

Chapter 9

BUILDING GAY NEIGHBORHOOD ENCLAVES: THE VILLAGE AND HARLEM

THE GAY WORLD EVOLVED THROUGHOUT THE CITY, BUT IT TOOK ITS MOST developed and visible form in just a few neighborhoods. The Bowery had been a center of fairy life at the turn of the century; by the 1910s and 1920s, two other neighborhoods had become gay centers, attracting disproportionate numbers of gay residents and commercial establishments where gay men and lesbians set the tone. In the 1920s, Greenwich Village hosted the best-known gay enclave in both the city and the nation—and the first to take shape in a predominantly middle-class (albeit bohemian) milieu. By the late 1910s, a Village song included the line “Fairyland’s not far from Washington Square,” and by the early 1930s, the Village’s gay reputation was so firmly established that a New York tabloid could quip that while a doctor had learned how to “switch the sex of animals, turning males into females, they beat the scientist to it in Greenwich Village!”¹ Gay men and women had to fight for space even in the Village, but its reputation for flouting bourgeois convention made it seem an inviting place and did in fact let them create a haven for homosexuals.

If the Village was considered the city’s most infamous gay neighborhood by outsiders, many gay men themselves regarded Harlem as the most exciting center of gay life. In a segregated city, it was the *only* place where black gay men could congregate in commercial establishments, and they were centrally involved in many of the currents of Harlem culture, from the creative literary circles that constituted the Harlem Renaissance to the blues clubs and basement speakeasies where the poorest of Harlem’s residents gathered. African-Americans organized the largest annual communal event of New York’s gay society, the Hamilton

Lodge Ball, which attracted thousands of white as well as black participants and spectators. Nonetheless, the men and women who built Harlem's gay world confronted the same challenges their white counterparts did elsewhere. While the "faggots" who were highly visible in the neighborhood's streets and nightspots might earn a degree of grudging respect from others, they had no hope of respectability. Most middle-class gay Harlemites struggled to keep news of their homosexuality from spreading, lest it cause their social downfall.

New York's first substantial lesbian enclaves developed in the Village and Harlem at the same time gay male enclaves did. Although lesbians and gay men continued to move in largely separate social worlds, they both gathered at some of the same speakeasies, including several particularly prominent ones run by lesbians or featuring lesbian performers, and lesbians attended some of the drag balls organized by gay men. The limited convergence of lesbian and gay life in the 1920s, particularly through the appearance of commercial establishments attracting both men and women on the basis of their shared participation in the gay life, marked an important stage in the emergence of the social category of the homosexual.

Neither the Village nor Harlem could be said to have been a gay neighborhood in the 1920s, for in neither did homosexuals set the tone. But each neighborhood, for different reasons, allowed a gay enclave to take shape, and the differences between those enclaves highlight the degree to which particular gay subcultures were shaped by the dominant neighborhood (or parent) cultures in which they developed.

LONG-HAIRED MEN AND SHORT-HAIRED WOMEN: THE GAY WORLD OF VILLAGE BOHEMIA

The emergence of Greenwich Village as a gay center was closely linked to the development of the bohemian community there. Although the Village had originally been north of the city's borders, a refuge for the rich from urban disorder and disease, by 1900 most of its elite residents had departed and the Village itself had been physically incorporated into a city whose borders had long since pushed far beyond it to the north. At the turn of the century the area was known simply as the Ninth Ward, dominated by working-class Italian immigrants. Only when native-born bohemian writers, artists, and radicals began to move into the neighborhood in the 1900s did it begin to be called "the Village" again—and then only by the self-styled bohemian "Villagers" who moved there, not the Italian "Ninth Warders."

The newcomers to the Village were attracted by its winding streets and Old World charm, by its relative isolation from the rest of the city, and above all by the social life its cheap apartments and services

made possible. "After college and the war," the writer Malcolm Cowley recalled of his generation of writers, "most of us drifted to Manhattan, to the crooked streets south of Fourteenth, where you could rent a furnished hall-bedroom for two or three dollars weekly or the top floor of a rickety house for thirty dollars a month. We came to the Village . . . because living was cheap."² Although the Village became the most famous bohemian community in the country in the 1910s and 1920s, subject to searching examination in the national press, similar residential districts were developing in large cities throughout the country. In many respects the Village was a prototypical furnished-room district, for it offered cheap rooms to unmarried men and women who wished to develop social lives unencumbered by family obligations and to engage in work likely to be more creative than remunerative.

Lesbians and gay men also found the cheap rents and cheap restaurants appealing, but greater attractions were the Village's reputation for tolerating nonconformity (or "eccentricity") and the impetus for social experimentation engendered in the district by the bohemians who originally settled there, for these held out the promise of making the Village a safe and even congenial place for homosexuals to live. Moreover, the particular forms of eccentricity allowed the "artistic types" made it unusually easy for gay men and lesbians to fit into Village society and also provided a cover to those who adopted flamboyant styles in their dress and demeanor.

Not only were many Villagers unmarried, but by becoming artists, free-lovers, and anti-materialists (if not always anti-capitalists), they had forsaken many of the other social roles and characteristics prescribed for their class and gender in ways stereotypically associated with homosexuals.³ Indeed, the unconventional behavior of many bohemian men—ranging from their long hair, colorful dress, and interest in art to their decided lack of interest in the manly pursuits of getting married and making money—often led outsiders to consider all of them queer. Although not everyone thought their queer tastes extended to sexual matters, the bohemian men of the Village were often regarded as unmanly as well as un-American, and in some contexts calling men "artistic" became code for calling them homosexual.

The frequent references by critics to the "long-haired men" and "short-haired women" of the Village sometimes constituted precisely such accusations of perversity, only slightly veiled, since the gender reversal implied by such images directly evoked the semiotic codes that denoted sexual perversion. In 1929, for instance, a conservative Village paper attacked bohemian women for being "so ashamed of their sex that they do their best to appear like men, claiming, however, the privileges of

womanhood just the same." It went on to charge that "the majority of that type manifestly endeavor to create a third sex."⁴

This overlapping of homosexual and bohemian characteristics threatened some straight members of the avant-garde, who often were not so tolerant of homosexuals as their reputation might suggest. Indeed, a considerable gap often existed between the *representation* and the *actuality* of Village life and mores. As the historians Ellen Kay Trimberger and Leslie Fishbein have shown, many of the leading self-identified male feminists of the Village remained deeply troubled or ambivalent about the independence of women and strove to protect their prerogatives and identities as men from the demands made by the ideologies of feminism and bohemianism.⁵ In this context it is not surprising that many of them were also troubled by the insinuation that their unorthodox behavior meant they were "queer" in a specifically sexual sense. In his 1934 memoir, Malcolm Cowley acknowledged his fear that he and his fellow writers, intellectuals, and artists were being slandered as perverts. He recalled that *Broom*, the little magazine he worked on in the early 1920s, received letters at its 45 King Street office addressed to "45 Queer Street," and "mention[ing] Oscar Wilde." He added, "I came to believe that a general offensive was about to be made against modern art, an offensive based on the theory that all modern writers, painters and musicians were homosexual. . . . I began to feel harried and combative, like Aubrey Beardsley forced to defend his masculinity against whispers." His reaction, as he frankly admitted, was to "hate . . . pan-sipoetical poets." He claimed to have had drunken dreams of a writers' revolution in the Village, when "you would set about hanging policemen from the lamp posts, . . . and beside each policeman would be hanged a Methodist preacher, and beside each preacher a pansy poet."⁶

The artistic and political bohemian men of the Village discussed sex more explicitly than their middle-class contemporaries deemed proper, and their "modern," scientific views of homosexuality sometimes disturbed the guardians of the old order. But their "frank" consideration of homosexuality was not necessarily positive, and it often simply condemned homosexuality in scientific rather than more overtly moralistic terms. John Sumner, Anthony Comstock's successor as head of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, attacked *The Masses*, a radical magazine published by Villagers in the 1910s, for addressing the question of homosexuality, but its coverage was hardly always positive.

The Masses had long mocked the Society's censorious moralism. In one issue, it published a caricature of Comstock dragging a woman by her hair before a judge and charging, "Your Honor, this woman gave birth to a naked child!" Sumner retaliated in the summer of 1916, shortly after Comstock's death and just a year before the Post Office

closed *The Masses* for good for circulating anti-war propaganda, by targeting the bookshop the magazine ran in the Village. The shop sold such classics of the new sexual thought as *Love's Coming of Age* by the British gay socialist Edward Carpenter and *The Sexual Question* by the Swiss sexologist Auguste Forel, and the magazine regularly filled its pages with ads for them. Sumner, charging that *The Sexual Question* was an "indecent book," raided the shop on August 31, arrested the circulation manager, and seized the magazine's September issue, which contained an advertisement for the book.

A few days before the raid, when Floyd Dell, the magazine's managing editor, happened to be minding the shop, Sumner had visited it to secure proof that it carried the book. As Dell later recalled, he had inquired as to why Sumner found the book so objectionable. "It was," Dell remembered, "because Forel expressed sympathy for homosexuals—or, as Sumner put it, 'approval,' which, as I remembered the book, was not true." Dell himself was hardly sympathetic to homosexuals. In his own book, *Love in the Machine Age*, he argued that homosexuality was characteristic of patriarchal societies in which women were subordinated to men, and, in the modern age of free love, was a social anachronism and sign of personal regression. He considered Forel's treatise "a very wise and good book," one of "the most enlightened books that existed upon the subject of sex," and, tellingly, he was correct in noting that it did not approve of homosexuality. It attacked the writings of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Magnus Hirschfeld, and other German homosexual crusaders as the work of "apologists," and argued that homosexuality was a perversion.⁷ Sumner, it is clear, was disturbed that Forel considered homosexuality a medical rather than a moral problem, properly in the domain of physicians rather than clergymen and moral crusaders, a perspective Dell lauded as enlightened. But it seemed unobjectionable to Dell that, in contrast to the studies of Hirschfeld, Forel's enlightened approach to homosexuality should simply condemn it as evidence of biological rather than moral degeneration. A report on the raid in the November 1916 issue of *The Masses* recorded Sumner's claim that Forel's book "advocates sodomy!" before reassuring its readers that "it does, of course, nothing of the sort." If anything, the magazine suggested in an anti-homosexual aside, it was the minds of "our prominent vice-experts" that "really do not seem to us to be normal."⁸

Dell's critique and Cowley's anxiety hardly represented the entire range of bohemian opinion on the subject of homosexuality, however, and other bohemians—especially bohemian women—accepted the gay people in their midst with greater equanimity. The anarchist Emma Goldman, for one, defended the rights of homosexuals in some of her speeches. According to the historian Judith Schwarz, not only were numerous lesbians involved in the feminist club Heterodoxy, but the club's other mem-

bers accorded lesbian relationships the same respect they granted marriages.⁹

Even a cursory review of the intellectual and political ferment of the 1910s demonstrates that numerous homosexuals participated in the bohemian milieu and that several played an important role in the construction of Village bohemia itself. Carl Van Vechten was a gay married man and a leading white critic and novelist of the 1910s and 1920s who helped introduce the white public to the Harlem Renaissance. He played a key role in the 1910s in organizing Mabel Dodge Luhan's famous salons on lower Fifth Avenue, at which socialists and anarchists, Freudians and free-lovers, artists and activists debated the issues of the day. The lesbians in Heterodoxy were open with heterosexual friends. Eugene O'Neill's companions in the Village and Provincetown included the noted gay painters Charles Demuth and Marsden Hartley, and, according to O'Neill's biographer Louis Sheaffer, the playwright based Charles Marsden, the effete, implicitly homosexual character in *Strange Interlude*, on them.¹⁰ Margaret Anderson and her masculinely attired lover, Jane Heap, published the influential *Little Review* from the Village, gathering gay and nongay writers around them.

