

**Wayward Women and Lady-Lovers:  
Same-Sex Intimacies Between Women in Progressive Era New York City,  
1901-1930**

Emily Reed



Barnard College  
History Department  
Thesis Advisor: Professor Celia Naylor  
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**Cover Image:** A young Mabel Hampton in furs. Photographer unknown, “Portrait of Mabel Hampton,” Lesbian Herstory Archives photo files, Mabel Hampton Special Collection, 1919.

## Introduction

On July 5, 1924, twenty-one year-old Mabel Hampton was arrested for allegedly having permitted her apartment for the purpose of prostitution.<sup>1</sup> Despite her insistence that she was innocent and that her arrest was a “put up job,” Hampton was sentenced to the New York Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills.<sup>2</sup> This was not uncommon; many other working-class black women in Progressive Era New York were entrapped by police officers who viewed their presence on the streets at night as synonymous with illicit activity. The Magistrate who presided over her case, Judge Jean Norris, was the first female judge in New York Women’s Court, but she was later removed for her harsh and discriminatory sentencing.<sup>3</sup> While at Bedford, Hampton formed close relationships with other women and was immersed in the defiant culture of same-sex intimacies at the institution. Upon her release on parole on February 7, 1925, officials prevented Hampton from returning back to New York City. They worried her infatuation with an older black woman would inhibit her ability to maintain “good behavior” on parole, and instead Hampton was restricted to Jersey City.<sup>4</sup> Refusing to abide by the terms of her parole, Hampton frequently escaped into Harlem with a white lover she met at Bedford. Together they explored

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<sup>1</sup> Born in North Carolina, Hampton was orphaned as a young child, and she was sent to family members in New York before she ran away and was raised by a working-class family in Jersey City. She later became a prominent black lesbian activist in the 1960s. “For more on Hampton, see Mable Hampton Special Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, New York and Cheryl D. Hicks, *Talk with You like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York 1890-1935* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Inmate #3696, “Commitment to New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford, NY” July 5, 1924, 14610-77B Inmate Case Files ca. 1915-1930, 1955-1965, Records of the Department of Correctional Services, New York State Archives, Albany, New York. Hereafter referred to as BH. All women’s names who appear in this thesis have been changed to protect their anonymity, but the case numbers remain the same. The one exception is Mabel Hampton, whose name is revealed in accordance with standards set by other scholars like Cheryl Hicks and Saidiya Hartman. Records from before 1915 were destroyed in a fire.

<sup>3</sup> Cheryl D. Hicks, *Talk with You like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890-1935* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2010), 178.

<sup>4</sup> Inmate #3696, letter from Amy M. Prevost to Amos T. Baker, November 13, 1924, BH.

the queer landscape of the Harlem Renaissance, from speakeasies and dance halls to A'Lelia Walker's famously extravagant and scandalous parties.<sup>5</sup>

Mabel Hampton's journey, from her arrest, to her time at Bedford, to her parole, illustrates how Progressive Era reformers and the New York State Reformatory system policed and surveilled women's expressions of sexual desire and agency. Hampton's open defiance, her insistence on her innocence, and her refusal to comply with the terms of her parole reveal how she and other women resisted and subverted reformers' control. Like Hampton, many other working-class women rejected reformers' racialized and gendered ideologies of the "ideal woman" by engaging in same-sex intimacies and forming their own communities in Harlem. Moreover, Hampton's experience provides crucial insight into how working-class queer women, particularly black and formerly incarcerated women, shaped and influenced the development of lesbian culture in New York City.

Progressive Era New York City was ripe with anxiety about vice, promiscuity, and the dissolution of social order. Reformers, private anti-vice organizations, and state interventions identified the growing openness of women's sexuality during prohibition as immoral and detrimental to society, and they attempted to rid the city of prostitution and other vices primarily through the surveillance, policing, and criminalization of European immigrant women and black women.<sup>6</sup> The creation of Bedford Hills Women's Reformatory in 1901, the establishment of the Committee of Fourteen in 1905, a private anti-prostitution organization, and the implementation

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<sup>5</sup> "Mabel Hampton's Story, July, 1986 (Tape 3)," Mable Hampton Special Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, New York. Hereafter referred to as MHSC.

<sup>6</sup> For the purpose of this thesis, "reformer" signifies a member of an organization or an institution dedicated to addressing social and behavior problems they believed would lead to the moral contamination of working-class women. Unlike earlier organizations concerned with morality, Progressive Era reformers did not have a distinctly religious ideology and did not believe in individual solutions, but instead argued for structural changes. They did not advocate for Prohibition or complete bans on prostitution, but rather for regulation and control. For more on the Committee of Fourteen and Progressive Era reformers, see Jennifer Frone, *New York Undercover: Private Surveillance in the Progressive Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

of the Women's Court in the New York City Magistrates Court in 1914, resulted in a significant increase in the population of incarcerated women in New York. These Progressive Era institutions, which regulated and controlled working-class women's sexuality under the guise of "morality" and social reform, were essential to the development of a punitive carceral system for women in New York.<sup>7</sup>

The societal tension between the Victorian ideals of womanhood and the emergence of the "New Woman," who exhibited comparative freedom and sexual expression, hinged on the policing of working-class women's sexuality. As Ruth Alexander outlines, this conflict was rooted in disagreements between parents and their daughters. Families often reported their "wayward" daughters, who they complained were staying out too late, drinking, smoking, "necking" or otherwise taking advantage of New York's blossoming Prohibition Era nightlife. Although most families only wished for authorities to scare their daughters into conforming to their perceptions of ideal womanhood, once the young women entered the New York Reformatory System, they were confined to a three year "indeterminate sentence," the conditions and duration of which were completely up to Bedford officials.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, New York's Tenement Laws, which criminalized women suspected of vagrancy or prostitution, those associated with alleged acts of solicitation, or women who lived in "reputed houses of prostitution," targeted single working-class women and acted as a means of social control. New York Tenement House Laws explicitly stated that "it is not necessary for the defendant to have actual sexual intercourse to commit prostitution," and it declared that a

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<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Frone, *New York Undercover: Private Surveillance in the Progressive Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth M. Alexander, *The Girl Problem: Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 46-48.

woman's intent to solicit was sufficient evidence to charge her.<sup>9</sup> These laws regulating disorderly conduct and prostitution disproportionately affected working-class black women, and racist conceptions of black women's promiscuous and immoral sexuality made them more likely to be caught up in entrapment schemes and given harsher sentences. Similar to what likely happened to Mabel Hampton, authorities could easily twist the mere presence of a single black woman on the street at night into proof of solicitation. Furthermore, because many homes for "delinquent" women, like the House of Good Shepherd, only accepted white women, black women were incarcerated at the Workhouse and reformatories like Bedford at much higher rates. In 1914, twenty-five percent of the women imprisoned at Bedford were black.<sup>10</sup>

However, in the midst of Progressive Era reforms and policing, Prohibition and the Harlem Renaissance provided an atmosphere for young working-class women to experiment with their sexual autonomy, albeit mostly behind closed doors. The prohibition of alcohol in 1920 forced middle- and upper-class whites to turn to illicit establishments, like dance halls, speakeasies, cabarets, and buffet-flats for entertainment. Furthermore, the voyeuristic practice of "slumming," in which middle- and upper-class whites sought out nightlife in Harlem and other predominantly black neighborhoods, despite its base in racist fetishization, resulted in the first interracial and mixed-gender entertainment spaces. "Slumming" not only crossed racial lines, but also made queerness a public spectacle during the lesbian and pansy craze of the 1920s and 1930s. Crowds flocked to Harlem for the Hamilton Lodge Ball, an interracial drag show, or The Clam House, which featured black lesbian performer Gladys Bentley. Thus, the emergence of

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<sup>9</sup> Arthur Spingarn, "Laws Relating to Sex Morality in New York City," Bureau of Social Hygiene, 1915, New York, NY.

<sup>10</sup> Carrietta V. Owens, "Investigation of Colored Women at Night Court. From June 8 to August 8, 1914," Folder: Women's Court, Negro Cases, Box 63, Committee of Fourteen Papers, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York Public Library, New York City. Hereafter referred to as Committee of Fourteen.

heterosocial, interracial, and often queer forms of entertainment during Prohibition afforded working-class women, and especially those who engaged in same-sex intimacies, a space to express their sexual desires.<sup>11</sup>

Through analyzing investigative reports and internal correspondence of the Committee of Fourteen, the records of women incarcerated at Bedford Hills, including love letters passed between women, the parole records of women released from Bedford, as well as Mabel Hampton's oral history, this thesis analyzes how these same-sex intimacies between women, often interracial, contributed to or eluded the anxieties of the state, reformers, and parents about miscegenation and the dissolution of social order. The first chapter, "A Perversion Not Commonly Noted" investigates same-sex intimacies between women in the records of the Committee of Fourteen, and how and whether these relationships evaded criminalization within the framework of delinquent heterosexual sexuality, or were seen as particularly "dangerous" and threatening to the social order.

The second chapter, "I don't care who catches me," examines the interracial same-sex intimacies at Bedford, why they concerned prison administrators, and what they meant to the incarcerated women themselves. The chapter questions the distinction between "dangerous" and "feeble-minded" women in relation to racialized ideologies about black women's sexuality, and it also analyzes the New York State Board of Charities 1914 decision to segregate white and black women at the Reformatory.

The third chapter, "If New York is around the corner then I'm gone," outlines how women on parole from Bedford resisted the continued surveillance of officials and created their own communities in Harlem. The chapter follows the lives of Mabel Hampton, Frances Mitchell,

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<sup>11</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994), 253.

and Mamie Jackson after they were released and their attempts to reconnect with women they had relationships with while incarcerated. Furthermore, the chapter explores the extent to which black working-class queer women were tolerated by black middle-class Harlemites and able to live and thrive within the seemingly sexually liberal but nevertheless restrictive landscape of the Harlem Renaissance.

This thesis builds on the works of George Chauncey, Lilian Faderman, and Carroll Smith-Rosenburg, scholars whose histories have profoundly impacted the field of gay and lesbian history. This paper is equally in conversation with the works of Cheryl Hicks, Ruth Alexander, and Sarah Potter, whose investigations into same-sex intimacies at Bedford provide the foundation for this thesis. Adding to these historical discourses, this thesis examines how black working-class women who engaged in same-sex intimacies at Bedford, and later formed their own queer communities while on parole in Harlem, influenced the development of a visible lesbian culture, and therefore represent a crucial aspect of the queer culture and history of New York.



## Chapter 1

### “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted:” Same-Sex Intimacies in the Records of the Committee of Fourteen, 1905-1930<sup>12</sup>

On February 28, 1928, three investigators with the Committee of Fourteen and two undercover police officers arrived at Madame Trixie’s call-flat on West 75th Street, expecting to be entertained by a “sex-circus.” After payment was arranged and were drinks passed around, Trixie announced the main attraction, which was divided into two acts, “Couples” and “Daisy Chain,” and four nude women emerged and performed sexual acts with each other. The anti-prostitution investigators attempted to solicit the women individually, and once they decided they had obtained enough information to complete their entrapment operation, they raided the apartment and arrested Trixie and the other women.<sup>13</sup> Despite the performance of same-sex intimacies between women, Trixie’s sex circus raid was not perceived as an unusual evening for the undercover anti-vice investigators. Instead, the raid was highlighted by the Committee of Fourteen as a successful and triumphant victory in their crusade against vice and prostitution in New York City. In a bulletin sent out to their members, the Committee heralded Trixie’s arrest as putting an end to the “exploitation of girls” and congratulated themselves for closing a dozen other “call-flats” in the winter of 1928 alone.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the committee’s raid on Trixie’s call-flat demonstrates how reformers conceptualized women’s sexuality within a heterosexual framework that evaluated the extent of women’s sexual delinquency on the “immorality” of prostitution, not the sex acts they committed. The undercover operation on Trixie’s call-flat exemplifies the methods, aims, and ideology of the Committee of Fourteen—the eradication of

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<sup>12</sup> Margaret Otis, “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 1913.

<sup>13</sup> Report on tenement, 57 W 75<sup>th</sup> St. February 28, 1928, Box 36, Committee of Fourteen.

<sup>14</sup> “Exploitation of Girls,” Bulletin #1979, March 15, 1928, Committee of Fourteen.

prostitution, collaboration with law enforcement, and the reform of delinquent women, which centered around the regulation and surveillance of working-class women's sexuality.

### **The Committee of Fourteen**

Created in 1905 with the intent to advance the work of the defunct Committee of Fifteen and abolish "Raines Law Hotels," the Committee of Fourteen turned its attention to venues of commercial vice by 1911, and sent undercover investigators to dance halls, speakeasies, burlesque shows, restaurants, massage parlors, and tenement houses with the primary focus of eliminating prostitution in New York City.<sup>15</sup> The Committee advocated for a Women's Court to specifically handle prostitution cases, which was established in 1910 as a night court, and became a day court in 1919.<sup>16</sup> The vast majority of women arrested and tried for prostitution in the Women's Court were charged with Vagrancy (Prostitution) under Section 151 of Tenement House Laws, legislation which conflated women who committed purposeful and intended acts of prostitution with other single working-class women who happened to live or inhabit a "reputed house of prostitution."<sup>17</sup>

The records of the Committee of Fourteen serve as an excellent window into how Progressive Reformers perceived various expressions of sexuality and recreational behavior in New York City. The incredibly detailed investigators' reports, which describe the attire, actions, gender, and race of spectators and clientele, provide invaluable accounts of both interracial and same-sex intimacies throughout the city's nightlife. In addition, the internal correspondence of

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<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Fronc, *New York Undercover: Private Surveillance in the Progressive Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.)

<sup>16</sup> Annual Report by the Committee of Fourteen, 1915-1916.

<sup>17</sup> Arthur Spingarn, "Laws Relating to Sex Morality in New York City," Bureau of Social Hygiene, 1915, New York, NY. Alexander, *The Girl Problem*, 46-48. For an in-depth analysis on how vagrancy laws were racialized, gendered, and class, and disproportionately criminalized and affected working-class black women, see Douglas Blackman's *Slavery by Another Name: the re-enslavement of Black People in America from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

the anti-vice committee exposes their framework for understanding both male and female expressions of same-sex intimacies. Therefore, despite their anti-prostitution focus, the records of the Committee of Fourteen are one of the most important sources for clandestine queer life and the obstacles it confronted during the Progressive Era.

The mission of the Committee of Fourteen reflects the wave of Progressive Era institutions and reform organizations which sought to restore social order through the policing of women's sexuality as women moved into the public sphere and society became less sex-segregated. In *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman outline how increasing heterosocial relations between young men and women resulted in conflict within families: "Mothers watched as their daughters left home to go to work, where they learned all sorts of newfangled ideas. Daughters' behavior puzzled and disturbed older women who had come of age in an altogether different environment."<sup>18</sup> Committee of Fourteen records indicate that parents and legal guardians were the main complainants in many vagrancy and prostitution cases, and they sought to discipline their "wayward" daughters by handing them over to anti-vice investigators, law enforcement, and reformatories for women.<sup>19</sup> Thus, women's changing place in society during the Progressive Era, and their challenges to Victorian notions of female respectability, incited a moral panic over the dissolution of the social and sexual order. These social anxieties fueled reform efforts, and in New York City, these concerns were amplified by increasing urbanization, European immigration, unsafe tenement house conditions, and later, in the 1920s and 1930s, the Great Migration and racialized ideologies of black women's sexuality.

