

SECTION II AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

THIS HARLEM LIFE: BLACK FAMILIES AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE 1920S AND 1930S

By Stephen Robertson, Shane White
Stephen Garton, Graham White

University of Sydney

On the evening of June 24, 1928, Morgan Thompson uncharacteristically lost his temper. What had provoked him was a confrontation between his seventeen-year-old son, George, and a man visiting an apartment across West 144th Street from the building in Harlem in which the Thompson family lived. When an exchange of words about George's behavior toward a girl on the street escalated into a confrontation in which the man stepped menacingly toward George, Morgan reacted by cutting his son's foe with a knife, first on the right shoulder, and then four times on his left arm. Bleeding profusely, the man fled down the street, and located a police officer, who helped him get to Harlem Hospital. A doctor had to use eighteen stitches to close the wounds. Later that night, officers returned to West 144th Street, roused Morgan from his bed, and arrested him.¹ When the police officers brought Morgan Thompson to the 16th Precinct station and charged him with assault, they initiated a legal process that brought Thompson and his family into the written record. An affidavit from the Magistrate's Court and a case file created by the District Attorney's office identified him as a forty-year-old West Indian, a bricklayer by occupation, who had resided on West 144th Street for a decade. That information led us to census schedules and there we learned that Morgan lived with his wife of seventeen years, Margaret, a domestic servant who had also come from the West Indies, and two children, George, and fifteen-year-old Elizabeth. The family had resided in New York City since 1917, but had not become citizens.² Taken together, these snapshots capture only Morgan's roles as a protective father and a member of a nuclear family, but such fragmentary moments are typical of the limited evidence that exists about the lives of ordinary blacks in Harlem.

In Morgan Thompson's case, another source exists, one produced by a newly created branch of the correctional system. After a jury convicted Thompson of second-degree assault, the judge did not immediately pronounce sentence. Instead, he referred Thompson for investigation by the court's Probation department, an experience that, from 1927, he shared with all those convicted in the Court of General Sessions, the city's felony court. Over the period of a week, a probation officer, E. C. Collins, checked Thompson's criminal record and found out if he was known to social welfare agencies, spoke with him, had him examined at a psychiatric clinic, and interviewed or corresponded with his teachers, family, landlord, neighbours, employers and associates. Collins then compiled a three page report about Thompson's family, education, leisure, religious practice,

and residential and employment histories. With that document before him, the judge opted to suspend Thompson's prison sentence and place him on probation for five years.

Thompson's probation file, which contained the initial investigation report and the record of his supervision while on probation, provides a longer and wider view of his life than do the District Attorney's case file and census schedules, one that stretches over several years and beyond the family. Instead of a snapshot, the file provides a short movie. Its script comes from the Probation Department's concern about where Thompson lived, how he spent his leisure and managed his money, and whether he attended religious services. Supervision towards those ends took the form of a mandatory weekly report by Thompson to the department's office, and visits by an officer to his home twice a month and workplace once a month. The officer recorded a "chronological or diary type" report of each interaction, most no longer than three or four lines in length, only a few extending to more detailed and revealing accounts of an individual's activities or character.³ As a result, Thompson's file, like those of other black probationers, is most revealing of the shape of his life rather than its quality.

Such pictures of the everyday lives of ordinary residents of Harlem are strikingly absent from historical studies of the neighborhood in the 1920s and 1930s. The richest and most individualized accounts of Harlem are of what the late Lawrence Levine labelled "high culture." Epitomized by David Levering Lewis' *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, this scholarship focuses on the writers and intellectuals who constituted the Harlem Renaissance and the incipient civil rights movement, and the high society in which they moved. Other Harlems appear only dimly in these accounts; as Levine noted in reviewing Lewis' book, "he acknowledges the importance of jazz and blues, of the sporting life, and of religion, but subjects none of it to close scrutiny." Individual musicians, numbers bankers and clergy are glimpsed, but the more fully realized lives that feature in historical accounts of high culture in Harlem are absent. Audiences, customers and followers appear only in aggregates: the crowds at nightclubs; the amount gambled on numbers; the funds raised to build churches.⁴

One consequence of the lack of scrutiny of the worlds beyond high culture is that our picture of Harlem has not entirely shaken the view, bequeathed to us by E. Franklin Frazier and Gilbert Osofsky, that, even at its peak in the 1920s, the neighborhood was a tragic slum.⁵ It was in these years that waves of migrants from the South and immigrants from the West Indies pushed out the boundaries of black settlement, so that by 1930, blacks, now numbering over 200,000, almost one fifth of whom hailed from the West Indies, had spilled over Eighth Avenue to Amsterdam Avenue and the heights overlooking central Harlem as far south as 130th Street, moved north to 160th Street, and had begun to settle as far south as 110th Street. But segregation pushed rents up to a point where families could only survive by taking in lodgers. The consequently overcrowded apartments made some Harlem blocks among the most densely populated in the city, and contributed to rates of disease and death that exceeded dramatically those of the city's whites. New York City offered few opportunities to shake free of that situation. With only a small number of manufacturing jobs available, and barred by unions and employers from skilled jobs, most blacks ended up in low-paid, dead-end service work.⁶ Of course, there was another kind of work for blacks in Harlem:

numbers gambling. The racket employed, by one estimate, around a thousand men and women collecting bets, and made a handful of the 'bankers' operating the games into fabulously wealthy 'kings' and 'queens,' but as an illegal enterprise it placed those involved at risk of arrest, and made them targets of white gangsters seeking control of the profits. It also tainted Harlem with criminality, as did the thriving trade in illegal liquor and entertainment that drew whites uptown during Prohibition.⁷