As these few examples suggest, individual homosexuals were accepted as friends by many Villagers in the 1910s, although they were scorned by others. But gay people were initially drawn to the Village primarily as bohemians rather than as homosexuals and had little apparent interest in developing distinctively gay institutions. The development of a gay enclave resulted from the expansion and reorganization of the Village community during World War I and the postwar years, the loss of the intimacy and small scale of the Village as it was integrated into the city as a whole, and the development of a speakeasy demimonde in which gay locales might develop.

The Changing Character of the Postwar Village

The rapid commercialization of the Village during and after World War I altered its character. The construction of the subway routes along Seventh Avenue in 1917 and along Sixth Avenue in 1927-30 and the simultaneous widening and extension of both avenues transformed the Village from a remote, self-contained backwater into one of the most central and easily reached of the city's neighborhoods. Because the opening of the subway lines made the Village a more convenient place to live, growing numbers of businessmen, attracted by the Village's Old World charm, began to move there. They pushed rents up and some of the struggling artists out, real estate developers began building new apartment complexes in prime locations, and newly established taxpayers'

associations launched campaigns to clean up some of the more disreputable aspects of the Village.¹¹

Just as the Village became more accessible, the advent of Prohibition in 1920 made it a particularly attractive destination to men and women out on the town. The Italian restaurants, grocers, drugstores, and other shops that lined its streets were the city's major sources of homemade Italian wine, and people flocked to the Village for their liquor supplies.¹² The Village's national reputation as a center of "free love" and other unconventional behavior was just as intriguing to tourists. The tearooms to the west and south of Washington Square had already enjoyed a boom during the war, when they became a major attraction to the soldiers and sailors passing through the city. In the years following Prohibition, the area's speakeasies and clubs lured growing numbers of middle-class men and women out slumming, as well as men out to find the women known as "free-lovers of the Greenwich Village type."

Villagers complained that their less scrupulous compatriots had begun to cater to the tourist trade, decking themselves out in the costumes visitors expected of bohemians, selling their verse and etchings to the unsophisticated, and offering tours of a fabricated "Bohemia" to the gullible. Sheridan Square became known for the outlandish theatricality of its establishments. Don Dickerman's Pirate's Den featured "clanking chains, clashing cutlasses, ship's lanterns, and patch-eyed buccaneer waiters"; jazz clubs proliferated; and Julius', a particularly successful speakeasy at Waverly Place and Tenth Street, became known as the rendezvous of college men and "flappers."¹³

Most of the original Villagers, the political radicals and bohemian artists who self-consciously identified themselves as members of a small-scale experimental community, lamented these changes. In their eyes, the postwar Village seemed to have lost the intimacy, intellectual ferment, and genuinely bohemian aspect of its halcyon prewar days. The Village's incorporation into the city in the 1920s had turned it into another Coney Island, a cheap amusement center and playground for rich uptown slummers and poorer youths from the boroughs alike. The sociologist Caroline Ware, who published a study of the Village in 1935, reflected such misgivings when she dismissed the postwar generation of Villagers as "pseudo-Bohemians," interested less in intellectual creativity than in a mindless escape from the conventions of bourgeois society.¹⁴

Nonetheless, the condescension of contemporary observers toward the newcomers should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the Village's reputation as a center of unconventional behavior—particularly of unconventional sexual behavior—had made it a beacon not only for rich slummers but also for increasing numbers of disaffected youths from the city's outer boroughs who wished to escape the con-

straints of family and neighborhood supervision. The Village became an even more visible national symbol over the course of the twenties, as the cultural gap between Prohibition America and Jazz Age New York seemed to widen, with rural politicians pandering to prohibitionist and nativist constituencies by denouncing New York as the nation's Sodom and Gomorrah.

In this context the Village took on special significance for lesbians and gay men around the country, and disaffected New Yorkers were joined in the Village by waves of refugees from the nation's less tolerant small towns.¹⁵ As one gay man wrote in 1924: "I have for the longest time tr[ied] so hard to make people understand me, and [it] was so very hard; my friends that I know don't care for people of that kind and I left them because I always thought they would find [me] out, then I went down to the Village and [met] plenty [of gay people]."¹⁶ A hostile newspaper reporter made the same point when he asserted in 1931 that the people who flocked to Greenwich Village were "men and women taunted by their biologically normal companions in the small towns that ostracize those who neither eat nor sleep nor love in the fashion of the hundred percenter."¹⁷ They fled to the Village, and in the 1920s they built an extensive gay world there.

If the Village's reputation for unconventional sexuality attracted lesbians and gay men, their growing visibility in the district soon made homosexuality almost as much a part of the Village's reputation as free love. The presence of "fairies" and "lady lovers" in the Village was already sufficiently well known to have elicited press comment and attracted slummers by the beginning of World War I, and the Village's reputation as a gay neighborhood solidified throughout the 1920s. One 1927 account of New York nightlife noted that two women dancing together in a Times Square club elicited no comment, while in the Village it would be taken as a sign of their lesbianism.¹⁸ The "exposés" of the Village periodically published by the city's newspapers increasingly focused on the homosexual aspects of the neighborhood's "depravity." In 1931 one series spotlighted gay meeting places in its "initial [tour] of the innermost stations of Greenwich Village's sex, pollution, and human decay."¹⁹ In 1936 even the staid medical journal *Current Psychology and Psychoanalysis* published an article on the "Degenerates of Greenwich Village," which announced that the Village, "once the home of art, [is] now the Mecca for exhibitionists and perverts of all kinds."²⁰

The gay scene in the Village became so prominent that it even turned up in the movies. In the 1932 Clara Bow vehicle *Call Her Savage*, Bow's escort took her to a Greenwich Village dive patronized by artists, revolutionaries, and pairs of neatly dressed male and female couples, sitting in

booths with their arms around each other. The waiters were two young men in frilly white aprons and maid's caps, each sashaying about holding a feather duster and singing: "If a sailor in pajamas I should see / I know he'll scare the life out of me / But on a great big battleship / We'd like to be / Working as chamber maids!"²¹

Caroline Ware noted the growing prominence of homosexual circles in the Village over the course of the twenties, although she dismissed it as a fad: "As sex taboos broke down all over the country and sex experimentation found its way to the suburbs, the Village's exoticism could no longer rest on so commonplace a foundation." The Jazz Age public's growing curiosity about homosexuality, she thought, simply provided the Village with a new angle: "The Village became noted as the home of 'pansies' and 'Lesbians,' and dives of all sorts featured this type." Villagers "pass[ed] on from free love to homosexuality . . . to mark the outposts of revolt."²²

Throughout her study Ware regarded homosexual behavior and identity, particularly that of women, as nothing more than something that "normal" people experimented with as part of a general "revolt," rather than as part of a significant effort to shape a personal and collective identity. Indeed, she suggested that in the late 1920s, homosexuality, and especially lesbianism, had become chic among Villagers, including numerous heterosexual women (whom she derisively termed "pseudo-Lesbians," as though they were a subcategory of "pseudo-Bohemians") who behaved like lesbians simply because it seemed the thing to do. "By 1930, promiscuity was tame and homosexuality had become the expected thing. One girl who came nightly [to a speakeasy noted for its gay patronage] was the joke of the place because she was trying so hard to be a Lesbian, but when she got drunk she forgot and let the men dance with her."²³ Despite Ware's cynicism, however, her observations suggest that by the 1920s, homosexuality had become more acceptable in Village circles and that lesbians and gay men had seized the opportunities provided by the general bohemian rebellion to construct a sphere of relative cultural autonomy for themselves.

The history of the dances, or balls, held at Webster Hall on East Eleventh Street near Third Avenue illustrates how gay people used the openings created by bohemian culture to expand their public presence; it also points up the commercialization and homosexualization of the Village's reputation. The first and most prominent of the balls were thrown in the mid-teens by the Liberal Club to finance its operations. But the financial rewards of organizing a ball had soon become so evident that entrepreneurs unaffiliated with any community group began to sponsor them, competing to produce the most outlandish balls and

attract the largest audiences.²⁴ Floyd Dell, one of the organizers of the Liberal Club's first ball, lamented that the club's success had "shown the more commercially enterprising among us another way to make money out of the bourgeoisie." The balls had "finished the process [of betraying the Village's original ideals] which the restaurants [that drew slummers] had begun."²⁵

Reports submitted by Committee of Fourteen agents investigating "vice conditions" in the wartime Village confirm Dell's recollection that as the reputation of the Village as a bohemian enclave grew, increasing numbers of slummers from throughout the city visited the balls in order to get a taste of the unconventional life. As one agent reported in 1917: "Many of the people are advertising their dances as Greenwich Village dances in order to get the crowd, and it works."²⁶ In a later report he noted, "These dances are getting quite popular." The reason was obvious: "Most of those present at these dances being liberals and radicals, one is not surprised when he finds a young lady who will talk freely with him on Birth Control or sex psychology."²⁷

"Free love" was an important part of the attraction of the Village balls, but so, too, was homosexuality. In 1918 the same investigator reported that an increasingly "prominent feature of these dances is the number of male perverts who attend them. These phenomenal men . . . wear expensive gowns, employ rouge[,] use wigs[,] and in short make up an appearance which looks for everything like a young lady."²⁸ In another report he confirmed how essential such "phenomenal men" were to the allure of the Village balls when he commented that a ball had attracted "the *usual crowd* who go expecting to find ['Homosexualists'] there. Some of the latter mocking [the 'Homosexualists'], others actually patronizing them, associating with them during the night and dancing with them. . . I mean," he added, "*men with men.*"²⁹

Part of the attraction of an amusement district such as Greenwich Village, like that of Harlem, was that it constituted a liminal space where visitors were encouraged to disregard some of the social injunctions that normally constrained their behavior, where they could observe and vicariously experience behavior that in other settings—particularly their own neighborhoods—they might consider objectionable enough to suppress. The organizers of the balls were well aware of this phenomenon and welcomed the presence of flamboyant gay men—sometimes making them a part of the pageants they staged—precisely because they knew they enhanced the reputation and appeal of such events. At the Liberal Club's Golden Ball of Isis, attended by two thousand people in February 1917, Horace Mann (well known to the audience, apparently, as a "noted homosexualist") took the major role of the slave in love with the

Egyptian goddess Isis in the 1 A.M. pageant.³⁰ Some Villagers expressed reservations about the presence of such men—in 1922 one Villager worried publicly that “the golden goose of Village ball promotion was slowly being strangled by the admission of stags and certain mincing undesirables from uptown who love to exhibit themselves in dainty effulgence”³¹—but bohemian ideology encouraged the toleration of unconventional forms of sexual expression and identity. Gay people clearly capitalized on this tolerance to claim their right to participate in Village affairs.