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<sup>18</sup> John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman. *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 198.

<sup>19</sup> Report on Women's Court, Box 88, Committee of Fourteen.

## The Committee's Attitudes Towards Immigrant and Black Women

The negation of women's sexual autonomy by members of the Committee was founded on the belief that adolescent white female sexuality required protection from the vice-ridden city. In *The Girl Problem: Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930*, Ruth Alexander describes how the Committee believed it was their duty to intervene and save working-class women from their own sexuality: "The committee acted on the belief that disadvantaged adolescent girls felt the power of their sexuality but lacked the ability to judge or control their conduct."<sup>20</sup> The Committee focused on protecting young immigrant women, who they believed to be especially vulnerable because of a lack of sufficient familial or community control. The Committee's 1915 annual report states: "The Committee, through its experience, knows only too well the dangers surrounding poor immigrant girls, or perhaps more particularly, the daughters of poor families which have only been in this country but a short time."<sup>21</sup> The Committee of Fourteen believed "delinquent" women from immigrant families required outside intervention and guidance and thought young women were unable to control their sexual desires and assert sexual autonomy. Thus, because of their failure to recognize women's sexual agency, same-sex intimacies between women often escaped the attention and concern of the Committee.

In comparison to Committee of Fourteen's commitment to protecting working-class immigrant women, very few of their reform efforts were directed at working-class black women. A report commissioned in collaboration with the National Urban League, an organization dedicated to the social and economic advancement of the black community, argues that the Committee of Fourteen and other reform organizations focused their outreach on white and immigrant women, often at the expense of black women. Carrietta V. Owens, the author of the

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<sup>20</sup> Alexander, *The Girl Problem*, 46.

<sup>21</sup> Annual Report by the Committee of Fourteen, 1915-1916: 62.

report, states: “The Protestant, Catholic and chief probation officer come in contact with colored women and to some extent help them; but their chief interest is centered in the white women.”<sup>22</sup>

The Committee, like most Anglo-Saxon reform organizations, largely ignored black women, and operated under the assumption that regulation of black women’s morality was the responsibility of black reform organizations and charities. Similarly, Judge Jean Norris, the first woman Magistrate in New York City, argued that black women appeared in court at disproportionately high rates not because of racist policing, but because, “the colored girl lacks the right interest from her people both in an out of the court.”<sup>23</sup> Norris, who presided over the Women’s Court and who was notorious for her harsh sentencing of black women and women accused of sex-work related offenses, thus blamed the supposed apathy of the black community for the over-policing and incarceration of young working-class black women.

However, there were many black Progressive Era reformers and organizations, including the National Urban League and the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), that worked to ameliorate the conditions of working-class black women. Contrary to Norris’ assumptions, there were explicit structural reasons for the overwhelming number of black women arraigned, charged, and sentenced to prison in Women’s Court. In addition to racist policing and discriminatory Magistrates like Norris, due to racial segregation, black women were often excluded from probation houses: “Although the House of Good Shepard has a separate home for colored girls, under sixteen, it does not accept those over sixteen, claiming that the white girls will make it unpleasant for the colored girls, and they could not afford to mix

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<sup>22</sup> Carrietta V. Owens, “Investigation of Colored Women at Night Court. From June 8 to August 8, 1914,” Folder: Women's Court, Negro Cases, Box 63, Committee of Fourteen.

<sup>23</sup> Hicks, *Talk with You like a Woman*, 177.

them.”<sup>24</sup> Because institutions like the House of Good Shepard refused to accept black women, they were sentenced to prisons and reformatories at significantly higher rate than white women sentenced with the same offense. In 1914, black women consisted of twenty-five percent of the population of the New York Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the disproportionately higher rates of arrest and incarceration for working-class black women conveys how Tenement House Laws against disorderly conduct and prostitution were enforced as a means to control and regulate black working-class women’s sexuality.

### **“Delinquent” vs. “Deviant” Sexuality**

Within the Committee’s heterosexual framing of women’s sexual delinquency, same-sex intimacies between women often went unacknowledged and, to some extent, evaded criminalization at the beginning of the 20th century. The Committee of Fourteen’s intense preoccupation with heterosexual immorality only allowed for an understanding of women’s sexuality as “delinquent” and not “deviant,” as the Committee referred to sexual intimacies between men. While young women’s “delinquent” sexuality was criminalized and punished, it was perceived by reformers as nevertheless capable of reform, granted the women conformed to their narrow definition of respectable female sexuality, which inherently excluded black women and most working-class women. However, in contrast, men accused of homosexual acts were characterized as unnatural perverts who were incapable of reform. While the private anti-vice organization categorized investigators’ encounters with homosexual desire among men as “deviant” and “perverted,” there was no such categorization for intimacies between women,

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<sup>24</sup> Carrietta V. Owens, “Investigation of Colored Women at Night Court. From June 8 to August 8, 1914,” Folder: Women’s Court, Negro Cases, Box 63, Committee of Fourteen.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

indicating that the Committee of Fourteen did not necessarily perceive them as a threat to the social order.

The report “Sexual Perversion Cases in New York City Courts, 1916-1921,” authored by Frederick Whitin, the Secretary of the Committee of Fourteen, demonstrates a concerted effort by the Committee of Fourteen to record and analyze the increase in the number of men convicted of sexual perversion. Although these men were often charged under the same disorderly-conduct statute as “delinquent” women accused of prostitution, the pathologizing of their sexual behavior was different. Men convicted of sexual perversion or “indecent acts” were referred to as “sex perverts” and “degenerates” and the report warns, through the declaration of a doctor, that “the pervert, not deeming his acts unnatural, is constantly seeking converts to his practices.”<sup>26</sup> This characterization of the men themselves as immoral and unnatural, not simply the acts of sexual intimacy, reflects the theories of sexologists like Krafft-Ebing and Freud.<sup>27</sup> This is a crucial difference in the Committee of Fourteen’s attitude towards and perceptions of same-sex intimacies between men and intimacies between women, whose sexual agency reformers refused to acknowledge.<sup>28</sup>

While the Committee of Fourteen did not explicitly categorize same-sex intimacies between women as a comparable “social evil” to prostitution or male sexual perversion, descriptions of these intimacies still found their way into investigators’ reports. Although there were some instances of reports where women were labeled as “perverts,” the language used to

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<sup>26</sup> Frederic Whitin, “Sexual Perversion Cases in New York City Courts, 1916-1921,” 1921, Bulletin #1480, Box 88, Committee of Fourteen.

<sup>27</sup> In very brief and simplistic terms, both Freud and Krafft-Ebing argued that acts of same-sex intimacy reflected the psyche of an individual and could be analyzed in scientific terms. Although they differed, these sexologists’ theories were crucial to the development of the concept of sexuality—both heterosexual and homosexual—and the scientific and psychoanalytic analysis of varying sexual behaviors. For an in-depth discussion on how the theories of Krafft-Ebing and Freud shaped social and legal conceptions of homosexual acts and homosexuality, see John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman’s *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

<sup>28</sup> D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 194.

describe the intimacies between women does express the same disdain and disgust as the reports on sexual acts between men. The report on Trixie's sex circus, which describes the sex acts the women performed in explicit detail, does not contain any language referring to the women as perverts, deviant, degenerate, or unnatural. In comparison, one investigative report surveilling men interacting with off-duty sailors in Times Square describes the civilian men as "acting in an effeminate manner," and it concludes that "they appeared to be fairies (male perverts.)"<sup>29</sup>

More common than the language of "pervert," however, investigators appear to have a fascination with asking if a woman was "French." "'You are not a French girl (pervert) are you?'"<sup>30</sup> These questions appear to be an attempt to determine whether women performed "an act of regular or French prostitution."<sup>31</sup> However, the meaning of this slang was lost on some of the women the investigators asked, and on one occasion a young woman responded "No, I am Italian." The investigator later clarified his question, and she responded: "No, I am a straight lay," implying that investigators made a conscious effort to determine if women would perform sex acts with other women.<sup>32</sup> However, it is important to note that there is a difference between the performance of intimacy between women as a function of sex work for the entertainment of men, as is the case with Trixie's sex circus, and the intimacies that women shared outside of the male gaze.

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<sup>29</sup> Report, "Fairies' Hangout in Basement," Times Square Bldg. March 2, 1927, Box 36, Committee of Fourteen.

<sup>30</sup> Report, "Grant Hotel, Broadway and 31<sup>st</sup> St." March 16, 1928, Box 36, Committee of Fourteen.

<sup>31</sup> Report, "Mrs. Marie Edwards," Feb. 25, 1928, Box 36, Committee of Fourteen.

<sup>32</sup> Report, "Italian-French Restaurant," Box 36, Committee of Fourteen. The misunderstanding of the investigator's inquiry into whether the young woman was 'French,' was probably because the interaction occurred in a French-Italian restaurant.



## Laws Regulating Disorderly Conduct and Prostitution

The lack of a discrete category for criminalizing same-sex intimacies between women does not imply that these relationships went unpunished, but rather that they were criminalized under the guise of prostitution, as the raid at Trixie's call-flat illustrates. While the report on male sexual perversion connects the "social evils" of perversion and prostitution, it also notes that the number of men convicted for disorderly conduct was comprised of only one third of the number of women convicted of prostitution in the Women's Court. The report states: "The number of perversion cases in the Magistrates courts in the last three years has averaged a third of the prostitution cases in Women's court. While the problem is different from that of prostitution, perversion is a serious associated social evil."<sup>33</sup> Thus, while disorderly conduct charges for public acts of sexual intimacy between men consisted of the sole means by which male sexuality was regulated, women's sexuality, especially that of working-class women, was already highly regulated and surveilled through anti-prostitution legislation that criminalized "unlawful sexual intercourse or any other indecent act."<sup>34</sup>

Although New York State law did explicitly prohibit sex between women through laws against sodomy and "crimes against nature," the majority of women were prosecuted under disorderly-conduct or Tenement House Laws because they required less of a burden of proof to convict.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, as George Chauncey notes in *Gay New York*, women during the early

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<sup>33</sup> Frederic Whitin, "Sexual Perversion Cases in New York City Courts, 1916-1921," 1921, Bulletin #1480, Box 88, Committee of Fourteen.

<sup>34</sup> Spingarn, "Laws Relating to Sex Morality in New York City." Under Subdivision 4 of section 887 of the code of criminal procedure.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 10. The law states: ". . . any person who carnally knows any male or female person by the anus or by or with the mouth or voluntarily commits to such carnal knowledge. . . is guilty of sodomy." Whitin, "Sexual Perversion Cases in New York City." Whitin acknowledges that it was more common to charge and convict men with disorderly conduct because "it is the safest way for the police to secure the evidence." Thus, it can be inferred that the COF and law enforcement applied the same logic to charging women with disorderly conduct and or vagrancy under the Tenement House Laws, and not sodomy.

20th century did not occupy public spaces to the same extent as men, and same-sex intimacies between women most often occurred in private homes, not in subway bathrooms, movie theaters or bathhouses. As a result, law enforcement and reformers resorted to other strategies, like entrapment, to police women's sexuality.<sup>36</sup>

### **Marie Edwards' Lady Lovers**

The case of Marie Edwards, one of the women who participated in Trixie's sex circus, is fundamentally different from other references to same-sex intimacies in the records of the Committee of Fourteen. Despite the patronizing tone of the investigator's report, there is a recognition of her own agency in her desire for intimacy with other women. Originally from Montreal, Marie Edwards grew up in a convent and told the investigator she was married to a twenty-year-old man who lived in Atlanta, with whom she refused to live with because he spent all of her money. Marie Edwards confided in the investigator that she had a seven-year-old daughter from her first marriage who lived with her mother in Montreal.<sup>37</sup> Thus, Marie Edwards clearly lived a life at odds with reformers' ideals of respectable womanhood in the early 20th century.

Most remarkably, Marie Edwards openly flaunted her sexual relationships with other women. A report on Edwards by an investigator with the Committee of Fourteen states:

She told several stories of lady lovers falling in love with her and staying with her, one of them being a 19-year-old girl who tried to have intercourse with her like a man and who whenever she was in the bathroom with her told her to look the other way, pretending that she had male organs. She claimed to know a famous hangout for fairies and lady-lovers and offered to take me there some time. She said that every time she visits this place she is solicited repeatedly by lady-lovers.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 173.

<sup>37</sup> Report, "Mrs. Marie Edwards," Feb. 25, 1928, Box 36, Committee of Fourteen.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 1-2.

Regardless of the reputability of her claims and the investigator's report, her descriptions of "lady-lovers falling in love with her" indicate a fundamental shift from the framing of the "romantic friendships" of the Victorian Era, and clearly depict women's sexual desires for each other.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, her allusion to a "hangout for fairies and lady-lovers" acknowledges the existence of clandestine spaces in which non-heterosexual men and women formed their own communities. Despite Marie Edwards' blatant disregard for abiding by Progressive Era conceptions of ideal womanhood, the investigator does not label her as delinquent or deviant, and makes no judgment on her sexuality, most likely because she has admitted to being a sex worker, and therefore, to the anti-prostitution investigators of the Committee of Fourteen, any other act of "immorality" is unsurprising and secondary to the issue of prostitution. Marie Edwards's case thus illustrates how although same-sex intimacies between women often went unacknowledged by the Committee of Fourteen, the women who engaged in these relationships were nevertheless criminalized for their sexuality through anti-prostitution legislation.

### **Same-Sex Intimacies that Concerned Reformers**

Same-sex intimacies between women in the early 20th century did not always elude reformers' scrutiny. Psychologist Margaret Otis's 1913 report, titled "A Perversion Not Commonly Noted," decries the sexual intimacies that formed between white and black women at the New Jersey State Home for Girls. She makes a clear distinction between these interracial intimacies between working-class women and the "ordinary" relations between white students at "high-class boarding-schools," indicating that her view of these overtly sexual intimacies as "perverted" and threatening was because they were interracial and, therefore, posed a threat to

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<sup>39</sup> Carroll, Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 1 (1975): 1-29.

the established racialized social order. Otis understood the sexual attraction and desire among these women as founded on their racial difference: “The difference in color, in this case, takes the place of difference in sex, and ardent love-affairs arise between white and colored girls in schools where both races are housed together.”<sup>40</sup> White women’s fetishization of black women, rooted in racialized notions of “aggressive” and “masculine” black female sexuality, also occurred at the Bedford Hills Reformatory for Women during the same time period and was considered a major threat to the functioning of the institution by the reformers.<sup>41</sup> As Cheryl Hicks argues, black women’s darker skin color was equated with virility, and reformers’ concerns were thus grounded in their desire to protect white women’s purity.<sup>42</sup>

The scrutiny that Progressive Era reformers like Margaret Otis and Katherine Bement Davis, the first Superintendent of Bedford and later a member of the executive board of the Committee of Fourteen, inflicted on intimacies between working-class women directly conflicts with the general societal acceptance of intimate “female friendships” during the late 19th century. Although these “female friendships” were tolerated until they interfered with the prospect of heterosexual marriage, “Boston marriages” or “romantic friendships” between elite white women were not uncommon, especially among reformers like Jane Addams and administrators of women’s colleges.<sup>43</sup> These discrete, often desexualized, relationships were able to elude scrutiny because of the wealth, status, and power of the women, while these same reformers criminalized and punished the sexual behaviors of working-class women.

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<sup>40</sup> Margaret Otis, “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* (June 1913): 113-116.

