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From Sociability to Spectacle: Interracial Sexuality and the Ideological Uses of Space in New York City, 1900-1930

By Elizabeth Clement[1]

Abstract

This paper addresses inter-racial sociability and sexuality in New York City before and after the Great Migration of African-Americans from the rural South to northern US cities. Using space and the arrangements of objects in space as my primary evidence, I argue that spatial relations both reflected and created race relations in the urban North and that these practices shifted dramatically over the course of a twenty-year period. While the black proprietors of clubs in Hell's Kitchen in the 1910s used space to make transgressive interracial sociability possible, by the 1920s, the white-owned clubs of the Harlem Renaissance did the opposite. These clubs used space to re-enforce the increasingly strict vision of white supremacy that emerged in northern cities in the 1920s. This paper traces this shift and points to the importance of the spatial organization of race and race relations even in the "unsegregated" North.

Keywords: Race/Racism, Gender, Sexuality

Writing about New York City's elaborate restaurant scene in the early 1920's, restaurant critic George Chappell touched briefly on interracial entertainment: "One of New York's evening pastimes," he reported sagely, "is to observe the antics of members of its enormous Negro population, many of whom show great ability in song, dance and comedy performance"(1925, 119-20). According to Chappell, Black Americans' "unfailing sense of rhythm, their vocal quality, something primitive, animal-like and graceful in their movements" combined "to make their performances interesting to all who can put racial prejudice out of their minds." Classifying clubs where blacks and whites mixed sociably as suitable for only the more adventurous of his white audience, Chappell advised his readers that in these establishments, "the residents of the neighborhood form part of the audience and all of the performance." For Chappell, interracial mixing in New York City meant whites observing blacks and black culture from the vantage point of their own sense of racial privilege and superiority. By definition, interracial clubs catered to the voyeuristic desires of white elites willing to tramp uptown for an amusing jaunt in Harlem.[2]

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[2] A note on terminology: in this paper, the use of "African-American" is limited to specific instances, such as the Great Migration. In general, "black" and "white" are the preferred terms, indicating

Chappell accurately described the kinds of interracial clubs that developed during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. However, the glittery world of white voyeurism and black spectacle that flourished in Harlem during Prohibition has overshadowed the more complex forms of interracial mixing that emerged before World War I in other areas of the city. In this essay, I explore New York's interracial clubs between 1910 and 1930 to investigate the ways club owners deliberately transformed the interracial sociability of the pre-war years into the interracial spectacle typical of the Prohibition era through the deliberate construction and reconstruction of physical space. Moving in both time and geographical location, I analyze three types of establishments that flourished in New York City between the turn of the century and the mid-1920's: black bars in Hell's Kitchen that sometimes tolerated white intrusion, the genuinely interracial clubs of Hell's Kitchen, and the later interracial clubs of Harlem that developed after the Great Migration of the 1910s.[3]

Relying on contemporary descriptions of these clubs and reports about how New Yorkers used them, I argue that black proprietors of black and interracial clubs, both before and after the move to Harlem, used physical space--that is, the arrangement and partition of rooms, hallways and bar areas, as well as the chairs and tables in that space--either to limit or to encourage mixing between whites and blacks. Carefully arranging space allowed them to balance the gender and racial priorities of the black community with those of white New York's racial and sexual hierarchy. Before the move to Harlem, club owners limited contact between white men and black women to disrupt the traditional relationships of power that often made black women the victims of sexual exploitation. They also used the physical construction of their establishments to create hidden spaces that protected the most volatile interracial relationships, those between white women and black men. In these clubs, working-class blacks and whites took advantage of the shelter created by proprietors to conceal their interracial activities from the rest of the city. Although the design of these clubs did not erase inequalities of power among the patrons--people did not leave their race or gender at the door--they did shield all clientele equally. In sharp contrast, the interracial clubs in Harlem after World War I recognized the profits of catering to middle-class whites, and manipulated their floor plans in ways that supported the racial hierarchy of the city. Thus, the geographical move uptown from the interracial neighborhoods of Hell's Kitchen to the segregation of Harlem closed off the more radical possibilities of interracial mixing, as the new clubs, motivated largely by a desire for higher profits, designed and allocated space to echo middle-class whites' sense of their own superiority.

In the early years of the twentieth century, before the migration of large numbers of African-Americans from the South, most African-Americans native to New York City lived in small concentrations scattered throughout New York's working-class neighborhoods. The most obvious of these was Hell's Kitchen, a neighborhood on the far west side of mid-town Manhattan. The concentration of working-class families of both

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the cultural reach and political and economic effects of "blackness," and "whiteness," concepts which exceed skin-color.

[3] Hell's Kitchen was a very poor mixed-race community on the mid-West side of Manhattan. Over time, the neighborhood shifted from a largely Irish and African-American composition to one including Italians, who began to arrive in the 1890s. The derivation of the term, "Hell's Kitchen," is not entirely clear to historians. Some attribute it to the name of a gang found in the area in the 1860s or 1870s. It is also possible that local police came up with the name in the 1870s (Jackson 538).

races in Hell's Kitchen led to the development of establishments that tolerated, and occasionally promoted, interracial mixing.[4]

The early interracial spaces of Hell's Kitchen shared a great many common physical characteristics with other working-class establishments in New York City. Essentially basement bars, New Yorkers called these types of clubs "rathskellars," the German term for working-class cellar saloons. Small and dark, rathskellars rarely had windows, but often left the doors open for light and ventilation. Clubs usually had an open and often narrow room, with a bar running along one side, where patrons could purchase beer, and sometimes hard liquor and food. At the far end of this room, most establishments had back rooms that provided more privacy and sheltered occupants from the casual gaze of passersby. Women, be they prostitutes or respectable working-class matrons, usually did their drinking and socializing in back rooms rather than in the more publicly accessible bar. Although the design and physical space of white and black clubs were similar, at the turn of the century most African-Americans and working-class whites patronized segregated places of public amusement. After all, most working-class blacks and whites lived in segregated neighborhoods, and did not usually travel far for drinks and entertainment. However, when their neighborhoods touched, as they did in Hell's Kitchen, they also attended establishments where the races had opportunities to mix.