Lewis rejected the idea that 1920s Harlem was a slum without challenging that picture of the social reality of neighborhood; instead, he located his counter argument at a remove from everyday life. What distinguished Harlem, Lewis asserted, was a prevailing mood of "proud self confidence," founded on the success of a handful of its residents, of whom he chose to highlight a few of the more exotic, including the aviator Hubert Julian.⁸ As much as the energy and possibilities produced by the unprecedented concentration of blacks are a crucial part of what made Harlem a black metropolis, the neighborhood offered more immediate, concrete supports for establishing and sustaining its residents' lives that also distinguished it from a slum. Early in the 1920s, Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association, the mass movement of ordinary black men and women, with several thousand members in Harlem, devoted to racial unity and uplift, was by the far the neighborhood's most prominent organization, but it was just one small part of Harlem's rich fabric of voluntary groups. Hundreds of small clubs gathered in apartments or meeting rooms, to socialize, play cards, and to organize dances, lunches and excursions. Fraternal orders such as the Prince Hall Masons and the Elks, which set up a dozen or so lodges in Harlem, had more elaborate premises, with auditoriums, and rooms in which members could meet, and their renowned orchestras and bands could practice. Religious organizations existed on an even larger scale than voluntary groups. Forty-nine church buildings, and hundreds of storefronts and apartments converted to houses of worship, were scattered throughout the neighborhood. Each was "much more besides a place of worship," James Weldon Johnson wrote in 1930;⁹ the largest churches organized athletic clubs (particularly basketball teams), classes ranging from vocational training to art, choirs and musical groups, and social clubs. A similar range of activities could be found at Harlem's thriving branches of the YMCA and YWCA.

These institutions and organizations emerge from the 'other Harlems' that Lewis slights, and which have remained on the margins of scholarship about the neighborhood. However, in the more than thirty years since Herbert Gutman refuted Frazier's claim that the black family disintegrated into single-parent households as a consequence of the Great Migration north after World War I, community studies of a variety of other northern cities have coupled evidence of poverty, unstable and dangerous employment and ill-health with details of institutions and organizations that black communities built and sustained in this period of dramatic growth.¹⁰ What community studies have not made clear is just how those different facets of everyday life came together for ordinary blacks, making it possible to continue to focus on what Harlem, and other black neighborhoods, lacked rather than on what existed within their bounds. This article reconstructs the lives of five individuals to highlight what the black metropolis offered those outside the elite, to show how ordinary blacks negotiated the challenges, and drew on institutions and organizations, to establish and sustain new

lives. We offer the kind of individualized perspective on everyday life that other scholars have provided for high culture, but which does not exist for Harlem, even in early twentieth century sociological studies of black life.

At first glance, individuals on probation seem unrepresentative of the inhabitants of Harlem; they are convicted criminals, after all. However, black criminals were not all a distinct class apart from ordinary residents. Investigations, in the words of the Chief Probation Officer, filtered out those “whose attitudes and past records reveal that they will be probation failures,” and selected for supervision first offenders, such as Thompson, and those deemed not to be anti-social.¹¹ Rather than hardened criminals, probationers were much more likely to be ordinary residents of Harlem who had been caught, once, breaking the law, usually acting out of desperation or poverty. In short, their sole conviction was out of character. Our five examples are typical probationers involved in the variety of family relationships that were a commonplace in Harlem: three are married adults, one of whom experienced a marriage breakdown; one is an adolescent in a single parent household; and the fifth is a young adult lodger.¹² These men also spent a long time on probation, and as a result had some of the most extensive and revealing files. Their records nonetheless offer incomplete pictures of their lives: they do not span their whole life; and offer only glimpses of the quality of their relationships. What the files do is outline the extent of each individual’s family and community relationships, and thus the richness, and dynamism, of life in Harlem in 1920s. The slum that Harlem would become, the hardships the Depression would bring, the rich evidence of family upheaval offered by sociological studies conducted in the 1930s and 1940s, have all cast shadows that excessively darken our picture of life in the neighborhood in those earlier years. These five men experience those conditions, but the Harlem in which they live is also, in Roi Ottley’s words, a “vibrant, bristling black metropolis.”¹³