A Visible Gay Presence

By the early 1920s, the presence of gay men and lesbians in the Village was firmly established. No longer were they simply visitors to the Liberal Club’s masquerade balls. They organized their *own* balls at Webster Hall and appropriated as their own many of the other social spaces created by the bohemians of the 1910s. Chief among these were the cheap Italian restaurants, cafeterias, and tearooms that crowded the Village and served as the meeting grounds for its bohemians. Gay men and lesbians seem to have become noticeable in such locales during World War I, at about the same time they began attracting attention at the Liberal Club’s balls.³² By the end of the war, the gay presence seemed to some worried observers to have become ubiquitous: an anti-vice agent investigating a MacDougal Street restaurant in 1919 commented that “in this restaurant, *as in all other Greenwich Village places*, there are all sorts of people among [the customers], many obviously prostitutes and perverts, especially the latter.”³³

The gay presence became even more noticeable after the war, when lesbians and gay men began opening their own speakeasies and tearooms. In the early 1920s at least twenty restaurants and tearooms “catering to the ‘temperamental’ element” were said to exist in the Village. Some were a few blocks west of Washington Square Park on Christopher and Charles Streets; others were located in the heart of the Village’s bohemian commercial district just south and west of the Square, along MacDougal Street to the south and along West Third and Fourth Streets as far west as Sixth Avenue and Sheridan Square. The Flower Pot, run by Dolly Judge, was described as a “gay and impromptu place where excitement reigned from nine in the evening until the wee hours of the morning.” Located at the corner of Christopher and Gay Streets, it was not far from the Pirate’s Den, a straight tourist trap, and just around the corner from Trilby’s, another gay rendezvous. Charles Street was the home of the Red Mask, a club run by the well-known gay impresario Jackie Mason, and a third “ultra-ultra speak,” which, one account noted, “isn’t Ireland even if the fairies may be seen there.”³⁴

The arrangements made for the Fourth of July party held in 1922 at the Jungle, a "hangout for fairies" at Cornelia Street and Sixth Avenue, indicate how secure gay men and lesbians felt in the area. The club advertised its party by distributing a handbill promising souvenirs, refreshments, a jazz band, and entertainment by "Rosebud" and the "Countess." Rosebud and the Countess were men—not female impersonators, but gay men, or "degenerates," as an investigator who had attended the event after seeing the notice described them—apparently with a local reputation big enough to draw a crowd. Their audience consisted primarily of unattached men and women, the investigator reported, most of them apparently "fairies," many of them seemingly wealthy, "lady lovers of [the] Greenwich Village type," and, apparently, a few interested heterosexuals. The club had obviously made arrangements to ensure police protection—and protection from the police. The investigator noted that "a uniformed patrolman who is stationed in here was sitting with some of these fairies at one table and conversing with them and also entertained by them. . . . It appeared that he took a great interest [in] this performance [by Rosebud and the Countess] and clapped his hands after [the] performance was over."³⁵

Such arrangements could stave off the police for only so long, however. After receiving numerous complaints from real estate interests trying to "upgrade" the Village and from parents who had discovered their sons were frequenting the places surreptitiously, the police launched a series of crackdowns in 1924 and 1925. In the spring of 1925 they succeeded in having two of the proprietors convicted of keeping disorderly houses; one was sent to the penitentiary. By one account, they had closed all but three of the clubs by May. But several more soon opened.³⁶

Many of the gay and lesbian clubs were modeled on the "personality clubs" that had played an important role in building the original Village community. The original clubs were run by gregarious men and women whose personalities set the tone for their establishments and attracted a following. Their restaurants and tearooms served as the salons of the Village intelligentsia. The proprietors made sure that new patrons were welcomed and introduced to regulars, they sponsored poetry readings, musicales, and discussion groups, and, above all else, they offered a congenial environment in which regulars could maintain ties with their friends and meet other like-minded people. The best known of such locales in the 1910s was Polly's Restaurant on MacDougal Street. Run by Paula Holladay with the assistance of her husband, the restaurant served as the unofficial dining club of the Liberal Club, which met in the rooms above it.³⁷

When several gay men and lesbians such as Dolly Judge followed Holladay's lead by opening similar places in the 1920s, they quickly

became leading centers of gay social life. Gay residents of the Village formed the core of their patronage, but these restaurants also provided a home-away-from-home for gay visitors from other parts of town, a place where people who had no private space of their own in the neighborhood could gather nightly and construct a social world for themselves. This function was especially important for poorer men and women; Caroline Ware noted that many would-be Villagers forced by high rents to live with their relatives or crowded with other youths in the outer boroughs had succeeded in making the Village their social center by spending their evenings in its restaurants and cafeterias, and their number surely included gay men and women. Although gay people were not the only patrons of the gay-run restaurants, they predominated and set the tone. By the late twenties, as Ware discovered, most of the personality clubs had closed, making it more difficult for newcomers to meet others and become a part of the Village community. But lesbian and gay clubs represented a notable exception to this trend; homosexuals, especially lesbians, found it easier than most other newcomers to find an entrée into the Village community.³⁸

One of the best-known gay personality clubs in the Village in the 1920s was Paul and Joe's. It had opened as an Italian restaurant at the corner of Sixth Avenue and Ninth Street in 1912, and during the war years, when the Village was thronged with soldiers on leave, it was considered a "tough place," reputed to attract prostitutes who robbed their customers. Although some gay men and lesbians may have patronized it then, it did not have a gay reputation and seems to have begun cultivating a gay following only after the war, when it began hosting impromptu drag performances. The club gave several female impersonators their start, including Jackie Law, who opened his own place, the Studio Club on Fifteenth Street near Fifth Avenue, in the late twenties, and Gene Malin, whose nightclub act played a prominent role in the pansy craze of the early thirties (see chapter 11). By the early twenties, the restaurant had established itself as a major gay locale in the Village.

In an effort to escape the police crackdown in the Village in 1924, Paul and Joe moved their restaurant up Sixth Avenue to a building on the corner of Nineteenth Street, thus removing it from the Village proper. There they controlled the rooms upstairs, which patrons could rent for the evening for private parties. With the move, Paul and Joe consolidated their position, quickly becoming, by one account, the "headquarters for every well-known Lesbian and Queen in town," who felt no need to hide their homosexuality there and who were joined by numerous stage and screen celebrities, opera divas, and underworld figures. The restaurant also became identified publicly as a gay rendezvous. One gossip sheet

mentioned its homosexual patrons several times in 1924, and in 1925 the writer and Village booster Bobby Edwards described it as the “hang-out of dainty elves and stern women” in the pages of his magazine, the *Greenwich Village Quill*. It closed around 1927, possibly due to the efforts of the Committee of Fourteen.³⁹

After the 1925 crackdown, the block of MacDougal Street south of Washington Square—the site of the Provincetown Playhouse and numerous bohemian restaurants, gift shops, and speakeasies—became the busiest, and certainly the best known, locus of gay and lesbian commercial establishments. Lesbians managed several of the speakeasies there in the twenties. The most famous of the lesbian proprietors was Eva Kotchever, a Polish Jewish émigré who went by the name Eve Addams (also spelled Adams), an androgynous pseudonym whose biblical origins her Protestant persecutors might well have found blasphemous. Called the “queen of the third sex” by one paper and a “man-hater” by another, after the police crackdown of 1925 she opened a tearoom at 129 MacDougal Street that quickly became popular with the after-theater crowd. A sign at the door announced “Men are admitted but not welcome.”⁴⁰

Addams’s place soon aroused the ire of some of the neighborhood’s bohemians, including Bobby Edwards, who ran a regular commentary on Village events and personalities in his *Greenwich Village Quill*. Although Eve’s place stood directly across the street from his office, he failed to mention it or its weekly poetry readings, musicales, and discussions until the summer of 1926. In the June issue that year he listed the club in his Village guide. “Eve’s Hangout,” it announced, “Where ladies prefer each other. Not very healthy for she-adolescents, nor comfortable for he-men.” Despite the ad, Edwards participated in a poetry reading at Eve’s on June 15, which drew a number of other locally prominent poets, and he provided an unusually long account of it in his July issue, which noted that “the place [was] jammed.” Two nights after the poetry reading, however, the police raided the club. Addams, charged with writing an “obscene” book, *Lesbian Love* (reportedly a collection of short stories about “the lesbian element”), as well as with disorderly conduct, was sentenced to a year in the workhouse and was deported the following December. (Upon her arrival in Paris, she was said to have opened a lesbian club in Montmartre.)

Edwards published no comment on the raid, noting in his September 1926 issue only that “Eve’s place is gone,” and that she had been replaced by a new, more commendable proprietor. Five years later, however, the raid on Eve Addams’s place was still recalled bitterly by many Villagers, and at least one commentator contended that the police had been led to act by a campaign orchestrated by Edwards against the visibility of lesbians in the Village. Edwards seems to have

been sensitive to such charges, for in the *Quill* published around the time of the raid he contended that while he had often “longed to cast out [from the Village] all radicals, Freudians, androgynes, narcissi, etc., . . . I was no Mussolini or Savonarola.” But he concluded hopefully that “now it looks like we’re going to have a real Village again,” and in the following issue he reiterated his disdain for lesbians by commenting in an essay on the Village that “boys must be boys. But girls mustn’t.”

Addams was remembered fondly by many Villagers. In 1929, three years after her deportation, a Village theatrical group surreptitiously presented a play based on her *Lesbian Love* stories at the Play Mart, a cellar theater on Christopher Street. *Variety* reported that the two-week run drew “mainly an audience of queers,” who asserted that recent lesbian-and gay-themed plays on Broadway, including *The Captive* and *Pleasure Man* (see chapter 11), seemed like “kindergarten stuff in comparison.” The performers, who billed themselves as the Scientific Players and called the play *Modernity*, had planned a four-week run. But they abruptly closed the show after being tipped off that the police planned to raid it.⁴¹

In the late twenties and early thirties, Addams’s tearoom was succeeded by several other ventures on the blocks of MacDougal just south of Washington Square. The Black Rabbit on MacDougal at the corner of Minetta, “one of the Village’s gay stamping grounds,” was as well known for its lesbians in overalls as for its rum concoctions before the police closed it around 1929. Louis’ Luncheon, at 116 MacDougal, which attracted a varied crowd of writers and Ziegfeld Follies chorus girls, had a reputation as a lesbian and gay hangout in the early 1930s.⁴² The Bungalow, a speakeasy run by a former prizefighter who called himself Battling Thompson, attracted some of the Black Rabbit’s old customers—nothing but “lisping boys and deep-voiced girls,” according to one scornful account in 1931. Next door stood Julian’s, a cheap and popular “whole-in-the-wall [sic] lunch counter” run by “a mannishly attired lady.” Julian, one of the major gay entrepreneurs of the period, subsequently opened the Left Bank, a restaurant on Wooster Street just south of the Square, whose announcement card sported a drawing of a sexually ambiguous couple (most likely two women, one femininely and the other mannishly attired) and the promise of entertainment by Eric, formerly the pianist at Tillie’s, a Harlem restaurant patronized by homosexuals. Julian and a partner also organized a dinner dance and rumba revue on Sunday evenings at the Fullhouse Restaurant on West Fourth Street at Cornelia, near the old site of the Jungle.⁴³