The city's white elite frowned on interracial mixing, and although it was not strictly illegal, many reform agencies with ties to high politics made it their business to keep blacks and whites apart. New York City's most important reform organization dealing with commercialized vice was the Committee of Fourteen.[5] Founded in 1905 and running through 1932, the Committee of Fourteen waged nearly a thirty-year campaign to destroy organized prostitution in the city. Hiring working-class white, immigrant and African-American investigators, the Committee compiled voluminous field notes on New York's places of public amusement.[6] The preservation of these reports make historical analysis possible because they allow for the mapping of vice throughout the city.

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[4]As Katherine Bement Davis, a prominent reformer, described in 1911, the "colored places on the protested list . . . are scattered around the city, starting at W 37th Street and ending in Harlem, but the majority are not in Harlem but in Midtown." She continued by stating that there was a "ratheskellar in which two inspectors report soliciting, white women with colored men and colored women with white men" ("Letter").

[5]New York also had anti-obscenity reformer Anthony Comstock's Society for the Suppression of Vice, the Society for the Prevention of Crime, the Committee of Fifteen, which, like the Committee of Fourteen, focused specifically on prostitution, and the American Social Hygiene Association. Numerous smaller organizations and settlement houses also sponsored investigations into vice in the city. None of these organizations did so with the zeal, longevity and attention to record keeping that makes the Committee of Fourteen Papers such a valuable historical resource.

[6]After a series of embarrassing incidents in which bar owners clearly recognized the executive secretary of the Committee when he came to investigate, the Committee hired working-class men and women to do this work. From then on, it relied heavily on immigrants because they possessed the language and cultural skills to effectively infiltrate these spaces. For similar reasons, the Committee hired black American men and women, as well as white men, to investigate black and interracial clubs. In one case, a white investigator commented in his report that he was not solicited in an African-American bar, but that "a colored investigator could get more facts" ("Investigative Reports--1910-12," Box 28, Committee of Fourteen Papers). For examples of reports from black investigators, see "General Correspondence, 1918," Box 4, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

These reports also reveal the racial, sexual and class politics of the Committee, and the ways in which it shaped the racial and sexual geography of New York. The Committee of Fourteen sent dozens of undercover investigators into the working-class districts of the city looking for prostitution. When investigators identified an establishment that tolerated prostitution, the Committee contacted the brewer that supplied its beer and the surety company that guaranteed its loans. Under pressure from the Committee, for example, brewers would stop supplying beer until the club in question eliminated prostitution. As historian Timothy Gilfoyle has argued, this meant that private and not public agencies policed vice in the city. While the police functioned much like a licensing agency, taking bribes in exchange for ignoring violations of the law, organizations like the Committee of Fourteen relied on private funds and private means to suppress vice.[7]

The private regulation of vice had a profound impact on interracial sociability in the ostensibly non-segregated northern city of New York. Because the Committee was private it could establish its own guidelines for what constituted vice and largely ignored the statues that banned racial discrimination in public accommodations. Initially investigating interracial prostitution, the Committee quickly expanded its focus to include the much broader category of non-commercial interracial sociability. Thus they enforced a private code of segregating the races in public spaces, despite the fact that the laws of New York City allowed just this sort of mingling. Historian Kevin Mumford has argued that the racial politics of organizations like the Committee of Fourteen profoundly shaped the racial geography of the City and led to the concentration of vice in black neighborhoods. By the 1920s, Harlem had become the center not just of the interracial sex trade, but of the white sex trade as well. I concur with Mumford's findings, but focus instead on what we can learn from the Committee's reports about everyday strategies of managing interracial space, as well as on the ways the Committee's policing of these spaces led to debates between the Committee and the black community over the nature and meaning of racial segregation in a northern city.

The Committee's fears of racial mixing in places of public amusement rested on the broadly held middle-class white belief that any social contact between the races would lead to interracial sexual relationships, which would lead to miscegenation and the degeneration of the white race. While the Committee did not forbid bars from serving an interracial clientele, they did their best to discourage any establishment that allowed social contact between blacks and whites. One black proprietor, when warned about the liberties taken at his place and threatened with the revocation of his beer contract, wrote to the Committee insisting: "I have punctiliously adhered to the exclusion of the Caucasian and Negro. I have not permitted them to mix." Seeking to clarify just what did go on in his bar, he stated that "I will admit that women of the former race accompanied by one of their own have been made welcome, and I have yet to know an instance where they have been molested, or in any way been disturbed while inside my doors. I have, however, refused admittance invariably to either a colored man and white woman or white man and colored woman."[8] This proprietor's response reflects the ways in which

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[7] Unlike some of the nineteenth-century vice organizations which tried to clean up municipal police departments, the Committee of Fourteen maintained a good relationship with the police, and rarely openly criticized police practices. It also worked with the magistrate's courts, city and state government, and various city licensing and oversight agencies like the excise tax board and the tenement commission.

the Committee's strictures against interracial mixing derived from its desire both to protect white women from black male "molestation," and more generally to keep heterosexual or even heterosocial contact between whites and blacks at a minimum. In addition, it indicates that although this club owner might try to follow the Committee's prescriptions, he profited from his interracial clientele and was loath to give up the money he made from even limited white attendance.

In the years before the Great Migration, the vast majority of whites who patronized interracial establishments came from the working class and the Committee's reports on their interracial socializing reflect its desire to teach them their place in America's racial hierarchy. Living in mixed working-class neighborhoods or segregated but abutting neighborhoods, some working-class whites enjoyed socializing with their black neighbors, or, as immigrants, did not fully understand the stigma attached to doing so. The Committee of Fourteen criticized both whites and blacks for fraternizing, often despairing at white immigrants' inability to grasp the inappropriateness of interracial mixing. One investigator seemed unable to decide who to blame when he described one bar as "the worst place on Long Island, being a black and tan and Italian establishment."[9] At times, the Committee blamed blacks for interracial mixing, but in other cases it condemned white immigrants for spreading vice and sexual immorality in the black community. Another investigator wrote about a "nigger dive" patronized by "vey *(sic)* low white couples [who] come here and very profane language [is] used by women who dance partially undressed."[10] By identifying "low white couples," as the source of the problem, this report implied that whites came to black clubs to commit prostitution in safety, positioning black patrons as innocent witnesses to their depravity. A third investigation into a club on 6th Avenue clearly held the Irish proprietor responsible for interracial mixing. As the investigator described, it "was a 'black and tan' of the lowest and worst description possible for an Irishman to keep."[11]