<sup>41</sup> Sarah Potter, “‘Undesirable Relations’: Same-Sex Relationships and the Meaning of Sexual Desire at a Women’s Reformatory during the Progressive Era,” *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 2 (2004). Relationships and intimacies formed between women at Bedford are discussed further in Chapter 2.

<sup>42</sup> Hicks, *Talk with You like a Woman*, 225.

<sup>43</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual.”

These contradictions are ripe in Katherine Bement Davis' own 1929 study, "Factors in The Sex Life of Twenty-Two Hundred Women," which sought to determine the extent to which "normal" women, defined by Davis as white upper-class college educated women, had emotional and sexual experiences with other women. The study found that of 1,200 college educated women, 605 women reported having experienced "intense emotional relations with other women," and 312 of those women reported that their relations with other women were "sexual in character."<sup>44</sup> Despite the indication that same-sex intimacies were possibly more prevalent between college educated white women than working-class women, Davis argues that the social and educational factors of these women do not allow for the study to be representative of the larger population of women in the U.S: "It would be a mistake to infer from our data that our results would apply to other groups of women on other social or educational levels, or to the woman population in general."<sup>45</sup> Thus, Otis' pathologization of interracial intimacies between working-class women in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, and the relatively high frequency of intimacies between college educated women in Davis' study, illustrate how for reformers the most concerning aspect of relationships between women was not their homosexual acts or feelings, but the dissolution of the racial and social order.

Similarly, the only instance in which the records of the Committee of Fourteen expressed explicit concern with same-sex intimacies between women was in the context of interracial attractions at The House of Mercy, a home for "wayward women." The report, "Investigation of Colored Women at Night Court," commissioned in collaboration with the National Urban League, noted that intimate interactions between white and black women at the House of Mercy

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<sup>44</sup> Katherine B. Davis, "Factors in The Sex Life of Twenty-Two Hundred Women," Bureau of Social Hygiene, (Harper and Brothers Publishers, New York, NY, 1929): 246.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

posed a threat to the order of the institution: “Sister Gertrude, superintendent, claims that the colored girls possess an unwholesome physical attraction for the white girls and that it is better for both the races that they be kept apart.”<sup>46</sup> The characterization of interracial relations between women as an “unwholesome attraction” indicates a clear shift compared to the Committee’s relatively passive attitudes toward intimacies between white women. The 1914 report, which is one of the only instances where black women’s sexuality is discussed explicitly in the records of the Committee of Fourteen, also depicts black women as initiators of the relations, reflecting reformers’ perceptions of black female sexuality as masculine and promiscuous.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, Sister Gertrude’s proposal to segregate white and black women to prevent the formation of these “undesirable relations” was implemented at Bedford Hills in 1917, and referenced in Otis’ study, although she notes that this plan backfired and only lead to increased desire due the “motive of the forbidden fruit.”<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

The records of the Committee of Fourteen offer insight into Progressive Era reformers’ anxieties about working-class women’s sexuality and how same-sex intimacies between women challenged reformers’ heterosexual framework of “ideal womanhood.” The elusive but glaring presence of same-sex intimacies in the files of the Committee of Fourteen demonstrates the extent to which reformers negated women’s sexual agency, which prevented the Committee and other reformers from characterizing expressions of intimacy between women as “deviant,” unlike

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<sup>46</sup> Carrietta V. Owens, “Investigation of Colored Women at Night Court. From June 8 to August 8, 1914,” Folder: Women’s Court, Negro Cases, Box 63, Committee of Fourteen.

<sup>47</sup> The report also contains detailed statistics about racial discrimination in the Women’s Courts, and cites that black women were disproportionately sentenced to Bedford at higher rates and denied probation because most probation homes only admitted white women.

<sup>48</sup> Annual Report by the City Magistrate Courts, City of New York, 1916. Otis, “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted,” 116.

intimacy between men. Marie Edwards' accounts of her "lady-lovers," her descriptions of explicit sex acts, and her references to a clandestine community of queer working-class women indicate a clear shift from "romantic friendships" of the Victorian Era, and point towards the emergence of a visible working-class lesbian culture in 1930s. Nevertheless, working-class women who engaged in same-sex intimacies suffered and remained vulnerable to policing and criminalization under the Tenement House Laws. However, the regulation and surveillance of the Committee of Fourteen was only the first step for women caught up in the criminal justice system of Progressive Era New York. After their sentencing in the Women's Court, many women were sent to reformatories and later only released under the strict conditions of parole.

## Chapter 2

“I don’t care who catches me:”  
 “Harmful Intimacies” at Bedford Hills Reformatory for Women, 1901-1930<sup>49</sup>

In a 1914 investigation into the conditions and disciplinary methods employed at the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills, Julia Jessie Taft, the assistant superintendent, argued that “harmful intimacies” between white and black women at the prison were a central obstacle to the reforming mission of the institution. She argued, echoing psychologist Margaret Otis’ argument in “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted,” that the racial dynamics of these relationships exacerbated their intensity: “There is no denying that the colored girls are extremely attractive to certain white girls and the feeling is apt to be more intense than between the white girls alone.”<sup>50</sup> After numerous interviews with staff, physicians, and the president of the board of Bedford, all of whom argued for the separation of white and black women, the committee of the New York State Board of Charities concluded that segregation was the only solution: “While the committee makes no objection to this because of the color line, it is undoubtedly true that the most undesirable sex relations grow out of the mingling of the two races.”<sup>51</sup> Why did interracial intimacies between women at Bedford garner such attention from the administration and New York reformers? What did these “harmful intimacies” look like?

A letter confiscated by the Bedford administration in 1920 from Florence Jones, a young black woman, sent to her by Sadie Rosenthal, a twenty-year-old Jewish woman from Brooklyn,

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<sup>49</sup> Inmate #2515, confiscated letter, BH. New York State Board of Charities, *Report of the Special Committee Consisting of Commissioners Kevin, Smith, and Mulry, Appointed to Investigate the Charges Made against the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills, N. Y., 49<sup>th</sup> Annual Report of the State Board of Charities, Volume 1* (Albany, 1915), 864. Hereafter cited as State Board of Charities, *Report of the Special Committee* (1915).

<sup>50</sup> State Board of Charities, *Report of the Special Committee* (1915), 863.

<sup>51</sup> State Board of Charities, *Report of the Special Committee* (1915), 872.



exemplifies the exact expressions of intimacy that disturbed Julia Taft and the New York State Board of Charities. Rosenthal addresses Jones as “My own loving daddy,” and writes, “Some fine day I’m going to grab you and make you warm me up and fuck me and I’ll be willing to get punished every day in the week for *you* and *you* only.”<sup>52</sup> The letter, confiscated three years after the official segregation of the reformatory, is one of many documents, including other love letters, disciplinary records, and administrative correspondence, that illustrates how same-sex intimacies between women continued after the segregation of Bedford. Despite administrative attempts to suppress and punish intimacies between women at the reformatory, particularly between white and black women, these relationships nevertheless flourished undercover, and at times, were defiantly flaunted out in the open. These intimate encounters and relationships were a crucial means through which women at Bedford exhibited resistance to their incarceration, built relationships, and most basically, expressed their sexual desires.

The segregation of Bedford Hills and the complex intimacies that formed between women at the prison both before and after the separation of white and black cottages reveal the pathologization of working-class women’s sexuality by Progressive Era reformers, and provide insight into how these women understood their own sexuality. While the 1914 investigation into “harmful intimacies” brought public attention to the relationships between women at Bedford, these forms of intimacies between women were not uncommon at Bedford or at similar institutions, including other women’s reformatories, elite boarding schools, and women’s colleges. However, the specific racialized interpretation of these relationships, in which black women were perceived as “extremely attractive” to white women at Bedford, reflects the racist conceptions of black women’s presumed promiscuous sexuality. Such ideas were pervasive

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<sup>52</sup> Inmate #2516, confiscated letter, BH.

throughout the intake interviews and disciplinary records of black all women at Bedford, including married heterosexual women, and served to explain their “delinquent” and “immoral” behavior.<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, the structure of the reformatory system, and the class dynamics of the New York Women’s Courts and Tenement House and Vagrancy laws, policed and criminalized working-class women’s sexuality that did not conform to notions of respectable middle-class womanhood. The patronizing framework of the reformatory system, which established upper-class, college-educated Anglo-Saxon women as the authorities on acceptable expressions of womanhood, subjected the women incarcerated at Bedford to constant surveillance and inquiry into their private lives. These intrusions began with intake interviews, which officials supplemented with detailed information acquired from interviews with family members and employers, as well as and home visits. Even once released from Bedford on parole, officials closely monitored the women’s living conditions, employment, religious involvement, and interactions with other women released from Bedford. Thus, while the intimacies that formed between women at Bedford, who were already considered “abnormal” and “wayward,” drew critical attention and outrage from reformers and psychologists, they were also, to some extent, excused on the basis of the women’s race, class, or presumed lack of mental capacity, which reformers noted as “feeble-mindedness.”

### **History of Bedford and its Reformatory Mission**

The New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills was first petitioned for by Abby Hopper Gibbons, former president of the Women’s Prison Association, based on the need

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<sup>53</sup> State Board of Charities, *Report of the Special Committee* (1915), 864.

for a reformatory for women close to New York City. Bedford officially opened in 1901, as the third penal institution for women in New York State with an almost completely all-female staff, including the first superintendent, Katherine B. Davis, who later became the Commissioner of Correction in New York City in 1913 and a board member of the Committee of Fourteen. The population of the prison increased dramatically and Bedford quickly became overcrowded, housing from 118 women in 1902 to 523 women in 1914, well over its capacity of 410.<sup>54</sup>

Bedford was founded with the intent to incarcerate women between the ages of sixteen and thirty convicted of misdemeanors or first time felonies, which, according to the 1915 Annual Report by the New York State Board of Charities, included: “. . . petit larceny, vagrancy, habitual drunkenness, being a common prostitute, or frequenting disorderly houses or houses of prostitution, or of a misdemeanor.”<sup>55</sup> In accordance with New York State Charities Law, all women at Bedford, regardless of their conviction or offense, were given an “indeterminate” sentence which committed them to the reformatory for a maximum of three years, including their time on parole. Both the duration of the women’s incarceration at Bedford and the length of time they spent on parole were up to the discrepancies of the staff and the board of managers.<sup>56</sup> Compared with women at the Auburn House of Refuge, where women served sentences of at least one year to life, or other state penitentiaries, women at Bedford were intended to be capable of “being substantially benefited by the discipline of such an institution.” This was in keeping with the belief that the young women sentenced to Bedford were not

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<sup>54</sup> Clifford M. Young, *Women’s Prisons, Past and Present and Other New York State Prison History* (Elmira: Summary Press, Elmira Reformatory, 1932), 30. Prison Association of New York, *58th Annual Report* (1902), 70. State Board of Charities, *49<sup>th</sup> Annual Report* (1915), 851.

<sup>55</sup> State Board of Charities, *49<sup>th</sup> Annual Report* (1915), 841.

<sup>56</sup> Alexander, *The Girl Problem*, 179.

“hardened criminals,” but instead were “fallen” women, who could be guided to social and moral transformation by a staff of “highly educated women.”<sup>57</sup>

The physical layout of Bedford was built to reflect its reformatory mission, the spirit of which is proclaimed in the institution’s motto: “Forgetting the things which are behind and reaching forth to those which are before.”<sup>58</sup> When it was first built, the reformatory consisted of a reception house with three floors. The first floor housed married women and their children (all under the age of two), the second housed women waiting for classification by the Laboratory of Social Hygiene, and the third held women who tested positive for venereal disease in quarantine until their symptoms disappeared. The Bedford campus also contained four cottages, each complete with a kitchen and a dining room, and separated by age—two cottages for the “younger girls,” and two for the “older girls.” In 1917, after the construction of eight more cottages and the decision of the New York State Board of Charities, the cottages were segregated by race. All of the women were made to do their own laundry and sewing, and schooling was mandatory. The reformatory sat on a 100 acre plot, with vegetable gardens and a recreation area where the women played ball, croquet, and basketball. In a romanticizing and patronizing description of the prison, the Prison Association of New York described Bedford as “more like a school yard where young people are having a jolly time, than a bit of reformatory institution.”<sup>59</sup>

However, reformers at Bedford frequently complained about the negative influence of some young women they believed to be unsuited for Bedford and incapable of reform. After women with more serious offenses were sent to Bedford in 1920, Amos T. Baker, the first male superintendent, declared there were only two types of women at Bedford: those “timid and in

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<sup>57</sup> State Board of Charities, *49<sup>th</sup> Annual Report* (1915), 850.

<sup>58</sup> Prison Association of New York, *58th Annual Report* (1902), 73.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

fear,” and those who were “antagonistic and uncooperative.”<sup>60</sup> These “antagonistic and uncooperative” women were perceived by the Bedford administration as a serious disruption to the reform of those “timid and in fear,” and therefore seen as directly impeding the mission of the institution. In *The Girl Problem: Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930*, Ruth Alexander outlines how officials at Bedford and Albion, another women’s reformatory, pathologized the women’s defiance and sought out medical diagnoses to excuse their unruly conduct: “During the first two decades of the century, ‘feeble-mindedness’ and ‘psychopathy’ became popular explanations for female criminality among progressive penologists and anti-prostitution activists: these explanations presumed a medicalized view of women offenders, defining them as diseased and defective rather than merely ill-behaved.”<sup>61</sup> The characterization of women as feeble-minded was also associated with their apparent inability to recognize their wrongdoing and moral failures, which Bedford officials regarded as an essential first step in a woman’s ability to be reformed.

In addition, racialized conceptions of innate intelligence frequently dictated officials’ categorization of women as feeble-minded. Both of these factors are exemplified in the case of Anna Cooper, a seventeen-year-old black girl from Jacksonville, Virginia arrested on charges of prostitution, who the officials at the Laboratory of Social Hygiene declared was “extremely untruthful and unreliable,” and appeared to be “very stupid in the way she goes from one story to another.” Despite Cooper’s statement that she wanted to “. . . turn over a new leaf here—be a good girl,” the officials concluded: “It is evident that she has no realization of the gravity of her sexual offenses. Her attitude is that of a feeble-minded girl.”<sup>62</sup> The strain that the number of

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<sup>60</sup> Alexander, *The Girl Problem*, 71.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>62</sup> Inmate #2496, Laboratory of Social Hygiene, “Information Concerning Patient,” July 20, 1917, BH.

“feeble-minded” young women and girls placed on the institution was considered so great that in 1930 reformers at Bedford succeeded in transferring women characterized as feeble-minded to Albion.<sup>63</sup>

### **Administrative Responses to Same-sex Intimacies at Bedford**

In 1918, when Bedford officials wrote in Sadie Rosenthal’s disciplinary record that she was “more or less trouble about colored girls all the time” and that she “is interested in some colored girls every few weeks,” they were not unfamiliar with expressions of intimacy between white and black young women and girls at Bedford.<sup>64</sup> As Sarah Potter explains in “Undesirable Relations,” administrative attention to interracial relationships at Bedford began in 1908: “First noted in the reformatory’s Annual Report in 1908, officials considered them to be a typical aspect of prison life. Available inmate records indicate that relationships were an ongoing disciplinary problem in the institution from the 1910s onward.”<sup>65</sup> Many white women’s disciplinary records contain at least one reference which describes them as “very fond of colored girls,” or “has colored girl for friend.”<sup>66</sup> These relationships were common enough at Bedford that officials developed a euphemism for interactions they labeled as unacceptable—records frequently cite punishing young women for “passing notes,” an action which, after the segregation of white and black women into separate cottages in 1917, indicated an intentional attempt to communicate and form relationships that officials viewed as immoral and “harmful.” Although there is evidence that intraracial relationships and intimacies occurred at Bedford, the

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<sup>63</sup> Clifford, *Women’s Prisons*, 30.

