex, when and at what age they had their first sexual encounter, and if that encounter was consensual. Finally, they were asked whether they practiced prostitution, and if they did, at what age they entered the trade as well as how much money they accrued.

¹⁷ Inmate #3724, Admission Record, August 1924, Series 14610-77B, Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, 1915-30, 1955-65, Records of the Department of Correctional Services, New York State Archives and Records Administration, State Education Department, Albany, New York (hereafter BH). I have used pseudonyms for inmates' names but have retained their original inmate case numbers.

¹⁸ Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy," 176.

¹⁹ Inmate #3706, History Blank, 8 July 1924, BH.

²⁰ Regina Kunzel addresses how historians need to understand that "case records often reveal as much, if not more, about those conducting the interview as they do about those interviewed." See her "Pulp Fictions and Problem Girls: Reading and Rewriting Single Pregnancy in the Postwar United States," *American Historical Review* 100, no. 5 (1995): 1468-69. See

Yet these partial transcripts also show how inmates challenged the public discourse that delineated all black women as pathologically promiscuous. These women's responses were also influenced by attempts to negotiate Bedford's indeterminate sentencing, which, based on how an administrator assessed an inmate's behavioral improvement, could include a minimum sentence of several months or a maximum sentence of three years.

While exploring offenders' responses to questions about sexual behavior, this study takes seriously the possibility that black women who felt compelled to silence may have seen the admission interview as an opportunity to document their incidences of desire as well as abuse. Some women described experiences that ranged from initial romance to participation in the sex trade. Others revealed the dangers found by young and independent women living in a large city. Understanding that society questioned most black women's complicity in their rapes, these inmates may have viewed administrators' direct question about whether their first "sexual offense" was consensual or rape as a chance to address their abuse in ways that may not have been possible among friends, family members, community leaders, or the police. Administrators' decision to label young women's first sexual encounters as criminal offenses reminds us of their moral position on premarital sex and makes clear their preconceived notions about all incoming and primarily working-class women.

Officials also documented "harmful intimacy" or, rather, the interracial relationships they observed at Bedford. While acknowledging the prevalence of same-sex desire among white inmates, administrators seemed most concerned with developing attachments between black and white women. Evidence of such relationships stemmed largely from the various conduct violations (described variously as "fond of colored girls" or "seen passing notes to black inmates") noted within white women's files.²¹ Black women also received conduct violations, which would indicate that they actively participated in interracial liaisons. Administrators, however, portrayed "harmful intimacy" as white women's heterosexual attraction to black women, whose dark skin color supposedly represented virility.²² Dismissing their own notations, officials attempted to ignore black women's participation in "harmful intimacy" and same-sex desire among black women.

These same officials also overlooked their own evidence of black women's varied sexual experiences and instead based many of their inmate evaluations on powerful racial stereotypes. Centuries-old images that defined black women

also how Timothy Gilfoyle discusses the difficult questions that historians of sexuality must pose regarding their evidence. See his "Prostitutes in History: From Parables of Pornography to Metaphors of Modernity," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 1 (1999): 139-40.

²¹ See Inmate #2475, Conduct Record, October-December 1918, and Inmate #4044, Conduct Record, 13 June 1926, BH.

²² Margaret Otis, "A Perversion Not Commonly Noted," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 8, no. 2 (1913): 113.

as immoral and pathological deeply influenced these officials' perceptions. As scholars Jennifer Morgan and Deborah Gray White have shown, already in the seventeenth century male European travelers depicted African women's bodies as savage, lewd, and unfeminine, and they unleashed Christian, moral condemnations of various cultural practices such as seminudity, polygamy, and dancing, narratives that eventually justified the slave trade.²³ Such observations of cultural differences shaped the development of enslavement and led to correlations between lasciviousness and Africans generally. As Sander Gilman has argued, Europeans eventually viewed black men's and women's bodies as "icon[s] for deviant sexuality."²⁴ In the context of American slavery antebellum southerners accepted the image of the sexually insatiable enslaved woman, thereby characterizing all white men as victims of sepia temptresses.²⁵ The direct connections that southerners made between black women, immorality, and promiscuity remained vivid in popular culture long after slavery ended.²⁶ In 1904, when one southern white woman commented that she could not "imagine such a creation as a virtuous black woman," she captured the sentiments of many late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century white Americans.²⁷

When black women were imprisoned for sex-related and other minor offenses, Bedford prison officials' knowledge of prevailing stereotypes affected their overall assessment of black women's culpability. It was not uncommon for administrators to conflate their ideas about an uncivilized Africa with their physical descriptions and overall behavioral assessments of incoming black women. In 1923 written comments such as "true African type . . . inclined to be somewhat vicious looking" and "a typical African cunning calculating eyes" indicated the depth of their prejudices in evaluating individual women's cases.²⁸ More positive appraisals such as "appears

²³ Jennifer L. Morgan, "'Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder': Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500–1770," *William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (1997): 167–92; also see Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History," 263–64. My interpretation in this section has also been influenced by Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), esp. 27–61.

²⁴ Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late-Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 209.

²⁵ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 30.

²⁶ Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History," 263.

²⁷ "Experiences of the Race Problem: By a Southern White Woman," *Independent*, March 1904, 46.

²⁸ Inmate #3533, History Blank, 24 October 1923, and Inmate #3521, History Blank, 20 September 1923, BH. Scholars have shown how physical descriptions of black women were used to construct and later fulfill stereotypes that played major roles in American enslavement as well as to define black femininity and criminality. Subjective comments by Bedford officials (both male and female) about black women's appearance seem to reiterate and even perpetuate the earlier assessments of European male travelers in Africa who, in a different context, "grappled with the character of the female African body—a body both desirable and repulsive, available

intelligent for one of her race and station" and "has little moral sense but appears more decent than the average colored girl" still revealed their beliefs in black people's inferiority.²⁹ Along with observations of black women that ranged from "refined looking pretty colored girl" to "very inferior looking colored girl," regional biases also influenced initial interviews.³⁰ Administrators making notations akin to the following description—"peculiar way of speaking, a drawl and a typically Southern way of pronouncing words"—often questioned southern migrants' level of intelligence, fitness for urban life, and susceptibility to crime based on their diction.³¹ Thus, not only did these officials evaluate and categorize Bedford's working-class and poor women, but their notations also illustrate their specific beliefs in black women's criminality.

In 1924 Mabel Hampton, characterized by Bedford's superintendent, Amos Baker, as a "bright and good looking colored girl," simultaneously reinforced yet complicated Bedford officials' assumptions. Administrators never questioned the validity of her arrest but did acknowledge that Hampton seemed unique. Even though she fervently denied her solicitation charge, her comportment impressed prison administrators. They found her "alert" and "composed" with a "pleasant voice and manner of speaking"; in a separate interview officials noted that Hampton's "attitude and manner seem[ed] truthful" as she talked, "freely and frankly conceal[ing] nothing" about her everyday life and what she considered to be her false arrest.³² While administrators found Hampton attractive, personable, and honest, they still imprisoned her. Ignoring their own observations regarding her credibility, officials judged Hampton based on their assumption that black women's sexual misconduct, when not a direct legal violation, could also be attributed to their innate susceptibility to unfortunate associations with "bad company."³³ Hampton, however, explained her police altercation quite differently, as she called her arrest a "put up job."³⁴

and untouchable, productive and reproductive, beautiful and black" (Morgan, "Some Could Suckle," 170). See also Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 107–36; Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 135–61; White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 27–61; and Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies."

²⁹ Inmate #3699, Admission Record, 10 July 1924, and Inmate #3502, History Blank, 22 August 1923, BH.

³⁰ Inmate #3333, History Blank, 26 December 1922, and Inmate #3728, Admission Record, 19 August 1924, BH.

³¹ Inmate #4477, Escape Description Record, 19 July 1928, BH.

³² Inmate #3696, History Blank, 10 July 1924, BH. I have revealed this inmate's name and case file in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act of 1966, *U.S. Code*, sec. 552, pt. 1, subchap. 2.

³³ Inmate #3696, Recommendation for Parole, n.d. (ca. January 1925), BH.

³⁴ Inmate #3696, History Blank, 10 July 1924, BH.

The "ill-feeling" that Hampton expressed "toward her accuser" mirrored the sentiments of a number of black women and community members as they contended that police corruption rather than black women's behavior accounted for high numbers of prostitution arrests.³⁵ Caught in a house raid when her employer of two years took an extended European trip, Hampton was most likely arrested because she was "between jobs."³⁶ The fact that Hampton had access to her employer's home shows how she was trusted, but that same employer's absence from the court proceedings indicated that once in court Hampton had no one to vouch for her reputation.³⁷

Her arrest also illuminates how the courts expanded the legal definition of vagrancy to include prostitution. During this period vagrancy laws were defined more broadly instead of the traditional perception of a person with no employment or a public drunkard. In 1919 the New York statute encompassed prostitution and included anyone who "in any way, aids and abets or participates" in the sex trade.³⁸ In Hampton's case a plainclothes detective charged her with being an accessory to a sex crime by alleging that she permitted a female friend to use her employer's apartment for the "purposes of prostitution." According to Hampton, on the night of the arrest she and a friend waited for their dates, "who promised to take them to a cabaret." Shortly after the men's arrival the police raided her employer's home and arrested both women.³⁹ Initially, the arrest may have puzzled Hampton, as she denied ever prostituting herself, contending that she had been seeing her date for a month. Although she seemed conflicted about his romantic pursuit, she also stated that he "wanted to marry her." Hampton's perception of her boyfriend and the incident changed when she surmised that her date worked as a "stool pigeon" or police accomplice who arranged her arrest.⁴⁰ Thus, Hampton's evening excursion led to her subsequent imprisonment because in court the police officer's word was deemed more legitimate than that of a young black domestic.

³⁵ Inmate #3696, History Blank, 10 July 1924, BH.

³⁶ Joan Nestle, "Lesbians and Prostitutes: An Historical Sisterhood," in *A Restricted Country* (New York: Firebrand Books, 1987), 169.

³⁷ After returning from Europe, Hampton's employer was apparently so "indignant at the idea of her apartment having been used for purposes of prostitution that she refused to appear" in court to vouch for Hampton's character. Although Hampton had been in "faithful service" for at least two years, her employer disregarded various friends' advice and chose not to support Hampton's court case. See Inmate #3696, Letter from Amy M. Prevost to Dr. Amos T. Baker, 13 November 1924, BH.

³⁸ Arthur Spingarn, *Laws Relating to Sex Morality in New York City* (New York: Century, 1926), 32-33; see there Crim. P. 887, subdivisions 1-4, especially 4e, "permitting premises to be used for a purpose forbidden thereby is valid where testimony is sufficient to show that such use was with the guilty knowledge of [the] defendant" (33).