The inability of reformers like those who ran the Committee of Fourteen to decide whether blacks or white immigrants should be held accountable for interracial mixing derived from their understanding of the nation's racial hierarchy, which placed middle-class white Anglo-Saxon Protestants at the top and other groups in a descending order

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[8] "General Correspondence--1908, July-December," Box 1, Committee of Fourteen Papers. In another instance, a bar proprietor was concerned that, the Director of the Committee of Fourteen, Mr. Whitin, might come in and see a white patron at the bar. After suggesting that the white man go to several places in Harlem, he changed his mind and "said it wasn't necessary as he knows I am alright, only he is afraid of Mr. Whitin who is the Executive Chairman of the C of 14 *(sic)*, he said Mr. Whitin generally drops in Saturday Nights and if he was to see a white man here he could get mad, he don't *(sic)* mind them being open late as long as there are no whites mixed with the blacks.... He also told me if I was a little darker I could claim I was a colored man but that I was a little too light in color for that." Some proprietors went so far as to patrol outside their bars. One investigator reported that the manager was "on the lookout for 'Detectives.' He scrutinized every one *(sic)* closely, if they were white or even near-white and were headed for his place" ("Investigators' Reports--1914," Box 28, Committee of Fourteen Papers).

[9]"Black and Tan" is contemporary American slang for interracial establishments. "Brooklyn/Queens--Investigators Reports 1914," Box 29, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

[10]"Investigators' Reports--1910, Survey of Conditions of Establishments Selling Liquor, Lists of Dance-hall operators in Brooklyn/Queens," Box 29, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

[11] "General Correspondence," Box 1, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

below them. Some reformers used religion to distinguish between the two degenerate groups and viewed blacks as slightly more moral because they were Protestant, not Catholic or Jewish.[12] Others used race and skin color and ranked white immigrants slightly higher. When either blacks or white immigrants attended interracial establishments, both groups appeared debased and immoral in the eyes of white reformers. Race, class and ethnicity were all combined in condemnations of social mixing between whites and blacks.[13]

Many of the bars that the Committee of Fourteen labeled interracial actually functioned primarily as black social spaces, into which whites occasionally intruded (as appeared to be the case in the club attended by "low white couples.") Because few proprietors wanted to turn away potential clients, rather than lose white patrons, black managers relied on a physical demarcation of the space in their bars to keep the races separate. In part, proprietors shaped space in the way they did in order to avoid the condemnation of organizations like the Committee of Fourteen, but they also did so in allegiance with black community's concerns about white men preying on sexually vulnerable black women. Protecting black women from sexual exploitation was a value that both middle-class and working-class blacks agreed upon, and club owners went out of their way to ensure that any mixing between these two groups occurred on black women's terms (Wolcott).

In a typical example, a white undercover investigator reported that "I ordered [a] drink from [the] colored waiter he said I would have to get it at the bar as they don't serve white men in rear [of the bar]." As this quotation indicates, proprietors designed the layout of their establishments to regulate interracial interactions, and in particular interracial sexuality. This bar did not just control interracial sexual mixing, but explicitly protected black women from white men. While this white investigator could get a drink at the bar, he could not do so in the rear where he might come into contact with the black women who were the legitimate patrons of this black business. Restricting access to the back room of the bar limited white male access to black women, protecting the women from harassment and the bar from repression by the Committee of Fourteen.[14]

The explicit organization of space to further community values that demanded the safeguarding of black women from white male harassment stands out even more starkly in the descriptions of another white investigator who observed a white man sitting at one table talking to black women seated at another table. He reported that he: "took a seat near 2 colored women and got them into a conversation. Was moving over to sit with

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[12] Some reformers, for example, declared that the "better sort" of colored people avoided such places and eschewed any mixing. For an interesting discussion of the significance of religion versus race in the minds of elite white New Yorkers, see Bernstein.

[13] American elites in this period had complex and often conflicting views on race, ethnicity and whiteness. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the issue of the construction of whiteness and its evolving relationship to American cultural and social practices and ideology. For a fascinating discussion of this topic, see Roediger.

[14] Other bars tried to limit access by restricting all white patrons, male and female, to the back room. For example, at the Clifton Hotel on Coney Island, "an attempt is made to keep the races separate by putting the whites in the rear of the premises, but owing to large crowd the races were well intermingled." "Investigators' Reports--Brooklyn/Queens-Investigators' Reports 1914," Box 29, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

them when stopped by waiter who said, 'Nothing like that in here son; if you want a woman for Christ's sake get a white one.'"[15] Patrolling the edges of the space allocated for whites and blacks, this waiter did not exclude the white man from this bar. Instead, he explicitly forbade this white man social access to the black women patrons by denying him the opportunity to sit with two women he had engaged in conversation.

This pattern of black managers restricting white men's access to certain rooms or areas of the bar as a way of protecting black women typified the compromise many black owners made between profit and community. Under-capitalized and operating on the margin of New York's entertainment economy, black proprietors of explicitly black social space rarely turned away white patronage. However, they did consciously and conspicuously limit white male contact with black women patrons. In some ways, this compromise reflected the hierarchy of patrons that many black proprietors established to function effectively in their own community and in the racist world of white New York. Valuing black women as regular customers, black owners and managers put these women's needs and comfort over the much more episodic intrusion of white men. This ordering of social values clearly had an impact on a club's financial profitability and testifies to the ways in which community needs and values interacted dynamically with financial decisions.[16]

Black customers also rebuffed white customers on racial grounds, resenting white incursion into black social space. One investigator reported that when he went into the rear room of a black bar in Sheepshead Bay, he found "3 colored women singing, piano playing . . . I asked him [the waiter] if he could introduce me to one of the women, he said, that he'll ask them first. He went over to their table, but came with a reply, that 'only colored men' were welcome."[17] Although these women did not mind male company, they had no desire for white companions and did not mind saying so. Here again, gender, race, and sexuality became central to motives for inclusion and exclusion in interracial situations. In this case, clearly seeing the bar as their own social space into which this man had intruded, the women excluded him from their company, neatly accomplishing themselves what the architectural design of other bars often did for them. Their explicit rejection of interracial sociability and sexuality reflected the community values that most black proprietors upheld when they refused white men access to certain areas in black bars.