<sup>64</sup> Inmate #2516, Disciplinary Record, BH.

<sup>65</sup> Sarah Potter, “Undesirable Relations: Same-Sex Relationships and the Meaning of Sexual Desire at a Women’s Reformatory during the Progressive Era.” *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 2 (2004), 398.

<sup>66</sup> Inmate #2380 Disciplinary Record, BH. Inmate #2516 Disciplinary Record, BH.

reformatory's framing of "harmful intimacy" was rooted in their discomfort with interracial intimacy, not necessarily same-sex intimacy, and therefore those relationships were less directly targeted by officials.<sup>67</sup>

The existence and pervasiveness of intimate relations between women at Bedford was not unique to the institution and the superintendent and administrative officials were not unaccustomed to expressions of intimacy between women. In fact, Julia Jessie Taft, the assistant superintendent interviewed about "harmful intimacies" at Bedford in 1915, was in a life-long committed relationship with Virginia Robinson, with whom she later adopted and raised two children.<sup>68</sup> In similar all-female atmospheres, as Lillian Faderman argues, the culture of "crushing," and "smashing" was a central aspect of student life. At women's colleges like Barnard and Vassar, it was customary for freshmen to express their love for sophomores, and juniors for seniors. These relationships were so common and accepted within the culture of these institutions that "freshmen crushes" were the subject of a sophomore play at Barnard in 1903.<sup>69</sup> In "A Perversion Not Commonly Noted," psychologist Margaret Otis presents the intimacies between upper-class young white women in boarding schools as common knowledge, and at worst, an educational nuisance: "The ordinary form that is found among girls even in high-class boarding schools is well-known, and this feature of school life is one of the many difficulties that presents itself to those in charge of educational affairs."<sup>70</sup> This representation of intensely emotional female friendship is also outlined in Smith-Rosenberg's analysis of women's romantic

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<sup>67</sup> This does not imply that black women escaped reformers' scrutiny or went unpunished for their expressions of same-sex desire. While there is evidence of relationships between black women at Bedford, reformers showed far less concern and interest in them. However, once black women were released on parole Bedford officials were much more concerned and disapproving of their behavior and sexual encounters.

<sup>68</sup> Potter, "Undesirable Relations," 414.

<sup>69</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-century America* (Penguin, 1991), 19. *Barnard Bulletin*, "Sophomore Entertainment," December 14, 1903.

<sup>70</sup> Otis, "A Perversion Not Commonly Noted," 113.

friendships in the mid-to-late nineteenth century.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, while not considered ideal, intimate relations between white, upper-class women were tolerated to the extent that they did not interfere with heterosexual marriage, and in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, expressions of love and admiration were considered essential aspects of female friendship.

The segregation of Bedford as a means to prevent “undesirable relations” was not completely unprecedented in the New York criminal justice system in the early twentieth century. The forced segregation of a prison population on the basis of controlling sexual activity also occurred in men’s prisons, most notably on Welfare Island, where most men convicted of homosexuality or cross-dressing were sentenced. As Regina Kunzel notes in “Situating Sex,” men who were considered “fairies” or “effeminate” were sent to the South Annex of the prison: “Authorities placed any man convicted of homosexual solicitation or cross-dressing, as well as any whose dress or mannerisms suggested that he leaned in that direction, in the ‘South Annex.’ The logic implicit in this policy, of course, was that ‘fairies’ would entice ‘normal’ men to ‘take advantage of their favors.’”<sup>72</sup> Prison officials characterized these men as aggressors or perpetrators of homosexual intimacies because their visible expressions of femininity directly challenged the acceptable notions of masculinity.

This assumption that the presence of visibly queer people and bodies in prison would seduce heterosexual inmates was similarly applied to masculine-presenting incarcerated women and continued into the middle of the 20th century. Sara Harris’ 1948 report on New York City’s Women’s House of Detention describes her concern for the influence of butch women at the

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<sup>71</sup> Carroll, Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 1 (1975).

<sup>72</sup> Regina G. Kunzel, “Situating Sex:” Prison Sexual Culture in the Mid-Twentieth-Century United States.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8, no. 3 (2002): 257.



prison: “Sara Harris worried that women in prison ‘may be ruined for a life of heterosexuality,’ because prison butches ‘have a fascination that drab women, like the majority of those who land in the House of Detention, find hard to resist.’”<sup>73</sup> Harris’ anxiety illustrates how by the late 1940s and 1950s, within the context of the Cold War and the Lavender Scare, same-sex intimacies between women in prison were perceived as a larger national threat to the structure of post-war society.

The study of the relationships women formed in prison brings into question their agency, theories of “situational homosexuality,” and the trope of the “prison lesbian.” Progressive Era reformers, and prison officials, including Margaret Otis and Katherine B. Davis, characterized intimacies between women in prison as fundamentally different from homosexual acts outside of prison. The separation of “situational” homosexuality from a presumed “true” or “pure” homosexuality is also conveyed in more modern historical works, which argue that the environmental and circumstantial elements of prisons distinguish relationships and intimacies formed within those institutions from similar interactions between non-incarcerated individuals. In fierce opposition to this theory, Jonathan Katz argues that “all homosexuality is situational, influenced and given meaning and character by its location in time and social space.”<sup>74</sup> Kunzel similarly challenges historians’ dismissal of same-sex activity that was not rooted in homosexual identity, and she argues that the history of homosexual activity, regardless of the participants’ identity, is just as revealing: “I argue for the payoffs as well as the productive challenges of cultivating historical curiosity about sexual practices assumed to have no history.”<sup>75</sup> The varied and complex forms of intimacy expressed by women at Bedford includes

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 259.

<sup>74</sup> Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (New York: Crowell, 1976), 11.

<sup>75</sup> Kunzel, “‘Situating Sex,’” 260.

women who had relationships with women before Bedford, women whose conceptions of their own sexuality were changed by the relationships they formed at Bedford, and women who passed notes and crushed on other women because it was exciting and forbidden. All of these expressions of intimacy and identity are equally important to determining the atmosphere and culture of the institution.

The expressions of same-sex intimacy that Otis, Bedford officials, and other reformers considered “harmful,” were the “unnatural” attractions that white, working-class, “wayward” women expressed for black women. As Otis argues in her article on relations between women at the New Jersey State Home for Girls, where she was a resident psychologist, the intimacies between these “delinquent girls,” are characterized as a “perversion,” instead of an “ordinary form” that is “a feature of school life” at elite boarding schools.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, in his response to the 1915 investigation into Bedford, President Wood of the State Board of Charities excused the relationships between women at Bedford as unsurprising based on the women’s social class and criminal record. Wood argued: “They are known to be not uncommon among the people of this class and character in the outside world, and when inmates addicted to these practices come into the institution it is practically impossible to prevent them finding an opportunity in some way or another to continue them.”<sup>77</sup> Wood’s characterization of working-class women at Bedford illustrates how even white working-class women’s sexuality, which was considered to be the ideal target of Bedford’s reform efforts, was denied the same privileges as upper class women in “romantic friendships,” indicating how working class women were held to a standard of respectable middle-class womanhood that even upper-class women did not necessarily uphold. Because they had already failed to conform to Progressive Era values of respectable

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<sup>76</sup> Otis, “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted,” 113.

<sup>77</sup> State Board of Charities, *Report of the Special Committee* (1915), 855.

womanhood, white working-class women at Bedford were subject to intense scrutiny of their personal and private lives, before, during, and after Bedford.

Conversely, black women's sexuality and their involvement with same-sex intimacies were less examined by Bedford officials. Black women who engaged in relationships with white women were not characterized as exerting agency in these relationships, but were instead labeled as objects of uncontrollable affection. In the 1915 investigation into the 'harmful intimacies' at Bedford, Julia Jessie Taft argues that black women at Bedford were "undoubtedly very attractive" and explains "there is no denying that the colored girls are extremely attractive to certain white girls and the feeling is apt to be more intense than between the white girls alone."<sup>78</sup> This framing of interracial intimacies, in which white women are unable to contain their fascination with blackness, marks the mere presence of black women at Bedford a disciplinary problem, while white women's attraction to them was viewed as a psychopathic delinquency. In the same 1915 investigation, The New York State Board of Charities overtly connects the disproportionately high number of black women at Bedford to the disciplinary issues at the institution: "There are now present in the institution ninety-one negro women and a very considerable part of the disciplinary problem arises from the unfortunate attachments formed by the white women for the negroes."<sup>79</sup> Thus, because reformers perceived white women as the perpetrators of interracial intimacies, and black women as simply attractive distractions, officials pathologized and studied white women's attraction to black women while punishing and policing black women who expressed the same desires.

Bedford psychiatrist Edith Spaulding's 1923 study of "Psychopathic Delinquent Women" investigated the records of 175 women identified as engaging in "harmful intimacies," the vast

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 864.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 853.

majority of whom were white. The premise of Spaulding's research, which centers around her inability to comprehend why and how white women could desire black women, reflects a commonly held view among Progressive Era reformers who believed that interracial attraction between women in prison was purely situational and rooted in an eroticism of racial difference. Otis' study echoes this analysis in her assertion that "the difference in sex is replaced by the difference in race."<sup>80</sup> Historian Estelle Freedman outlines how the white women in Spaulding's study, and those engaged in same-sex interracial intimacies in other prisons, evaded characterization as lesbians, and were instead perceived as psychopathic or mentally unfit. As Freedman notes: "White women were not really lesbians, for they were attracted to men, for whom Black women temporarily substituted."<sup>81</sup> The fact that Spaulding's study only includes women in the psychiatric hospital illustrates her assertion that only "feeble-minded" white women could be attracted to black women. Furthermore, Spaulding's, Otis' and other reformers' masculinization of the black women to whom white women were attracted, and their dismissal of black women's own sexual desires, reflects stereotypes about black women's presumed innate sexual promiscuity, and Hortense Spillers' concept of the ungendering of black female bodies.<sup>82</sup> As Cheryl Hicks argues, "Spaulding's findings reinforced administrators' premise that the attraction white women felt for black women stemmed from the fact that black inmates seemed masculine."<sup>83</sup> Thus, Spaulding's study illustrates how officials' anxieties about interracial intimacies between women at Bedford were influenced by broader social fears of miscegenation,

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<sup>80</sup> Otis, "A Perversion Not Commonly Noted," 113.

<sup>81</sup> Estelle B. Freedman, "The Prison Lesbian: Race, Class, and the Construction of the Aggressive Female Homosexual, 1915-1965." *Feminist Studies* 22, no. 2 (1996): 400.

<sup>82</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Feminisms*, 1987, 384-405.

<sup>83</sup> Hicks, *Talk with You like a Woman*, 227.

and their concern with reforming young working-class women to ascribe to normative womanhood, both of which were undermined by white women's sexual desire for black women.

Officials were also disturbed by the often overtly sexual nature of the relationships between the women at Bedford and the explicit notes they passed to each other. Although assistant superintendent Julia Jessie Taft insisted, "It is a romantic attachment rather than any immoral relations; it takes a romantic form," the relationships between women at Bedford cannot only be characterized as "romantic attachments."<sup>84</sup> Sadie Rosenthal's letter to Florence Jones conveys the intensity of the women's sexual desire for each other: "You'd have to look out for I bite awful when I am cumming you don't blame me do you sweetheart?"<sup>85</sup> Similarly, in her letter to Esther Hayes, Mamie Jackson reminisces about staying up all night with her lover writing, "Those were the days when J.M. was kept up all night we would wait until she go to bed about 1 o'clock at night and then we would start and then we would quiet down about 5 o'clock and start again about 8 in the morning."<sup>86</sup> Despite Taft's assertion that these "harmful intimacies" were purely romantic, Bedford officials frequently noted sexual encounters between women in their disciplinary records, including "2 girls in room with door closed. In room indefinitely."<sup>87</sup> Otis was similarly shocked by the expressions of sexual desire between women at the New Jersey Training School for Girls during the same time period, noting, "With others it proved to be a serious fascination and of intensely sexual nature."<sup>88</sup> While the openly sexual interactions between women at Bedford are not reminiscent of the romantic female friendships between upper-class white women in the nineteenth century that Carroll Smith-Rosenberg identifies in

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<sup>84</sup>State Board of Charities, *Report of the Special Committee* (1915), 864.

<sup>85</sup>Inmate #2516, confiscated letter, BH.

<sup>86</sup>Inmate #2503, confiscated letter, BH.

<sup>87</sup>Hicks, *Talk with Me Like a Woman*, 228.

<sup>88</sup>Otis, "A Perversion Not Commonly Noted," 114.

“Love and Ritual,” they reflect a similar erotic exchange that Karen Hansen describes in the correspondence between two black women in the 1850s and 1860s in “No Kisses Like Youres.”<sup>89</sup> Hansen outlines the women’s relationship: “Their friendship included passion, kisses, and what I call ‘bosom sex’ and competed with their heterosexual relationships.”<sup>90</sup> Because Bedford administrators were well-educated, upper-class, white women who were unfamiliar with the expression of sexual desire among working-class women and who perceived any sexual interaction outside of marriage as deviant and immoral, officials’ disgust and concern with expressions of interracial same-sex intimacies were rooted in their disapproval of same-sex desire, interracial intimacy, and overt sexual practices.

### **Resistance and Sexual Desire: Bedford Women’s Understanding of Themselves**

Sitting in solitary confinement, Mamie Jackson, a black sixteen-year old raised by foster parents in Tarrytown, New York and sent to Bedford for “incorrigibility,” composed a love poem dedicated to her “Devoted Pal:”

Sweetheart in dreams  
 I’m calling  
 I love you best of all  
 When shadows of twilight are falling  
 I miss you most of all  
 Sunshine of joy in you  
 Smile I can see  
 In each winking star  
 Your sweet face I can see,  
 You’r all of my heart  
 So don’t let us part  
 Sweetheart I’m calling,  
 You.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual.”

<sup>90</sup> Karen V. Hansen, “‘No Kisses Is Like Youres’: An Erotic Friendship between Two African-American Women during the Mid-Nineteenth Century.” *Gender & History* 7, no. 2 (1995): 158.

<sup>91</sup> Inmate #2503, confiscated letter, BH.

The poem, written on a roll of toilet paper, appears as part of a longer letter she wrote to her white lover while she was in punishment for “improper actions with another girl.”<sup>92</sup> Throughout her three years incarcerated at Bedford, Jackson was frequently punished by officials and characterized as “an incorrigible story-teller and light-fingered.”<sup>93</sup> Her relationship with her foster family was fraught, and Jackson was frequently caught in the middle of domestic violence, preventing the husband from shooting his wife at least once. On the night of her arrest, Jackson went to Rye Beach with a married woman who later left her, and Jackson missed her train back home and spent the night in a dance hall. Her intake with psychologists at Bedford’s Laboratory of Social Hygiene recounts what happened when she returned home the next morning: “her mother beat her and her father reported her to the judge and had her arrested. Jackson insists that she has never done anything for which she could be arrested, and that her people wanted her sent away because she was not their own child.”<sup>94</sup> Jackson’s time at Bedford, her confrontational relationship with the reformatory staff, and her expression of resistance to authority through her relationships with women, illustrate how black women’s sexuality was regulated and policed at Bedford—not through studies at the Laboratory of Social Hygiene, but through harsh punishment, which often included solitary confinement and longer sentences. Jackson is one of few women who actually spent the maximum three-year “indeterminate sentence” incarcerated at Bedford. Unlike Sadie Rosenthal, who administrators believed would “probably be a law abiding citizen in the institution,” and who was paroled after two years, officials were antagonistic towards Jackson from the moment she was committed to the institution.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Inmate #2503, Letter from Amos T. Baker to Elizabeth A. Jackson, October 29, 1918, BH.