Morgan Thompson’s probation file helps us to conjure an image of the forty-two-year old black man as he appeared in 1928: he stood five feet eight inches tall, had black eyes, weighed 135 pounds, and possessed a “powerful physique,” honed by years spent as a laborer. He spoke with an accent that revealed his Caribbean roots on the island of Montserrat. Sometime after he left school at the age of fourteen, Thompson had joined the tens of thousands of West Indians who migrated to Panama to work on the canal.¹⁴ There he met Margaret Franklin, three years his junior, another native of Montserrat, whom he married in 1911. Six years later, after the canal had been completed, and the couple had had a son and a daughter, they came to New York City, a journey many West Indians made after working in Panama. In New York, Margaret gave birth to a third child, who appears only in Thompson’s probation file; born in 1926, the boy named James died at age two years, a life span that fell in the interval between censuses. Morgan worked as an unskilled laborer for construction contractors based in the borough of Queens, Margaret as a domestic servant. Although both did day work rather than holding steady jobs, and Morgan picked up few jobs in winter, their income was regular enough by 1928 that they had accumulated \$100 in savings and had lived in the same four-room apartment for all eleven years of their life in New

York City. They were not alone among their neighbours in maintaining a stable residence. Fifteen of the other thirty-one households dwelling in their apartment building in 1920 were still there in 1925; four remained at least until 1930.¹⁵

A shared background linked the Thompsons and their neighbors: three-quarters of those living in the building hailed from the British West Indies.¹⁶ Morgan's heritage also provided the basis for his limited involvement in organized recreation; the one group to which he belonged was the Victoria Society, a West Indian social club with rooms on West 137th Street that held bi-monthly dances and luncheon parties. When he occasionally attended religious services, it was at an Anglican church on 140th Street, where he would also have rubbed shoulders with fellow West Indians. Clustering together in these ways was typical of black immigrants to Harlem in the 1920s. With one in every five residents hailing from the West Indies, there was ample scope for them to live much of their lives in the company of fellow immigrants. That did not mean they were isolated from the larger African American community, but it certainly helped them retain an identity that created sometimes tense relationships with their black neighbors. West Indians could be distinguished from native-born blacks by their accent and language, and distinctive styles of worship, cuisine, and sartorial display. Color prejudice against dark Caribbeans also divided the two groups, as did the increasing prominence of West Indians as business owners, which stirred economic competition.¹⁷ The chances are that the clash that brought Thompson into the legal system was yet one more instance of just such a conflict, but no evidence of the background of his victim survives to confirm our suspicion.¹⁸

After Morgan's arrest in 1928, the Thompsons experienced many of the pressures and obstacles to family life that have dominated accounts of the black urban experience. Employment proved hard to find and retain, housing became more difficult to afford, and strangers and relatives joined the household. Two of the strategies the family pursued in response to those challenges are familiar to historians, namely, a move to cheaper housing and taking in lodgers. A third strategy, having teenage children contribute to the family economy, has been overlooked by historians, even as it looms large in accounts of white immigrant families.

A few days after being placed on probation in December 1928, Thompson was back at work for a building contractor in Queens, from whom he expected to get four days work each week. Irregular work nonetheless soon destabilized the family. The cause was neither discrimination nor limited opportunities, but a workplace injury. By early January, a swollen ankle left Thompson unable to stand, let alone work; it would be three months before he could put sufficient weight on the ankle to return to his job. He had suffered the injury in a workplace accident the previous September. Such injuries were anything but unusual for black men, who had access only to what historian Marcy Sacks has called "the most dangerous, least reliable and lowest paid" labouring jobs in the city.¹⁹ The workmen's compensation system had mitigated the impact of Thompson's disability: he received treatment from a doctor on East 79th Street, and weekly payments.²⁰ Together with wages from a few days work obtained by Margaret, savings, and assistance from Morgan's brother, who was now lodging with them, the compensation was enough for the family to avoid destitution. Almost half of the other households in the building had lodgers in 1920, rising to more than three out of five in 1925, and three out of four in the depression year of 1930.²¹ That pat-

tern was replicated throughout the neighborhood: an Urban League investigation in 1927 found one in four Harlem households included a lodger, twice the rate among whites living in Harlem. Not all lodgers shared family ties with their landlord, but many hailed from the same community, and were thus not complete strangers.²² This combination of household resources and family ties was likely to have been the way that the Thompsons had managed to get through other periods of unemployment.

This time, though, these measures were not enough to allow the Thompsons to keep paying their rent. In April 1929 their landlord evicted them from their home of twelve years. Borrowing money to pay the costs of moving the few items of furniture they owned, the family relocated to a six-room apartment at 204 West 143rd Street. They paid considerably more in rent than they had for the apartment on West 144th Street, but, when queried about this by his probation officer at the time, Abraham Simon, Morgan dismissed the cheaper apartments they had seen as being uninhabitable.²³ The mobility of urban black families is generally explained as a search for better housing or a flight from unpaid rent; neither explanation quite captures the Thompsons' circumstances. They had been forced to relocate, but responded by changing not just their address, but also their strategy for survival, taking advantage of the variety of residences available in Harlem. Two extra rooms did not improve their living conditions, but did provide a source of additional income, allowing the Thompsons to take in additional lodgers to help pay the rent. One in three of the other households in the building used exactly the same strategy.²⁴ Morgan's brother moved elsewhere, but several individuals and a married couple rented the spare rooms in the ensuing years, helping the family avoid the inconvenience of another relocation. The presence of lodgers did not, as far as was apparent to Morgan's probation officers, cause any disruptions to the Thompsons' family life, notwithstanding the fears of reformers. Nor did the move unduly disrupt ties to friends and family. The Thompsons' new home was only one block south and west of the old apartment. Other residents of the building on West 143rd Street would also have helped the family feel at home; half of the Thompsons' new neighbours were West Indian immigrants, fewer than in the building they had left, but still a proportion twice that of the West Indian population in Harlem.²⁵