Some whites were clearly puzzled by their exclusion from black social space. Although many white working-class New Yorkers accepted the banning of black Americans from white places of amusement as a matter of course, they obviously believed that the asymmetrical racial hierarchy of the city allowed them access to any black club they cared to frequent. As one white investigator described, the "white men coming in were refused, the manager telling them it was a Negro club and they could not be served. Several Negroes at tables [were] served whatever they would order. One white

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[15] "Investigators' Reports--Brooklyn/Queens-Investigators' Reports 1914," Box 29, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

[16] Although it is possible that black proprietors felt they might lose black women's patronage if they allowed white men free reign, it seems more likely that, when forced to choose, they upheld the concerns of their community over allowing any and all customers access to all space in the bar.

[17] "Investigators' Reports--1916," Box 30, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

man tried to argue, [he] said he did not mind drinking with Negroes."[18] Clearly, this white man could not comprehend his own exclusion. The vehemence of the proprietor's refusal, however, indicates that this club had no desire for white patrons.

In explicitly black establishments, blacks and whites could attend some of the same places of public amusement but they could not share physical space. Proprietors regulated access to areas and whole rooms in their bars to gain flexibility in balancing between their own community values and the larger racial hierarchy upheld by organizations like the Committee of Fourteen. Some owners refused white customers altogether. Others allowed whites to spend money, but heavily controlled their access to different areas in the bar and their interaction with other patrons. Black proprietors were especially protective of women, partially because that kind of mixing could lead to trouble with vice societies but mostly because they wanted to limit white male harassment of black women.[19]

Any establishment that catered to both white and black patrons ran risks. Serving whites was a calculated gamble, but many proprietors of black social clubs found the profits whites generated valuable enough to continue the practice, usually under sharp-eyed supervision. Bars that actually encouraged white and black patrons to mingle freely had even more trouble with vice societies like the Committee of Fourteen. The establishments that allowed interracial mixing did so at the risk of losing their leases, brewer's contracts and licenses. As a result, genuinely interracial bars before World War I operated furtively in the shadows of both white and black New York night life.

Like their black counterparts, explicitly interracial establishments structured their physical space to regulate patrons' access to each other and to the outside world. Instead of using space to balance the needs of community and profits, however, managers of deliberately interracial bars allocated space in ways that protected both the patrons and the bar itself from exposure. In Baron Wilkins's cafe, located in Hell's Kitchen, an investigator in 1910 described an intricate floor plan: "there is a number of tables and vienna chairs (*sic*) in the rathskeller, and a large painting of a nude woman in the rear of the hall." In addition, he reported that there were dancers, "nice looking brown-skinned girls, neatly dressed," who sang "popular and suggestive songs." The investigator continued, stating that "On our last visit they did not lift their skirts when dancing, perhaps this was because few patrons were in during our stay." Hidden near the back, the investigator found "a special room where white women and colored men can meet and be protected from the public rathskeller in the basement."[20] Baron Wilkins's cafe allowed risqué dancing and mixing between white men and black women in the more public rathskellar, but reserved a special room for the more socially dangerous combination of white women and black men. Other interracial hotels and bars used similar ploys that allowed white men relatively public access to black women, but carefully hid interactions between white women and black men, the most explosive racial/sexual combination.

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[18] "Investigators' Reports--1913, Aug-Sept," Box 28, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

[19] Some proprietors dealt with the problem of mixed neighborhoods, and thus mixed clientele, by establishing different nights when the different races were welcome. As one investigator reported, "The waiter told us that Tuesday and Fridays are 'colored' nights; otherwise only white people go to the hall." "Investigators' Reports, (no title)," Box 29, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

[20] "Investigators' Reports-1910-2," Box 28, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

In another club, the proprietor expressed exasperation to an investigator about his failed attempts to ban white prostitutes from his establishment. Giving up on their total exclusion, the owner decided to remodel his saloon to separate prostitutes from the non-commercial interracial couples. He stated that he wanted to "move the kitchen and dining room upstairs, which is not in use now, and run a partition across the lower room...for a dance hall in the rear." The investigator then continued the description, commenting that "a large sign in the front hall notifies white women that they cannot come in without escorts. The proprietor said that white women coming in frequently with different men were barred from the place, though if a woman came continually with the same man nothing could be said. No white men seen in the place at all."[21] In this case, extensive renovation of public space served to create new rooms that would separate commercial and non-commercial interracial couples. Prostitutes mingling in the open dining and drinking areas might draw the attention of vice societies and endanger the non-commercial patrons. In fact, the very existence of this report indicates that the Committee of Fourteen already had this club under surveillance. Further, the total absence of white men indicates that the bar catered to black men and white women, the most threatening social combination. White prostitutes parading about clearly endangered the other couples in the bar. In the hopes of protecting his non-commercial interracial clientele, this proprietor coped with the problem by creating a traditional back room for prostitutes, allowing other couples access to a less public space upstairs. Reconstructing his bar and re-dividing its rooms, he sought to hide his most vulnerable patrons.[22]

The design of interracial establishments to provide sheltered social space gave white and black customers the ability to use the clubs in a variety of ways that satisfied their own concerns. Their activities give us clues to their motivations for patronizing interracial clubs, as well as the ways in which people interacted with and responded to their physical and social environments. Some clients took advantage of the shelter these clubs provided to engage in relationships that would be stigmatized and forbidden elsewhere. Others used the protective qualities of interracial space to manipulate each other and satisfy their own social, cultural and economic ends.

Couples composed of white women and black men relied on the safety of interracial clubs to meet in secret. At Allen's Cafe on West 61st Street, for example, "white women and colored young men, altho (*sic*) they entered separately--sat and drank together."[23] Engaging in relationships that violated racial, sexual and gender taboos, these patrons protected themselves by entering and leaving separately. Once inside, they could socialize together, perhaps more freely than in any other public or private place in the city. White women and black men clearly came to this bar to take advantage of its

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[21] "Brooklyn, Investigators' Reports and related inf., 1913-1914," Box 29, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

[22] Some white prostitutes also appreciated the protection that interracial space could provide for them and their black lovers. For example, one investigator reported that an interracial establishment allowed prostitutes "limited privileges only," explaining that, "many of the girls have negro lovers." "Investigators' Reports, 1910, Survey of Conditions of Establishments selling Liquor, Lists of Dance-hall operators in Brooklyn/Queens," Box 29, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

[23] "Investigators' Reports--1914," Box 28, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

secretive space and hide their relationship from family, friends, neighbors, and a wider disapproving public.