³⁹ Joan Nestle, "I Lift My Eyes to the Hill": The Life of Mabel Hampton as Told by a White Woman," in *A Fragile Union* (San Francisco: Cleis, 1998), 34.

⁴⁰ Inmate #3696, Recommendation for Parole, 13 January 1925, BH.

THE DANGERS OF BLACK WORKING-CLASS LEISURE

Hampton was not alone in her desire for entertainment and companionship, nor was she exempt from experiencing the dangers that such yearnings posed. Indeed, working women's longing to escape the everyday toil of personal service labor by attending cabarets and dance halls at night could result in arrest or what most women called a police set-up.⁴¹ In 1923 Harriet Holmes, a laundress making fifteen dollars a week, argued that she was falsely arrested when leaving a popular dance hall. It is not clear if she arrived at the function with friends, but when she left at half past one o'clock in the morning she was alone. The twenty-three year old said that when she was walking to her apartment on West 133rd Street a car stopped at the curb, and four men, claiming that they were police, pulled her in and, according to her, "without any reason . . . declared that she was guilty of prostitution."⁴² In a similar case a twenty-two year old decided that she would leave a cabaret alone at half past one o'clock in the morning. In this instance her girlfriend refused to leave with her, so she reportedly followed her sister's advice, which stressed that "after dark always take a taxi" home, to no avail. When she got in the cab, "two men stepped in with her." She fought them, thinking they were robbers. Instead, she was taken to the police station and arrested for prostitution.⁴³

In addition to attending cabarets and dance halls young black women found that the cheap and pleasurable practice of visiting friends' homes could also be a dangerous form of leisure.⁴⁴ A number of women discovered that the simple act of enjoying the company of friends in their tenement or boardinghouse rooms could result in a solicitation arrest. Twenty-four-year-old Millie Hodges had been in New York for a few weeks working in a coat factory before her arrest and Bedford sentence. Having recently separated from her husband of nine years, she decided to leave Chicago and come to New York so that she could make a fresh start. Without any relatives in the city, she sought a supportive community and was visiting on 132nd Street when her friend's boardinghouse was raided and its occupants charged with "being disorderly."⁴⁵ Her denials about solicitation and her claims that she had never been arrested failed to change her fate; she gained a criminal record by simply being in a seemingly appropriate residence at the wrong time. Incidences such as this one reinforced the

⁴¹ For discussion of the problems associated with working-class black women and leisure in Atlanta see Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom*, 168-86.

⁴² Inmate #3474, History Blank, July 1923, BH.

⁴³ Inmate #3489, History Blank, 1 August 1923, and Preliminary Investigation, ca. June 1923, BH.

⁴⁴ William Fielding Ogburn, "The Richmond Negro in New York City: His Social Mind as Seen in His Pleasures" (master's thesis, Columbia University, 1909), 60-61.

⁴⁵ Inmate #3535, History Blank, 18 October 1923, BH.

dilemma young black women faced in Harlem: they had the freedom to participate in various commercial and informal amusements, but the stigmas attached to working-class and black communities meant that their behavior was regulated on a consistent and often discriminatory basis.

Some black women, however, made entertainment choices based on the short-term benefits of pleasure rather than thinking through the implications of associating with bad company or, rather, men and women with morally questionable backgrounds. Scenarios ranged from those instances when young women misjudged the character of their acquaintances to when they knowingly associated with bad company and were led into dubious and sometimes illegal activities. Having lived in her furnished room for two weeks before her prostitution arrest, twenty-four-year-old southern migrant Sarah Woods claimed that she believed that her West 140th Street boardinghouse was run by a "respectable [colored] woman." Woods later discovered that the house had been raided; moreover, her landlady was described by the police as a white woman in an interracial marriage and with a previous arrest for running a disorderly household.⁴⁶ While Woods may have suspected her landlady's racial identity, she would have been less able to know of her arrest record, which illustrates how some women simply became caught up in unforeseeable circumstances. Alice Kent's case nevertheless illustrates how young women's associations with bad company could be fun but lamentable. Once she arrived in New York the twenty-year-old Philadelphia native immediately made friends with people who shunned legitimate employment but devoured Harlem's nightlife. Kent's troubles began when she and a friend attended the Savoy Dance Hall on Lenox Avenue and there met two men with whom they eventually cohabitated and who partially supported them. While social workers contended that she prostituted during her New York tenure, Kent fervently denied her culpability and later wrote to a friend (in a letter that was confiscated by prison officials and never mailed), admitting her mistakes: "I was furious for a time, having the knowledge of my innocence. But I am now coming to the conclusion that it was more or less my fault for staying there, knowing what was going on. We are always judged by our companions. This has taught me a lesson. . . . I will always remember my (A.B.C.) that is to *avoid bad company*."⁴⁷

Kent's reaction shows that she understood the precarious nature and consequences of Harlem's quick friendships and fast living. Twenty-two-year-old Wanda Harding, described as a native of the British West Indies, acknowledged her relationships with inappropriate acquaintances by referencing her Pentecostal background. When confronted about her misconduct, she responded that she recognized her "great weakness and craving for the attractions of this world." She also seemed to suggest that others should empathize with her

⁴⁶ Inmate #2480, Statement of Girl, 23 June 1917, BH.

⁴⁷ Inmate #4501, Letter (more than likely confiscated) from Inmate to Friend, 19 January 1928, BH, emphasis added.

slip-ups and noted that "everybody . . . [was] a born a sinner."⁴⁸ Harding's sentiments reveal a young woman's acute awareness of her personal mistakes and subsequent psychological struggles when forced to face the consequences of having disregarded proper decorum. Reinforcing the fact that "her father and mother were devout Christians" and concerned about her moral dilemma, Harding's minister concluded that "through bad company she went astray [and] through good company she will be brought back again to the narrow way."⁴⁹ His comment exemplifies how the negative consequences resulting from black women's associations with bad company only underscored reformers' and relatives' contentions that these women ought to socialize only with respectable people and under appropriate circumstances.

In this sense, black relatives and community members, while acknowledging rampant police corruption, simultaneously expressed myriad concerns about black women's naive or wayward personal behavior. They empathized with some of these young women's grievances regarding false arrests, but, emphasizing a woman's appropriate decorum, they also often questioned these women's decision to attend unsupervised dances, associate with questionable people, or walk unaccompanied late at night. Relatives were especially anxious. Consider, for instance, the mother of one eighteen-year-old Long Island native whose frustration with her daughter's behavior is clear: "Her going to the bad was going to dances and then being led by others older than herself."⁵⁰ While this mother accepted the fact that her daughter was "going to the bad fast," she also revealed how she worked diligently to safeguard and raise all of her children properly. "I have tried to bring my children up in a christian way have done the best I knew of," she explained, "but you know the world has to[o] many charms for young people of today."⁵¹ Similar to reformers' concerns, working-class parents believed in the need for suitable recreational facilities and activities for black youth because they agreed that the urban trappings of "silk and electric lights" and other "evil influences" such as dance halls and saloons caused young women to go astray.⁵²

BLACK WORKING WOMEN'S SEXUALITY

Although they were acutely aware of black people's second-class citizenship and supported black activists' attempts to address this problem, many of these young women also simply wanted to engage in and enjoy Harlem's

⁴⁸ Inmate #3377, History Blank, 16 February 1923, BH.

⁴⁹ Inmate #3377, Letter from Minister to Bedford Reformatory, 13 August 1923, BH.

⁵⁰ Inmate #4058, Letter of Inmate's Mother to Superintendent Baker, 26 April 1926, BH.

⁵¹ Inmate #4058, Letter of Inmate's Mother to Superintendent Baker, 17 April 1926, BH.

⁵² "Silk and Lights Blamed for Harlem Girls' Delinquency," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 19 May 1928, Reel 31, Tuskegee News Clipping File.

social life. In most cases they understood reformers' and relatives' anxieties about the temptations of the neighborhood, but as workers, many employed since they were twelve or thirteen years old, a number of women doubtless felt like one nineteen-year-old domestic from Washington, D.C., who asked: "Why shouldn't I go out some times if I worked?"⁵³ Indeed, many of these women probably hoped that the easy pleasure of commercial leisure would temporarily transport them from the everyday drudgery of never-ending workdays as well as the economic struggle to make ends meet. When they had extra money or if they had a date, they enthusiastically spent their time in dance halls, dancing and listening to the most popular tunes of the day.⁵⁴ To the horror of most of their parents and community members, young women quickly learned popular dances, such as the "turkey trot" in the early 1910s and the "black bottom," the "mess around," and the "charleston" in the 1920s. Rev. Adam Clayton Powell's 1914 comments still resonated in the 1920s when he noted that young blacks' fascination with music and dancing were "not only in their conversations but in the movement of their bodies about the home and on the street."⁵⁵ Such anxiety about how young women seemed captured by secular music and behavior epitomized black leaders' and family members' authentic concerns about individual women's welfare in addition to their belief that respectability was a viable strategy for racial advancement and a stable home life.⁵⁶ From whatever perspective one viewed young women's behavior, attending dances, cabarets, and movie theaters failed to represent the most pressing problems or inducements. Instead, socializing within smaller, unsupervised, mixed-sex groups as well as the concomitant developing romantic and sexual interests alarmed adults and excited young women. Young women disclosed a number of reasons for how and why they rejected or became involved in premarital sexual relationships. These included the promise of marriage, ignorance, curiosity, their interest in acquiring nice things by bartering sex for them, and even coercion.

As might be expected, relatives constantly sought to avert young women's attempts at complete independence as they hoped to guide their moral lives. They chaperoned their young women's social activities, enlisted strict curfews, and encouraged them to devote their leisure time to church life. In some instances their parenting may have worked, as a number of women

⁵³ Inmate #2505, Mental Examination, Attitude toward Offense, 18 September 1917, BH.

⁵⁴ For a southern context regarding commercial leisure see Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom*, 168–86.

⁵⁵ "Race Is Dancing Itself to Death," *New York Age*, 8 January 1914. See also Tera W. Hunter, "'Sexual Pantomimes,' the Blues Aesthetic, and Black Women in the South," in *Music and the Racial Imagination*, ed. Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 145–64; and Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom*, 168–86.