Within a month of returning to work in April 1929, Morgan was injured again, this time suffering a smashed finger. Simultaneously his wife Margaret's rheumatism flared, compelling her to give up working as a housekeeper. Her condition recurred periodically over the next four years, but the family could not afford the cost of treatment, leaving Margaret to rely on home remedies, and medicine from the local drug store, none of which was particularly effective. The experience of illness and no or poor treatment was a common one for residents of Harlem. Blacks suffered from malnutrition and disease at rates far in excess of whites, although not more so than blacks elsewhere in the United States. Even had Margaret had money for treatment, she would have found physicians and hospital care in short supply, since neither public nor private agencies made much provision for the black residents of Harlem.²⁶ The remedies she could employ did not allow her to undertake paid work again in the following four years.²⁷ Morgan did return to labouring, but despite travelling all over Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens, experienced long periods without employment as the Depression gripped

New York City. The probation officer temporarily supervising Thompson in February 1931 clearly expected that the mix of illness and irregular employment would cause the family to disintegrate, and when it did not, was moved to ask Morgan how he “was able to support his home as well as he did.” Thompson had in fact already provided the answer several times: he did not sustain the family; his two teenage children did. George had a position in a dress factory, and later as a scarf maker, and his sister Elizabeth was employed in a hat factory. Both contributed all their earnings to the household, turning over their wages to Margaret in the same fashion as did Morgan.²⁸

The probation officer had failed to see the children’s contribution to the household; far too often historians of the black family have made the same mistake. Bodnar, Simon and Weber argued in 1985 that black parents encouraged a strong sense of individualism in their children, who consequently usually retained their wages, generally contributing only for specific purposes such as the education of a sibling.²⁹ Kimberley Phillips offered two contrary oral histories of children who financially aided their families, but most studies ignore working children, perhaps because of the relatively small numbers of children in northern communities in these years.³⁰ Family economies in New York’s white immigrant neighbourhoods had become increasingly fraught by the 1920s, as working children sought more control over their wages and time.³¹ Although none of the probation officers who supervised Morgan recorded much about the family dynamics, perhaps unsurprisingly given that the children were almost always out working when they visited, the Thompsons appear to have negotiated such tensions by giving George a leading role in managing the family’s funds. Morgan reported that it was his son who deposited any surplus money the family had into an account at the 125th Street branch of the Empire State Bank. Although pushed by his probation officer to do so he refused even to ask George how much was in the account. Several months later, when the officer urged Morgan to commit to making regular deposits, he would only agree to discuss the suggestion with George.³² Changes brought by the Depression would also have helped diffuse tension. By the next year, the tables were turned, with George and Elizabeth unemployed for periods in 1932 and 1933, and Morgan, as the head of the household, able to obtain work through relief agencies.³³ The ability of the Thompsons to swing between the roles of dependent and breadwinner displays the malleability of the black family.

Relationships outside the family also survived even as economic conditions worsened. Morgan spent some of his leisure time at the Victoria Club, the West Indian social organization to which he belonged, and also watching movies, but generally organized activities played little part in his life. Most often, when he left home it was in the company of his wife and children to visit friends and relatives living nearby. At home, where Morgan spent the bulk of his free time, he too entertained family and other visitors. A probation officer encountered two of Thompson’s wife’s cousins visiting from the West Indies when he conducted a home visit in November 1931, and another set of visitors a few months later, whom he did not identify in his haste to exit quickly “so as not to embarrass” the Thompsons. What the officer saw was merely the tip of the iceberg; most visiting did not take place at times when probation officers made home visits, but in the evenings and on Sundays. The majority of the Thompsons’ visitors would

have been fellow West Indians.³⁴ Visiting literally kept Morgan and his family together, and formed and sustained the web of relationships that shaped Morgan's life through the 1920s and into the years in which the Depression hit Harlem.

Perry Brown also established a life in Harlem in the 1920s. The forty-five-year-old man's theft of coats from the building of which he was superintendent in 1930 was as anomalous as Morgan Thompson's assault on a visitor to his street. A building crisis, not a loss of control, lay behind Brown's action: his wife Pauline had a "nervous condition" that often prevented her from raising her arms and caused pains in her muscles, leaving her frequently unable to care for herself, let alone work. Without children to help sustain their life in Harlem, the Browns relied more on their siblings and on social organizations than had the Thompsons. Those contributions could not prevent their living situation from progressively deteriorating in the face of the Depression, or their relationship from becoming marred by conflicts not present in the Thompsons' marriage. Nonetheless, they survived those pressures, and when Perry was discharged from probation, the Browns remained together.³⁵