The unprecedented success of lesbians and gay men in claiming space in the Village was signaled by several developments in the Village press

in the late twenties and early thirties. The underemployed writers and artists of the Village produced a number of small and usually short-lived neighborhood journals, particularly in the early years of the Depression. Most of them devoted attention to the gay scene. Some of them, like Bobby Edwards's *Quill*, were hostile. In its inaugural issue in 1929, *Greenwich Village: A Local Review*, one of the more conservative and overtly boosterish of the papers, ran a long diatribe against the bohemian women of the Village stigmatizing their behavior as lesbian-like.⁴⁴

But other papers adopted a more benign perspective, and by the early thirties several columnists were presenting an unprecedentedly positive view of the gay presence in the Village. The *Greenwich Villager*, published weekly in 1933–34, included a reference to the "short-haired women and long-haired men [who] filled the streets" in its description of the changes brought about in the Village by the war, and casually included gay references in its gossip column and articles.⁴⁵ Billy Scully, a columnist for the *Greenwich Village Weekly News*, went further, supporting gay clubs and including complimentary references to prominent lesbian and gay personalities in his gossip column, "Village on Parade." His background is obscure, but he displayed an insider's knowledge of the history of the Village's gay community. In a 1931 column he praised the "brilliance" of the customers at Billie Champion's "lesbian hang-out" of the early 1920s, and he described Eve Addams's club, closed five years earlier by the police, as "one of the most delightful hang-outs the Village ever had."⁴⁶ He openly defended a lesbian musician (who remained unnamed, but presumably would have been known to those who followed the Village club scene or the newspapers' reviews) by attacking a "Broadway columnist" who criticized the musician's playing "because she prefers the attention of a certain girl to the unwanted affection showered on her by the writer and his brother."⁴⁷

Scully and other pro-gay columnists assumed their readers were sophisticated in their knowledge of gay matters. Four years after Eva Kotchever was deported (and five years after her MacDougal Street tea-room was padlocked), a second columnist for the *Greenwich Village Weekly News* alluded to her famous pseudonym by noting that the gay novel Parker Tyler was "working like mad on" was "to be called something like 'Eve's Adam.'"⁴⁸ (It was finally called *The Young and Evil*, and, given its gay content and surrealist style, had to be published in Paris.) The papers these columnists wrote for were as short-lived as the others of their genre, but the fact that some of them were prepared to publish pro-gay comments by pro-gay writers, many of which seemed designed for a sophisticated gay audience with a sense of its history, indi-

cates the extent to which lesbians and gay men had established themselves in the Village.

The opposition that Addams's tearoom and the other gay-run clubs that succeeded it on MacDougal Street encountered should not obscure the more important fact that the very existence of such clubs in a middle-class milieu was unprecedented. Before the development of the bohemian community in the Village, middle-class gay life had always been conducted covertly, and commercial establishments publicly identified as gay had been restricted to working-class entertainment districts such as the Bowery. In the 1890s, when the notorious "degenerate resort" the Slide stood on Bleeker Street, just two blocks south of Washington Square and two blocks east of MacDougal, the neighborhood was occupied largely by poor African-Americans and Italians. That gay life was more open in working-class than middle-class society should not be surprising, given the findings of other recent historical studies. Although historians long assumed that change in attitudes concerning sexuality had begun in the middle class in the 1910s and 1920s, and only later percolated down to the more "rigid" working class, recent work has suggested that much of the new "freedom in manners and morals" among middle-class youths in the twenties was modeled on that of working-class youths, who were generally more direct about sexual matters than bourgeois reticence allowed.⁴⁹

But the growing toleration of homosexuality within the bohemian elements of middle-class society did not simply replicate older working-class attitudes. Homosexually active men in the working class had hardly been "free," as we have seen; rather, their behavior had simply been circumscribed by a different pattern of social regulation, which shaped them as firmly as bourgeois propriety shaped their middle-class brethren. The gay clubs of the bohemian Village seem to have tolerated a wider range of gender behavior on the part of gay men than the Slide; to use the terminology of the era, they were open resorts for "queers" (who did not clearly demarcate their difference from "normal men" by their inversion of gender norms) as well as for "fairies" (who did). Their clientele was "mixed," in that, like the Slide, they attracted queer and straight men alike, but also because, unlike the Slide, they attracted non-prostitute women as well as men and were often *run* by women.

Moreover, the straight and queer men who interacted in the MacDougal Street clubs, unlike those at the Slide, did not, as a rule, do so as potential sexual partners. Some bohemian men might be willing to experiment, but most of them, unlike the "normal" men at the Slide, had begun to think of themselves as heterosexuals properly interested only in the women they socialized with at the clubs. Queer and straight men thus thought of themselves as sexually incompatible as well as sex-

ually different. They also often thought of themselves in other terms altogether, as bohemians united by their rejection of bourgeois convention. By the 1930s there were still relatively few commercial institutions where queers or fairies could openly socialize (with or without the presence of heterosexuals). The appearance of clubs in the Village patronized openly by queers and straights alike thus represented an unprecedented expansion in the possibilities for gay sociability and marked a decisive change from earlier patterns in both working-class and middle-class society.

The gay history of Greenwich Village suggests the extent to which the Village in the teens and twenties came to represent to the rest of the city what New York as a whole represented to the rest of the nation: a peculiar social territory in which the normal social constraints on behavior seemed to have been suspended and where men and women built unconventional lives outside the family nexus. Attracted by the Village's bohemian reputation, gay men and lesbians soon played a distinctive role in shaping both the image and reality of the Village, for they became part of the spectacle that defined the neighborhood's colorful character, even as they used the cultural space made available by that character to turn it into a haven. Although their numbers remained small and their fellow Villagers did not always live up to their reputation for open-mindedness, gay people in the 1920s seized the opportunity provided by Village culture to begin building the city's most famous gay enclave.

"IN THE LIFE" IN HARLEM

Although Greenwich Village's gay enclave was the most famous in the city, even most white gay men thought gay life was livelier and more open in Harlem than in the Village—“Oh, much more! Much more!” the artist Edouard Roditi declared.⁵⁰ “Harlem was wide open,” a white female impersonator recalled. The clubs would “be open all night long. Some of them didn’t *open* until midnight.”⁵¹ It was easier for white interlopers to be openly gay during their brief visits to Harlem than for the black men who lived there round the clock. But black gay men nonetheless turned Harlem into a homosexual mecca. Denied access to most of the segregated restaurants and speakeasies white gay men patronized elsewhere in New York, they built an extensive gay world in their own community, which in many respects surpassed the Village’s in scope, visibility, and boldness. The Village’s most flamboyant homosexuals wore long hair; Harlem’s wore long dresses. The Village had cafés where poets read their verse and drag queens performed; Harlem had speakeasies where men danced together and drag queens were regular customers. The Village’s Liberal Club ball was attended by scores of drag queens

and hundreds of spectators; Harlem's Hamilton Lodge ball drew *hundreds* of drag queens and *thousands* of spectators. Among outsiders, Greenwich Village's reputation as a gay mecca eclipsed Harlem's only because it was a white, middle-class world—and because Harlem's singular reputation as a black metropolis took precedence over everything else.

Harlem had become Manhattan's major black neighborhood in the 1900s and 1910s. Most of the community's rowhouses had been built by speculative builders in the last years of the nineteenth century. A collapse in the area's real estate market around 1904—and the aggressive tactics of a handful of realtors—made those houses available to blacks just as they were being forced out of their old neighborhood in the West Thirties by the construction of Pennsylvania Station. By the mid-teens, more than 80 percent of Manhattan's African-Americans lived there, and by the early 1920s, Harlem was home to most of the city's major black churches and social organizations.⁵²

Harlem consolidated its status as New York's leading black neighborhood just as World War I led tens of thousands of Southern blacks to migrate to New York and other Northern cities. The Great Migration, as historians have called it, was precipitated by the sudden availability of thousands of well-paying jobs in Northern industry due to the military mobilization of white workers and the cutoff of European immigration. Many blacks also viewed moving North as an act of political self-determination, tied to the elevation of the race as well as to individual improvement. To many southern migrants, the North seemed a land of freedom, where they could escape the grinding poverty, political powerlessness, and daily indignities to which they seemed forever condemned in the Jim Crow South. African-American newspapers, published in Northern cities and smuggled by Pullman car porters to blacks in Southern towns where the papers were banned by white officials, trumpeted the good wages and free life to be found outside the secessionist states. Some barbershop proprietors, small shopkeepers, churchwomen, and other local leaders organized the move North of whole communities, which re-created themselves on the blocks of Harlem and Chicago's South Side. The ferment of the Great Migration, the heated debate among blacks about whether they should support a racist government's war to "preserve democracy," and the bitter disappointment that resulted when scores of anti-black race riots broke out in the year following the war produced an unprecedented level of militancy in the immense new black neighborhoods spread across the North.⁵³

The largest and most significant of these neighborhoods was Harlem. In the 1920s, Harlem became to black America what Greenwich Village

became to bohemian white America: the symbolic—and in many respects, practical—center of a vast cultural experiment. A huge black metropolis unlike anything America had seen before, it was home to soaring black cathedrals, thriving businesses, a wide array of social clubs, and Marcus Garvey's militant black nationalist movement, to dozens of elegant nightclubs and hundreds of basement jazz clubs and speakeasies, and to the poets, artists, and novelists whose work produced the Harlem Renaissance. Above all, it was home to what African-Americans themselves called the New Negro, self-assured and determined to control his or her own destiny. Seventh Avenue from 110th to 148th Streets was "the crossroad of the Negro world," one Harlemites wrote in the 1930s, "where Black people from Africa, our own southern states, the West Indies, South America, parts of Asia and many of the half forgotten Islands of the East Indies meet."⁵⁴

Harlem's elegant and lively nightlife also made it the Paris of New York, one of the city's most popular entertainment districts.⁵⁵ "Harlem was really jumpin'" in the 1920s, the singer Bricktop recalled. It "was the 'in' place to go for music and booze, and it seemed like every other building on or near Seventh Avenue from 130th Street to 140th was a club or a speakeasy.... Every night the limousines pulled up... and the rich whites would get out, all dolled up in their furs and jewels."⁵⁶ Pointing to its "sizzling cafes, 'speaks,' night clubs and spiritual seances," *Variety* declared in 1929 that Harlem's "night life now surpasses that of Broadway itself."⁵⁷

The liquor and the sensational floor shows available at Harlem's clubs attracted white visitors. But so, too, did their growing curiosity about the vibrant African-American society taking shape in Harlem. The production of several musicals featuring black performers, especially *Shuffle Along*, which opened on Broadway in 1921, helped further the new interest in black culture. The publication in 1926 of *Nigger Heaven* by Carl Van Vechten provoked a storm of outrage among black intellectuals, who criticized its depiction of Harlem life as well as its title, but its very caricature of black lasciviousness only whetted white New Yorkers' interest in the neighborhood and reinforced their sexualized—and condescending—attitude toward the neighborhood's people.