White men often went to black and interracial bars to pick up black women. But the social power that whiteness gave these men could make them dangerous for the women whose company they sought. One investigator reported a dangerous combination when she identified the many different sorts of women who patronized the Criterion Club Cafe on West 37th Street. She reported that "a good many white men looking for colored girls frequent the place, so [there is] always a crowd of street walkers is on hand.... In the afternoon a good many school girls frequent this place."[24] Perhaps the presence of prostitutes shielded the young school girls, or perhaps the two crowds attended the club at different times and did not overlap. In any event, the danger of white men preying on black women cast a pall over interracial socializing in the black community. Despite this very real concern for the black community, not all black women made easy victims, and many deliberately used interracial clubs to take advantage of white men's relative prosperity. Investigators reported black women practicing a wide variety of economic strategies that ranged from sexual barter and prostitution to stealing. One investigator got his pocket picked by a young black woman who told him that she visited the club to pick up white men.[25] Black prostitutes occasionally patronized interracial establishments because they felt white men had more money to spend. One black investigator reported bargaining with a black woman over the price for sex. He stated: "I asked her where would we go and what would she charge. She said we could go back in the dark on what seemed to be an open lot in the rear of a house, and she wanted a dollar. I told her that was too much to pay for standing up, but she said she would take off her skirt and we could lay down. When I continued to object to the price she dropped to 50c. I told her I would not go with her unless she went to a room and one of the other women stepped up then and said 'Don't you see that is a colored man?'"[26] Clearly the two women involved in the exchange preferred to go with white men because they paid higher, and perhaps argued less. Another black prostitute declared that she only catered to non-black clients-- that is, to whites, Asians and Puerto Ricans--because she wanted to marry a black man, and did not want him to know her previous business. For her, choosing men of other races as clients helped her protect her reputation and she believed would eventually ease her exit from prostitution.[27]

Like their white counterparts, young black women also treated with white men, both for companionship and to obtain goods they could not afford. First identified by historian Kathy Peiss, treating involved the exchange of sex for entertainment expenses and emerged in both black and white urban working-class communities around the turn of the century.[28] One young black woman told an investigator that "she ain't out for the

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[24] "Investigators' Reports--1910-2," Box 28, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

[25] Ibid.

[26] "Investigators' Reports--Brooklyn/Queens and Related Material, 1914-1915," Box 29, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

[27] "Investigators' Reports--Restricted--Sa-Su," Box 36, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

[28] For a discussion of "treating," see Peiss, and my forthcoming, Trick or Treat [see note 1].

dollar but is as game as the rest of them, and if she likes a white man, she'd go the limit with him, she wouldn't expect any pay for it but if she needs a pair of shoes or waist she'd expect him to buy it for her."[29] White working-class girls who treated often made distinction between younger men and older ones. Arguing that older men had more money, these young women felt it was fair to treat with men who could afford to pay.[30] Some black women clearly made a similar assessment of white men. Like their white counterparts, they thought it fair to take from those who had more money to spare, be they older and more established, or white. As these examples of treating and prostitution indicate, both black and white patrons made use of the interracial space, at times interacting on terms of relative equality, and at other times taking advantage of racial and gender inequalities on the one hand, and relative gullibility and prosperity on the other.

  While club proprietors used the arrangement of space in their clubs to support community values and appease vice societies like the Committee of Fourteen, W.E.B. Du Bois, Editor of the N.A.A.C.P.'s <u>Crisis</u>, directly challenged the Committee's right to impose its own racial order on the City of New York. Du Bois entered the fray when the Committee attempted to close a black-owned hotel and club called The Marshall in 1911. Located on 53rd Street just north of Hell's Kitchen, The Marshall catered to a racially mixed crowd of artists and intellectuals. As Roi Otterly writes in <u>The Negro in New York</u>, The Marshall "became famous as the headquarters of Negro talent" (156).[31] Otterly acknowledged the interracial nature of the club, explaining that whites went "slumming" at The Marshall, but that most who did worked as actors in black face and patronized the club to "secure firsthand imitations" (Ottley 157). Du Bois may have had no problem with the Committee's initial mission to police prostitution, but policing interracial sociability set off alarms for him. Concerned about the growing racial segregation of New York City (and the possibility that southern style *de jure* segregation might establish itself in the North), Du Bois protested the Committee's attempts to close The Marshall arguing that it was "about the only place where a colored man downtown can be decently accommodated" ("Letter"). In Du Bois' view, when the Committee attacked The Marshall, it engaged not in sexual policing, but in the inscribing of racial segregation onto the geographical map of the City. Closing down The Marshall would have made it difficult for black men to do business in midtown, pushing them even further to the margins of New York's economic and political life.

  In responding to Du Bois's complaint, the Committee's General Secretary, Frederick Whitin, ignored the issue of racial segregation and instead focused on the Committee's belief that interracial mixing only occurred among the lower classes. Whitin argued that The Marshall was "a place which if it could be conducted for either your race or mine, undoubtedly would not be objectionable." At the present time, however, he said that it "has that unfortunate mixing of the races which when the individuals are of the ordinary class, always means danger"("Letter"). According to Whitin, The Marshall presented a danger because it allowed whites and blacks of the "ordinary class" to mix,

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[29] "Investigators' Reports--1916," Box 30, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

[30] For examples, see Donovan.

[31] James Weldon Johnson, who attended the club regularly, commented that it "attracted crowds of well dressed people" and that patrons had to book in advance if they wanted a table on the weekends (118-119).

which would lead to interracial sexuality and miscegenation. Whitin's response reveals that the Committee saw vice in general, and interracial sexuality in particular, as a problem of the working classes.