Prior to his arrest, Perry's life in Harlem had been marked by stability absent from his early life. He was born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, cared for by his mother until she died in childbirth when he was ten years old, and then by an aunt in Virginia, until he left home at age thirteen to work on a farm in Long Island. In 1915, he married Pauline, a native of Georgia eleven years his junior, in New York City; they made their home in a "neatly furnished" four-room apartment, number 17 in 142 West 143rd Street, where they still resided fourteen years later when Brown was arrested. Like the Thompsons, the Browns had extensive community ties supporting their life in Harlem. Three quarters of their neighbors in 142 West 143rd Street were African American migrants from the South: in 1920, one third originated in Pauline's home state of Georgia, and another third in Virginia, where Perry had grown up; by 1930, an influx of residents from South Carolina made up the largest group, but a third still came from either Georgia or Virginia.³⁶

More so than the Thompsons, the Browns' ties took the form of membership of organized groups. Perry belonged to several social organizations, including the Elks, through which he had an extensive and longstanding network of friends in Harlem, and a standing in the community, in which he took pride.³⁷ The Elks were Harlem's largest fraternal order, attracting professionals and working-class men who shared Perry's aspirations to respectability and leadership. A secular organization, the Elks emphasized educational programs and community service, and offered insurance benefits, help finding jobs and housing, and entertainment, such as organized boat rides and parties. Depending on which of the Elk lodges in Harlem Perry belonged to, he would have had access to a clubroom with bars, halls, offices, and orchestras and bands, and weekly meetings to attend. Many men belonged to more than one social or fraternal organization, as did Perry, weaving their lives into a web of sociability and support.³⁸ Pauline was a regular congregant at the Catholic Church only a short distance from their home, joined occasionally by Perry.³⁹ He had been raised a Baptist, but had attended a variety of other Harlem churches, to avoid, as he told one of his probation officers, "becoming tired of listening to one preacher all the time."⁴⁰ Religious organizations flourished in Harlem: as well as organized churches there was also a proliferation of

storefront sects that would number in the hundreds by the 1930s. Black churches had moved to Harlem from throughout the city, both taking over the buildings of white congregations and building structures of their own. Critics complained that most of the resources gathered from congregations went into these building programs, but many churches also developed social, recreational and community programs, ranging from aid to the needy, adult education and day care, to concerts, excursions and sports teams.⁴¹ Different in flavour from Perry's links to the community, Pauline's religious practice offered another set of social ties and material support. Underpinning the Browns' stable residence and immersion in the community was a history of regular employment. For five years Perry had been superintendent of a loft building at 20 East 17th Street, following five years in various positions as an elevator operator, and a stint laboring in the Brooklyn Naval Yard. Pauline had worked as a domestic and sewed before her illness.

Perry Brown was not able to reconstruct his life after encountering the legal system nearly as quickly as did Morgan Thompson. After he pled guilty to unlawful entry, and agreed to pay restitution, in return for three years on probation, it took Brown six weeks to find a new job. His conviction for theft likely had more impact on his employability than did Thompson's conviction for assault, if Brown revealed it to prospective employers, but his difficulties would have owed more to the deteriorating economic conditions in 1930. When he did find a position, as a freight elevator operator in a loft building at 17 West 17th Street, only a block from his old workplace, it involved heavier work than that he had been doing, for lower wages, which were then further diminished by the need to make regular restitution payments. By June 1931, Pauline was feeling well enough to take on sewing, doing piecework at home on her own machine. To maintain her new-found health, in July the couple moved to a three room apartment at 2860 Eighth Avenue, where the rent was slightly higher, but the housework less demanding and the neighborhood quieter. In December they pursued a different strategy, relocating to a larger, five-room apartment at 140 Edgecombe Avenue, where they leased the extra room to a lodger, whose rent paid three quarters of the cost of the apartment. As with the Thompsons, this mobility was motivated by something more complex than a search for adequate housing; the Browns too took advantage of the range of housing options in Harlem to try different strategies to balance their straitened finances and Pauline's health. Despite the financial benefits, life with a lodger proved a strain on Pauline's nerves, forcing her again to give up work. In April 1932, Perry too lost his job, suddenly laid off after two years when the management of the building changed, an experience about which he complained bitterly to his probation officer. With the economy in increasingly sharp decline, and unable to qualify for the relief work Morgan Thompson secured because he had no dependents and a wife who worked, albeit irregularly, Perry would secure only a few days work in the next eighteen months.