Some whites went "slumming" to cabarets and small after-hours clubs in Harlem where blacks predominated. But most slummers felt safer visiting the enormous white-owned clubs that excluded blacks from the audience. There they could experience a highly contrived version of black culture by listening to jazz bands and watching elaborate (but "primitive" and sometimes salacious) floor shows. "One of the New York evening pastimes," a typical New York guidebook noted in 1925, "is to observe the antics of members of its enormous negro pop-

ulation, many of whom show great ability in song, dance and comedy performance. . . . Their unfailing sense of rhythm, their vocal quality, something primitive, animal-like and graceful in their movements,” the guide explained in a stunning summary of the era’s racist construction of blacks as primitive other, “combine to make their performances interesting to all who can put racial prejudice out of their minds.” As the guide pointed out, “Most of these shows . . . try to establish a Southern illusion”; the Cotton Club, the Everglades, and other clubs adopted Southern names and motifs to evoke the history of black subordination and to emphasize the subordination of the African-American performers. The clubs thus played on their customers’ desire to feel they were transgressing the conventional boundaries of race while resolutely confirming them.⁵⁸

The ascendancy of Harlem’s nightlife—particularly its speakeasies and brothels—also owed much to the willingness of city authorities to look the other way as a largely white-controlled “vice industry” took shape in a poor black neighborhood. Even the Committee of Fourteen devoted less effort to the moral regulation of Harlem than of white neighborhoods.⁵⁹ Although it advocated the eradication rather than the segregation of vice, it effectively colluded in the concentration of “vice” in Harlem by virtually ignoring the neighborhood. Only in 1928, at the height of the white invasion of Harlem, did the Committee temporarily hire an African-American investigator to study prostitution there. But after publishing a report indicting the district as a den of immorality, it turned its attention back to neighborhoods it cared about more.⁶⁰

As the historian Eric Garber has shown, an extensive gay and lesbian social world developed in this complex cultural context.⁶¹ Among the thousands of young men and women who flocked to the land of freedom were people who hoped Harlem would liberate them from the conformity imposed in small Southern communities. Although some evidence suggests that gay men were more accepted in rural black communities than in comparable white communities, moving to the city made it possible for them to participate in a gay world organized on a scale unimaginable in a Southern town. In 1930 three times as many African-American men aged thirty-five to forty-four were unmarried in Harlem as in South Carolina, one of the major sources of Harlem’s migrants, and almost twice as many as in the nation as a whole.⁶²

Harlem’s gay world was perhaps the most complex in the city because segregation forced such a wide range of people to live side by side: successful professionals and wealthy businesspeople occupied the immaculate townhouses and apartment buildings of Sugar Hill and the elegant Italianate brownstones of Striver’s Row (138th and 139th Streets), while the poorest of new migrants crowded into tenements

and subdivided rowhouses nearby. Gay life suffused the district, but the class and stylistic conflicts that divided the white gay world elsewhere in the city took on special force in Harlem, simply because so many people from such varied backgrounds were gathered together. Black gay life was also complicated by the number of white gay men visiting Harlem, who enjoyed a kind of freedom unavailable to their black hosts. Like the straight white slummers who made Harlem's jazz clubs and speakeasies their playground, gay white men visiting Harlem were leaving behind the communities and families who enforced the social imperatives that normally constrained their behavior. But unlike the white visitors, black gay men and lesbians had to negotiate their presence in the shops and churches of Harlem as well as its clubs.

X

SISSY MEN IN WORKING-CLASS HARLEM

Although Harlem was best known to outsiders for its glamorous clubs, most Harlemites socialized at corner cabaret saloons, basement speakeasies, and tenement parties thrown to raise money for the rent.⁶³ There Harlem's poorest residents danced, drank, saw their friends, and claimed stature and respect in a cultural zone governed by their own social codes rather than those of white employers or the black bourgeoisie. Many of those locales attracted prostitutes, gamblers, and other "disreputable" folk who participated in what they called the "sporting life" or simply "the life." Lesbians and gay men were "in the life" as well, and they mixed easily with the other guests at many such gatherings.

At speakeasies where men and women engaged in sexually charged behavior, lesbians, gay men, and sometimes the latter's "normal" male friends were likely to do the same in the full view of the other patrons. Late one night in May 1928 the black investigator hired by the Committee of Fourteen was taken to a speakeasy in the basement of a building on West 136th Street, where he witnessed lesbians and gay men socializing with a larger number of straight people. In the front room men and women sat around drinking, talking, and laughing, but in a back room a larger group of people were dancing:

Another woman was dancing indecently with a man. . . . Several of the men were dancing among themselves. Two of the women were dancing with one another going through the motions of copulation. One of the men [invited me to dance]. I declined to dance. I also observed two men who were dancing with one another kiss each other, and one sucked the other's tongue.⁶⁴

Gay men were a fixture at many quieter places as well, recognized and accepted by other patrons. When the investigator visited the Blue Ribbon Chile Parlor in the basement of 72 West 131st Street, at two in the morning, he found a handful of men and women drinking. The women were prostitutes trying to make connections, and one of the patrons casually pointed out two of the men as "noted faggots."⁶⁵

Some men carried themselves openly as fairies in the streets of other working-class neighborhoods, but perhaps nowhere were more men willing to venture out in public in drag than in Harlem. Drag queens appeared regularly in Harlem's streets and clubs. When Cyril Lightbody opened a café on Seventh Avenue in December 1930, its informal atmosphere immediately attracted "the artistic group, freethinkers, communists and thrill-seeking youths from downtown," according to Baltimore's *Afro-American*. "Sunday afternoon was its opening and we saw erotics, neuretics [sic], perverts, inverters and other types of abnormalities, cavorting with wild and Wilde abandon to the patent gratification of the manager and owner. . . . About two A.M., five horticultural gents came in 'in drag' as the custom of appearing in feminine finery is known."⁶⁶

The casual acceptance of the drag queens at Cyril's Café and the frequency of their appearance in Harlem's streets suggest a high degree of tolerance for them in the neighborhood as a whole. Still, it took considerable courage for men to appear in drag, since they risked harassment by other youths and arrest by the Irish policemen who patrolled their neighborhood. Over the course of two weeks in February 1928 the police arrested thirty men for wearing drag at a single club, Lulu Belle at 341 Lenox Avenue near 127th Street. Five men dressed in "silk stockings, sleeveless evening gowns of soft-tinted crepe de chine and light fur wraps" were arrested on a single night.⁶⁷

Some drag queens refused to cower before the police and defied them all the way to the courthouse. Two "eagle-eyed" detectives patrolling Seventh Avenue early one Sunday morning in 1928 enjoyed watching the amusing antics of four young women who "seemed well lit up and out for a glorious morning promenade" until they realized the "girls" were "pansies on parade." They quickly arrested the quartet and marched them to the 123rd Street police station; the next morning the men were sentenced to sixty days in the workhouse. Still defiant, the drag queens, aged eighteen to twenty-one, mocked the officers by shouting "Goodbye dearie, thanks for the trip as we'll have the time of our lives" as they were led out of the courtroom.⁶⁸

Not all drag queens were so defiant. After a policeman casually looked at a twenty-one-year-old "woman" as they passed each other on 117th Street late one night in 1928, the "woman," fearful that the policeman

had realized he was a female impersonator, began to run. Keen to learn what the "woman" had to hide, the patrolman chased her down the street, up some stairs, and across the rooftops until cornering her. Although later commenting that "'she' could run faster than any 'woman' he had ever chased," the policeman realized he had arrested a drag queen only when they got to the station. The queen had good reason to fear arrest. He had already been arrested twice, once for degenerate disorderly conduct and once for masquerading as a woman, and had served three months in the workhouse on the latter charge.⁶⁹ When in 1932 the police raided a Seventh Avenue apartment, perhaps a buffet flat, and arrested the twenty-seven men they found gambling and drinking there, one of them, a forty-two-year-old in women's clothes, leapt from the second-floor window, fracturing his skull and spine.⁷⁰

Although "faggots" were casually integrated into many lower-class social settings, they also became part of the spectacle at some of the local resorts. They played a particularly prominent role in some of the neighborhood's buffet flats. As Eric Garber has explained, the flats were private apartments whose tenants made their rooms available to paying guests. They had originally developed to meet the needs of black travelers denied space at white hotels, but developed a wilder reputation in the 1920s, functioning as virtual speakeasies, where drinking, gambling, and other illegal activities could take place. The most notorious offered their customers live sex shows as well as prostitutes. The gay sex shows became part of the entertainment for Harlem's "lower" elements, much as the fairies and sex shows of the Bowery had been to an earlier generation of immigrants. It was "an open house, everything goes on in that house," recalled Ruby Smith of a Detroit-based flat she had visited with her aunt Bessie Smith.

They had a faggot there that was so great that people used to come there just to watch him make love to another man. He was that great. He'd give a tongue bath and everything. By the time he got to the front of that guy he was shaking like a leaf. People used to pay good just to go in there and see him do his act.

A buffet flat featuring an immense female impersonator on 140th Street in Harlem was known as "The Daisy Chain" or the "101 Ranch."⁷¹

The place of gay men in the culture of black working-class migrants was captured by the blues, the primary expressive musical form of poorer blacks. The blues reflected the everyday experiences, disappointments, conflicts, and resolve of these migrant men and women in a racist society. Most blues singers were migrants themselves, who had joined

touring vaudeville troupes to escape the South or had taken jobs in cellar speakeasies as an alternative to domestic service, and who identified more with the prostitutes and poor people who patronized their clubs than with respectable Harlemites. Many of them were lesbian or bisexual: Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Alberta Hunter, and, above all, Gladys Bentley, who performed in a tuxedo and top hat and married her white lesbian lover in a much discussed ceremony.⁷² Some of their songs offered pungent critiques of the injustices migrants faced, while others evoked the personalities and everyday events of the “lowlife” milieu. Along with their songs about lonely separations from loved ones gone North and the need to put up with violent husbands and petty employers, they sang about “sissies” and “bulldaggers”—and about men who turned to sissies in place of their wives. Ma Rainey complained about her husband leaving her for a sissy man named “Miss Kate.” Several male blues singers recorded “Sissy Man Blues,” in which they demanded “If you can’t bring me a woman, bring me a sissy man.” The songs typically represented the sissy man as a fairy—a “lisping, swishing, womanish-acting man,” in one of Bessie Smith’s songs, which also referred to “a mannish-acting woman.”⁷³ They did not celebrate such people, but they recognized them as a part of black working-class culture and acknowledged their potential sexual desirability to “normal” men.