This argument may also reflect a complicated alliance Whitin had made with the City's black elites. At the turn of the century the black middle class began to promulgate what historians have called "the politics of respectability" (Brooks-Higginbotham). Many black leaders, particularly in the urban North, argued that adhering to bourgeois respectability would convince whites of black's worthiness for citizenship, and their basic rights to political and economic equality. black reformers attempted to "uplift" the black masses and they focused in particular on working-class blacks moving from the South to northern cities in what historians now refer to as the Great Migration. They exhorted working-class blacks to embrace more restrained styles of dress, behavior and personal expression, and placed heavy emphasis on sexual chastity for women. As a result, black organizations like the Urban League vigorously policed their own communities, chastising those who spoke too loudly on streetcars, spit in public, attended commercial amusements, or wore flashy clothing. In Detroit, the Urban League actually cooperated with vice societies and the police, reporting businesses and individuals who they suspected of participating in the informal economy of prostitution and gambling (Wolcott 93-103). In this context, Whitin's comments about class reveal his understanding of the mechanics of the politics of respectability and its inherent class bias. He clearly assumed that Du Bois would respond to an appeal made across racial lines but on the grounds of a shared class status.

In fact, the Committee had enlisted the help of leading African-American men in the fight against vice and, like the Urban League in Detroit, most of these men supported the politics of respectability as a means of racial advancement. For example, in an editorial published in 1911 in the <u>New York Age</u>, the city's most important black paper, the author fumed that "a new generation have come upon the scene in New York, many of whom have a notion that loud, boisterous and vulgar conversation, indelicately suggestive dress, dances in which the proprieties are whistled down the winds, and drinking to excess, are the things most approved to be done" ("Conduct"). The Editor of the <u>New York Age</u>, Frederick Moore, sat on the Committee of Fourteen advisory board, recommended African-American investigators to the Committee, and defended the Committee in articles and editorials against charges of racism and unfair targeting of black owned businesses ("About Committee of Fourteen").[32] Whitin's class based appeal to Du Bois indicates that his alliances with other leading black men in the city had apprised him of the politics of respectability and that he either believed in it, or perhaps more likely, he found it useful to say that he did, when negotiating with leading blacks over the Committee's right to judge black businesses.

The argument with Du Bois over The Marshall also implies a schism among black elites over the degree to which they should cooperate with white organizations like the Committee of Fourteen when it set about policing their social and business spaces. However, as later articles in the <u>New York Age</u> suggest, the paper, and the community as a whole, did not support the repression of interracial sociability and sexuality. Instead, the paper executed a complicated balancing act that condemned interracial sexuality at the same time that it opposed any laws that would prohibit these relationships. In an

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[32] See also, "To Raise the Moral Tone of Local Saloons."

article entitled "Marriage of Whites and Blacks," the paper criticized both federal and state anti-miscegenation laws for restricting the legal rights of blacks and challenged the very legitimacy of "race" as defined in America: "We do not need to favor the marriage of blacks and whites as a personal matter," the paper declared, "but we do need to stand by the principle that blacks and whites shall be free to marry if they so desire, without legal or sentimental restriction, as other races are free to do. It may be best and wisest for people to marry within their race lines, but what are the race lines of the Negro people and what legal statute can run a truthful division between the white and black lines?" ("Marriage of Whites and Blacks").[33] Appearing as it did amidst numerous articles about the alarming northward spread of segregation, this article indicates the complicated alliances that black leaders sustained in this period as they attempted to protect the limited freedoms of Northern blacks from white leaders' attempts to turn cities like New York into cities like Birmingham. After all, the president had only segregated the nation's capitol in 1912, and blacks understandably panicked at the very real threat that legal segregation would continue its march into the North. Du Bois took his stand over the Committee's attempt to close a black-owned hotel adjacent to downtown Manhattan because he feared that it would further segregate and isolate the City's black community. The New York Age took its stand over laws that encoded southern race relations into northern laws. Both feared the possibility that New York would actually allocate space and legal rights in the city on the basis of race.

  In the context of the Great Migration, both of these fears were well founded, as the use of space in interracial clubs in the Prohibition era indicates. In contrast to the bars of Hell's Kitchen, which had relied on secrecy of space that protected all patrons from exposure, Harlem's new interracial clubs of the 1920's catered to a white middle-class clientele who came as voyeurs to observe the spectacle of black life. The Great Migration of African-Americans from southern states into northern cities in search of work, better living conditions, better education, access to politics, and less overt racism, transformed race relations and entertainment in New York City in the years during and after World War I. Most of the new migrants settled in Harlem. As southern blacks moved into New York, the racial geography of the city changed. Native-born blacks also began moving to Harlem, and the more established mixed-race neighborhoods in areas like Hell's Kitchen disappeared. Establishments in Hell's Kitchen rapidly moved uptown to meet the needs of the burgeoning black population of Harlem. This concentration of blacks and the experiences of migration and the limited freedoms of the North led to an outpouring of creative and artistic expression known as the Harlem Renaissance (Lewis; Huggins; Watson). Catching the attention of middle-class whites, the music, dance, and writing of Harlem's jazz age drew prosperous whites uptown. Ultimately, this geographical shift also brought about a profound shift both in clientele and in purpose of interracial spaces in New York City.

  Writers for the New Deal's Work Progress Administration (WPA) project on Negroes in New York chronicled the move from Hell's Kitchen to Harlem. As one author explained, "ten years ago the principal colored colonies were in the vicinity [of]...a section of the tenderloin (39th Street [from] 6th Avenue to 9th Avenue) now known as

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[33] In another article, the paper conducted an informal survey of opinion among its readership and found that, "while the Negro citizens are not clamoring for amalgamation of the races, and are not interested in the subject as much as whites may appear to be, yet they take exceptions to the passage of any bill which as been designed to place the race in a humiliating position" ("Bills Against Intermarriage").

'Hell's Kitchen'. . . . Rathskellars or hunkey tunks sprung up like mushrooms in every section of the Negro Community" ("Negroes of New York" Reel 5).[34] The Great Migration and New York's racist housing restrictions funneled the new migrants into Harlem, but they also encouraged the migration of native African-American New Yorkers from scattered areas across the city. Black entrepreneurs, wishing to take advantage of the new and overwhelming concentration of African-Americans in Harlem, moved their clubs uptown.