The Browns survived Perry's unemployment and Pauline's irregular employment by turning to their family and to the organizations to which they belonged, and by taking advantage of the extensive housing options available in Harlem. Within weeks of Perry losing his job the electricity was cut off, and the Browns' were lighting their home with oil lamps and surviving on food from friends and Perry's lodge brothers while the rent remained unpaid.⁴² Harlem's fraternal organizations provided such support for large numbers of families facing destitution

in the 1930s.⁴³ Nonetheless, eviction loomed, forcing the Browns to relocate to 258 West 154th Street, with Pauline's sister paying the moving expenses. Employed as a domestic servant, she sometimes lived with Perry and Pauline, and her continuing contributions helped them remain at the West 154th Street address for almost a year. Such support was an established family practice. In September 1932, Perry confided to his new probation officer that when his sister-in-law had been unemployed in the past, "he had practically supported her and her husband, and now, since the tables have been turned, he felt that it is only right that he should receive the assistance which he is now being given."⁴⁴ By April 1933, the Browns nonetheless found themselves in arrears with their rent again, and relocated once more, to 301 West 152nd Street. This time it was Perry's sister, also employed as a domestic servant, who joined the household. Again, they had no electricity and all the cooking had to be done on a small kerosene stove. With winter looming, the household moved for a final time, to an apartment on West 144th Street that had steam heat and hot water, where they resided when Perry's probation ended in November 1933. Given that they frequently could not pay rent, it is striking that the Browns never found themselves homeless. Harlem offered enough housing to allow them to relocate each time eviction threatened, albeit sometimes to residences lacking amenities. If their mobility displayed some of the dissatisfaction with the condition of the neighborhood's apartments that has attracted the attention of other scholars, it also highlights how the extensive range of housing in Harlem acted as something of a safety net for residents facing economic crises.

While the Brown household was still in existence in 1933, the constantly changing circumstances of their lives unsurprisingly created tensions between Perry and Pauline. As was the case with countless men throughout the United States in the 1930s, Perry reported that his failure to find work left him "despondent." Adding to his despair, when he worked it was most often "under the direction" of his wife, cutting material for her piecework sewing. Pauline was no more comfortable with that situation than was her husband. In a series of unusually revealing conversations with probation officer N. E. White, she reported that the "economic strain" of being responsible for meeting the household expenses brought on an attack of nervousness. Perry lacked initiative, she complained on another occasion, and "unless she continually pushes him he will not seek work or do anything that would tend to improve their social or economic aspirations." Pauline also voiced her grievances to her husband; he reported that his "home life is marred by the frequent quarrels which he has with his wife."⁴⁵ Pauline's ambition to be a concert singer provided another source of tension. When Perry had a steady income, he urged her to take lessons because she found that arduous piano and vocal training "counteracted her nervousness." Once unemployed, he became concerned that Pauline did not have much ability as a vocalist, and tried to discourage her from spending money on lessons. When he went so far as to tell Pauline that she had no talent, she had stopped speaking to him for a week. After hearing her perform, White agreed with Perry, recording that Pauline showed "little knowledge or appreciation of what she was attempting to do," and had "neither capacity nor voice for study [of music]." He concluded that it was "pathetic" that money was being "wasted" on lessons, but he ultimately convinced Perry not to block her efforts since she was deriving some comfort from them. This conflict

also served to expose deeper differences between the couple. Pauline complained that her husband was “not concerned with the higher things of life,” failing to make any effort to “raise his own cultural level.” She often “wished that [he] were a different kind of man,” and regretted marrying him. For all that, her most frequent response to the questioning of various probation officers was that relations between them were harmonious.⁴⁶

Pauline’s insistence on spending some of the household income – her wages – on lessons, notwithstanding Perry’s effort to exert control over their resources posed the kind of challenge to patriarchal authority that regularly triggered violence and domestic homicide in black families in these years.⁴⁷ No such violence marred the Browns relationship. Even as their marital relationship frayed, Pauline and Perry maintained relationships outside the home that wove them into the community. Pauline continued to attend Catholic mass, and enjoyed the company of her sister. On several visits, the probation officer found the two women sewing and talking, or “entertaining themselves.” Perry’s social ties diminished after his arrest, when the burden of paying restitution on his smaller income forced him to give up many of the organizations to which he had belonged. He did, however, remain an Elk, attending meetings once a week, at least until the end of 1931.⁴⁸ By September 1932, “somewhat discouraged” and “without proper clothing,” he had also stopped attending religious services. His probation officer urged him to become involved in the YMCA, and obtained a free membership for him. However, Perry took time to adjust to “the atmosphere” of the organization, which would have been very different from that of the secular, fraternal Elks, and had not taken up any “definite activities” at the time his probation ended. As he retreated from his social relationships, his family relationships came to the fore, with his sister joining the household. Whether this was enough to sustain the Browns after Perry was discharged from probation, as the Depression worsened, we do not know.⁴⁹

The Browns disappeared from the historical record in diminished circumstances and precariously poised both economically and emotionally, but with their household intact. Frank Hamilton’s marriage, by contrast, came apart entirely before his period of probation ended. At first glance, he appears better equipped to survive, even to flourish, in Harlem than Thompson or Brown. Born in Memphis, Tennessee, Hamilton grew up in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, the eldest of ten children of a mail carrier. At age sixteen, he was sent to school at the famous Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, an education enjoyed by only a minute fraction of the race. Excellent at athletics, and fair in the classroom, where he studied to be a printer, but poor in his deportment, Hamilton was suspended after his second year for stealing. After two years working as a printer in Atlanta, he arrived in Harlem in 1926, aged twenty-one years. For all his advantages in education, Hamilton lacked the family ties of Thompson and Brown. Engaged to twenty-year-old Martha Robinson before he left Atlanta, Hamilton did not marry her and bring her to New York until August 1929. In the interim, he achieved a level of indebtedness far beyond anything that Thompson or Brown could have even imagined. That debt was not the product of efforts to survive, but was the result of an attempt to enjoy the material goods and jazz age leisure available in the Black Metropolis. As with many young middle-class blacks, Hamilton embraced not only the private apartment bridge parties and cocktail parties, long staples of black leisure, but also

rent parties, where blacks of different classes mingled, and cabarets and night-clubs, venues where alcohol flowed and jazz provided the soundtrack for performances and dancing. This was a new world of leisure that challenged older ideas of respectability and promoted consumption. When he could no longer support this lifestyle by legitimate means, Hamilton began to explore the possibilities of Harlem's underground economy.⁵⁰