<sup>93</sup> Inmate #2503, Staff Meeting, Laboratory of Social Hygiene, September 29, 1917.

<sup>94</sup> Inmate #2503, Statement of Girl, BH.

<sup>95</sup> Inmate #2516, Laboratory of Social Hygiene, Information Concerning the Patient, September 15, 1917.

Bedford officials' intense fixation with Jackson and bitter criticism of her supposed immaturity and untruthfulness were directly related to their racist assumptions of her and other young black women at Bedford. In her intake interview, Bedford officials described Jackson as "a tall, slender rather poorly nourished mulatto girl of 16."<sup>96</sup> A sociologist at the Laboratory of Social Hygiene, when presented with the information that Jackson had not yet menstruated, responded: "Don't those colored girls usually menstruate rather early?" Despite evidence that Jackson's birthday was incorrect, and that she was actually two or three years younger than what appeared on court documents, making her fourteen at the time of her commitment to Bedford, officials ignored this information. Edith Spaulding, the head psychiatrist, insisted on her commitment to Bedford, not the New York Training School for Girls at Hudson, which was a reformatory for young girls. Instead of considering the possibility that Jackson was actually a thirteen-year-old or fourteen-year-old girl, Spaulding blamed Jackson's "immaturity" on the allegation that she "takes pleasure in acting younger than she is" and "tries to make it appear that she is an innocent, little girl."<sup>97</sup> The suspicion and outright hostility with which officials approached Jackson's case is also reflected in the records of other black young women at Bedford, who were characterized as "an ordinary looking negroess" or "a very tiny, dark-skinned, colored girl," and often described as untruthful and deceitful.<sup>98</sup>

In the midst of this negative attention and frequent punishments, Jackson was defiant in her opposition to the Bedford administration. In the same letter in which she composed the love poem, she wrote to her white lover, "Really I get so utterly disgusted with the g-d- cops I could

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<sup>96</sup> Inmate #2503, Laboratory of Social Hygiene, 1917, BH. This description of Jackson offers insight into how officials' racist perceptions of black women's character were often related to their physical appearance.

<sup>97</sup> Inmate #2503, Laboratory of Social Hygiene Staff meeting, September 29, 1917, BH.

<sup>98</sup> Inmate #3533, Statement of Girl, 1923. Inmate #2496, Lab of Social Hygiene, Information Concerning Patient, July 20 1917, BH.



kill them they may run Bedford and they may run some of these pussies in Bedford but they are never going to run Mamie Jackson.”<sup>99</sup> Jackson’s resistance to officials’ authority began from the moment she was committed to Bedford, and her intake notes that she was “very emphatic in stating that she feels she was sent here unjustly.” Within her first month at Bedford, Jackson was already in punishment, and the mental health examiner who found her “locked up in her room for punishment” described Jackson’s conduct as “very troublesome, sly and deceptive, an undercurrent. Requires frequent discipline. Fond of white girls, and had an undesirable friendship with Esther Hayes, white.”<sup>100</sup> Unlike Rosenthal, who a year into her sentence at Bedford was credited with being “a model girl these three months,” most likely because she had “given up colored girls,” Jackson remained a disciplinary problem for Bedford throughout her three years at the institution.<sup>101</sup> Her relationship with Esther Hayes, with whom she was later found to be living with while on parole, was regularly monitored by officials who sent the police to investigate the women’s living situation.<sup>102</sup>

Bedford officials regarded Jackson as such a disturbance to the reformatory mission that when she was re-arrested six years later for possession of a firearm, the superintendent, Amos T. Baker, discharged her from Bedford. Baker admitted that Jackson “. . . was an inmate during the troublesome times and took a very prominent part in the disorder,” most likely referring to her involvement in the race riot of 1920, which garnered public attention for being remarkably violent for a women’s reformatory.<sup>103</sup> Baker also worried that Jackson’s resistance to authority

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<sup>99</sup> Inmate #2503, confiscated letter, BH.

<sup>100</sup> Inmate #2503, Mental Examination, September 18, 1917, BH.

<sup>101</sup> Inmate #2516, disciplinary record, BH.

<sup>102</sup> Inmate #2503, Letter from Sarah Irvine to Amos T. Baker, May 14, 1921, BH. Further discussion of the surveillance of same-sex intimacies between women on parole from Bedford will appear in the next chapter.

<sup>103</sup> Inmate #2503, Letter from Amos T. Baker to New York Magistrate Courts on discharge from Bedford, 1926, BH.

and her relationships with white women would influence other women at Bedford: “I feel quite sure that she will entertain the other girls, if given an opportunity, by reciting, probably in a much exaggerated form, the happenings during her previous residence here.”<sup>104</sup> Although there is little information on Jackson’s own interpretation of her time at Bedford, her statements against the “g-d- cops” in her letter to her “devoted pal,” and her central involvement in the 1920 uprising indicate a continuous and fierce opposition to her mistreatment by Bedford officials on account of her race and sexual desires. She declares in the same letter, “True dear it doesn’t pay to be a good Fellow in a joint of this kind, but I don’t Regret any thing I ever done.”<sup>105</sup>

Many other women who engaged in same-sex intimacies at Bedford also asserted their refusal to conform to the institution through their declarations of love and desire for other women. Sadie Rosenthal wrote to Florence Jones, “I wouldn’t give a dam if I had to do all my time in the hole as long as I’d have you here to love me up.”<sup>106</sup> Rosenthal also refers to being willing to suffer punishment by officials because of her love and sexual desire for Jones: “I’ll be willing to get punished every day in the week for *you* and *you* only.”<sup>107</sup> These references to punishment, and, more specifically, solitary confinement, suggest that Rosenthal and other women were frequently sent to “the hole” for their expressions of love and intimacy with other women at Bedford. Her disciplinary record, which states she was given “5 punishments,” for “Notes, colored girls, screaming,” reflects how Bedford officials used solitary confinement to attempt to regulate women’s desire for each other.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Inmate #2503, Letter to Mrs. Haley Fiske from Amos T. Baker, 1926, BH.

<sup>105</sup> Inmate #2503, confiscated letter, BH.

<sup>106</sup> Inmate #2516, confiscated letter, BH.

<sup>107</sup> Inmate #2516, confiscated letter, BH.

<sup>108</sup> Inmate #2516, Disciplinary Record, BH. See figure 3 in the Appendix.

Clara Johnson, a twenty-eight year-old white woman sentenced to Bedford for violation of Tenement House Law, was regularly punished for “disobedience, writing notes,” and being “extremely daring and loud.”<sup>109</sup> In a letter to Harriet Mills, a black sixteen year-old on parole from Bedford, Johnson boldly exclaims: “Baby, you know I don’t care who catches me or reads my letter because if any one don’t like it why their can go their own way and I mine.”<sup>110</sup> Although Johnson did not sign the letter in her name, she risked her own punishment and Mills’ parole status by directly contacting her and explicitly addressing the envelope to Mills’ residence, exposing their relationship to the watchful eyes of Bedford administrators and parole officers, who easily traced the letter back to Johnson. Johnson, much older than most women at Bedford, and convinced that she was not the reformatory type, rejected the institution’s reformatory mission in her initial intake interview: “It is an outrage for any socially minded judge to send a woman who has my record to a reformatory. The chances are that I will be a contamination to the younger girls and it is not right for their sakes to have such a hopeless failure sent to live with them.”<sup>111</sup> Her assumption that she would “be a contamination to the younger girls,” reflects how she had internalized their framework of respectable womanhood, casting herself as beyond the possibility of reform because of her age and long history of prostitution. At the same time, Johnson’s disregard for the consequences of expressing her desire for Mills reflects the similarly defiant attitudes of Jackson and Rosenthal. All three of these women were unwilling to apologize for their intimacies with women, and continued to send letters, pass love notes, and express their desire for other women despite the harsh punishments they received from Bedford officials.

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<sup>109</sup> Inmate #2515, Disciplinary Record, BH.

<sup>110</sup> Inmate #2515, confiscated letter, BH. See figure 4 in the Appendix.

<sup>111</sup> Inmate #2516, Statement of Girl, September 14, 1917.

### **“I love my daddy I scream I do:” The Language of Same-Sex Intimacies<sup>112</sup>**

The gendered and racialized language that women at Bedford used to write to each other provides insight into the culture of same-sex intimacies at Bedford. The letters women passed to each other also illustrate their own understanding of their own sexuality and assertion of their identity against the policing and surveillance of reformatory officials. Despite officials’ justifications of white women’s attraction for black women, in which black women are described as “mannish” and denied womanhood, the letters between white and black women at Bedford reveal more complex expressions of identity and sexual desire. In her long and colorful letter to Florence Jones, Sadie Rosenthal signs off: “Kisses and millions of hugs and all my jazz for you daddy dear I am your little mama Blondie Indeed I love my daddy I scream I do.”<sup>113</sup> By claiming the label of “mama Blondie” and referring to Jones as her “daddy,” Rosenthal appears to perpetuate the masculinization of black women central to Otis’ inversion of race and gender.<sup>114</sup> At same time, however, Rosenthal’s reference to Jones as “daddy” does not prevent her from seeing Jones as a woman and describing her as beautiful. Rosenthal’s declaration: “I am daffy about my woman,” and her description of Jones as “beautiful daddy,” indicates that for Rosenthal, her attraction to Jones is not rooted in the projection of masculinity onto her blackness, but is more importantly an exploration of her own sexual desire.<sup>115</sup> As Sarah Potter argues, contrary to reformers’ perceptions, the desire for sexual intimacy was the main driving factor for women at Bedford: “Although inmates adopted racialized gender personas, a commitment to passionate sexual satisfaction, rather than gender non-conformity, prevailed as

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<sup>112</sup> Inmate #2516, confiscated letter.

<sup>113</sup> Inmate #2516, confiscated letter.

<sup>114</sup> Otis, “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted,” 113.

<sup>115</sup> Inmate #2516, confiscated letter.

the necessary marker of relationships among women.”<sup>116</sup> Therefore, although women at Bedford employed gendered and racialized language to describe each other as “mama” and “papa” or “daddy,” they clearly conceived of themselves as being attracted to and desiring intimacy with other women.

In particular, the use of the term “daddy” by women at Bedford played a crucial role in the creation of a culture of interracial same-sex intimacies at the Reformatory. In a letter later confiscated by Bedford officials, Agnes Green, a young black woman on parole wrote to Martha Evans, a white woman at Bedford who lived in the nursery with her child: “I walked up to the nursery and I had Baby Ethel in my arms and she cried. I ask her if she didn’t know her own daddy and all the girls laughed.”<sup>117</sup> Green’s declaration of herself as her girlfriend’s baby’s daddy is a playful assertion of paternity and power that challenges the patronizing reformatory structure of Bedford. Additionally, her use of “daddy” is a performative act which exhibits her relationship with Evans in front of the other women in the nursery, whose humorous reaction suggests their comfort and familiarity with same-sex intimacies and “daddy”/ “mama” relations at Bedford. Thus, Green’s interaction in the nursery and use of the term “daddy” reveal the prevalence of interracial same-sex intimacies at Bedford, and how they contributed to the larger culture of the institution, where women openly joked and made references to these supposedly “harmful” intimacies.

## Conclusion

The most obvious and blatant resistance to officials’ authority came from women who engaged in same-sex intimacies, mostly likely because their personal lives, both at Bedford and

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<sup>116</sup> Potter, “Undesirable Relations,” 409.

<sup>117</sup> Inmate #2380, confiscated letter.

later on parole, were under constant surveillance by officials. Within this punitive environment, expressions of sexual desire, and or love for other women at Bedford, constituted a direct attack on the order and mission of the institution, especially interracial intimacies, which contributed to reformers' anxieties about miscegenation and the dissolution of the social and racial order. As Hicks notes, "While some inmates began same-sex relationships as an act of rebellion, rejecting the control of Bedford administrators, others entered into them seeking a true connection. They strove to maintain relationships developed in Bedford, and some may have desired women before their imprisonment."<sup>118</sup> The letters passed between women at Bedford and the relationships they formed are crucial to understanding how incarcerated women at Bedford asserted some degree of agency and created a subversive community that challenged officials' control and surveillance through daring expressions of sexual desire and intimacy.

As Bedford Assistant Superintendent Julia Jessie Taft noted in her 1915 interview with investigators from the New York Board of Charities, "the attempts between the girls, white and white, or white and colored, are usually between girls who are not in the same house, but in separate houses."<sup>119</sup> Reformers familiar with the dynamics of Bedford knew that the racial segregation of the institution in 1917 would not prevent the persistence of interracial same-sex intimacies. However, the formal segregation served as an ideological assurance for officials and eased their anxieties about miscegenation, the dissolution of the racial and social order, and working-class women's sexual deviancy. Although the segregation of Bedford made interactions between white and black women more obvious to officials, and therefore easier to identify and punish, women nevertheless found ways to communicate and maintain intimate relationships with each other, through open defiance of officials, and overt expressions of interracial same-sex

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<sup>118</sup> Hicks, *Talk with Me Like a Woman*, 232.

<sup>119</sup> State Board of Charities, *49<sup>th</sup> Annual Report*, 864.

desire. However, Bedford's surveillance and policing of women's same-sex intimacies did not end when the women were released on parole, as the women remained under the control and custody of parole officers who watched and reported their every move. Nevertheless, women who engaged in same-sex intimacies at Bedford, like Mamie Jackson and Esther Hayes, continued to resist Bedford officials' authority while on parole through their determination to live together and build their own communities.

### **Chapter 3**

“If New York is around the corner then I’m gone.”  
Forming Community on Parole in Harlem, 1920-1930<sup>120</sup>

On November 13, 1924, Amy M. Prevost, a reformatory worker at Church Mission for Girls, wrote to Amos T. Baker, the superintendent of New York Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills, requesting that twenty-year-old Mabel Hampton not be paroled to Manhattan. Prevost expressed concern that Hampton’s affection for an older black woman would impede her ability to maintain “good behavior” on parole: “I feel very strongly that she should not be able to return to New York. Mrs. Burden tells me she is very much infatuated with a middle-aged colored woman, with whom she became acquainted a short time before her arrest, and whom she thinks is not a good influence for the girl.”<sup>121</sup> Baker agreed, and Hampton was paroled to an acquaintance in Jersey City and, under the terms of her parole, prohibited from going into New York City. However, Hampton, who deemed Jersey City “far too slow,” refused to let her parole restrictions infringe on her social life, and she frequently escaped to parties in Harlem and Brooklyn with a white woman she met at Bedford—a prominent madam who “knew half of New York,” and introduced her to A’Lelia Walker and Gladys Bentley.<sup>122</sup> The strict conditions of Hampton’s parole illustrate how Bedford officials’ fears of women’s seduction into the immoral nightlife of the city were exacerbated by their distrust of the black community and especially the “unruly” Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s. Administrators and parole agents continued to police, surveil, and punish same-sex intimacies, and explicitly prohibited women on

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<sup>120</sup> “Mabel Hampton's Story, July, 1986 (Tape 3),” MHSC.