⁵⁶ See Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 194–204; Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 152–78; and Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 76–140.

adamantly denied ever having intercourse or premarital sex, arguing that their arrests for sexual offenses were strictly frame-ups.⁵⁷

Relatives also dealt with the consequences of young women's disobedient behavior. In one case a twenty-three-year-old Cuban immigrant recalled that after becoming pregnant at the age of fifteen her aunt forced her to marry the baby's father.⁵⁸ Miranda Edmonds's experience also illustrates the tensions within families over differing perspectives regarding leisure and sexuality. When recalling her first sexual encounter, the seventeen-year-old North Carolina migrant contended that she was "partly forced" to have intercourse with her boyfriend. While she blamed the troubling experience on her "ignorance," she was also "clear in opinion" that possibly her parents were also at fault because she believed the incident "would not have happened if she had had sex instruction." Her position highlights the complex consequences of her inexperience in that she was sent to Bedford by her mother as an incorrigible case because she chose to stay away from home for two consecutive days with her boyfriend.⁵⁹ Edmonds's case clearly shows the difference between the adult behavior young women thought they exhibited when they dated and became sexually active and the maturity they actually needed to live as adults.

Like Edmonds, other black women acknowledged that their sexual encounters occurred as a result of ignorance and curiosity. One twenty-five year old divulged that she had sex at fifteen but still "had no idea why."⁶⁰ Another twenty-year-old woman noted that her first encounter occurred because "she was [simply] foolish."⁶¹ The desire to know more about sex prompted the responses of a number of women who revealed that they had intercourse because they "saw other girls do it" or were "curious to know what [the] sex experience was," and one nineteen year old revealed that she consented because it was a "boy she had known for some time."⁶² While these accounts convey these women's youth and lack of forethought about the physical and moral dangers of sexual relationships, other cases reveal the experiences and choices of women who understood the consequences of such a decision.

The promise of marriage prompted a number of single women to engage in premarital sex. As romantic relationships transitioned into more intimate contact, young men, whether they were sincere or not, negotiated with girlfriends over how sex represented one aspect of the couple's courtship and future commitment. For example, one nineteen-year-old child's nurse explained that she consented to sex because she "liked the man" and he

⁵⁷ Inmates #3696, #3389, #4058, #2796, BH.

⁵⁸ Inmate #3501, History Blank, 21 August 1923, BH.

⁵⁹ Inmate #4028, History Blank, n.d. (ca. February 1926), BH.

⁶⁰ Inmate #3722, History Blank, 26 August 1924, BH.

⁶¹ Inmate #3721, History Blank, 10 October 1924, BH.

⁶² Inmate #2760, History Blank, n.d. (ca. 7 December 1925), Inmate #3699, History Blank, 19 July 1924, and Inmate #2504, Statement of Girl, 8 August 1917, BH.

“promised to marry her,” while a twenty-one-year-old single waitress noted that her initial sexual relationship occurred when she was eighteen because she was “engaged.”⁶³ When divulging this type of information, these women suggested that since marriage was inevitable, their decision to have premarital sex failed to deviate completely from traditional norms.⁶⁴ In those instances where boyfriends refused to marry under any circumstances, especially with unplanned pregnancies, young women’s convictions about courtship were certainly challenged. For some, however, premarital sex coincided with their ideas about courtship, as they continually emphasized that their first sexual encounter occurred with their husbands.⁶⁵ Twenty-one-year-old Ohio native Lena Jones, characterized by administrators as a “thoroughly decent woman,” recalled that she began intercourse at sixteen with her husband.⁶⁶

Yet the early twentieth century also represented a moment when young women’s sexual activity stemmed from more than a precursor to marriage and instead highlighted these women’s social and economic options. Instead of seeking courtships, some women enjoyed intimate contact that allowed for intercourse without an impending marriage. Single working women increasingly engaged in consensual and noncommercial sexual relationships. Scholars have characterized some of this behavior as the turn-of-the-century phenomenon known as “treating.”⁶⁷ Much like other working-class women, black women with limited financial resources bartered sex for commercial goods or amusements rather than accepting money for intercourse. For instance, one nineteen-year-old domestic emphasized that she took “presents from the men she went with but . . . never accepted money.”⁶⁸ Another nineteen year old, Evelyn Pitts, also claimed that she never prostituted but did have sex “off and on with two or three different men since she was 17.” She, like many other young women, stressed that she “never [took] . . . money for it.”⁶⁹ Even the language some women used to refer to their sexual partners—such as friend, sweetheart, or, in some cases, lover—illustrated how treating represented young women’s distinct perceptions of heterosexual relationships and acceptable sexual behavior.⁷⁰ Soaking up the dynamics of an early-twentieth-century youth culture of amusement parks, movies, and dances, working-class women across the color line believed “treating” addressed their desire for romance and pleasure as well as the city’s commercial amusements.

⁶³ Inmate #3705, History Blank, 18 July 1924, and Inmate #4498, History Blank, n.d. (ca. 30 March 1926), BH.

⁶⁴ Clement, *Love for Sale*, 18–25.

⁶⁵ Inmates #3535, #3538, #4092, #3376, #3475, #4137, #4042, #3694, BH.

⁶⁶ Inmate #4137, History Blank, n.d. (ca. 7 July 1926), BH.

⁶⁷ See Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 108–14; and Clement, *Love for Sale*, 45–75.

⁶⁸ Inmate #2505, Statement of Girl, 2 August 1917, BH.

⁶⁹ Inmate #2504, Statement of Girl, 8 August 1917, BH.

⁷⁰ Inmates #3367, #3386, #2505, BH.

Although many women accepted these nontraditional sexual arrangements, they also understood that reformers and their relatives expressed strong objections to such behavior. One twenty-four-year-old domestic who revealed how she grew up with a mother who was "strictly Methodist and insisted that . . . [her] children go to church regularly" disregarded her traditional upbringing once she arrived in New York. She noted that even after she started earning her own money "her mother would not let her go to a dance or theatre because she thought it was wicked." When she finally left Washington, D.C., she reportedly emphasized that "no one [could] to tell her what she could do . . . [and she] began to go out nearly every night." She consistently denied soliciting but acknowledged that during her five-year tenure in New York she had intercourse with "three different friends." Her experience with "treating" garnered her various presents from lovers that consisted of "candy, theatre tickets, and invitations to dinner."⁷¹ Relatives, reformers, and prison administrators viewed these women's situations quite differently: "treating," for them, represented another form of female sexual delinquency. Young women's frequent admissions to being "immoral" suggests how they responded to administrators' specific questions about their premarital sexual practices rather than offering a seemingly constant and simplistic explanation regarding their sexual behavior. As with one twenty-three year old who disclosed that she had been "immoral" but denied that she had "ever practiced prostitution," these working women insisted that they had made an independent choice to engage in sex for the enjoyment it provided rather than being dependent upon the sex trade for their survival.⁷²

Yet black women's sexual relationships were not always consensual or liberating. Sexual danger in this sense was not simply about reformers' and relatives' concerns that young women were compromising their moral standing with premarital sexual experimentation. This type of sexual danger also highlighted incidences of abuse and rape. Young women recounted experiences of sexual harassment from employers as well as within their familial and social lives. Later in life Mabel Hampton recalled that when she was eight years old her uncle had raped her.⁷³ She also recalled that when she was working as a domestic, men in certain households "would try to touch" her inappropriately.⁷⁴ Like most women, Hampton understood that any disclosure of her sexual abuse and harassment would have led others to question her credibility rather than that of her attacker or harasser.

⁷¹ Inmate #2480, Statement of Girl, 23 June 1917, BH.

⁷² Inmate #3718. Also see Inmates #3533, #3474, #4498, BH.

⁷³ Joan Nestle, "Excerpts from the Oral History of Mabel Hampton," *Signs* 18, no. 4 (1993): 930; see also Nestle, *A Fragile Union*, 32.

⁷⁴ Excerpt from oral history tapes made with Mabel Hampton, an African American lesbian, interview with Joan Nestle, 21 May 1981, MH-2, Box 3, Mabel Hampton Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archives of the Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation, Inc., New York City (hereafter cited as MHC).

Other black women's experiences highlight similar scenarios of sexual abuse when they knew their assailant. One twenty-one year old remembered that she was raped by "the husband of her foster parent," while a twenty-four-year-old woman revealed that she was raped by a "friend who was visiting her sister's house."⁷⁵ Even seemingly innocent interactions between young women and men could lead to horrific consequences. One twenty-three-year-old domestic recalled that she was forced into intercourse at age fifteen when she and a boy "were playing school" and then a game called "Mama and Papa" that she "did not understand" until it was too late.⁷⁶

Even as they were indicted for sexual offenses themselves, these women chose to disclose that rape—whether committed by a family member, family friend, or neighbor—had made a huge impact on their lives. In the most unlikely forum with prison administrators, where they knew their stories would be recorded, black women revealed various aspects of their harrowing experiences. Certainly, they understood that administrators would not take legal action against their abusers, but some women must have believed that revealing their trauma was important enough to provide a general or detailed story about their plight as well as mitigate administrators' negative perspectives of them. Twenty-three-old domestic and Colorado native Sally Bruce seems to have blamed herself for her abuse when explaining how she dealt with her rape. Revealing that her "first time was at 20 years [old] without her consent," Bruce decided to continue with the relationship, rationalizing that "she was a woman, no longer a child and intended to marry" her abuser.⁷⁷ Indeed, believing she had no other options, Bruce's decision highlights the difficult choices working women made when simultaneously negotiating their sexuality as well as the longstanding sentiment that black women could not be raped.⁷⁸

In light of the history of such pernicious stereotypes, some black women's decision to enter the sex trade also represented a difficult choice for those who claimed that they supplemented their paltry salaries as personal service laborers. Highlighting her longstanding dilemma of dealing with menial work's inadequate wages and the immediacy of solicitation's higher earnings, twenty-six-year-old New York native Heather Hayes, a cook and chambermaid, acknowledged that she had "practiced prostitution off and on since she was seventeen."⁷⁹ These sorts of revelations about black women's misgivings concerning the trade coincide with the findings of a 1914 Women's Court investigation, which argued that black women's "meager salaries and uncongenial surroundings tend[ed] to produce a state of dissatisfaction

⁷⁵ Inmate #4501, Summary Report on Application for Parole, ca. 1928, and Inmate #2480, Statement of Girl, 23 June 1917, BH.

⁷⁶ Inmate #4078, History Blank, n.d. (ca. 1 May 1926), BH.

⁷⁷ Inmate #3706, History Blank, 18 July 1924, BH.

⁷⁸ See Melton A. McLaurin, *Celia, a Slave* (New York: Bard, 1991), 104–22.