If Frank Hamilton came to New York City in search of opportunities, he, like most other skilled blacks, did not find them in his chosen trade. Denied membership of the Printers Union, and hence opportunities to practice his craft, on the grounds of his race, he instead worked as a porter. For his first eighteen months in the city he lived with two men in an apartment at 165 West 127th Street, then relocated briefly to a furnished room at 2400 Seventh Avenue, before joining one of his former roommates to lease a four-room apartment in 137 West 137th Street. "Luxuriously outfitted," with walls adorned with photographs of beautiful women, in a "high class apartment building with every modern convenience," located on one of the most respectable blocks in Harlem, this residence provided Hamilton with the setting for a jazz age life. Here he entertained young men and women from "good circles," establishing a web of relationships centred not on the organizations that the Thompsons and Browns joined but on friendships forged in the pursuit of "good times." Hamilton displayed a style in keeping with this life, and was "cleancut" in appearance and "well-dressed."⁵¹

Establishing such a lifestyle was one thing; maintaining it proved to be rather more difficult. In an effort to meet his expenses, in July 1928 Frank stole three suits of clothes from his workplace, Trivers' Clothing Store in midtown. Despite his subsequent arrest, conviction and sentence to an indefinite period of probation, Hamilton changed little in his life. He continued to live in the apartment on West 137th Street, but thanks to a new job as a Pullman porter he stayed there only a few nights each week. Although Frank's salary, with tips, was more than what he had been making, the need to pay restitution left him even less able to make ends meet. Nonetheless, when Martha arrived in New York City, he rented an apartment for them in a "high-class" building at 582 St Nicholas Avenue, where, even after the contributions of two lodgers, he paid more rent than for West 137th Street. While Frank provided a home for Martha, he did not inform her about all the details of his prior life. She only learned that her husband was on probation when two police officers knocked on their front door on November 22, 1929, to arrest Frank for failing to report and make restitution payments. During the almost three weeks he spent in the city prison, Martha and his probation officer also discovered that Frank owed almost \$1000 to three stores in Harlem and one in midtown for the lavish furnishings and a radio in his home, all of which had been bought on instalment plans. This debt, the equivalent of almost six months wages from his current position, put the Hamiltons in a precarious financial situation.⁵²

Frank's release brought the couple little economic security. He continued to obtain fairly regular work as a Pullman porter, and to make some restitution and instalment payments. However, he missed as many payments as he made, choosing to spend his wages in other ways. He gambled fifty cents a day playing numbers, insisting that the odds of winning the game of chance central to life in Harlem were too good to refrain (actually one in a thousand), bought stock in

one of Harlem's newspapers, and talked of buying an interest in a speakeasy or running a dice game. Even as Hamilton pursued these shortcuts to material success, he laughed at a probation officer's suggestion that he work out a budget, preferring to avoid being "discouraged" by seeing in black and white how much money he owed.⁵³ Martha could do little to help. Although not struggling with the ill-health that Margaret Thompson and Pauline Brown experienced, she could not find work, or at least the white-collar employment she was prepared to consider. She explained to Frank's probation officer that her high school education and two years of junior college included "no training which might fit her for the business world." But neither did it equip Martha for her desired career of social work; she needed to undertake further study that they simply could not afford. Unable to increase the family's income, she could only reduce its expenditure, giving up her telephone and ensuring that they "lived within their means."⁵⁴ The probation officers supervising Frank wanted the Hamiltons to do more, but neither their urgings nor formal delinquency notices moved the couple to set their lives on a firmer foundation. Then, in June 1930, Frank lost his job.⁵⁵