However, many of the interracial establishments that followed the Great Migration to Harlem shifted their focus from providing protected space for blacks and whites engaging in socially unacceptable relationships to catering to, as a WPA writer noted, "rich whites" (Ibid. Reels 4 & 5). The geographical move did not necessarily require this shift in patronage, but the importation and development of new black cultural forms during the Great Migration stimulated white interest. The explosion of black cultural and musical expression fascinated whites and many sought the thrill of visiting the places where it took place. Black cultural life and its popularity among middle-class whites precipitated the shift in the purpose of these interracial establishments. As one WPA writer asserted, "up to the time of the entry of the U.S.A. into the World War . . . .Greenwich Village was the Mecca of the sophisticated and the thrill seekers" ("Negroes of New York" Reel 4). Recognizing the money to be made in catering to curious whites, some black proprietors transformed their interracial clubs from hidden space into racial spectacle. Making use of "a series of articles written about Harlem and its black and tan and white resorts," black proprietors of interracial establishments made "a bid for white patronage" (Ibid.). One owner went so far as to buy up issues of the newspaper and distribute them to interested whites. The result, the WPA author reported, was that "scores of whites poured into the Negro rathskellars" (Ibid.).

The movement up to Harlem and the fascination of "thrill seeking" middle-class whites destroyed the interracial sociability of Hell's Kitchen. Relocating in Harlem, many black owners saw profits in a different sort of interracial trade. This trade did not provide space for blacks and whites to socialize, but rather allowed white middle-class patrons to observe black entertainers. The new white customers, however, often failed to distinguish between the official entertainment and their voyeuristic observations of black social life.

Many historians have written about the ways in which Harlem cabarets such as the Cotton Club reinforced middle-class white people's sense both of class and racial privilege by their observation of what they thought of as "authentic black life." My argument about the changing construction of public space supports this analysis by examining the ways in which these clubs arranged and allocated their rooms to reinforce white patrons' sense of their own superiority and rightful place atop New York City's race and class hierarchy.

The social class of whites attending interracial bars clearly shifted with the move up to Harlem. Whereas most of the white patrons in the bars in Hell's Kitchen came from New York's working class, the new clubs gave middle and upper-class whites a tantalizing window into black night life. At Taafe's on the northwest corner of 133rd Street and 5th Avenue, an investigator reported that "tables had parties who seemed to be

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[34] Another WPA writer stated that some black entrepreneurs had been "operating basement gin-joints below the ill-famed Hell's Kitchen tenement house district but had moved to Harlem after the riots following Jack Johnson's victory over Jim Jefferies in 1910."

slumming."[35] Another man described the white patrons attending Baron Wilkins's interracial place on 134th Street: "the type of white patrons were apparently of the higher sporting element. The gay life they lead was apparent from their features." Summarizing his opinion of social class of whites in Harlem more generally, the investigator concluded that Harlem "caters mainly to a group of sporting whites from downtown."[36]

The new clubs preferred white patronage and inconvenienced and humiliated black patrons to give whites the best seats and accommodations. As one black investigator reported of the Astoria Club, "a great deal of deference was paid to...the white patrons, in particular, by Proprietor and his able deputy who acted in the capacity of head waiter and seated the favored ones." In contrast, "colored men had to seek their own tables." The Astoria Club treated its black male patrons with a disrespect that bordered on open contempt. As the investigator described, "One colored male couple who were seated at a large table were asked by the 'floor manager' to please take another place as he wanted it for 'a party of white customers coming in.'" Not willing to tolerate such an obvious slight, "the two men moved alright, but were apparently miffed at such treatment, for when the whites came in, they walked out."[37]

The management of this club deliberately communicated both a racial and a gendered message to the black and white customers. By catering to the comfort of white patrons at the expense of black men, the proprietor deliberately humiliated them, letting them know that their patronage was unimportant and, furthermore, that they themselves occupied a lower rung of the social ladder. Shaming black men served both to publicly emasculate them and to express the politics and priorities of the bar to the entire community. "Unmanning" black men was a crucial component of white supremacy, which this club practiced in an obvious form. As we shall see, some establishments, like the Cotton Club, enacted an even more extreme ordering that confirmed the position of white men atop the racial hierarchy of the city and reduced the entire black community to a position of servility and exploitation.

The management of the Astoria Club actually took its enforcement of racial hierarchy a step further, by designing an entire system to prepare space in their clubs for white patrons before white customers even entered the room. The investigator reported noticing "the ringing of a bell (after 1 am [*sic*]) which seemed to be a signal announcing the arrival of white patrons and invariably upon hearing it, the Prop. or his assistant would go out to the entrance."[38] This bell signified white patrons, and allowed the proprietor and waiters to shift the black patrons present to give whites the most desirable seats. All of this was done for whites, but not in front of them. While the whites involved may not have objected to the moving of black patrons, the very fact that this was done in their absence indicates that proprietors deliberately reinforced notions of white superiority in ways that were largely invisible to whites and at the same time quite apparent to blacks. The ringing of the bell allowed proprietors to make racial distinctions

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[35] "Investigators' Reports--1914," Box 28, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

[36] "Investigators' Reports--Restricted--1924, Democratic National Convention," Box 35, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

[37] "Investigators' Reports--1914," Box 28, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

[38] "Investigators' Reports--1914," Box 28, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

and positions seem natural and as a result served as a mechanism of racial hierarchy. Assumed to be natural and clearly invisible to many whites, racial distinctions appeared all too obviously constructed and enforced to blacks.

Another investigation of Harlem performed by a black detective at the height of white voyeurism revealed the ways in which proprietors manipulated the physical layout of their clubs to make black patrons a part of the entertainment. Like the Astoria Club, Baron Wilkins's at 134th Street and 7th Avenue favored white patrons over black, and, as the investigator stated, "the colored are shown, through the actions of the waiters, that they are not particularly wanted as patrons." The doorman received them "rather coldly" and showed them to "a table in the center." Unhappy with their central location, the party "requested a side table but he refused saying that there were none vacant. Immediately after we were seated, a group of four whites came in and they were escorted to side seats." The investigator compared the quality of the different tables allocated to blacks and whites, commenting that "the two tables in the center were of plain unfinished wood while all the other tables were of beautiful marble tops with cane bottom chairs."[39] Given inferior tables and treated rudely, this group of black customers could not help but notice their patronage was unwanted.