⁷⁹ Inmate #3494, Recommendation for Parole, ca. 1924, BH.

which sometimes [led] . . . to prostitution.”⁸⁰ Undoubtedly, there were women like the twenty-two-year-old laundress who fully admitted to being a “habitual prostitute,” but others attempted to show that they solicited only infrequently.⁸¹ For instance, one twenty-three year old revealed that she “prostituted with 2 men in 3 years,” and while she conceded that she had been “immoral,” she denied “being promiscuous.”⁸²

Black women’s behavior after arrest also suggests that they struggled with the mental impact of their decisions to solicit. The aforementioned Women’s Court study, entitled “Investigation of Colored Women at Night Court,” indicated that when questioned during admission interviews, twenty-four out of fifty-six women claimed that they were single and alone in the city “without near relatives”; furthermore, at least eight of these women “admitted having mothers” in New York but refused to provide familial addresses to court administrators because they did not want their relatives “to know where they were.” The same investigation concluded that most of the women came from “poor but respectable homes” yet eventually buckled under the pressures of inadequate wages and bad company. Charting their moral downfall, the study disclosed the trajectory of their transition from taking on legitimate but unskilled work to prostitution: “From all restraining influences they lodge in questionable districts; associate with questionable people; work for a while; then both solicit and work[;] finally ending by giving up their regular employment in order to solicit.”⁸³

The lure of money and the expectation of an easier lifestyle undoubtedly influenced some young women’s decision to enter the sex trade full time. For instance, one seventeen-year-old domestic earning seven dollars a month claimed that she was able to make “about \$10 a week” when prostituting.⁸⁴ Young women’s motivations ranged from their immediate need for higher wages to supporting drug habits. Yet a small group of women claimed that they solicited because they enjoyed sex and needed money for material possessions. In the same year that she consented to have sex with her “boy-sweetheart,” one sixteen-year-old domestic revealed that she also began prostituting for “money and pleasure.”⁸⁵ The temptation of material possessions prompted another woman to enter the sex trade because “she saw other girls with nice things and wanted them too.”⁸⁶ Likewise,

⁸⁰ Carrietta V. Owens, “Investigation of Colored Women at Night Court. From June 8th to August 8th 1914,” Folder Women’s Court—Negro Cases, Box 63, p. 7, Committee of Fourteen Papers, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York Public Library, New York City.

⁸¹ Inmate #3497, History Blank, 13 August 1923, BH.

⁸² Inmate #3706, History Blank, 18 July 1924, BH.

⁸³ Owens, “Investigation of Colored Women,” 7. For background on reformers’ argument about the relationship between women’s low wages and prostitution see Freedman, *Their Sister’s Keepers*, 114, 123–24.

⁸⁴ Inmate #2497, Verified History, 26 July 1917, BH.

⁸⁵ Inmate #3365, History Blank, 8 February 1923, BH.

⁸⁶ Inmate #4063, History Blank, n.d. (ca. 23 April 1926), BH.

twenty-year-old laundry presser Christina Greene explained that she grew up in New York neighborhoods with prostitution and "associated" with sex workers "without entering their profession," although she readily admitted that as a "young child" she "used to envy them because of the money they made." For a while, according to Greene, her aunt, who consistently "kept her back," she noted, made sure that she observed prostitution rather than participated in the sex trade. Yet "after many years of trouble with [her] husband and poverty," she revealed that she ultimately "succumbed."⁸⁷

Cases like Greene's, where women "succumbed" to the sex trade, created waves of anxiety not only for reformers but also for working-class black women. Poor black women, who made distinct choices to work in legitimate positions, understood the impact of prostitution on their lives all too well. Often living in the same neighborhoods where the trade thrived, they negotiated on a daily basis their moral stance against the sex trade and fought against the stereotypes that implied that all black women were its natural purveyors. Although most black reformers expressed their frustration with prostitution in a public forum and incorporated their concerns in their work, likeminded working women must have also talked with each other and their families about their anxieties. These discussions probably reinforced the contention of one twenty-four-year-old domestic who told prison administrators "prostitution [was] . . . the worst crime anybody [could] . . . commit because you have to do things that take away your self-respect."⁸⁸ Women like her quickly asserted their conscious choices not to prostitute and were equally dismayed and frustrated that as working-class women in black neighborhoods they were consistently mistaken for and often arrested as sex workers. Such instances illustrate the tenuous position black working women faced traversing the urban terrain when they negotiated their perceived as well as real sexual identities. Indeed, such concerns reflected not simply black women's concerns about prostitution but also the very real impacts they experienced when exposing their sexual desires within their racial community.

REGULATING BLACK WOMEN, REGULATING HARLEM

During the 1920s Harlem was part of a Renaissance in black cultural production that included the height of dance hall and nightclub gaiety, the popularity of rent parties, and a growing characterization that the neighborhood was accepting of various forms of sexual expression. Many black residents and leaders, as the previous discussion has shown, expressed grave and conservative concerns about the confluence of popular entertainment and nonmarital sex. It seems that they were also particularly concerned about the growing presence of same-sex relationships. Many would have heard about

⁸⁷ Inmate #3376, History Blank, 13 February 1923, BH.

⁸⁸ Inmate #2480, Information Concerning the Patient, 23 June 1917, BH.

the openly lesbian references in blues singers' songs like Gertrude "Ma" Rainey's "Prove It on Me Blues" or even the much-noted, outrageously popular, and sexually decadent Harlem parties.⁸⁹ Yet outside of the music industry and within many working-class communities, publicly expressing one's sexuality and desire, whether single or married, was discouraged.⁹⁰

Ironically, some black churches were discovering their own gay congregants during this time. The pulpit denouncement of such relationships, however, conflated two distinct issues: same-sex desire and ministers who preyed on young male congregants without condemnation from their parishioners. Rev. Adam Clayton Powell of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, a most vocal critic, briefly noted that young women were increasingly engaged in same-sex relationships, although he did not distinguish consensual from predatory relationships. "Homosexuality and sex-perversion among women," argued Powell, "has grown into one of the most horrible debasing, alarming and damning vices of present day civilization." Powell was not simply concerned that homosexuality was "prevalent to an unbelievable degree" but also that such relationships, according to him, were "increasing day by day." Powell's conflation of same-sex desire and sexual abuse of children gained strong support from his colleagues as well as his congregation, whose responses on the day of his sermon indicated that his "opinions were endorsed and approved without limitations."⁹¹

Mabel Hampton (mentioned at the start of this article) was not a member of Powell's church, yet it is not difficult to believe that she would have understood the minister's sentiments as representing the views of most Harlem residents, since she actively sought to hide her sexual orientation in her Harlem neighborhood before acting on her desire for women at private rent parties. At the same time, while they may not have condoned such behavior, most Harlemites in Powell's congregation would not have

⁸⁹ For analysis of the song see Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 39–40; and Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime," 337.

⁹⁰ See, for example, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "Rethinking Vernacular Culture: Black Religion and Race Records in the 1920s and 1930s," in *The House That Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West, and Others on Black Americans and Politics in America Today*, ed. Wahncema Lubiano (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 157–77. In the context of religion and the black working class Higginbotham notes that the "storefront Baptist, Pentecostal, and Holiness churches along with a variety of urban sects and cults . . . were doubtless more effective than middle-class reformers in policing the black woman's body and demanding conformity to strict guidelines of gender roles and sexual conduct" (171).

⁹¹ 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 Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1989), 318–31. See also "Dr. A. C. Powell Scores Pulpit Evils," *New York Age*, 16 November 1929, 1; "Dr. Powell's Crusade against Abnormal Vice Is Approved," *New York Age*, 23 November 1929; and "Corruption in the Pulpit," *New York Amsterdam News*, 11 December 1929, 20; George Chauncey also discusses this issue in his *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 254–57.

found the fact that Hampton frequented rent parties all that unusual. Large numbers of working-class residents gladly paid fees to enjoy a night of food, Prohibition Era drinking, dancing, and music while also contributing financially to a fellow neighbor's rent. They, like Hampton, attended "pay parties" and "rent parties" in various people's homes, and, according to her, depending on the night and the residence, one could eat "chicken and potato salad" "pig feet, chittlins," and "in the wintertime" black-eyed peas.⁹² She recalled that, having paid the fee, one could just "dance and have fun" until the early hours of the morning. But Hampton partied exclusively with other women. Her reminiscences about those moments indicate that while black Harlemites may have acknowledged the existence of rent parties, they would not have as easily accepted a party of women desiring women. Explaining her predicament, Hampton revealed that, on the one hand, as a young Harlemite she experienced a "free life" where she "could do anything she wanted," yet, on the other hand, publicly expressing her developing and complex desires for women was out of the question.⁹³ "When I was coming along everything was hush-hush," she recalled. She and women like her felt safer meeting at house parties—"private things," she noted, "where you'd go with" a woman without fear of reprisals.⁹⁴

Hampton's experience strongly suggests that black women who desired women usually disguised their feelings in public, negotiating not only the police but also black Harlem. She disclosed that when black women attended house parties they made distinct choices about their public appearance that depended on whether they walked or drove to a particular function. In the privacy of an apartment they openly expressed their same-sex desires, yet Hampton also emphasized how much more cautious they were about exposing their sexual desire when out and about within the larger Harlem community. According to her, when women attended various parties "very seldom did any of them [wear] . . . slacks . . . because they had to come through the streets." Instead, they played it safe and dressed in women's suits. She later confirmed that she always wore women's suits when attending parties. "You couldn't go out there with too many pants on because the men was ready to see . . . and that was no good." Instead, she explained that "you had to protect yourself and protect the woman that you was with."⁹⁵

⁹² Nestle, *A Fragile Union*, 36. David Levering Lewis notes that "for a quarter, you would see all kinds of people making the party scene; formally dressed society folks from downtown, policemen, painters, carpenters, mechanics, truckmen in their workmen's clothes, gamblers, lesbians, and entertainers of all kinds." He stressed that "rent parties were a function . . . of economics, whatever their overlay of camaraderie, sex, and music" (*When Harlem Was in Vogue* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1979], 107-8); see also Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 94-116.

⁹³ Hampton, interview with Nestle, 10.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹⁵ Mabel Hampton, interview with Joan Nestle, "LFL Coming out Stories," 21 June 1981, 8, Box 3, MHC. Another version of this interview is also in Nestle, *A Fragile Union*, 36.