<sup>121</sup> Inmate #3696, letter from Amy M. Prevost to Amos T. Baker, November 13, 1924, BH.

<sup>122</sup> Inmate #3696, letter from Amy Prevost to Amos Baker, December 15, 1925, BH. “Mabel Hampton's Story, July, 1986 (Tape 3)” and “Mabel Hampton Interviews (Tape 1),” MHSC.



parole from Bedford from maintaining contact with each other, which was unsuccessfully enforced.

Despite the possible consequences, women at Bedford made explicit plans to reconnect and live with each other once they were released on parole. Like Clara Johnson, who wrote to her lover on parole arranging for a future when they could live together, women often passed notes before their release with a family member's address where their friends and lovers could more safely direct their correspondence. The desire to maintain relationships formed at Bedford, realized both by women living together in Harlem, and women returning to Bedford to visit each other, demonstrates that while some intimacies that occurred at the institution were fleeting, a significant number were long-lasting relationships. Young black women in particular, including Mabel Hampton, Frances Mitchell, Nellie Davis, and Mamie Jackson, fought against the surveillance and control of parole agents and Bedford officials and defiantly formed their own communities.

Although not explicit, the impact that this community of formerly incarcerated, young, black, working-class queer women had on the later development of a slightly more visible working-class lesbian culture that emerged in New York City in the 1930s, is not negligible. As Lillian Faderman argues, a visible lesbian subculture in New York developed first among formerly incarcerated black women in Harlem: "They sometimes established similar 'butch/femme' arrangements once they were released from the institution, and perhaps they helped bring such patterns into the fledgling subculture and to give it a clear, identifiable image."<sup>123</sup> Therefore, the lives of women released from Bedford on parole—often overlooked

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<sup>123</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 73.

and dismissed—are a crucial part of the queer history of New York City, and the complex gay and lesbian world of the Harlem Renaissance.

## **Parole**

Although free from the literal confines of Bedford, women on parole were by no means at liberty to express themselves or act as they pleased. Parole was essentially a continuation of the “indeterminate” sentence of up to three years that all women sent to Bedford were subject to, and the length of their time on parole, just like the length of their incarceration at Bedford, was contingent on Bedford administrators’ and parole agents’ perception of the young women’s “good behavior.” While on parole, women’s personal, professional, and family lives were surveilled and scrutinized, and officials were in constant contact with employers, family members, friends, neighbors and other charity organizations to investigate the women’s actions and behavior.

The provisions for parole and conditional release of incarcerated people were first outlined in an 1877 act which established The Indeterminate Sentence and Reformatory System of New York state. Section five of the act states:

The board of managers shall have power to establish rules and regulations under which prisoners within the reformatory may be allowed to go upon parole outside of the reformatory buildings and enclosure, but to remain, while on parole, in the legal custody and under the control of the board of managers, and full power to enforce such rules and regulations and retake and re-imprison any convict so upon parole.<sup>124</sup>

Thus, it is important to note that while on parole, women remained under the custody of Bedford officials, who retained the right to re-imprison them for any offense, and could subject women on parole to any regulations they deemed fit and necessary. In addition to the state-wide

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<sup>124</sup> Edward Lindsey, Historical Sketch of the Indeterminate Sentence and Parole System, 16 J. Am. Inst. Crim. L. & Criminology, (May 1925 to February 1926), 22.

provisions for parole, Bedford outlined its own regulations for women released on parole, many of which fixated on the danger of the city. As Cheryl Hicks explains, compared to Auburn Prison, which vaguely warned parolees to not “keep evil associates,” and behave as “you know you ought to,” Bedford’s approach was much more stringent: ““You are to keep good hours. If you are located in the country, it does not seem necessary to remain out at night later than 10pm. If you wish to do so, special permission must be received from the institution. If you are located in the city, it does not seem necessary to remain out later than 11:30 at night.”<sup>125</sup> With this defacto curfew, Bedford officials sought to prevent women from repeated involvement with prostitution and to further regulate all other forms of sexual expression and desire. Women on parole were denied any meaningful form of social life and interaction with their own communities, from visiting family members, going to the movies with friends, or “slumming” in Harlem and going to cabarets. Ruth Alexander explains the extent to which women were confined by the wishes of their parole agents: “They were not to take any recreation or go out at night without the explicit approval of their employers, and they were not to make friends or visit family members without the consent of the superintendent, parole agent, or mistress of the household.”<sup>126</sup> All of these behaviors, regardless of their level of illicit or sexual activity, were viewed as potentially damaging and detrimental to the final stage of the women’s reform.

However, despite these regulations and guidelines, the Indeterminate Sentence and Reformatory System, and the subsequent parole system, were not as effective as Progressive Era prison reformers had initially hoped. From its establishment in 1901 until the 1910s, Bedford relied on one overworked parole agent to supervise and monitor all of the women released on

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<sup>125</sup> Hicks, *Talk with You like a Woman*, 239.

<sup>126</sup> Alexander, *The Girl Problem*, 129.

parole.<sup>127</sup> Clearly unable to keep up with every case, parole agents relied on correspondence with families and other charitable organizations to provide updates on the women. Even in the 1920s, with slightly more economic resources and staff, Bedford officials recognized that regardless of the strict regulations, women on parole often went back to prostitution, had contact with other women on parole, or engaged in other “immoral” or “wayward” behavior. Furthermore, Alexander notes that the recidivism rates for women were fairly high: “For example, fifty-five out of the 199 women placed on parole between October 1, 1914 and September 30, 1915 were returned to the institution for violation of parole; another forty-four violated parole but were never found.”<sup>128</sup> The inconsistencies and varying consequences for women on parole from Bedford indicate that reformers forced women to ascribe to their outdated Victorian moral values despite official’s admittance that the system regularly failed to reform them. In an effort to address the insufficient parole infrastructure, the New York State Department of Corrections established a full-time parole board in 1930.<sup>129</sup>

Women’s release on parole was conditional on their ability to find and maintain acceptable employment. Bedford officials often connected women to social workers at charitable organizations like Catholic Charities and Church Mission of Help, who provided them with employment, primarily domestic service. In requiring women to work incredibly long hours, often as live-in domestic workers, and refusing to let them engage in any form of non-sanctioned social interaction, reformers believed women would stay out of trouble and avoid “evil company.”<sup>130</sup> Officials’ patronizing attitude towards the women’s ability to provide for

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 127.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>129</sup> “History of Parole in New York State,” New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, 2019.

<sup>130</sup> Hicks, *Talk with You like a Woman*, 240.

themselves is reflected in their assumption that the women could not manage their own money, and needed instruction on how to appropriately budget and spend. Bedford insisted that women send portions of their wages back to the institution while on parole: “Unless other arrangements are made with you, you are expected to return to the Institution, to be held in trust for you, a certain percentage of your wages each month, as follows. For the 1st and 2nd months, — $\frac{2}{3}$  of your wages. For the 3rd and 4th months, — $\frac{1}{2}$  of your wages. For the 5th month and following months, — $\frac{1}{4}$  of your wages.”<sup>131</sup> This withholding of women’s meager wages, which for domestic work were no more than fifteen dollars a week and could be as little as nine dollars, further restricted women’s mobility and freedom while on parole.

While white women had the option of factory work, black women on parole from Bedford were almost always restricted to domestic work, for which they were often overworked and underpaid. Although officials described this work as an essential aspect of women’s rehabilitation and reform, many women found this forced employment worse incarceration. Black women often complained to officials that they were forced to do excessive work, and that their employers withheld their wages. As Hicks explains, women’s labor was easily exploited by their employers: “Most employers were less interested in rehabilitating the inmate than in taking advantage of cheap, controllable labor force.”<sup>132</sup> In a letter to Amos T. Baker, Mabel Hampton expressed her frustration with her employer and the exhausting conditions: “I have to ten to cook for, and 8 beds to make and there are 14 rooms in all to be clean . . . There are three straight meals to get and full one’s too. . . The people in the country don’t like to pay, for all the work that they want done.”<sup>133</sup> Eventually, Hampton decided to return to Bedford for the rest of her

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 327.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 240.

<sup>133</sup> Inmate #3696, letter from Mabel Hampton to Amos T. Baker, BH.

sentence instead of remaining in her placement. Hampton was familiar with the demands of domestic work, having worked as a domestic worker before Bedford, as well as in Superintendent Baker's home during her incarceration at the institution. Therefore, her decision to leave her parole placement indicates that the conditions were particularly heinous. Young black women serving as domestic workers while on parole were in an incredibly vulnerable position and rightly feared retaliation from their employer or Bedford officials if they spoke up. Nevertheless, many women, including Hampton, wrote to Baker demanding that he help them secure the wages that were owed to them, and their defiance carried over to other aspects of their lives on parole and their daring attempts to live freely in spite of the control and surveillance of Bedford officials.<sup>134</sup> In comparison to the isolation and excessive demands of domestic work, the promise of freedom in New York City must have been especially alluring.

Women on parole were required to write to the superintendent every month, detailing their employment, expressing remorse for their previous 'immorality,' and demonstrating that they were now on the right path towards reform. In one letter to Mamie Jackson, the Bedford superintendent emphasized the importance of hard work and employment: "I hope that you will enjoy the work and will put into it your very best effort. I am counting on you to make good in every sense of the word."<sup>135</sup> Jackson's own letters to the institution reflect a similar understanding of the information and attitude she was expected to convey while on parole: "I have my own room and bath . . . I will receive payment of \$40.00 a month and I think its fine if not hard work and I know that I will stay."<sup>136</sup> While these letters are not necessarily representative of the women's actual behavior while on parole, they provide insight into the

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<sup>134</sup> Inmate #3696, letter from Mabel Hampton to Amos T. Baker, BH. Hicks, *Talk with You like a Woman*, 240.

<sup>135</sup> Inmate #2503, letter from Bedford Superintendent to Mamie Jackson, June 28th, 1920, BH.

<sup>136</sup> Inmate #2503, Letter from Mamie Jackson to Miss Jones, June 19, 1920.

performance of what they believed the officials wanted to hear. Writing a letter that contained sufficient details about one's employment and living situation that succeeded in pleasing officials, and could be corroborated by neighbors or a parole sponsor, offered women a much desired cover for certain aspects of their lives they wished to remain private.

The ideal outcome of parole was a completely rehabilitated woman who recognized her past immorality and now embraced reformers' values of respectable and virtuous womanhood. In a promotional report detailing the mission and accomplishments of the institution, Bedford officials describe their vision of the model parolee, and emphasize marriage and children as key indicators of a successfully reformed woman: "Today there are scattered through the State girls who have passed through the institution. Some are happily married, mothers of our future citizens; others are in trades and gainful occupations, a number occupying positions of trust in their various communities."<sup>137</sup> This celebration of marriage and motherhood before employment or community service clearly reveals reformers' belief that these were women's most important roles and contributions to society. However, although encouraged, women on parole could not get married without permission from the Parole Commission or Board of Managers, and the process was so laborious that many women married without informing parole officials. The parole board both directly and indirectly discouraged black women's desire to marry. Few parole officers refused to work any black women's cases at all, and the parole board argued that black working-class women could not provide adequate financial or social stability.<sup>138</sup> Reformers believed black men would negatively affect black women's economic status and lead them back to a life of crime and immorality. Thus, even heterosexual black women who wished to conform

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<sup>137</sup> New York State Reformatory for Women, *Salient Facts About the New York State Reformatory for Women, Bedford Hills, N.Y.* (Bedford Hills, N.Y., 1926), 12.

<sup>138</sup> Hicks, *Talk with You like a Woman*, 245.

to Bedford officials' projection of the ideal parolee were denied any agency in their desire to build their own families and communities while on parole.

The structure of the parole system, which released women back to their homes or to relatives, many of whom lived in New York City, conflicted with reformers' characterization of the city as dangerous and seductive to young working-class women. In the 1909 Annual Report of the New York State Reformatory for Women, Superintendent Katherine B. Davis, warned that once parolees entered the city, they disappeared, and officials could no longer keep track of them: "When a parole girl goes to the city and leaves her place it is almost impossible to find her."<sup>139</sup> The contention between Bedford officials' reforming mission and their suspicions and fears of the city played out most prominently in parole agents' attitudes towards black women living in Harlem. Parole agents intensely monitored young black women like Frances Mitchell, Nellie Davis, and Mabel Hampton, all of whom were deemed deceitful and untrustworthy because they were working-class black women in Harlem. Hicks argues that black women were specifically targeted by parole agents because of Anglo-Saxon reformers' inherent and racist distrust of blackness: "Black women were often held to different standards and subject to different judgments from white and immigrant women. In particular, black women's treatment was shaped by administrators' fundamental disapproval of the black community."<sup>140</sup> This disapproval of the black community was largely directed at women on parole in Harlem because the neighborhood's ascendance as the center of New York's black community in the 1920s and 1930s correlated and exacerbated reformers' worst fears of urban nightlife and interracial intimacy.

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<sup>139</sup> New York State Reformatory for Women, *Annual Report*, (Bedford Hills, N.Y., 1902), 23.

<sup>140</sup> Hicks, *Talk with You like a Woman*, 238.



White Progressive Era reformers did not know how to approach Harlem, and often deferred to black organizations like the National Urban League for outreach and reform efforts. Anti-vice organizations like the Committee of Fourteen largely ignored Harlem, dismissing the neighborhood's nightlife on racist perceptions of black women's inherent promiscuity, which led the Committee to believe black women were incapable of being reformed and, therefore, outside of the purview of the organization's crusade to save women from immorality and prostitution. The Committee of Fourteen sent an investigator into Harlem for only one year, concluded that it was a "den of immorality," and turned its attention back to white neighborhoods.<sup>141</sup> However, this does not mean that black women in Harlem were free from policing and surveillance. Instead, as Hicks argues, the presence of black women in Harlem "reinforced their libidinous image and inflected police officers' and criminal justice administrators' assessments of their culpability in sexual offenses."<sup>142</sup> What exactly about the atmosphere of Harlem were reformers so expressly concerned about? Why did Harlem present opportunities for freedom and community building for women on parole that other neighborhoods did not?

### **Queer Harlem and the "Gay Renaissance"**

While descriptions of the sexual freedom of the Harlem Renaissance are often exaggerated and rooted in racist notions of black sexual promiscuity, Harlem was certainly the epicenter of entertainment and pleasure seeking during the 1920s and 1930s, largely because its dance halls and speakeasies provided easy access to liquor during Prohibition. Harlem's complex sexual landscape was largely segregated and presented a carefully constructed playground for the

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<sup>141</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 247.

<sup>142</sup> Hicks, *Talk with You Like a Woman*, 205.

pleasure of white slummers to “safely” experience a “highly contrived version of black culture.”<sup>143</sup> At the same time, the neighborhood offered a space where black gay men and women “in the life,” could privately express their sexual desires. As Eric Garber argues, Harlem enabled black gay men and women to create and celebrate their own community, albeit mostly behind closed doors: “But in spite of racial oppression, economic hardship, and homophobic persecution, black lesbians and gay men were able to build a thriving community of their own within existing Afro-American institutions and traditions.”<sup>144</sup> Black lesbians in Harlem were especially reliant on the seclusion that private spaces offered, away from the prying eyes of their own communities and anti-vice organizations. Although Harlem provided women like Frances Mitchell, Nellie Davis, and Mabel Hampton with the opportunity to form their own clandestine community of black queer working-class women, they were nevertheless unable to completely evade the surveillance and control of Bedford officials and other members of the Harlem community.