A select group of “noted faggots” became famous in Harlem. Most famous of all, perhaps, was “Gloria Swanson” (nee Winston), a female impersonator who had already won a clutch of prizes at Chicago’s drag balls and had run his own club there before moving to New York around 1930. He quickly found employment in New York as hostess at a popular cellar club on West 134th Street. “Here he reigned regally,” one gay Harlemiter noted, “entertaining with his ‘hail-fellow-well-met’ freedom, so perfect a woman that frequently clients came and left never suspecting his true sex.” He sang “bawdy parodies,” danced a bit, and appeared constantly in “net and sequins, velvet-trimmed evening-gown-skirts displaying with professional coyness a length of silk-clad limb.” The press took note of his appearances at the neighborhood drag balls and clubs. “Gangsters and hoodlums, pimps and gamblers, whores and entertainers showered him with feminine gee-gaws and trappings; spoke of him as ‘her,’ and quite relegated him to the female’s functions of supplying good times and entertainment.”⁷⁴

Swanson had moved to New York at an opportune moment. The late 1920s and early 1930s were the heyday of lesbian and gay clubs and performers in Harlem, as in much of the city (see chapter 11). As Bruce Nugent, a gay African-American writer explained, it was a time when

"male" and "female" impersonation was at its peak as night club entertainment. . . . The Ubangi Club had a chorus of singing, dancing, be-ribboned and be-rouged "pansies," and Gladys Bentley who dressed in male evening attire, sang and accompanied herself on the piano; the well-liked Jackie Mab[ley] was one of Harlem's favorite black-faced comediennes and wore men's street attire habitually; the famous Hamilton Lodge "drag" balls were becoming more and more notorious and gender was becoming more and more conjectural.⁷⁵

Many of the gay-oriented clubs were located in the area between Fifth and Seventh Avenues, from 130th to 138th Street, where most of Harlem's best-known clubs were clustered. The Cotton Club, Connie's Inn, Barron's, the Lenox, and other clubs that attracted a large (and sometimes exclusively) white trade were in this district, along with the Savoy Ballroom, Small's Paradise, and other clubs welcoming a largely black or interracial audience. Many of the district's most notorious speakeasies and clubs lined a strip on 133rd Street between Lenox and Seventh Avenues known as "The Jungle." Gay entertainers with large gay followings were featured at several of the district's clubs, including the Hot Cha at 132nd Street and Seventh Avenue, where the well-known entertainer and host Jimmie Daniels sang sophisticated tunes. A handful of clubs catered to lesbians and gay men, including the Hobby Horse, Tillie's Kitchen, and the Dishpan, and other well-known clubs, including Small's Paradise, welcomed their presence.⁷⁶

Although many gay entertainers included songs with sophisticated double-entendre in their repertoire, few were open to outsiders about their homosexuality. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, though, several gay hosts and entertainers moved out of basement saloons and into some of the district's better nightclubs. Gloria Swanson was perhaps the most prominent gay club host; Gladys Bentley was the most visible lesbian. "Huge, voluptuous [and] chocolate colored," according to one fan, Bentley was as famous for her tuxedo, top hat, and girlfriends as for her singing. Although she sang the blues, she was best known for ad-libbing popular ballads, show tunes, and the like, to give them a salacious edge—and for encouraging her audience to join in singing the now "filthy lyrics." As Eric Garber reports, she turned two Broadway tunes, "Sweet Georgia Brown" and "Alice Blue Gown," into an "ode to the joys of anal intercourse":

And he said, "Dearie, please turn around"
And he shoved that big thing up my brown.
He tore it. I bored it. Lord, how I adored it.
My sweet little Alice Blue Gown.

After a series of one-night stands at rent parties, buffet flats, and cellar clubs, Bentley landed steady jobs at two clubs in "Jungle Alley" on 133rd Street, including Hansberry's Clam House, which attracted an interracial audience of literati and entertainers, including many gay men and lesbians. She made her lesbianism and "bulldagger" looks part of her show-business persona at each of these clubs. When she finally moved on to the Ubangi Club, she toned down her lyrics to the merely risqué, wore "flashy men's attire," and headed a revue that included a pansy chorus line composed entirely of female impersonators.⁷⁷

The visibility of bulldaggers and faggots in the streets and clubs of Harlem during the late 1920s and early 1930s does not mean they enjoyed unqualified toleration throughout Harlem society. Although they were casually accepted by many poor Harlemites and managed to earn a degree of grudging respect from others, they were excoriated by the district's moral guardians. Many middle-class and churchgoing African-Americans grouped them with prostitutes, salacious entertainers, and "uncultured" rural migrants as part of an undesirable and all-too-visible black "lowlife" that brought disrepute to the neighborhood and "the race." Like other black Northern communities—and like white New York—Harlem was rent by deep class and cultural divisions. An old elite of merchants, entrepreneurs, and professionals and an emerging middle class of teachers, artisans, and salaried employees struggled to steer the destiny of their neighborhoods and to exert control over the huge numbers of poor southern migrants flooding in. As the cultural historian Hazel Carby has shown, they organized homes to protect—and police—young single migrant women, called on the police to close brothels and buffet flats, and denounced dance halls and cabarets as a threat to the advance of the race and to their position as a respectable class of blacks.⁷⁸

Sexuality became one of the critical measures by which the black middle class differentiated itself from the working class and constituted itself as a class. As Carby shows, the figure of the sexually irresponsible woman became one of the defining tropes of middle-class African-American discourse, a symbol of the dangerous social disintegration that urbanization could bring. Many white middle-class New Yorkers regarded the single woman in similar terms, but black middle-class women found it particularly crucial to attack—and distinguish themselves from—images of black female sensuality because racist ideology used those images so effectively to stigmatize all black women as morally debased.⁷⁹ Similarly, the "womanish-acting man" became a special threat

[Handwritten mark: a large green X is drawn across the top left margin.]

to middle-class black men because their masculinity was under constant challenge by the dominant white ideology. As in white middle-class discourse, the attacks on homosexuals were usually but a part of a wider attack on men and women who threatened the social order by standing outside the family system.

Harlem's leading churchmen periodically railed against the homosexual "vice" growing in the neighborhood. Churches were major political forces and centers of social life in Harlem, their ministers' statements commanding close attention from the press and political leaders. The visibility of gay people and the tolerance afforded them in Harlem—even in some of its churches—was a particular concern of Harlem's most powerful minister, Adam Clayton Powell, the pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church from 1908 to 1937 and perhaps the most famous African-American clergyman in the nation. A champion of civil rights and an early leader of the Urban League and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Powell was also a tireless campaigner against "immorality" in African-American society. *[Handwritten mark: a large green X is drawn across the right margin.]* As the influential leader of one of the city's most prestigious black congregations, he used his political ties to drive prostitutes and gambling dens from the streets around his church. By his own account, he developed a close relationship with the African-American press after an editor of Harlem's *New York Age* supplied him with information about buffet flats run by churchwomen in his own congregation and promised to publish any sermon he gave denouncing them. "I have not known a more helpful ally than the Negro press," Powell later claimed, and through the years it magnified the power of his anti-vice crusades by giving them extensive publicity.⁸⁰

The press outdid itself, however, when Powell launched a sensational attack on homosexuality in the African-American community—and particularly in the rectory. "DR. A. C. POWELL SCORES PULPIT EVILS" a banner headline across the front page of the *New York Age* proclaimed on November 16, 1929. The pastor "delivered a scathing and bitter denunciation of perversion as practised by many moral degenerates who not only are men and women of prominence in the secular world, white and colored, but many of whom fill the pulpits of some of the leading churches of the country," the paper announced. Charging that sexual perversion was "steadily increasing" in large American cities, Powell claimed that perversion among women "has grown into one of the most horrible, debasing, alarming and damning vices of present day civilization, and is . . . prevalent to an unbelievable degree."⁸¹

A week later, Powell claimed his office had been inundated with information revealing that the problem was even more extensive than he had believed. He implicitly blamed much of the problem on young people's

"contact and association" with homosexuals in the world of dance halls, cabarets, and rent parties when he warned that "the seeking for thrills of an unusual character by the modern youth" led many to experiment with homosexuality. Homosexuality, he seemed to say, was simply the last step down the road to ruin for morally weak youth. Moreover, personal degeneration had wider social consequences, for the spread of homosexuality threatened the Negro family, the bedrock of social stability, "causing men to leave their wives for other men, wives to leave their husbands for other women, and girls to mate with girls instead of marrying."⁸² The homosexual, like the heterosexual single woman, was a sign of the social disorganization that accompanied urbanization. Powell's emphasis on the dangerous extent of lesbianism in the black community suggests that he saw women's refusal to marry as posing the most insidious threat to the black family.

Other ministers joined the assault in the following weeks, preaching sermons or writing letters to the papers in support of Powell's denunciation of homosexual vice. A white philanthropist who funded programs for the moral reformation of African-American life signaled his approval of the campaign, condescendingly calling it "one of the most cheerful signs we have respecting the great advance that has been made among this ten per cent of our population, who have had every conceivable drag put upon their efforts to be . . . Christians in spirit and in truth."⁸³

Powell took special umbrage at the ministers who continued to preach despite being publicly accused of homosexual assaults on boys in their churches, and even more at the congregations that supported them despite full knowledge of such charges. He was particularly concerned, he later explained, about preachers "who had been publicly accused of abnormal sex practices" and about the churches that "with a full knowledge of [their] sins called [them] to its pulpit."⁸⁴ Although neither Powell nor the other ministers publicly named the offenders they had in mind, they described some of the cases in sufficient detail that knowledgeable parishioners would have been able to recognize the targets. Powell presumably hoped to hound such ministers from their posts, and it is likely that rumors about the identities of the offenders began to spread at the social hour following the service and washed through Harlem for weeks thereafter.

The results of such whisper campaigns are uncertain. Nonetheless, the intensity of Powell's denunciation suggests the lack of a consensus supporting his position within the black church. Although no one spoke up publicly to defend gay pastors from Powell's attack, some congregations appear to have been willing to accept gay pastors and choirmen so long as they observed a degree of discretion—and even, in some cases, when their homosexuality was well known or had resulted in legal trouble.

"The only reason a church keeps a rotten minister is because it is rotten," Powell charged. The very vehemence of his attack suggests how "rotten"—or tolerant—certain churches may have been.

Many African-American newspapers joined church leaders in attacking homosexuals, as Powell's press coverage shows. This was consistent with their general editorial policy, for many papers took on the role of policing their community as well as boosting it. In the wake of the Great Migration, black newspapers regularly exhorted Southern newcomers to assimilate into Northern society by leaving their "uneducated" rural ways behind. They lectured migrants on how to carry themselves properly on buses, what to wear, and how to behave in public, all for fear that disreputable behavior would bring disgrace to the whole community.⁸⁵ Some of them policed the lives of Harlem's working people by reporting on arrests—and policed the lives of middle-class men and women as well by publishing gossip columns. Gossip about purported homosexuality posed one of the gravest threats to a man's reputation; the press magnified that threat immensely by taking it into the public sphere. The *Amsterdam News* often published the names, addresses, ages, and occupations of men arrested for female impersonation or homosexual solicitation, thus multiplying the consequences of the arrest. The *Inter-State Tattler*, an East Coast black society and gossip sheet, lived up to its name by including news of gay relationships in its gossip columns. Along with engagement announcements, rumors of love triangles, and reports of divorces, the paper included accounts of gay romances and broken hearts such as this:

Louis W—, who is so temperamental that he changes friends as often as Peggy Joyce changes husband, has secretly leased an apartment in 141st Street with Kenneth S—. They have a not too bad "joint" with soft lights, incense, and everything. And poor William is singing "How about me?" [Full names appeared in the original.]