The management reserved tables for black patrons in the center of the establishment. This allowed white patrons to watch both the stage show and the black customers. This arrangement bolstered white's own sense of status while at the same time expanding the concept of black entertainment to encompass the black patrons. Black people watching the show thus became unwilling participants in a racial performance as white patrons watched their activities and saw their indignation over their shoddy treatment. Whites thus enjoyed both a black cabaret and the re-enactment of a racial hierarchy of which most of them approved and from which they all benefited.

Of course, the black investigator in this incident, like the men at the Astoria Club, resented and at times resisted these attempts to put black men in their place. The black men at the Astoria Club left when the waiter gave their table to white patrons. While this did not bother the club owner in the least, it did register their refusal to participate in their own degradation. The investigator at Baron Wilkins's club felt similar resentment, which he also tried to express publicly: "I said to the other people with me 'can you beat this.' We then noticed that the entertainer would slight our table altogether. We did not hesitate to let them know that we noticed what was going on."[40] Observing the changing conditions of interracial clubs and the accompanying shift in the meaning of interracial sociability, many black patrons resisted their relegation to subordinate status by vocally and visibly protesting it.

The new Harlem clubs also reinforced racial hierarchies in the clientele they accepted. In addition to treating black patrons as part of the entertainment, some clubs only admitted patrons in ways that would reinforce the privileges of whites, and in particular the rights of white men to access to black entertainment and Black women.

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[39] "Investigators' Reports--Restricted--1924, Democratic National Convention," Box 35, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

[40] "Investigators' Reports--Restricted--1924, Democratic National Convention," Box 35, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

These clubs contrasted sharply with earlier interracial or black establishments that took active steps to protect black women from white male harassment.

The famous white-owned Cotton Club, for example, used its status as a private membership organization to give white men access to black women while at the same time denying black men admittance altogether. Only members could attend, and only white men could be members. As a writer from the WPA noted with disgust, "while it was understood that the Cotton Club, "barred white women and Negro men...they reserved the right of [regulating], who could become a member of the club…Mixed Parties were O.K. if the men were WHITE and the women, BLACK. When a party was one of WHITE women and BLACK men or even if a Negro man or men were in a party of white men and women, they invoked their charter membership and demanded your card (emphasis in the original)." As the writer pointed out, "this card of course, a Negro man could not get and a Negro woman did not need" ("Negroes of New York" Reel 5). The Cotton Club's policy exemplifies both the shift in interracial entertainment and the negative implications of that shift for any improvement in racial or gender equality. Whereas the early clubs fostered a space that protected all patrons equally, these new clubs actively promoted the racial and gender hierarchy of New York City as natural, normal and right. In this context, white men's access to black women indicated the assertion of white supremacy in one of its purest forms, and starkly contrasted with the desires of other less powerful social actors.

Most black patrons noticed and resented their shoddy treatment. While there was they could do to expel whites from Harlem clubs, they could interpret this patronage in their own way, and comment on it among themselves. Perhaps the most common and certainly most amusing way to ridicule white authority and "superiority" was expressed in black dance. Using dance, black patrons turned the conception of voyeurism on its head as they openly mocked their observers.[41]

Many whites came to Harlem to both watch and participate in new dances developed and made popular by black entertainers. In an essay devoted to dances originating in Harlem, a writer from the WPA detailed the performance of a dance called the "truck": "Now let's get together while the music goes round. Put one foot forward and truck on down. Oh truck, truck, truck, on down..." After going through the steps in detail, he listed variations on the truck, which included the politician's truck "glad handing everybody," the housewife's truck, and the "imitation truck," which he described as a "white man imitating a colored man doing the truck." In a later discussion of the Charleston, the same author stated that "a hilarious part of the step was a colored person, imitating a white person doing the Charleston. The latter was supposed to be very clumsy and awkward" ("Negroes of New York" Reel 2).

Black Harlemites clearly resented both white voyeurism and the appropriation of black culture. Using dance as a way to comment on white power, black patrons expressed

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[41] I agree with Robin Kelly that it is a mistake to identify all black activities that run counter to white authority as deliberate resistance. I prefer his term, "oppositional politics," which he uses to describe situations in which the oppressed oppose domination without openly resisting it. In this case, since whites had no idea what blacks did, and since the dancing probably had little effect on either the actual conditions in the clubs, on white patronage, or on race relations in New York in general, I avoid using the term, "resistance." However, I do feel that to mock whites in this fashion was a deliberate and ingenious response to white voyeurism, patronage, and consumption of black culture. It exists as part of what James Scott might call the "hidden transcript" of the oppressed. For a discussion of these issues, see Kelly 32-34, 46-51, and 70-75. For discussion of the "hidden transcript," see Scott.

the frustration that many blacks felt at the exploitation of their cultural forms and the reduction of their presence in clubs to a form of entertainment for whites. This strategy did not actually stop whites from patronizing black bars, but given the profits and jobs that many of these establishments created in the community, it is unclear that many blacks really would have wanted that. However, mocking dance did put white participation in what blacks could view as the proper perspective. Affluent whites came uptown to bask in black culture and sat in favored seats on the periphery. What they watched, however, was not just "black culture." Turning white voyeurism on its head, black dancers danced the imitation truck and the Charleston not for, but at, white patrons. In some ways, the use of dance to mock whites indicates that black self-determination survived the creation of these new clearly unequal and racist interracial clubs. Just as earlier proprietors limited white access to black social space, black dancers commented on the limited understanding white patrons had of black culture. They could watch, the dancers seemed to say, but they could never understand or shape what they saw. Black control of black cultural forms persisted even inside clubs structured to deny black social power and affirm racial hierarchy.

Although it would be wrong to romanticize the radical possibilities of interracialism at the turn of the century, interracial clubs of the early period did provide a place for blacks and whites to come together in relative equality--to deliberately share space, food, drinks, sociability and affection--as well as to manipulate and take advantage of each other. Some of the earlier forms of interracialism still persisted in Harlem; even at its most segregated, Harlem has never been all black. The new clubs that catered to middle-class whites, however, closed off some of the more radical promise that interracialism might have had to offer American race relations. Instead of forcing whites to come to terms with the dreams, desires, and humanity of blacks, Harlem's interracial clubs merely echoed and reinforced the current power relations in the community--relations which were inherently classed and raced, which degraded black men and women, which posited white supremacy as normal, and which we have yet to fully confront in America's cities, neighborhoods, and social spaces.

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