While the majority of queer interactions occurred in clandestine spaces like private rent parties or buffet flats, same-sex intimacies also occurred in public restroom stalls and speakeasies where men danced with men and women with women, and drag queens and masculine women in suits were not an uncommon sight. The Hamilton Lodge Ball, a drag ball organized by black queer Harlemites, attracted thousands of black and white spectators of varying social classes, and was the most visible display of queerness during the Harlem Renaissance. The *New York Amsterdam News* advertised and reported on the Hamilton Lodge Ball every year, summarizing the event in 1929 as a normal occurrence: “As usual, Feministic

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 225.

<sup>144</sup> Eric Garber, “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem,” *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York, New American Library, 1989): 320.

Males Turn out in Gorgeous Costumes.” The paper reported that among the 3,000 audience members were “some of Harlem’s best known people, including prominent lawyers, doctors, and businessmen, who were there with their wives and friends,” indicating that the ball was considered a respectable public outing for families and people of all ages and sexualities.<sup>145</sup> In 1930, 7,000 spectators watched men “imitate the female by donning the most gorgeous of feminine attire.”<sup>146</sup> However, the crowds at the Hamilton Lodge Ball did not signify a respect for queer life, but rather reflected a “Pansy Craze” spectacle that mirrored white fetishization of black culture. Moreover, as with other aspects of sexual dynamics of Harlem, it was significantly easier for white gay men and women who traveled to Harlem to be open about their sexual desires than it was for working-class black men and women who lived in the neighborhood.

Although the majority of black lesbian culture in Harlem occurred behind closed doors, Gladys Bentley was a significant exception. Bentley, a 250-pound black male impersonator and blues singer, was an icon of black women’s queer masculinity and unmistakably the most visible lesbian in Harlem. Fully embodying the term “bulldagger,” Bentley performed in a white tuxedo, complete with a white top hat and cane. Bentley was known for her risqué renditions of popular songs, most notably her interpretation of the Broadway show tunes “Sweet Georgia Brown” and “Alice Blue Gown,” which she transformed into a crude “ode to the joys of anal intercourse:” “And he said ‘Dearie, please turn around’/ And he shoved that big thing up my brown.”<sup>147</sup> Just as the popularity of the Hamilton Lodge Ball did not reflect the Harlem community’s open acceptance of gay men, Bentley’s popularity did not signify that her audience supported or even understood her queerness. Her star status in the Harlem nightclub scene did not prevent law

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<sup>145</sup> “Masquerade Ball Draws 5,000 People.” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 20, 1929.

<sup>146</sup> “Mere Male Blossoms Out in Garb of Milady at Big Hamilton Lodge Ball.” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 19, 1930.

<sup>147</sup> Eric Garber, “Gladys Bentley: The Bulldagger Who Sang the Blues,” *Outlook* (Spring 1988): 52-61.

enforcement from raiding her performances, and critics, even though they were aware of the nature of Bentley's act, were put off by her gender-bending and expressions of "perverse" sexuality.<sup>148</sup>

As Chauncey notes, while same-sex desire was more likely to be tolerated by working class Harlemites, middle-class Harlemites were deeply disturbed by what they perceived as the growing immorality of the neighborhood: "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."<sup>149</sup> The black middle-class turned to law enforcement and anti-vice and reform organizations, like the Committee of Fourteen, the YWCA, the National Urban League, and the White Rose Mission, to surveil and police anyone perceived to be sexually immoral, including prostitutes, effeminate men, and masculine women. In addition, Reverend Adam Clayton Powell's explicit concern with same-sex desire among women conveys how black lesbianism, or even black women's rejection of heterosexual womanhood, was perceived by Powell and members of Harlem's middle-class as a threat to the status of the black community and an attack on the structure of the black family.<sup>150</sup> Thus, for queer black working-class women, Harlem was both a space of freedom and experimentation, as well as an arena of control and surveillance. However, Harlem's power and significance as a place of refuge cannot be overlooked, and as Saidiya Hartman argues, "If it wasn't possible in Harlem then it wasn't possible anywhere."<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> James F. Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 177.

<sup>149</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 253.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid, 254.

<sup>151</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 268.

## Mabel Hampton's Adventures in Harlem

Despite Bedford superintendent Amos Baker and social worker Amy M. Prevost's strict regulations against Mabel Hampton going to Manhattan while on parole, she escaped into the city two to three days a week, and she was intimately familiar with the queer landscape of Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s. Hampton, who later became a prominent black lesbian activist during the 1970s and 1980s, worked as a chorus line dancer at various nightclubs during the Harlem Renaissance. However, it was women she met at Bedford who exposed her to Harlem's most famous queer figures, and through whom she discovered the intimate and private world of other women "in the life" in Harlem.<sup>152</sup> Hampton describes how she first left Jersey City for Manhattan, just two weeks after her release from Bedford: "Two weeks to the day I left, the white women appeared in a grey car. . . the woman that had the whore house that I met at Bedford. . . and she knew half of New York, including the police force, so she came to see me. . . she said you wanna go for a drive I said mhmhm!"<sup>153</sup> Hampton's parole sponsor warned her about the terms of her parole, but the twenty-year-old was indignant: "'Well you know you don't go to New York.' Well if New York is around the corner then I'm gone. So we get to the car and get straight on down to New York. . . I met so many people that this girl knew."<sup>154</sup> In part, Hampton's introduction into the queer underworld of Harlem by a well-connected madam, Ruth, confirms reformers' worst anxieties about the negative influence of the city and the consequences of associating with other Bedford parolees. However, in Mabel Hampton's case, officials were more concerned with regulating Hampton's relationships with other black women and her connection to the black community, which they denied her access to by restricting her

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<sup>152</sup> "Mabel Hampton Interviews (Tape 1)", MHSC.

<sup>153</sup> "Mabel Hampton's Story July 1986 (Tape 3)," MHSC.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

parole to Jersey City. Therefore, for a time, Hampton's relationship with Ruth, a white woman, allowed her to evade the surveillance of Bedford officials.

Hampton's adventures brought her to some of Harlem's most exclusive and famous social scenes, most notably heiress A'Lelia Walker's extravagant parties.<sup>155</sup> Known for their raucous expressions of sexual freedom, A'Lelia Walker's parties were a fixture of the elite gay and lesbian world of the Harlem Renaissance and their exclusivity and privacy safeguarded guests from facing repercussions in their professional and personal lives. Hampton describes her initial shock at the open displays of explicit sexual desire all around her: "What caught my eye froze me on the spot. Ain't nobody had clothes on but me . . . Pillows all around the floor, no chairs. Somebody was feeding somebody else. I just stood there and froze. I had heard about it, but never been."<sup>156</sup> Hampton describes the atmosphere of Walker's party as freeing and sexually liberated, with no concern for the pressures of the outside world: "There was men and women, women and women, and men and men, they wanna do anything they wanna do they go ahead and do it . . . We had a lovely time. . . Everybody did whatever they wanted to do, nobody paid anybody else any attention."<sup>157</sup> While it is less remarkable that wealthy Harlemites were able to engage in same-sex intimacies within the privacy of their own homes, the fact that women on parole from Bedford also had access to these spaces is significant. Hampton and Ruth's presence at A'Lelia Walker's parties and other spaces that facilitated queer encounters, illustrates that private queer spaces in Harlem often blurred race and class lines, although the public entertainment and tourism to the neighborhood remained fairly segregated. Furthermore, Bedford

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<sup>155</sup> A'Lelia Walker, the heiress to the Madam C. J. Walker fortune, was known for friendships with gay men, and was closely attuned to the culture of queer Harlem, of which her parties played a crucial role. For more on A'Lelia Walker and gay Harlem, see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994).

<sup>156</sup> "Mabel Hampton Interviews (Tape 1)," MHSC.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

women's extensive connections to the gay and lesbian world of Harlem indicates formerly incarcerated women's potentially significant impact on the development of a visible working-class lesbian culture in New York City.

However, Hampton's involvement with Ruth and their frequent escapes to New York did not go unnoticed. Hampton's parole sponsor, Annie Burden, who disliked her from the beginning, threatened to notify Bedford officials that Hampton had repeatedly broken the terms of her parole. Burden often wrote to Superintendent Baker, complaining about Hampton's behavior: "I have my hands full, for she is wild and wayward. . . The truth is, Mabel don't want to stay in my home—she must do the right thing and behave around me, for she knows when she gets too high I will report her."<sup>158</sup> Despite Hampton's brazen defiance of Burden's authority, she could not ignore the influence in her parole case. Burden's remarks and threats to Hampton about her conduct and her relationship with Ruth were constant: "You are making love with a white woman, and I am going to tell her [the investigator]" and "I think that's terrible that you're going with that white girl."<sup>159</sup> Hampton also received coded threats from Superintendent Baker, who warned, "If you wish to come back to the Institution to remain here until your free day falls in August, you may do so. Perhaps, after all, this would be the best thing for you to do, because, recently a rumor came to me that you were making visits to New York City and I was asked to caution you about this." The potential consequences of broken parole became too much for

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<sup>158</sup> Inmate #3696, letter from Annie Burden to Amos T. Baker, June 12, 1925, BH. Mabel Hampton's Story July 1986 (Tape 3)," MHSC. Hampton's intense dislike for Burden radiates from her narrative of their relationship, and sixty years later the memory of Burden still elicited a visceral reaction from Hampton, who describes Burden's voice as akin to Anita Bryant's. During the oral history interview, Hampton mocks Burden's high-pitched voice, and calls her a "pucker-pus."

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

Hampton, and she decided it was safer to turn herself back into Bedford, where she finished the rest of her sentence.<sup>160</sup>

Back at Bedford, Hampton was awarded a cabin to herself, assigned to clean Superintendent Baker's home, and re-established her friendships with women still incarcerated at Bedford. In some respects, Hampton describes her last months at Bedford similar to a summer camp, and she seems to have thoroughly enjoyed re-incarceration. She and other women "drank wine, kissed each other, we had a ball."<sup>161</sup> However, what Hampton cites as having missed and valued the most at Bedford is the community of women and the relative ease with which she could engage in same-sex intimacies. In addition, Bedford officials appear to have favored Hampton, especially Superintendent Baker, who assumed a more forgiving attitude towards Hampton than other women who violated their parole. It is possible that Hampton's decision to return of her own accord, and her commitment to her faith—she wrote to Baker asking for the Reverend to gift her a Bible, and prayer books, and on at least one occasion returned to Bedford to attend church service—made officials more likely to view Hampton as devoted to the reformatory values of the institution.<sup>162</sup> Officials even went so far as to throw a going away party for Hampton when she was discharged from Bedford's custody, and she recalls that the investigator assigned to her parole case praised Hampton's positive effect on the other women: "I never knew a woman who could come in here and turn the place upside down. These women really like you." Hampton responded, "I like em all, they belong to me."<sup>163</sup> Hampton's response clearly illustrates the strong sense of community that women formed at Bedford and offers

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<sup>160</sup> Inmate #3696, letter from Amos T. Baker to Mabel Hampton, June 3, 1926, BH.

<sup>161</sup> Mabel Hampton's Story July 1986 (Tape 3), MHSC.

<sup>162</sup> Inmate #3696, letter from Mabel Hampton to Amos T. Baker, no date, BH.

<sup>163</sup> Mabel Hampton's Story July 1986 (Tape 3), MHSC.



insight into why women were intensely determined to support and maintain this community after their release.

### **Envisioning a Future Beyond Bedford**

In contrast to Bedford officials' relative trust of Mabel Hampton, administrators and parole agents targeted Mamie Jackson, Nellie Davis, and Frances Mitchell. These young black women were closely monitored because they were regarded as deceitful and untrustworthy, but their behavior garnered special attention because they were paroled to urban areas—Mamie Jackson to Tarrytown, NY, Nellie Davis to Philadelphia (although she soon escaped to Harlem), and Frances Mitchell to Harlem. In addition to in-person check-ins, parole agents interviewed neighbors and employers, monitored the women's mail, and related their findings to Bedford officials. On at least one occasion, the police were called to surveil Mamie Jackson and her girlfriend, Esther Hayes, a white woman also on parole from Bedford: "The girls are apparently being watched with suspicion by the police of Tarrytown and detectives at the 125th Street station, according to reports of our parole officer, Mrs. Engle."<sup>164</sup> Parole agents, understood by Bedford officials as the last line of defense for women's morality, policed more than women's actions, and ultimately they sought to reform women's minds. Despite finding no evidence of a violation of parole, Jackson's parole officer nevertheless left an in-person check-in dissatisfied, convinced that "her mind is full of Esther Hayes and Ethel Wallace."<sup>165</sup> Even though these women knew that their personal lives were under intense scrutiny, and that they risked reincarceration if they were caught violating parole, they persisted in their attempts to circumvent the control of Bedford officials, live together, and maintain their relationships.

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<sup>164</sup> Inmate #2503, letter from Bedford Superintendent to Sarah Ivins, Church Mission of Help, May 14, 1921, BH.

<sup>165</sup> Inmate #2503, BLM, June 18, 1920, BH.

On March 1, 1929, Frances Mitchell's parole officer, Mrs. Fitzgerald, visited her apartment and found her living with Nellie Davis, a twenty-three-year-old woman from South Carolina sentenced to Bedford for stealing lingerie, five other women, and ten men. Based on information the Bedford parole agent received from the butcher downstairs, Mitchell and her roommates had "pulled doors in between rooms off the hinges for fire wood as well as dish closet drawers and took the gas range with them."<sup>166</sup> Mitchell's parole record indicates another woman on parole from Bedford, Tammie Miller, lived with her, as well as a "masculine sort of woman known as 'Alec.'" The neighbors assigned to surveil the apartment by the parole agent reported that Mitchell frequently invited Mary Walker and "tried to keep her there all night unknown to the family, who when she was discovered, ordered her to get up and leave." The family, when asked about the relationship between Frances Mitchell and Mary Walker, "claimed that the affection they showed for each other was 'disgusting.'" Regardless of whether the family was repulsed by Mitchell and Cooper's relationship because it was interracial or homosexual, or both, the visceral reaction to their affection reflects Bedford officials' similar response to interracial intimacies at the institution.<sup>167</sup>

Mitchell's desire to live with her friends and lovers from Bedford, and in doing so, establish her own community of working-class parolees "in the life," blatantly challenged the strict limitations of parole, designed to prevent women from exerting authority over their own lives. Shocked by Mitchell's flagrant violation of her parole, Mrs. Fitzgerald issued a warrant for Mitchell's arrest. It is unclear which aspect of Mitchell's living situation appalled Mrs. Fitzgerald the most: the sheer number of people in one apartment, unmarried women's cohabitation with five other men, Bedford parolees associating with each other, or interracial

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<sup>166</sup> Inmate #4501, "Re- Frances Mitchell," March 2, 1929, N.L.F, BH.

<sup>167</sup> Inmate #4501, note for February 27, 1929, BH.

same-sex intimacies. However, it is likely that Fitzgerald blamed Mitchell's violation on her presumed sexual immorality and waywardness, and not her dire economic circumstances, which is the most likely answer to why she lived with sixteen other people. Although by 1929, Harlem had solidly emerged as a black ghetto and the majority of residents were impoverished, rent was by no means cheap or even affordable. Because of the unprecedented influx of black migrants to Harlem during the Great Migration and their exclusion from the larger housing market, white property owners easily exploited black tenants. They frequently paid twice as much as white tenants even within the same building, and spent one-half to a one-third of their income on rent, with prices that became increasingly difficult to afford in the 1930s.<sup>168</sup> Thus, Mitchell's unusual living arrangement can be attributed to her desire to cultivate her own community of Bedford parolees and other working-class queer women in Harlem, as well as economic necessity.