Hampton never revealed if she had ever experienced repercussions from having expressed her attraction to women, but she seemed to have managed her life by limiting her contact with men and those persons who were not "in the life." She told a personal friend later in her life that even during the height of the Harlem Renaissance and pleasure seeking "you had to be very careful," which meant that Hampton and her friends "had fun behind closed doors."⁹⁶ For her, going out to bars was too much of a hassle because, as she put it, "too many men [were] tagged up with it; . . . they didn't know you [were] a lesbian . . . [and] they didn't care." "You was a woman . . . [so] you had the public [and] you had the men to tolerate," she recalled. She later contended that while she met a number of girlfriends as a dancer in Harlem cabarets such as the Garden of Joy, she eventually ended her dancing career because it created unwanted exchanges with men. "I gave up the stage," she explained, "because unless you go with men you don't eat."⁹⁷

In hindsight and as a gay rights activist, Hampton spoke about herself as a young adult as having embraced lesbianism directly and publicly, yet when she was arrested for prostitution in 1924 she may not have been as forthcoming about her sexuality. Her arrest, after all, stemmed from a heterosexual double date gone awry. Her experience suggests that her later characterization of the solicitation arrest as absurd because she was considered a "woman's woman" might reveal more about her later life than how she worked to address her feelings and desires for women and men at that time.⁹⁸ Hampton's sentiments were shared by other women, black and white, but the general focus of urban reformers and criminal justice administrators as well as the federal government resulted from their attempts to regulate the behavior of those they believed to be dangerous, heterosexual, working-class women.

Alongside reformers' and relatives' concerns, young women's arrests during and after World War I also reflected the federal government's attempt to prevent the spread of venereal disease. In particular, a series of vagrancy and prostitution statutes landed primarily working-class women in state reformatories and detention houses. For instance, reformers' general anxieties about sexually active young women resulted in the federal government appropriating funds for at least forty-three reformatories and detention

⁹⁶ Hampton, interview with Nestle, 9. The material cited in the text refers to Hampton's response to Nestle's questions: "How would you describe the twenties? Was it a good period to be gay?"

⁹⁷ "LFL Coming out Stories," 9.

⁹⁸ Hammonds argues that "rather than assuming that black female sexualities are structured along an axis of normal and perverse paralleling that of white women we might find that for black women a different geometry operates." She refers to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* in raising the possible reality of "desire between women and desire between women and men simultaneously, in dynamic relationship rather than in opposition" ("Black (W)holes," 139); I want to thank Doreen Drury for her critical questions regarding this issue. See also Nestle, "Lesbians and Prostitutes," 169.

homes nationwide that housed, cared for, and treated "women and girls who, as actual and potential carriers of venereal diseases were a menace to the health of the Military Establishment of the United States."⁹⁹

The increased scrutiny of all working women's sexuality directly influenced black women's treatment in social welfare reform and the criminal justice system. Originally, seventeen-year-old Amanda B. was arrested for incorrigibility when her parents "could no longer keep . . . her from attending dances and associating with bad company." Yet Amanda's harsh Bedford sentence stemmed from social workers' discovery that she had refused treatment for a venereal disease at the City Hospital even before considering her mother's initial court petition.¹⁰⁰ Because of the nation's and particularly New York City's heightened alert about the connection between working-class women and venereal disease, Amanda's family's concerns about her inappropriate behavior were virtually ignored. Their attempt to regulate her youthful waywardness led to her imprisonment in a state institution rather than in the local rehabilitative home as well as to her permanent arrest record. Caught in a moment when their experimentation with leisure and sexuality was perceived as a national security threat, working-class women found that their behavior was deemed suspect. Black women in particular discovered that the police's perception of their supposed innate promiscuity and criminality shaped their arrests.

Ruby Brooks's case shows how reformers' as well as the federal government's anxieties about working-class women's sexual behavior and venereal disease continued even after World War I. In 1924 the thirty-year-old domestic worker revealed that as she was walking home one evening she was approached by a man who asked if he could go home with her. When she responded, "No, I have no place to take you," another man appeared and arrested her for prostitution. Brooks, with no prior criminal record and a solid work history, believed that her arrest had been a frame-up and contended that she would not have been sent to Bedford if she had not been adamant about keeping "her arrest from her family," with whom she still lived. Other case file evidence, however, indicates that her imprisonment more than likely stemmed from the fact that she had tested positive for a venereal disease. Brooks's claim that she had only had intercourse with her fiancé was recorded but ignored, as he was investigated rather than clinically tested. For prison administrators, regardless of Brooks's verified background and upstanding fiancé, her medical condition posed a danger to society, thus justifying her yearlong imprisonment and multiple parole delays until she

⁹⁹ Mary Macey Dietzler, *Detention Houses and Reformatories as Protective Social Agencies in the Campaign of the United States Government against Venereal Diseases* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922), 27. See also Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 52-121; and Clement, *Love for Sale*, 114-43.

¹⁰⁰ Edith R. Spaulding, *An Experimental Study of Psychopathic Delinquent Women* (New York: Patterson Smith, 1923), 271-72.

was cured with medical treatments.¹⁰¹ For Brooks, the arrest and imprisonment were simply unjust and disregarded all of her personal attempts to live morally. "Being that I have worked all my life for 30 years," she explained, "I think it's pretty hard to be arrested."¹⁰² Imprisoned in the same year as Mabel Hampton, Brooks believed that she understood the parameters of moral and legal behavior, but Bedford officials felt differently. Their objectives entailed rehabilitating and controlling the purported sexual deviancy of women as similar but distinct as both of these women.

BEDFORD AND RACIAL SEGREGATION

By the time of Brooks's and Hampton's arrests, Bedford had already long worked to fulfill its basic objective to reform young women. The opening of the institution in 1901 occurred simultaneously with changing perceptions of aberrant female behavior, from nineteenth-century fallen woman to twentieth-century sexual delinquent. During the 1870s reformers addressing the growing number of young women in custodial prisons pushed for the institution because they believed it would play a major role in rehabilitating wayward women and primarily first offenders between the ages of sixteen and thirty; they believed that young female offenders had the capacity to be reformed.¹⁰³ Thus, during Bedford's initial years administrators believed that working-class women's delinquent behavior could be redressed and even eliminated through proper training. The institution's first superintendent, Katharine Bement Davis, noted that Bedford received "women capable of such education and industrial training" that "would restore them to society, self-respecting and self-supporting."¹⁰⁴ City magistrates and some state legislators, however, found the practical application of the reformatory's objective too expensive, and it was consistently underfunded. Reformers protested, arguing that expenses related to rehabilitation far outweighed the consequences of being apathetic about urban crime and that the institution's three-year sentence was an insufficient training period for certain women. Bedford administrators contended that "the cost to the State of allowing [young women] to lead dishonorable, and perhaps criminal lives, . . . [perpetuating] their kind in

¹⁰¹ Inmate #3715, Recommendation for Parole, ca. 1925, BH. This inmate was considered for parole from February until August 1925 but was not released because of her venereal disease.

¹⁰² Inmate #3715, History Blank, 12 August 1924, BH.

¹⁰³ See Barbara Brenzel, *Daughters of the State: A Social Portrait of the First Reform School for Girls in North America, 1856-1905* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983); Freedman, *Their Sister's Keepers*; and Alexander, *The "Girl Problem."*

¹⁰⁴ Katharine Bement Davis, "A Plan for the Conversion of the Laboratory of Social Hygiene at Bedford Hills in to a State Clearing House . . .," Bureau of Social Hygiene General Material 1911-16, Box 6, Record Group 2, Rockefeller Boards, Rockefeller Archive Center, Tarrytown, New York.

succeeding generations in an ever-increasing propensity to evil [was] so very great that the State [should consider these women's] reformation . . . as the cheapest means of securing the public welfare."¹⁰⁵

Reformers instituted a number of practical initiatives with varying degrees of success. Over the years the institution maintained administrative policies whereby inmates were constantly occupied through industrial classes, religious services, and extracurricular activities. Instead of prison cells, women resided in individual cottages with designated matrons who encouraged a family-style structure. Some inmates seemed to enjoy this arrangement, as a number of paroled women wrote Bedford for permission to come back to visit their friends.¹⁰⁶ Specific buildings separated inmates by age in 1901, but by 1924, the year that Ruth Brooks and Mabel Hampton were admitted, Bedford had become segregated according to an inmate's psychological diagnosis and race, with cottages designated for a range of inmates from feebleminded white girls to newly admitted colored girls.¹⁰⁷ Some women found interacting with fellow inmates frustrating and even detrimental to their eventual discharge. Brooks, for instance, was so anxiety-ridden about how other black inmates' behavior would affect her release that she wrote prison administrators: "I was not brought up to fight and curse and I am willing to take any kind of [parole] job . . . as long as I get away from here."¹⁰⁸ Brooks's trouble with unruly cottagemates and her location in segregated housing reflected some of the major changes and problems Bedford experienced in implementing reform.

Although administrators insisted that inadequate funding affected Bedford's upkeep, hiring practices, and expansion, they also agreed that probation (supervision of a woman within her community without imprisonment) changed the type of inmate they received.¹⁰⁹ Introduced in 1901, probation

¹⁰⁵ *New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills, Second Annual Report for the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford* (Albany, N.Y.: J. B. Lyon, 1902), 7. Almost twenty-four years later Bedford still assessed its mission based on young women's need to be rehabilitated because, as administrators believed, young women were either "unfit to make the fight alone" or represented women whose lives were "wrecked by chance misfortune." See *New York State, Salient Facts about the New York State Reformatory for Women, Bedford Hills* (Bedford Hills, N.Y.: Reformatory, 1926), 3.

¹⁰⁶ See, for example, Inmate #2507, Letter from Inmate to Superintendent Cobb, 1 March 1920, BH.

¹⁰⁷ *New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford, Annual Report of the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford for the Year Ending September 30, 1901* (Albany, N.Y.: J. B. Lyon, 1902), 17–18. Expectant mothers and inmates with children no more than two years old were also housed in a separate cottage. See Isabel Barrows, "Reformatory Treatment of Women in the United States," in *Penal and Reformatory Institutions*, ed. Charles Richmond Henderson (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1910), 156.

¹⁰⁸ See Inmate #3715, Letter from Inmate to Superintendent Baker (Harriman Cottage), 7 August 1925, BH. According to a State Commission of Prisons report, Harriman Cottage was designated for "more unruly colored girls." *State of New York, State Commission of Prisons, Thirty-First Annual Report* (Albany, N.Y.: Commission, 1925), 172.