The next item announced: "Theodore H—, you don't act like yourself nowadays. Do tell us who the lucky man is!"⁸⁶ It is possible that these men were already well known as gay in the community and enjoyed seeing their names in the paper. The light-hearted tone suggests this interpretation. But the paper had a negative reputation among gay men. "The *Tattler* went after people who were arrested," one black gay man recalled. "Anyone who was important, anyone who was gay."⁸⁷ Such items were not that common, but they were common enough to serve as a warning. In 1932 one of the paper's columnists launched a broadside against Harlem as a whole in the course of explaining why he had been unable to attend the previous weekend's social affairs. He had briefly

"deserted Harlem where men are 'that way,' to spend a week in the wide open spaces where men ARE men."⁸⁸

The Hamilton Lodge Ball

Nothing reveals the complexity—and ambivalence—of the attitudes of the black press and Harlem as a whole toward gay men and lesbians more than the Hamilton Lodge ball, the largest annual gathering of lesbians and gay men in Harlem—and the city. (A more thorough discussion of the internal organization and cultural significance of the city's drag balls appears in chapter 10.) The organizers of the ball, Hamilton Lodge No. 710 of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, officially called it the Masquerade and Civic Ball, but by the late 1920s everyone in Harlem knew it as the Faggots Ball. Precisely when it acquired that name is not certain. Some observers writing in the late 1930s, when its reputation was well established, thought the ball, held annually since 1869, had always been a female impersonators' event. Somewhat more reliable sources, however, suggest the gay element became prominent only in the 1920s, perhaps after a new group of organizers within the lodge took charge of the ball in 1923. Although some drag queens had almost certainly attended the ball before 1926, a newspaper report that year was the first to note the presence of a sizable number of "fairies"—about half of all those present. "Many people who attend dances generally declare that the . . . ball was the most unusual spectacle they ever witnessed," the paper noted with some understatement.⁸⁹ A decade later, one observer summarized the common wisdom when he explained matter-of-factly that the ball drew together "effeminate men, sissies, 'wolves,' 'ferries' [sic], 'faggots,' the third sex, 'ladies of the night,' and male prostitutes . . . for a grand jamboree of dancing, love making, display, rivalry, drinking and advertisement."⁹⁰

Although whites attended the ball as both dancers and spectators, most of the guests were black. Lesbian "male impersonators" and straight masqueraders attended as well as gay men, but the latter constituted the vast majority of dancers and the focal point of attention. Although some upper-middle-class men showed up in drag, most of the drag queens—like the majority of "flaming faggots"—were young workingmen. The seventeen men arrested for homosexual solicitation at the 1938 ball included two laborers, two unemployed men, a dishwasher, a domestic servant, an elevator operator, a counterwoman, a handyman, an attendant, a clerk, and a nurse, along with a musician, an artist, and an entertainer. More than half were under thirty, and only one was over forty years old.⁹¹

The ball's popularity grew steadily in the late 1920s and peaked in the early 1930s, when a "pansy craze" (discussed in chapter 11) seized

the city. About eight hundred guests attended the 1925 ball and fifteen hundred in 1926. But as the event became known as the Faggots Ball, growing numbers of spectators attended not to dance but just to gawk at "Harlem's yearly extravaganza—'The Dance of the Fairies."

"Four thousand citizens, numbering some of Harlem's best, elbowed and shoved each other aside and squirmed and stepped on one another's toes and snapped at each other to obtain a better eyeful," the *Amsterdam News* reported in 1934.⁹² Three thousand spectators gathered to watch two thousand "fairies" dance in 1929, and during the following three years, at the height of the ball's popularity, up to seven thousand dancers and spectators attended. Attendance hovered around four thousand for the rest of the decade, but leapt to eight thousand in 1937.⁹³

Harlemites turning out to see the balls included celebrities, avant-garde writers, society matrons, prostitutes, and whole families who sometimes brought their suppers.⁹⁴ At the beginning of her career, the singer Ethel Waters not only attended the balls but boasted about the prizes won by drag queens (fans from a local club) to whom she had loaned her gowns. The singer Taylor Gordon "call[ed] up everyone I thought hadn't been to one" to urge them to attend a ball where he would serve as a judge. "That night the hall was packed with people from bootblacks to New York's rarest bluebloods," he recalled.⁹⁵ In February 1930 the young white writer Max Ewing attended the ball, where "all the men who danced . . . were dressed as women, wearing plumes and jewels and decorations of every kind." He observed several wealthy spectators, black as well as white, who had taken boxes to view the display, and watched the dancers do "special exhibition dances" in front of the boxes of the two most prominent black women present, the heiress A'Leila Walker and the singer Nora Holt.⁹⁶ Two years later an alderman served as a judge at the costume contest.⁹⁷

Those who did not attend the Hamilton Lodge ball could read about it every year from the mid-1920s until the end of the 1930s in Harlem's largest paper, the *Amsterdam News*, and often in the *New York Age*, Baltimore's *Afro-American*, and the *Inter-State Tattler*. In the 1930s the black press paid more attention to the Hamilton Lodge ball than to any other ball held in Harlem, regularly publishing photographs or drawings of the winning contestants, interviewing them and describing their costumes, and listing the dozens of society people in attendance—almost all in the news section on the first or second page, not buried in the society pages where the balls thrown by other social clubs got briefer notices. Its coverage reflected the growing interest of straight Harlemites in these affairs in the late 1920s and 1930s—and the ambivalence with which they viewed them.

In the 1920s the papers were likely to deride the dancers as “subnormal, or, in the language of the street, ‘fairies.’”⁹⁸ By the early 1930s, though, as the number of society people and ordinary Harlemites attending the ball approached seven thousand, most papers adopted the more positive (or at least bemused) attitude of those spectators. Some accounts delighted in parodying the camp tone of the dancers. “GRACIOUS ME! DEAR, ‘TWAS TO-OO DIVINE,” ran the 1936 *Amsterdam News* headline, in imitation of the dancers’ arch chatter; the following year its headline reported familiarly: “PANSIES CAVORT IN MOST DELOVELY MANNER AT THAT ANNUAL HAMILTON LODGE ‘BAWL.’” All the reporters expressed genuine admiration for—and astonishment at—the extravagance and creativity of the costumes. Even the sneering 1929 reference to subnormal fairies appeared under a headline citing the “GORGEOUS COSTUMES.”

Even the relatively conservative *New York Age* changed its tune as the ball’s popularity grew. “Clubs would do well to ask this body for the secret of their success,” its 1932 account began.

To one of the largest gatherings that has ever graced this hall [Rockland Palace] came the all-conquering Hamilton Lodge, resplendent in all the panoply of pomp and splendor, to give to Harlemites who stood in wide-eyed astonishment at this lavish display a treat that shall never be forgotten. The usual grand march eclipsed in splendor all heretofore given by them, and women screamed full-throated ovation as the bizarre and the seeming impossible paraded for their approval. . [We] say ‘All Hail, Hamilton.’”⁹⁹

Another column reporting on the weekend’s social events reluctantly admitted that “All those who were missing from Friday night’s club affairs were located . . up at the Rockland Palace at the ‘Fairies’ ball. Oh, yeah!,” it added. “We will never understand that.”¹⁰⁰ But where their readers went, the papers followed.

The complex spectacle of the drag balls allowed observers to position themselves in a variety of ways. They were all careful, though, to distinguish themselves from the queers who organized and participated in the affairs, often by casting aspersions on the Hamilton Lodge itself. “Say, Jack, in case you didn’t know, this function was given by the Odd Fellows,” a 1936 account reminded its readers in the most common and most obvious pun. A 1933 account made it even more obvious by referring to “The Grand United Order of (Very) Odd Fellows,” and in 1937, an unusually mean-spirited promotional piece for the ball called the lodge a “society of strange fellows,” a “wigged fraternity,” and a “famed, effete and ubiquitous society of . . Odd Fellows.”¹⁰¹

While many black middle-class men—like white middle-class men—found the drag queen a disquieting figure, he also served as a foil whose utter effeminacy confirmed the manliness of other black men. Male columnists sometimes used jocular, man-to-man terms to describe the affairs. “Jack, the chicks were ready at the Hamilton Lodge toe-warming ball at Rockland Palace last Friday night,” one columnist reported in 1936. He described the drag queens in the same dismissive terms he might have used for other “chicks”: “The ‘girls’ proved to be a temperamental lot. They fussed and squabbled all over the joint. . . . When one of the ‘girls’ had her train stepped on she promptly cussed out the other ‘girl’ . . . and accused the ‘low-down huzzy’ of trying to steal the show.” But he also evinced a remarkable degree of manly interest in the “girls”: “Some of the contestants were luscious looking wenches. . . . Others were gloriously clad. . . . Many pranced like thoroughbred women. . . . Every one of them was notoriously effeminate.”¹⁰² A typical 1929 account used the “notorious effeminacy” of the female impersonators—their near-perfect rendition of stereotypical feminine demeanor—to ridicule women who did not perform the role of women as successfully. “One could learn a great deal (meaning the female of the species) on how to deport one’s self when on parade” by observing the impersonators, it advised.¹⁰³



The interracial character of the ball provoked varying responses. In the 1920s some black observers openly expressed hostility toward the whites who attended and virtually blamed the presence of homosexuals and female impersonators in Harlem on bohemian whites from Greenwich Village. The issue exploded in April 1926 when the well-known party impresario James Harris organized a benefit for the Fort Valley Industrial School, a school in Georgia that often received the support of respectable black charitable organizations. Advertised as a “Benefit Costume Ball . . . [where] The Village and Harlem . . . Will Meet,” it drew attention from the black press around the country when dozens of female and male impersonators showed up. The *Chicago Defender* described it as “one of the gayest affairs that the night life of New York has yet been able to furnish . . . weirdly and grotesquely dressed men and women of both races revelled till the wee hours of morn.”¹⁰⁴ But another paper denounced the “disgraceful antics of the male women and female men who are said to have attended the benefit by the scores” for sullying the name of the “splendid” school, which “stood for the making of manly men and womanly women, for thrift, industry and christian [sic] character among the colored people.” Homosexual whites were the last people to whom blacks seeking respectability should turn, it argued, warning: “The discarded froth of Caucasian society cannot lift them or their

race in the respect and confidence of the Caucasian world.”¹⁰⁵ In 1929 the *Amsterdam News*'s report on the Hamilton Lodge ball still took umbrage at the presence of “some of the most notoriously degenerate white men in the city” who “seized the opportunity of a masquerade to get off some of their abnormality in public.” The *New York Age* seems to have found the dancers' willingness to cross racial lines in their coupling at the 1926 ball no less disquieting than their cross-dressing.¹⁰⁶

Many Harlemites found the participation of whites to be intriguing rather than disturbing, however, and the press began to reflect this perspective in the 1930s. The presence of white drag queens at the balls reversed the racial dynamic usually at work in interracial encounters in Harlem, presenting whites as an object of spectacle for blacks. An *Amsterdam News* cartoonist drew attention to this reversal in his 1936 depiction of black men in the audience watching a white drag queen on stage (see figure 9.2). Some spectators also took delight in watching the transgression of racial boundaries that seemed to accompany the transgression of gender and sexual boundaries—and in watching white gay men forced to transgress them by their entry into a space controlled by black gay men. As one bemused Harlem observer, Abram Will, noted of the Hamilton Lodge ball:

There were corn fed “pansies” from the deep South breaking traditional folds by mixing irrespective of race. There were the sophisticated “things” from Park Avenue and Broadway. There were the big black strapping “darlings” from the heart of Harlem. The Continent, Africa and even Asia had their due share of “ambassadors.” The ball was a melting pot, different, exotic and unorthodox, but acceptable.¹⁰⁷

For a moment, moreover, the *racial* differences between black and white spectators, although hardly forgotten, were overshadowed by their common positioning as “normal” bystanders who were different from the queer folk on the ballroom floor. In a city where racial boundaries were inscribed in the segregation of most public accommodations (integrated buses notwithstanding), the difference between normal spectators and abnormal dancers was inscribed in the differentiation of the balcony and other viewing areas from the dance floor. Each zone was racially integrated, but marked as sexually different from the other.