Although Mrs. Fitzgerald describes Mitchell and her roommates as living in complete squalor, Frances Mitchell, Tammie Miller and Nellie Davis took great care in creating and imagining a home for themselves after Bedford. A note confiscated by Bedford officials from Tammie Miller to Frances Mitchell demonstrates how women attempted to remain in contact after they were released: "Write to me as my aunt and send it to my sister. . . She will send it with her letter when she writes. Her address is . . ." <sup>169</sup> Miller's insistence that Mitchell write to her sister's address under the pretense of being her aunt illustrates the level of creativity and deception necessary for the women to evade the surveillance of Bedford officials and exert control over their own lives. The existence of this note additionally implies that other women at Bedford devised similar plans, indicating that some notes written on behalf of family members to Bedford administrators could have in fact been from women's friends or lovers. Nellie Davis,

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<sup>168</sup> Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 16.

<sup>169</sup> Inmate #2501, confiscated letter from Tammie Miller, April 4, 1928, BH.

who lived with Mitchell and Miller in Harlem, invented a similarly elaborate plan to escape to Atlantic City with another woman from Bedford, but it is unclear if it was ever executed.

Women's attempts to establish their own communities and strengthen their ties to each other were especially targeted and punished by Bedford officials. These defiant communities directly challenged officials' authority and rejected reformers' ideals of respectable womanhood.

Just as Frances Mitchell's apartment in Harlem was a refuge for various women on parole from Bedford, many other women made their own plans to maintain the connections and friendships they formed while incarcerated. Clara Johnson left her parole placement in Poughkeepsie because she found the forced domestic labor too demanding. She argued, "why should I do so when I don't have to?" Johnson arranged to meet up with her girlfriend, Harriet Mills, a black eighteen-year-old at Bedford, and mused about a future together in New York, "Dear little girl. . . I am going to New Haven where I expect to remain for some time. When I am settled I will write and send you the address...New York is wide open plenty of white stuff and everything you want so cheer up there are plenty of good times in store for you yet."<sup>170</sup> For Johnson and Mills, New York promised freedom. The real and imagined potentialities of the city presented an escape from the control of Bedford officials and the isolation of parole assignments in wealthy white homes in upstate New York. For women on parole from Bedford, the city offered a future that contained the capacity for self-transformation, and therefore, despite numerous obstacles, New York presented the only viable space for black working-class queer futurity.

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<sup>170</sup> Inmate #2515, letter to Harriet Mills, March 3, 1920, BH.

## Freedom

On November 28, 1924, Bessie Campbell's mother wrote to Superintendent Baker, "Dr. Baker dear Sir, I am writing to you to ask you could you let my daughter Bessie Campbell come Home for Christmas Dinner as i would love to have her home very much with her mother as we miss her very much."<sup>171</sup> Despite her mother's pleas to have her return home, Bessie Campbell remained imprisoned at Bedford for another year before she was released on parole.<sup>172</sup> Even when family members lamented turning their daughters over to the care of reformers and attempted to persuade officials to release them, obtaining freedom from Bedford was not easy. For women who had no living family, like Mabel Hampton, or whose parents were deemed unfit or unwilling to care for them, like Mamie Jackson, freedom was even more elusive.

Women on parole from Bedford expressed their demands for freedom in various ways, from direct challenges to Bedford officials demanding their "free papers," to leaving their assigned domestic work positions, escaping into the city, and dancing the night away. For black women in particular, requesting their own freedom was a perverse act all too reminiscent of enslaved people appealing to their masters for their free papers. Furthermore, black women's demands for their freedom required them to navigate the insurmountable power dynamics of the reformatory system, whose very structure negated black women's capacity for reform. Mabel Hampton, who arguably had a more amicable relationship with Superintendent Baker than other black women at the institution, wrote to him with urgency and determination, "Dear Dr. Baker, please let me know when I can get my free papers! Or if I must do all my time, if I don't get them soon, I will think that I haven't got any time off."<sup>173</sup> However, even Hampton, who

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<sup>171</sup> Inmate #3701 Letter from mother to Amos T. Baker, November 28, 1924, BH.

<sup>172</sup> Inmate #3701 Abstract of Personal History, BH.

<sup>173</sup> Inmate #3696, letter from Hampton to Amos T. Baker, no date, BH.

officials believed was “pleasant” and “a rather bright and good looking colored girl,” spent seven months on parole before she was completely discharged from Bedford’s custody, over two years after she was initially arrested for solicitation.<sup>174</sup>

In comparison, Mamie Jackson, who had a much more fraught and contentious relationship with Bedford officials, appealed to administrators by citing her father’s strict discipline, potentially in the hopes that his authority would be accepted as a substitute for Bedford’s: “I would like to know if you will send me my free papers or will I have to come after them as I would like to have them Friday, I am home with my Father who is very strict, but I get along alright.”<sup>175</sup> Jackson was incarcerated at Bedford for almost three years before she was even released on parole, and she spent much of her sentence in punishment. Ultimately, Jackson received her “free papers” two months after she was released on parole, not because officials considered her reformed, but because she had reached the end of the maximum three-year indeterminate sentence and Bedford could no longer legally retain her in their custody. Jackson was discharged exactly three years to the day she was admitted to Bedford.<sup>176</sup>

Despite the overwhelming obstacles to freedom, women on parole from Bedford found and celebrated each other. Within private spaces in Harlem, Frances Mitchell, Nellie Davis, and Mabel Hampton, evaded the control of officials, and they were able to assert authority over their own desires. As Hartman describes, Bedford women’s expressions of resistance occurred through their manifestations of joy: “On the dance floor it was clear that existence was not only a struggle, but a beautiful experiment too. It was an inquiry about how to live when the future was foreclosed. How was it possible to thrive under assault? . . . Or was the experiment to remake the

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<sup>174</sup> Inmate #3696, “History Blank,” BH.

<sup>175</sup> Inmate #2503, letter to Mrs. Christian from Mamie Jackson, March 8, 1920, BH.

<sup>176</sup> Inmate #2503, Parole Record, BH.

world that defined its mission against you and yours?”<sup>177</sup> Whether in their own apartments, Harlem cabarets, or A'Lelia Walker's parties, women on parole remade their own worlds in direct opposition to Bedford officials. These rebellious expressions of joy, desire, and community constitute what Hartman defines as “dream making,” or “beautiful experiments,” which allowed for women to transcend the boundaries of their own confinement and surveillance and exist defiantly, if only briefly, in a world of their own construction.

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<sup>177</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 307.

### Conclusion

In a 1983 interview with Joan Nestle for the Lesbian Herstory archives, Mabel Hampton describes what it was like to be a part of the clandestine atmosphere of lesbian culture in the 1920s. She compares the restrictions of the Progressive Era to the comparatively open gay and lesbian culture of the 1980s: “The gay then, was you had to be behind the covers. . . Now if you go somewhere, you don’t have to tell your aunt you’re going to church.” At the same time, throughout her oral history Hampton casually references the prolific and vibrant queer life of her adolescence: “There was plenty gay people, those parties went on all the time . . . I had all my friends and they was gay.”<sup>178</sup> Despite the control of and pressures from the state, progressive reformers, and family members, Hampton’s oral history reveals how an entire underground community of queer women thrived just below the surface. Thus, the challenge of writing the history of same-sex intimacies between women in the Progressive Era lies in the act of peeling back the covers to reveal a window into the experiences of these women, the lives they lived, and the women they loved.

The history of intimacies between women, often neglected and dismissed as lesser or trivial, serves as a crucial point of analysis from which to examine the deepest anxieties of a society. The racial segregation of the New York Reformatory for Women at Bedford, because of the prevalence of interracial intimacies between women at the institution, conveys reformers’ fears of miscegenation and reflects the larger context of racial violence in the early 1900s. Similarly, the Committee of Fourteen’s negation of working-class women’s sexual autonomy, and their raids to “end the exploitation of girls,” are rooted in the social anxieties produced by the emergence of the “New Woman” in the public sphere.

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<sup>178</sup> “Mabel Hampton Interviews (Tape 1), MHSC.



Equally important, the history of intimacies between women provide narratives of radical resistance and quotidian refusal. Mabel Hampton, Frances Mitchell, and Nellie Davis's attempts to subvert Bedford officials' surveillance and form their own communities of black working-class queer women in Harlem exemplify the creativity and resourcefulness of these women in the midst of surveillance and policing. Sadie Rosenthal and Mamie Jackson's daring expressions of their desires for women at Bedford illustrate the young women's sexual agency in their interracial intimacies. They reveal that these relationships were more than "romantic friendships," but were sexual and emotional intimacies that competed with and were understood on the same level as these women's relationships with men. Moreover, Rosenthal and Jackson's explicit connection between their sexual desires and resistance to authority articulates their sexuality as a politicized identity. The writings and records of the women at Bedford and the women who appear in the records of the Committee of Fourteen represent only a sliver of women who resisted reformers' ideals of Victorian womanhood and shared intimacies with other women in the Progressive Era.

While this thesis attempts to fill some of the gaps in the scholarship of George Chauncey, Lilian Faderman, Cheryl Hicks, Ruth Alexander, Saidiya Hartman, among others, and in, doing so, tie these critical histories of queer life and resistance together, there are still numerous areas to be explored. Although Chauncey's *Gay New York* is an incredibly comprehensive and groundbreaking work that details the history of gay men in New York from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century up until World War II, it only tangentially includes the history of queer women. Faderman's broad history of lesbians in the twentieth century primarily focuses on middle- and upper-class white women, and it does not include the lives and narratives of women at Bedford. Therefore, in terms of the trajectory of queer women's history, the shift from the "romantic friendships" and

“Boston marriages” between upper-class Anglo-Saxon women in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century remains disconnected from the development of a visible lesbian culture and community in the 1930s. Furthermore, the impact of black working-class and previously incarcerated women on the evolution of lesbian culture remains under-analyzed. In addition, the vast majority of queer historical scholarship is centered around New York City, and although New York was and remains an epicenter of gay life, in order to form a more complete and nuanced field of queer history it is necessary to include the existence and experiences of communities outside of New York and San Francisco, especially those in rural areas. Were there similar expressions of same-sex intimacies between working-class black women in the South? How did their lives, experiences, and forms of resistance differ from the black working-class women who migrated from the South and ended up at Bedford?

The biggest obstacle to the further development of the history of intimacies between women is the lack of women’s overt presence in the archive. As a result of the exclusion of women from the public sphere, there are limited sources and records of women’s lives, and even fewer accounts of the personal lives of working-class women. Working-class women’s sexuality, and in particular black working-class women, appears almost exclusively in the records of criminal and penal institutions, which inherently taints their depiction. Similarly, the legal obligation to exclude the real names of women at Bedford to protect their identity complicates scholarly discourse and dialogue and distances these women from their own narrative. Thus, the history of intimacies between women exists on scraps of paper passed between women, love notes written on toilet paper, and brief allusions to lady-lovers. They are whispers in the archive that call out to be heard, questioned, and understood.

Appendix

WOMEN'S COURT

VAG: SUBD. 4: LOIT.: SOL. PUB. PL.  
SUBD. 4: 887, C.C.P.  
SUBD. 150, T.H.L.

WAYWARD MINOR ☒

DEFENDANT: [REDACTED]

LOCATION OF OFFENSE: *Victims Association*

WITNESS: *Police office*

BAIL FIXED: *1000*

BAIL GIVEN: [ ] BONDSMAN: [ ] COUNSEL: [ ]

STA. H: COURT

ADJS. *1* - DATE *7/20* SENTENCE *Bedford* MAG

PRIOR CONV'S, PROST. [ ] INTOX. ETC. [ ] F. P. B. # [ ]

INFECTIOUS ☒ HEALTH REPORT [ ] NO CTF. [ ] NON-INFECTIOUS [ ] MENTALLY SUB-NORMAL. [ ] DRUG ADDICT [ ]

CASE No. *1488*  
DATE *7-16-26*  
AGE *20* NATIVITY *Austria*

T.H.D.N.  
T.F.R.H.T.C.  
P.H: HQTEL

HQTERS. I D. PRICE POLICE SOL  
PCT. \$ CTF. J. R.

P.G. *CHV.*  
P.N.G. *DCH*

**Figure 1.** A typical women’s court sentencing card. This twenty-year-old Austrian woman was sentenced to Bedford as a wayward minor. “Women’s Court,” July 16, 1926, Box 76, Committee of Fourteen.



**Figure 2.** Twenty-year-old Frances Mitchell in a Bedford uniform, staring defiantly at the camera. Inmate #4501, photographs, 1928, BH.

Period & Cottage	Character	Work	Discipline
1918.July-Sept. Cowdin	Silly, foolish, more or less trouble about colored girls all the time, truthful and willing.	Been waitress, works well.	5 punishments. Notes, colored girls, screaming.
1918.Oct.-Dec. Cowdin	Truthful, willing, is interested in some colored girl every few weeks.	Has been waitress, does work well.	10/3 Notes. Would n not go to cottage.D.B. 11/26 note to color- ed girl. 12/12 Swearing.
1919.Jan.-Mar. Cowdin.	Nice girl around the house, not so good outside. Has colored girl for friend.	Good worker for a young girl.	Feb. 14- 1 rec. Feb. 27 D.B.
1919.Apr.-June Cowdin.	Has been a model girl these 3 months. Has given up colored girls.	Willing and good.	No punishment.
1919.July-Sept. Cowdin.	Shows a very good example. Has improved.	Good waitress and good chamber- maid.	Sept. 14th. was impertinent and call- ed vile names. Notes 2 weeks.

**Figure 3.** Sadie Rosenthal’s disciplinary record. Includes punishments for “Notes, colored girls, screaming.” Inmate #2516, Disciplinary Record, BH.

Now, Won. I must close as I want to mail this letter in time for you to get it sunday or I mean Saturday, but what ever you do as I've told you some one who really has a spark of love for you, and who will never lead you wrong if I no it, well sure. I must say along but not for long as I am expecting to be able to be where you are next week and during the early part of the week too .

I will close with love from one whose cares.

WARNING                      B A B Y

IF ANYONE NOT CONCERNED OPENING LETTER, TAKE ADVICE AND DONT TRY TO MAKE ANY TROUBLE, FOR EITHER ONE OF THE TWO CONCERNED. ILL MAKE IT HOT FOR YOU IF YOU DO.

**Figure 4.** The last page of Clara Johnson’s letter to Harriett Mills, for whom she declares she has a “spark of love.” The letter ends with a handwritten warning. Inmate #2515, confiscated letter, BH.

Rated with the  
Faintest of friends  
My devoted pal  
Well I will heart & hope  
that you will mind passing  
the really don't know what  
I am writing I am a little  
but I hope you will have  
to excuse this paper as  
you know that I am run-  
ning in and cannot get  
any other kind.  
Will you please did  
cheer me you dear I not  
only know that you sit  
with Mr. G. but that you are

**Figure 5.** Part of Mamie Jackson’s letter to her “Devoted Pal” written on toilet paper while in punishment. Inmate #2503, confiscated letter, BH.

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