¹⁰⁹ Freedman, *Their Sister's Keepers*, 138–39.

slowly parceled out the most redeemable female offenders, according to Bedford administrators, and left the institution with an incoming population of probation violators, recidivists, and uncontrollable women.¹¹⁰ Superintendent Davis identified such inmates as the major impediment to Bedford's rehabilitation process. As early as 1906 Davis argued that if Bedford was to "receive so large a proportion of 'difficult' young women, whom probation and private institutions . . . [had] failed to help, the public must recognize the task" Bedford had before it.¹¹¹ Probation did not significantly decrease black women's presence, as they had difficulty obtaining it; however, their numbers increased as the institution's reputation as a model reformatory declined. Thus, most black women who were first-time offenders, like Brooks and Hampton, were admitted along with those white women whose behavior failed to warrant probation or who had violated probation. These problems were exacerbated by the fact that more young women overall were being committed to Bedford, which led to subsequent overcrowding.¹¹²

Bedford's problems with funding, increasing numbers of problematic inmates, and overcrowding led to a scathing 1914 State Commission of Prisons inspection report that culminated in several public hearings a year later.¹¹³ While the commission report noted myriad problems with Bedford, from its location to how it should be more self-sustaining because it held "several hundred able-bodied young women delinquents whose labors should suffice for their maintenance," Inspector Rudolph Diedling focused on the institution's inability to properly address its disciplinary problems.¹¹⁴ In 1915 during public hearings Diedling's criticisms were addressed, but investigators added an issue to the investigator's list by noting that the most troubling issue involved same-sex romances between black and white inmates. Bedford's administrators publicly disclosed that the institution's primary disciplinary dilemma stemmed from "harmful intimacy," or, rather, interracial sex.¹¹⁵

When the State Board of Charities' special investigative committee addressed Bedford's "harmful intimacy," it focused on the fact that, unlike most women's prisons in the North as well as in the South, Bedford was

¹¹⁰ Charles L. Chute, "Probation and Suspended Sentence," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 12, no. 4 (1922): 559.

¹¹¹ *State of New York, New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford, Sixth Annual Report of the New York State Reformatory Women at Bedford* (Albany, N.Y.: J. B. Lyon, 1906), 17. Davis revealed that the change in the type of inmate committed to Bedford was noticed in 1905.

¹¹² Freedman, *Their Sister's Keepers*, 138-39.

¹¹³ For the report see *State of New York, State Commission of Prisons, Twentieth Annual Report of the State Commission of Prisons* (Albany, N.Y.: Commission, 1914), 116-19. For the hearings see *State of New York, State Board of Charities, Report of the Special Committee Consisting of Commissioners Kevin, Smith, and Mulry, Appointed to Investigate the Charges Made against the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills, N.Y.* (Albany, N.Y.: J. B. Lyon, 1915), 3-29.

¹¹⁴ *State Commission of Prisons, Twentieth Annual Report*, 116-19, at 117.

¹¹⁵ For the administrators' reference to harmful intimacy see *Report of the Special Committee*, 7.

integrated. When questioned about this policy, former superintendent Katharine Davis explained that she did “not believe in segregation by color in principle and [had] not found it to work well in practice.”¹¹⁶ The committee strongly recommended otherwise. With Davis no longer the superintendent, Bedford’s board of managers agreed with the committee’s final recommendations, which cited segregation as the most viable solution to inappropriate interracial relationships.¹¹⁷ Denying that its concerns were based on racism, the board argued that it made no objection to the housing of black and white inmates because of race. Its members’ decision stemmed from the fact that they found “undoubtedly true that most undesirable sex relations [grew] out of [the] . . . mingling of the two races.”¹¹⁸ As such, the board defended its right to segregate inmates against the protest of those who argued that racial segregation was “contrary to the equal rights of all citizens under the Constitution.”¹¹⁹ Explaining the discretionary power given to them by the State Charities Law, the board argued that “individual [inmate] rights [were] not disturbed by the separation of delinquents into groups when such segregation [was] likely to promote reformation and prevent undesirable relations.”¹²⁰ In 1917 Bedford institutionalized racial segregation, with two cottages “set apart” for black women.¹²¹ Superintendent Helen Cobb also explained that in addition to disciplinary concerns, the separate cottages were established as a result of written requests by black inmates.¹²² During Mabel Hampton’s and Ruth Brooks’s imprisonments at Bedford, designated cottages housed black women who were characterized as “recently admitted,” “younger,” “more unruly,” and “quiet.”¹²³ Ironically, even after racial segregation was established administrators failed to acknowledge publicly that “harmful intimacy” persisted as inmates continued to pursue relationships with one another.¹²⁴

¹¹⁶ “Miss Davis Stands by Bedford Home,” *New York Herald*, 24 December 1914, 8.

¹¹⁷ *Report of the Special Committee*, 26–27.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹¹⁹ *State of New York, State Board of Charities, Annual Report for the Year 1915* (Albany, N.Y., 1915), 96. Although the Bedford’s board of managers described its response to critics, the report did not specify who had opposed its decision.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *State of New York, New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford, Seventeenth Annual Report of the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills, N.Y.* (Albany, N.Y.: J. B. Lyon, 1918), 8.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 8, 16.

¹²³ *State of New York, State Commission of Prisons, Thirty-first Annual Report of the State Commission of Prisons* (Albany, N.Y.: Commission, 1925), 172.

¹²⁴ See, for example, Inmate #4044, Conduct Record, 13 June 1926, BH. One white inmate was cited in this record as having aided a black inmate who “passed a note from one of the Gibbons girls [black inmates]” to a white inmate during an institutional baseball game.

"HARMFUL INTIMACY": INTERRACIAL SEX WITHIN
AND OUTSIDE OF BEDFORD

The actions of Bedford administrators and state officials coincided with the concerns of most early-twentieth-century women's prison administrators, psychiatrists, and reformers. Generally, they addressed the issue of female homosexuality by emphasizing, to the virtual exclusion of other romantic and/or sexual attachments, the problem of developing relationships between white and black inmates.¹²⁵ They portrayed white women's desires in same-sex, interracial relationships within the confines of the prison as a longing for masculinity.¹²⁶ The body of scientific observers argued, as did psychologist Margaret Otis in 1913, that whether viewed as "an affair simply for fun and . . . lack of anything more interesting to take up their attention" or a relationship of "serious fascination and . . . intensely sexual nature," the racial and gendered identities of such affairs were clear.¹²⁷ "The difference in color," Otis explained, "takes the place of difference in sex."¹²⁸ Otis's explanation of same-sex desire equated black women's darker skin color with virility; moreover, such relationships could be described as "racialized gender inversion."¹²⁹ In fact, she revealed that one white woman "admitted that the colored girl she loved seemed the man."¹³⁰ Similarly, in 1921 a Bedford official explained that black women's supposed "abandon and virility . . . offered" white women "the nearest substitute" for the opposite sex.¹³¹ According to her, black

¹²⁵ Estelle Freedman, "The Prison Lesbian: Race, Class, and the Construction of the Aggressive Female Homosexual, 1915–1965," *Feminist Studies* 22, no. 2 (1996): 400–401.

¹²⁶ Freedman notes that "at the same time, assigning the male aggressor role to Black women and preserving a semblance of femininity for their white partners racialized the sexual pathology of inversion. In this interpretation, white women were not really lesbians, for they were attracted to men, for whom Black women temporarily substituted. Thus the prison literature racialized both lesbianism and butch/femme roles, implicitly blaming Black women for aggression and, indeed, homosexuality, by associating them with a male role" (Freedman, "The Prison Lesbian," 400–401). See also Anne Meis Knupfer, "'To Become Good, Self-Supporting Women': The State Industrial School for Delinquent Girls at Geneva, Illinois, 1900–1935," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 4 (2000): 437–41; and Sarah Potter, "'Undesirable Relations': Same-Sex Relationships and the Meaning of Sexual Desire at a Women's Reformatory during the Progressive Era," *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 2 (2004): 394–415.

¹²⁷ Otis, "A Perversion," 113–14.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹²⁹ Regina G. Kunzel, "Situating Sex: Prison Sexual Culture in the Mid-Twentieth-Century United States," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8, no. 3 (2002): 262.

¹³⁰ Otis, "A Perversion," 114.

¹³¹ Edith Spaulding, "Emotional Episodes among Psychopathic Delinquent Women," *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 54, no. 4 (1921): 305. As Hazel V. Carby argues in her study of black female writers' response to ideologies of white and black womanhood, "the figurations of black women existed in an antithetical relationship with the values embodied

women functioned as masculine substitutes who fulfilled white women's heterosexual desire. Observations of white women's attraction for one another were categorized as nothing more than crushes (young women's courtship of one another during which, according to one report, they "vow that they will be friends forever, dream and plan together, confide their deepest secrets"), with no serious connection to homosexuality.¹³² Thus, white inmates, whether aggressors in the affairs or not, maintained a normative and heterosexual status. In this sense administrators failed to address directly same-sex desire but rather constructed their explanations so that, as Regina Kunzel notes, "homosexuality was heterosexuality; the unnatural was natural."¹³³ In contrast to white inmates, black women at Bedford were rarely portrayed as initiating relationships, although they may have done so.¹³⁴ They also were not characterized as responding in like manner to the attention of white women.¹³⁵ Black women's sexuality on its own terms, as a crush, heterosexual or homosexual, was ignored.¹³⁶

Even though officials noted numerous instances of intense and sometimes even violent romantic relationships among white women, they continually focused on the impact of interracial sex. Accordingly, they consistently agreed with the assessment of assistant superintendent Julia Jessie Taft, who defined the disciplinary problem as stemming from "colored girls [who were] extremely attractive to certain white girls" and who also noted the fact that "the feeling [was] apt to be more intense than between white

in the cult of true womanhood, an absence of the qualities of piety and purity being a crucial signifier. Black womanhood was polarized against white womanhood in the structure of the metaphorical system of female sexuality, particularly through the association of black women with overt sexuality and taboo sexual practices" (Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 32).

¹³² J. L. Moreno, *Who Shall Survive?: A New Approach to the Problems of Human Interrelations* (Washington, D.C.: Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing, 1934), 229; see also Elizabeth Lunbeck, *Psychiatric Persuasion: Knowledge, Gender, and Power in Modern America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 295–96.

¹³³ Kunzel, "Situating Sex," 262.

¹³⁴ Otis, "A Perversion," 114.

¹³⁵ Moreno noted that black women were "the subject adored and rarely the wooer. . . . While overtly she responds with affection, she almost invariably ridicules the courtship" (*Who Shall Survive?* 230).