Racial divisions were hardly erased at the balls, however. Drag queens mixed across racial lines but never forgot them, as Abram Will's careful delineation of European-, African-, and Asian-American participants made clear. Moreover, racial iconography was central to many of



Figure 9.2 Harlem's leading newspaper, the *Amsterdam News*, regularly carried pictures of the winning contestants in the costume competition at the Hamilton Lodge ball, New York's biggest drag ball. In 1932, the paper's illustrator pictured the "girls," and in 1936 he poked gentle fun at the rivalry, glamour, drunkenness, and gender ambiguity of the annual affair. He also poked fun at straight Harlem's response: note the expressions of desire and confusion on the faces of the two black men looking at the white drag queen. (*From the Amsterdam News: "The Artist Pictures the 'Girls,'" March 2, 1932; "And, Girls, How They Carried On!" March 7, 1936.*)

the dancers' costumes. "Among the outstanding costumes" at the 1932 ball, according to the *Inter-State Tattler*,

were a pair of Flora Dora girls in sweeping Empire gowns of red velvet trimmed in black velvet . . . an African chieftain, his tribal marks in gold, the sacred bull's horn on his head and ropes of wooden beads around his neck; an oriental dancer with long hair; a belle of the gay '90's—parasol and all; . . . a bare foot east Indian in colorful flowing robes; a black and red be-ruffled Spanish señorita; [and] no end of . . . Colonial dames.¹⁰⁸

The balls became a site for the projection and inversion of racial as well as gender identities. Significantly, though, white drag queens were not prepared to reverse their racial identity. Many accounts refer to African-American queens appearing as white celebrities, but none refer to whites appearing as well-known black women. As one black observer noted, "The vogue was to develop a 'personality' like some outstanding woman," but the only women he listed, Jean Harlow, Gloria Swanson, Mae West, and Greta Garbo, were white.¹⁰⁹

The pageantry of the balls sometimes exacerbated the racial divisions in the gay world. The costume competition became a highly charged affair, with all sides watching to see whether a black or white queen would be crowned. The Harlem press took considerable interest in the racial aspect of the competition, taking special note in 1931 when a black contestant, Bonnie Clark, was awarded the grand prize for the first time.¹¹⁰ He won again in 1932, but after losing in 1933 he denounced the racial injustice of the city's drag competitions. "There is a conspiracy afoot," he told the black press. "I participated in seven of these masquerades last year and except for the one here [sponsored by the Hamilton Lodge], they are always arranged for the white girls to win. They never had no Negro judges."¹¹¹ "Considerable rivalry exists between the ofay chicks and the Mose broods," a columnist for the *Amsterdam News* declared after attending the ball in 1936. "Last year an ofay won the costume prize. This year a Mose 'girl,' Jean La Marr, won the \$50."¹¹² While much of the black press used a mocking tone to distance itself from both the black and white contestants, it nonetheless often took the side of black contestants, regarding them as Harlem's representatives in the competition and thus granting them a place in black society.

The Price of Respectability

As the response of Harlem's press and public to the drag balls suggests, drag queens and other gay men could earn the grudging respect



—and even the awe—of many Harlemites. But they could not achieve respectability. “While youth will have its fling,” the newspaper attack on the 1926 Fort Valley Industrial School Benefit had warned, “there is a special need for the colored graduates of northern Universities to emulate the solid and substantial characters of their forefathers.” Harlem’s social elite and intelligentsia made it clear that the open expression of one’s homosexuality precluded participation in respectable society. As noted in chapter 7, W. E. B. Du Bois fired the managing editor of *The Crisis* upon learning that he had been arrested for homosexual solicitation in a public washroom. Whatever Du Bois’s personal response to the revelation of the man’s homosexual interests, it seems clear he believed it necessary to dismiss the man to safeguard the reputation of the journal.¹¹³

Gay members of Harlem’s middle class were well aware of this injunction and felt obliged to exercise greater discretion than many workingmen did. This was the case even among the most avant-garde of Harlem’s middle class, the writers and poets of the Harlem Renaissance, the flowering of black literary arts in the 1920s that transformed the American literary landscape. Indeed, the contours and constraints of middle-class gay life are exemplified by the problems faced by this group of avant-garde writers. (A full survey of the role of lesbians and gay men in the Harlem Renaissance is beyond the scope of this social history.)

Gay social networks played a key role in fostering the Renaissance. Two of its major patrons, Howard University professor Alain Locke and Carl Van Vechten, were gay men who took more than a purely literary interest in the young writers they championed and brought to the attention of publishers and benefactors. As cultural historians such as Eric Garber, David Levering Lewis, Amitai Avi-ram, and Alden Reimonenq have begun to show, many of the leading male poets and novelists of the Renaissance were gay-identified or sexually active with men as well as women, including Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, Bruce Nugent, Claude McKay, and possibly Langston Hughes. They regularly socialized with each other in gay settings and discussed the affairs they were having with other men. A gay artist from France who was immediately drawn into their circle when he visited New York in the late 1920s recalled that “there was a whole small crowd of rather nice gay blacks around Countee Cullen. They used to meet practically every evening at Caska Bonds’ and sit by the hour playing cards there.” They were also involved in broader gay social circles, attending the gay parties thrown by Bonds, Clinton Moore, Eddie Manchester, and other black gay men, and the extravagant “mixed” parties thrown by the millionaire heiress A’Leila Walker and Van Vechten.¹¹⁴

Several of their novels depicting the Harlem scene included gay and lesbian characters, including Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1927) and Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) and *Infants of the Spring* (1932). As Avi-Ram, Reimonenq, and other critics have noted, the poetry of Countee Cullen and possibly other Renaissance figures can be read as offering critiques of heterosexism as well as racism and odes to homosexual love as well as to black solidarity.¹¹⁵ In their boldest collective move, in 1926 they published *Fire!!*, an avant-garde literary journal that included Bruce Nugent's "Smoke, Lillies, and Jade," an extraordinary homoerotic story (or prose poem) celebrating his cruising and consummating an affair with a Latin "Adonis."¹¹⁶ Their flamboyance was instantly denounced by Harlem's leading intellectuals and social figures, including Alain Locke, who considered such flamboyance unacceptable.

Although these gay social networks played an important role in the construction of the Harlem Renaissance, they were carefully hidden. Most of its writers, like most other middle-class African-Americans, endeavored to keep their homosexuality a secret from the straight world. Even Bruce Nugent, the most audacious of the circle, published his story under the name Richard Bruce to avoid embarrassing his parents. Countee Cullen, who had begun to identify himself as gay before he turned twenty and was involved in several long-term relationships with men, twice married women in search of respectability. His first wedding, to Yolande Du Bois, daughter of W. E. B. Du Bois, was one of the major social events of 1928, but their marriage quickly foundered. Yolande appears to have cooperated in making sure that the Harlem press reported Cullen was infatuated with another woman, but she confided to her father that Cullen's homosexuality was the problem. Cullen married again twelve years later, even though he was romantically involved with another man. As Reimonenq has shown, Cullen became increasingly concerned in the 1930s and 1940s to hide his homosexual liaisons, using codes to refer to them in his letters to friends and signing letters to his beloved with a pseudonym. Cullen had quickly become one of the most celebrated poets of the Harlem Renaissance and had no illusions about what the revelation of his homosexuality could do to his career.¹¹⁷

Another bright star of the Renaissance, the novelist Wallace Thurman, also spent years worrying that his homosexuality would be used against him. He had been arrested within weeks of arriving in the city for having sex with a white hairdresser in a 135th Street subway washroom. Although he gave police a false name and address and a minister bailed him out, word of the arrest began to spread. Four years later, having established himself as an editor and leader of young black writers, he still felt dogged by rumors of the arrest and wondered anxiously

whether others had heard of it. His fears were exacerbated when his wife, after a short and unsuccessful marriage, threatened to use his homosexuality as grounds for divorce. "You can imagine with what relish a certain group of Negroes in Harlem received and relayed the news that I was a homo. No evidence is needed of course beyond the initial rumor," he wrote a friend in 1929, denying that the rumor was true.¹¹⁸

The organization of the Hamilton Lodge ball codified the differences between the public styles of middle-class and working-class gay men. Middle-class men passing as straight sat in the balcony with other members of Harlem's social elite looking down on the spectacle of workingmen in drag. Although the newspapers regularly noted the appearance of Caska Bonds, Harold Jackman, Edward G. Perry, Clinton Moore, Eddie Manchester, Jimmie Daniels, and other middle-class gay men at the balls, they simply included them in the lists of other celebrities and society people in attendance, all presumed to be straight.¹¹⁹ Some of the society people they joined to watch the queers must have known of their involvement in the gay life, and undoubtedly some of the reporters and readers of the papers knew as well. But all concerned seem to have agreed not to say anything.

The differences between the social worlds and public styles of middle- and working-class gay men should not be exaggerated, however. Men often interacted across class lines, gathering at the same speakeasies and sharing some of the same pleasures. And they negotiated their way through the neighborhood in not altogether dissimilar ways. Workingmen and men who had migrated to Harlem without their families were more likely than middle-class men to present themselves as gay men in the public sphere, but even they might choose to keep their participation "in the life" distinct from their family life. Many workingmen moved between two worlds, appearing as drag queens at the balls and as dutiful sons in their parents' apartments. Adopting a camp name helped them keep the two lives separate. "John Smith" could become "the sepia Mae West" at a drag ball, and even be quoted in the papers as Mae West, without drawing attention to John Smith. One man who had attended the Hamilton Lodge ball in drag recalled his panic when a neighbor asked him about it at a family dinner the next day. His brother and a friend, who were wise to the situation, immediately covered for him to protect his parents from the embarrassment of learning—or seeing a guest learn—that their son was a drag queen. "Nobody wanted their parents to know," he insisted.¹²⁰ Another man participated actively in the gay life for years without telling his sister, even though he shared an apartment with her. When he brought a man home, he simply told her that it was a friend who couldn't get home that

night. She probably knew the score, but she never asked, and he never told. It seemed a fine arrangement to him, since it allowed him to take part in gay life while also continuing an important family relationship.¹²¹ The "open secret," widely known but never spoken, governed many working-men's relations with their families, just as it governed some middle-class men's relations with the larger social world.

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