¹³⁶ Alexander, *The "Girl Problem,"* 92; Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Creating Born Criminals* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 181–82. White working-class women's arrest and imprisonment for sexual delinquency departed from the traditional script of the virtuous white woman needing protection from the black male rapist, yet administrators' concerns and responses to interracial same-sex romantic relationships showed how they were influenced still by society's longstanding anxieties about white female and black male unions, even to the point of perceiving black women as men. See Freedman, "The Prison Lesbian," 399–400; and Kunzel, "Situating Sex," 261–62. For more on the protection of white women from black men see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's cogent analysis of the rape-lynch narrative in her "'The Mind that Burns in Each Body': Women, Rape and Racial Violence," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: New American Library, 1983), 328–49. Bedford's accounts were distinct from most institutions in

girls alone."¹³⁷ Taft emphasized that black women had an "unfortunate psychological influence" on white inmates.¹³⁸ One white woman's attraction for black women, for instance, was noted as being so "extreme" that she was described as staring at her "temporary object of . . . affection as an animal might watch its prey, oblivious to all that was going on about her."¹³⁹ Yet such cases never diminished the number of similar incidents among white women. What, then, did officials find so damaging about "harmful intimacy"? Siobhan Somerville's work suggests that interracial relationships in reformatories highlighted "two tabooed sexualities—miscegenation and homosexuality."¹⁴⁰ During the 1915 State Board of Charities inquiry investigators certainly raised concerns about both "harmful intimacy" continuing beyond the women's release from Bedford and the concomitant possibility of white women living in black neighborhoods.¹⁴¹ With no likelihood of creating a separate state institution for black inmates (as some administrators suggested), Bedford officials' solution to this dilemma entailed imposing racial segregation. Ironically, this decision failed to address how "harmful intimacy" thrived among women living in different buildings. Indeed, administrators ignored Taft, who testified that she dealt with same-sex relationships "all the time" and stressed that these romantic attachments usually occurred between women "in separate houses."¹⁴² Racial segregation, as a result, would not solve the problem of same-sex relationships, but it would address institutional and national anxieties about interracial sex.

Between 1916 and 1918 psychiatrist Edith Spaulding of Bedford's Laboratory of Social Hygiene conducted the most extensive and documented study into "harmful intimacy." Examining those women who were deemed psychopathic, Spaulding concentrated primarily on white inmate behavior. Although she diagnosed some black inmates, a number of the black women whom she referenced worked in the hospital as laundresses, housecleaners, and cooks. Bedford's accounts were distinct from those of most institutions in that they argued that black inmates were passive recipients rather than aggressive participants in homoerotic relationships. Spaulding's findings

that they argued that black inmates were passive recipients rather than aggressive participants in homoerotic relationships.

¹³⁷ *Report of the Special Committee*, 18.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Spaulding, *An Experimental Study*, 329.

¹⁴⁰ Siobhan Somerville, "Scientific Racism and the Emergence of the Homosexual Body," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5, no. 2 (1994): 260. Somerville poses the cogent question: "Did the girls' intimacy trouble the authorities because it was homosexual or because it was interracial?" (261). Also see Lisa Duggan's discussion in *Sapphic Slashes: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000).

¹⁴¹ *Report of the Special Committee*, 18. Committee investigators asked Taft, "Do you think the relations between the white girls and the colored girls may be continued after the white girls leave the institution so that they may take up with living in colored neighborhoods?" (*ibid.*).

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 17–18.

reinforced administrators' premise that the attraction white women felt toward black women stemmed from the fact that black inmates seemed more masculine. One example may be found in her analysis of Amanda B., the seventeen year old noted earlier who was charged with incorrigibility but imprisoned because she had contracted a venereal disease. When writing about Amanda's experience as an employee, Spaulding described the teenager as a problem because white inmates desired her. Eventually, she was removed from the hospital because of the "infatuation which two white girls showed for her and the resulting disturbance caused by their jealousy."¹⁴³ For Spaulding, Amanda's appearance as a "young colored woman with thick lips and very dark skin" made her seem virile and thus accounted for her popularity among white inmates.¹⁴⁴ She further explained that Amanda was "not unattractive in personality and always ready for fun, [but] she readily supplied through her racial characteristics a feminine substitute for the masculine companionship [white women] were temporarily denied."¹⁴⁵ Spaulding's analysis implicitly contended that Amanda became a possible partner for white women because of specific "racial characteristics." She rejected the possibility of genuine and mutual interracial, same-sex desire because only "feeble-minded" white inmates became "attached to" Amanda. Interestingly enough, Spaulding also portrayed Amanda as an unwitting and thoroughly desexualized object of desire who was "fairly passive in the affair," although "she enjoy[ed] the situation keenly."¹⁴⁶

The attraction that white inmates expressed for black women like Amanda was usually diagnosed by administrators as mental deficiency (in ways that ranged from feeble-mindedness to psychopathy) as well as being symptomatic of their working-class backgrounds. When defending Bedford from charges that the institution fomented interracial, same-sex relationships, the president of Bedford's board of managers, James Woods, argued that these associations were initiated before the women entered the reformatory. His brief discussion conflated inmates' working-class status with deviant sexual behavior. Addressing the overall problem without direct reference to black women, Woods in fact suggested that white women desired women outside of the

¹⁴³ Spaulding, *An Experimental Study*, 270.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 272. In another case white inmates were equally attracted to Emily J., a black inmate who in Spaulding's assessment had "thick lips, [and] deeply pigmented skin" (306). Charged with solicitation, the seventeen year old's presence reportedly elicited an "emotional disturbance" because, in Spaulding's estimation, "unstable white girls were uncontrollably attracted to [Emily] . . . because of her color" (308).

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 273; see also Edith Spaulding, "An Emotional Crisis," *Mental Hygiene* 5 (1921): 279. Nicole Hahn Rafter contends that although Spaulding "racializes lesbianism from a white, heterosexual perspective" and makes no attempt to "pathologize it," her lack of interest in a more sustained analysis stems from her study's timing (*Creating Born Criminals*, 181); see also Julian Carter, "Normality, Whiteness, Authorship: Evolutionary Sexology and the Primitive Pervert," in *Science and Homosexualities*, ed. Vernon A. Rosario (New York: Routledge, 1997), 168-69.

¹⁴⁶ Spaulding, *An Experimental Study*, 273.

prison, concluding that this behavior was “not uncommon among the people of this class and character in the outside world, and when inmates addicted to these practices [came] into the institution it [was] practically impossible to prevent them finding an opportunity in some way or other to continue them.”¹⁴⁷ Woods’s assessment provides an example of how administrators attempted to deflect responsibility for an increasing disciplinary problem but also raised the idea that these relationships should not be solely defined as “situational homosexuality” or rather the consequence of a commitment in a women’s reformatory.¹⁴⁸ Instead, Woods’s perspective highlighted what administrators had already discovered, that these homoerotic relationships, as the earlier discussion of Mabel Hampton’s experience reveals, were a part of developing sex practices in the larger society, black and white.

While officials writing about Bedford’s “harmful intimacy” framed these relationships as aggressive white women pursuing passive black women, the reality of their observations suggests more complex evidence of black women’s individual sexual agency and desire. From their records, black women seemed to be active participants in interracial romances. Spaulding, for instance, observed but failed to reassess her conclusions about “harmful intimacy” in light of a black inmate’s pursuit of a white inmate: “While the girls were at chapel, a popular colored girl was reprimanded for talking to the white girl of her affections. When asked to change her seat the colored girl became defiant and there ensued an unpleasant episode in the midst of the service, in which she had to be taken from the room for striking the matron who had spoken to her.”¹⁴⁹ Conduct infractions in black women’s files—such as “passing a note” or “2 girls in room with door closed. In room indefinitely”—indicate the possibility of same-sex relationships, but the fact that these reports were written in race-neutral language also strongly suggests the existence of intraracial romances.¹⁵⁰ Spaulding’s observation of a disturbance caused by the “deep affection” that one black inmate held for another black woman mirrored the problems that she observed with white inmates, in that the two black women created a disturbance when one admired the other. Apparently more concerned with whether these women finished their jobs as hospital laundresses, Spaulding seemed to dismiss the sexual implications behind their actions and finally explained the altercation by linking their conduct as “two tigresses” to racial violence, noting that “primitive fires of that kind do not die down.”¹⁵¹ Like other administrators’ observations of black women’s involvement in “harmful

¹⁴⁷ *Report of the Special Committee*, 8. See also Potter, “Undesirable Relations,” 400.

¹⁴⁸ Kunzel, “Situating Sex,” 253–70, esp. 253–56.

¹⁴⁹ Spaulding, “Emotional Episodes,” 305.

¹⁵⁰ Inmate #2466, Conduct Report, 12 May 1919, 27 October 1919, BH. See also conduct infractions such as “writing notes” and “receiving a note.” Inmate #2496, Conduct Report, 9 May 1918, 23 July 1918, BH.

¹⁵¹ Edith Spaulding, “The Problem of a Psychopathic Hospital Connected with a Reformatory Institution,” *Medical Record* 99, no. 20 (1921): 818. Yet the issue of interracial

intimacy," Spaulding provided no sustained analysis of the detrimental moral effects of such attachments. Her and other officials' lack of concern might represent what they saw as general knowledge rather than their ignoring aberrant reformatory conduct. In this sense black inmates' behavior seemed to confirm prevailing beliefs about black women's innate promiscuity and resulting sexual deviancy.

While not contradicting general sexual stereotypes regarding black women, the case of Lynette Moore does show how a black woman's behavior and appearance disrupted prison administrators' questionable premise regarding "harmful intimacy." According to one Bedford superintendent, seventeen-year-old Moore did "fairly well" while imprisoned but had a "great attraction for . . . white girls," making her a "troublemaker."¹⁵² Initially, Moore's physical appearance—she was described as a "colored girl with . . . light skin and rather pretty, wavy hair"—garnered just as much attention from officials as her incorrigibility.¹⁵³ "I have an idea," one physician concluded, that "she has been rather good looking and considered clever by her set and has managed to get off with a good many things."¹⁵⁴ In light of their apathetic stance toward black inmates' active involvement with other women, administrators seemingly could not ignore Moore's appearance or behavior. Moore's actions even prevented her from corresponding with her parents, as the superintendent wrote her mother that Moore was in "punishment for improper actions with another girl."¹⁵⁵ A black woman whom even officials found physically attractive, she consistently pursued "undesirable" relationships with other, primarily white, inmates while at Bedford as well as when she was paroled.

After being discharged, Moore married but still maintained contact with the same white inmate, Connie Carlson, with whom she had developed an "undesirable friendship" in Bedford. In fact, after problems in Moore's marriage, the two women began living together while Moore

attraction and the developing romantic relationships in women's prisons was more complex than Spaulding's observations suggested. For instance, one study completely disagreed with Spaulding and in fact completely reversed her assessment by noting that white women were not attracted to dark-complexioned black women but to those black women with a lighter hue. Offering a distinct perspective, this study was still laden with racist stereotyping. It rejected the premise that "some administrators of women's prisons [thought] it [was] because white women associate masculine strength and virility with dark color"; instead, the study noted that "usually it is not the very dark negro women who [were] sought after for such liaisons, but the lighter colored ones; and those who [were] most personable, the cleanest and the best groomed" (ibid.). See also Joshua Fishman, *Sex in Prison: Revealing Sex Conditions in American Prisons* (New York: National Library Press, 1934), 28.

¹⁵² Inmate #2503, Letter from Superintendent Helen Cobb to Department of Child Welfare, Westchester County, 28 May 1918, BH.

¹⁵³ Inmate #2503, Information Concerning Patient, 8 August 1917, BH.

¹⁵⁴ Inmate #2503, Staff Meeting, 29 September 1917, BH.

¹⁵⁵ Inmate #2503, Letter from Superintendent Helen Cobb to Inmate's Mother, 29 October 1918, BH.

was still pregnant with her estranged husband's child. Prison administrators gained access to this information when an anonymous letter was sent to a charitable agency noting that Moore had become a beggar and that Carlson was "usually with her."¹⁵⁶ While the interracial relationship caused problems at Bedford, such a friendship was also problematic once both women were released. Unlike Mabel Hampton's attempts to keep her relationships private, Moore's case shows how her public display of interracial romance prompted a neighbor to write a letter regarding the possibility of "harmful intimacy" outside of prison.

Moore's story did not end here. Five years later she was arrested for gun possession and again sent to Bedford. Although Bedford officials refused to keep her, they did interview her. While working as a nightclub hostess, Moore explained, she had continued to experience relationship problems, as she wanted to marry her boyfriend but had not divorced her first husband. Her second case file shows one documented instance of how women charged with "harmful intimacy" struggled to maintain these relationships once released from Bedford. Moore and Carlson learned tough lessons about the possibilities for their love. As evidenced by the fact that Moore was reduced to asking for charity, neither woman could support the other or Moore's infant. Yet it seems that they dealt with those outside forces that challenged their intimate bond in distinct ways. Moore clearly established a life for herself in Harlem, and when rearrested she acknowledged her continued connection with Carlson by listing her, along with family members, as a friend who lived in Long Island.¹⁵⁷

Mabel Hampton's experience also complicated officials' essentialized portraits of homoerotic relationships. The story of her lesbianism, which was never directly mentioned in her case file but revealed through her subsequent social activism, challenged Bedford administrators' constructed premise about "harmful intimacy" and highlights many of the institution's evaluative discrepancies. In Hampton's brief account of her Bedford experience she openly acknowledged the prevalence of as well as her participation in same-sex relationships (she did not indicate whether they were interracial or intraracial).¹⁵⁸ She remembered such Bedford relationships as being comforting. After she and another prisoner revealed their attraction to one another, Hampton noted that her fellow inmate "took me in her bed and held me in her arms and I went to sleep."¹⁵⁹ Although she desired women and dated men before her imprisonment, her Bedford experience may have provided

¹⁵⁶ Inmate #2503; see Letter from Church Mission of Help to Bedford, 9 June 1921, and Letter from Church Mission of Help to Superintendent Baker, ca. June 1921, BH.

¹⁵⁷ Inmate #4092, Family History, ca. 1926, BH.

¹⁵⁸ Nestle, "Lesbians and Prostitutes," 169. Although from a later period, Billie Holiday noted the prevalence of same-sex relations when she was an inmate in the Federal Women's Reformatory at Alderson, Virginia; see Billie Holiday with William Dufty, *Lady Sings the Blues* (New York: Lancer Books, 1969), 132.

¹⁵⁹ Nestle, *A Fragile Union*, 34–35.

Hampton with an opportunity to embrace fully her same-sex desire. For instance, another inmate claimed that she learned about sex from "Bedford girls."¹⁶⁰ Hampton's looks also failed to fit administrators' characterizations of a black woman involved in "harmful intimacy." Instead of being portrayed as masculine, she was described in the most feminine manner by Bedford's superintendent, Amos Baker, as a "small rather bright and good looking colored girl."¹⁶¹ Because of her dissembling, Hampton never received any conduct violations. Her family members, however, may have sensed that she was not only being influenced by "bad company" but also expressing a troubling affection for women. During her parole her aunt wrote to Bedford officials, noting that Hampton was "very much infatuated with a middle-aged colored woman, with whom she became acquainted a short time before her arrest, and whom she [her aunt] thought was not a good influence on the girl."¹⁶² Hampton's case strongly suggests administrators' indifference to black women's sexuality within the prison and underscores why some black women might have chosen to hide their same-sex relationships.¹⁶³

Like Hampton, other black women made attempts to maintain intimate liaisons, especially during their parole. Ironically, Bedford sought to create a family-like atmosphere when young women were imprisoned but penalized parolees for interacting too closely with one another once they left the institution. Twenty-one-year-old Addie King reportedly experienced some difficulty keeping her distance from other Bedford women. Social workers discovered that she lived with another black parolee as well as a "masculine sort of woman known as 'Alec.'" King was also found in a cooperative living arrangement, more than likely a reflection of her dire financial situation. When social workers decided to rearrest her as a parole violator, they discovered not only that she lived intermittently with another Bedford parolee and three other women but also that these women shared an apartment with ten men.¹⁶⁴

The nature of King's associations with the black women and men with whom she lived is not clear, but there is evidence that she attempted to maintain at least one interracial sexual relationship. When she worked as a live-in domestic, King's different employers often complained that she disregarded her curfew, sometimes arriving home late or never returning home until the next morning. In one instance King brought a white Bedford parolee to her employer's house and "tried to keep her there all night unknown to the family." When family members discovered her there, King's

¹⁶⁰ Inmate #4092, History Blank, ca. May 1926, BH.

¹⁶¹ Inmate #3696, Admission Record, 9 July 1923, BH.

¹⁶² Inmate #3696, Letter from Amy M. Prevost to Dr. Amos T. Baker, 13 November 1924, BH.

¹⁶³ Nestle, *A Fragile Union*, 34. For more of Hampton's observations regarding 1920s Harlem see Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 76.

¹⁶⁴ Inmate #4501, Parole Report, 1-2 March 1929, BH.

companion was asked to "get up and leave." The white employer believed that the interracial friendship was inappropriate but became increasingly disturbed when evidence indicated that the two women's relationship was not platonic. Reportedly, the employer contended that the affection between the women was "disgusting."¹⁶⁵

It would be impossible to gauge how many of these relationships continued after a stint at Bedford, but evidence clearly shows that same-sex desire was not simply a situational condition for white or black women created by their imprisonment.¹⁶⁶ Whether Bedford women gave up on same-sex desire or became more adept at masking these relationships from their employers and social workers, examples show that homoerotic relationships existed outside the prison, however difficult. More importantly, these examples reflect how some women managed multiple relationships with men and women. Not surprisingly, social workers noted, primarily through violation reports, that black parolees were still in contact with their mates just as they were during their imprisonment. Sometimes their relationships were discovered when former inmates obtained permission to visit Bedford. A confiscated letter in one black parolee's file, for instance, explained how the former inmate "walked up to the Nursery" and picked up the child of her white girlfriend, asking "her if she didn't know her own daddy." Reportedly, "all the girls [in the nursery] laughed."¹⁶⁷ While some inmates began these relationships as a sign of temporary rebellion that rejected the controlling influences of Bedford administrators, other inmates saw these relationships as more than a crush or temporary desire.¹⁶⁸ Most importantly, these inmates strove to maintain relationships developed in Bedford; moreover, these inmates, as Mabel Hampton's case indicates, may have also desired women before their imprisonment.

CONCLUSION

Mabel Hampton's experiences in early-twentieth-century New York as understood through prison administrators' notations and her subsequent reflections upon her life provide a unique lens through which we might view black women's sexuality. She was not a reformer advocating the "politics of respectability," nor was she a blues singer expressing sexual desire through performance. Rather, her life represents the complex ways that young women acknowledged the relevance of proper decorum but also participated in the growing consumer culture of commercial amusements. Women like her faced enormous challenges as they sought to embrace their independence in a society that simultaneously offered carefree and uninhibited opportunities for

¹⁶⁵ Inmate #4501, Parole Report, ca. 27 February 1929, BH.

¹⁶⁶ See Kunzel, "Situating Sex."

¹⁶⁷ Inmate #2380, Conduct Report and Confiscated Letter, n.d., BH.

¹⁶⁸ See Alexander, *The "Girl Problem,"* 96-97.

pleasure while at the same time feeling threatened by working-class women's sexual behavior. As a result, relatives, community members, and law officers monitored young women's sexual expression and generally supported the rehabilitative objectives of state institutions like Bedford.

By studying the case files of black women like Hampton, we get a sense of the language that ordinary black women used to express heterosexual and same-sex desire. Acknowledging that such evidence has been mediated through prison administrators' biases, we still can discern the stories that black women chose to impart behind official responses to those narratives. Although administrators' actions reflected prevailing racial and sexual stereotypes, the experiences that they documented offer complex perspectives on how working-class and poor black women dealt with chastity, premarital sex, rape, prostitution, and same-sex desire. Black women revealed not only certain aspects of their conduct but also how the concerns of relatives and other community members regarding their behavior often conflicted with what they wanted for themselves. Frequently, their interactions with the community's representatives were as heavily regulated as those with state representatives. Indeed, Mabel Hampton's reflections about Harlem highlighted how she often dissembled in her neighborhood. As a black woman who desired women she explained her caution about publicizing those relationships because "you had to be careful" and "you had [to have] fun behind closed doors."¹⁶⁹

Although Hampton seems to have hidden her relationships with women when she was incarcerated, other women, black and white, flaunted these attachments. Bedford administrators claimed that the majority of their disciplinary problems stemmed not simply from same-sex relationships but rather from "harmful intimacy," or interracial sex. Their anxieties about such relationships mirrored the concerns of a nation that generally discouraged interracial social and sexual relationships in law and practice. Attempting to solve their dilemma by instituting racial segregation served only to temporarily assuage their racial anxieties more than it addressed the crux of the issue. When some officials argued that young women brought same-sex romance into the institution rather than those relationships being a consequence of imprisonment, they illuminated the fact that sexual expression varied both within and outside of Bedford. Emphasizing the latter point, this study offers a perspective from which to understand the complexity of black women's experiences in early-twentieth-century New York by exploring how they addressed the myriad pleasures and dangers of urban sexuality.

¹⁶⁹ Hampton, interview with Nestle, 9.

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