Unemployment exposed the Hamiltons' lack of the ties that had linked the Thompsons and Browns to Harlem. They belonged to no community or social organizations, and did not attend a church.⁵⁶ Their closest relative was Martha's cousin in Jamaica, Long Island. Even the bond of their relationship was relatively weak; they had been married for less than a year in June 1930, far short of the years of marriage the Thompsons and Browns had behind them when unemployment struck their households. With little holding them together, it is perhaps not surprising that they separated for "economic reasons." Martha left the city to live with her cousin, who provided shelter and employment as a storekeeper, but for only a "meagre [sic] wage." Frank remained in Harlem, reduced to sharing a furnished room, while the furniture for which he was in debt went into storage, and working irregularly as a waiter.⁵⁷ As his marriage fell apart, he fell back on his web of social relationships, spending much of his time at a barber's shop at 2397 Seventh Avenue.⁵⁸ Hamilton's friends provided one of the services offered by organizations like the Elks, giving him leads on where he might find work.⁵⁹ To make ends meet, he also relied on Harlem's pawnshops. Reporting to his probation officer in July 1931, Hamilton exhibited around \$200 in pawn tickets for clothing and jewellery. Such a collection horrified the officer, who could only attribute it to a need to pay gambling debts.⁶⁰ However, Harlem residents, like other working-class Americans, did not pawn goods only out of desperation, as the officer imagined, but as a survival strategy, a means of obtaining cash to tide them over to pay day, or to pay rent or other bills that had become due, circumstances that recurred in the economic rhythm of the lives of individuals only able to obtain intermittent work. Banks did not accept personal property as collateral, and rarely made loans to blacks; in fact, few even operated in Harlem. But at least sixteen pawnshops did, owned by Jews, providing modest access to white capital.⁶¹

Separation did not end the Hamiltons' marriage. Four times in the subsequent twenty-two months they re-established a home together. Such resilience has been celebrated as a sign of the strength of black families, but this case makes clear that endurance did not always indicate a functional relationship. In November, after five months apart, the Hamiltons set up a home together on St Nicholas Avenue, this time in a furnished room not a lavish apartment. They

did not, however, share the same vision of how to reconstruct their lives. Martha's plan to take stenography and typing courses at the YWCA, to get a job in the business world, bespoke an aspiration for respectability at odds with Frank's gambling and ambition to be a "high-class racketeer" and proprietor of a speakeasy.⁶² They quarrelled so much that within a month Martha left for Atlanta, to visit her mother. Her departure created a further point of contention between the couple. Frank revealed to his probation officer that he had sought "revenge," suggesting the "desperation and humiliation" that historian Jeffrey Adler has identified at the root of domestic homicides involving African Americans in early-twentieth-century Chicago.⁶³ Martha escaped that fate, but Frank struck her, tore her clothes, threw her out of their apartment, and threatened to kill her if she crossed his path again. She responded by calling in the police and his probation officer, before eventually deciding in February 1931 to leave Frank. As a consequence, Martha had to abandon her effort to find white-collar work, and join the mass of African American women in domestic service. However, even after resorting to such work, she was twice forced to return to live with Frank, first when her landlady left her husband and dissolved the household in which she rented a room, and later when she lost her position as a live-in domestic servant. Illness also contributed to keeping the Hamiltons together; in August 1931, Martha had her tonsils removed, and spent some time convalescing. Neither time apart nor Frank finding employment as a porter at the Russell Sage Foundation in May 1931 did anything to blunt their differences. Martha's efforts to keep Frank "going straight" provoked constant quarrels and drove away a fellow lodger in one of the apartments in which they rented a room, precipitating their own eviction. In October, Frank again struck Martha, who retaliated by breaking two plates over his head, and making a report to his employer that caused him to lose his job. Within a week she found work caring for an invalid woman, leaving him to live in furnished rooms for the remaining four months during which he was under supervision.⁶⁴

That the marriage endured as long as it did reflected Martha's lack of other relationships to provide support in the face of unstable housing and irregular work. Her situation makes clear that we cannot simply use the durability of a household as a measure of the health of the relationships between its members. If the breakdown of Martha Hamilton's marriage forced her into domestic service, it also freed her from domestic violence. The end of their marriage returned Frank to sharing a room with a friend, but he also added new kinds of relationships in the wake of Martha's departure, starting to attend St James Presbyterian Church, where the pastor was the brother of one of his teachers at Tuskegee, and joining the choral club at his workplace, the Russell Sage Foundation.⁶⁵ Whether these new activities came in reaction to Martha's departure, or were the product of continued residence in Harlem, they represented an intensification of his ties to community life.

Fuller Long's involvement in different facets of Harlem's community life more clearly reflected the breakdown of his family. His father deserted the family when Long was ten years old. They had been in Harlem for only two months, having migrated from Petersburg, Virginia. That was all the time it took for Fuller snr. to become involved with another woman and to end his marriage of thirteen years. He left his thirty-six-year-old wife Nettie to raise Fuller, and his sisters, Esther, a year older, and Marie, two years younger. Single parent households headed by

women appear in relatively small numbers in census snapshots of Harlem, but loom large in sociologists' images of the disorder of black urban communities. They are associated with dependency, in part because it was single mothers in need of aid who came to the attention of private and public welfare agencies, and hence of sociologists such as Frazier. Nettie Long appealed to the Domestic Relations Court in 1923 to obtain support from Fuller snr., who, far from disappearing, had moved only two blocks away to West 133rd Street, but she never became dependent on charity. Her ability to support the household owed little to the \$9 a week the court ordered her husband to pay, but which he often did not, despite steady work as a printer. A family economy sustained the Longs, as it did the Thompsons, although in their case the desire to provide their siblings with an education played a central role in motivating the children to contribute their wages, conforming to the argument put forward by Bodnar and his colleagues.⁶⁶ Nettie initially held a position as the janitor of the building in which they lived, a position that would have provided housing and kept her close to her children. After two years, the family moved to a bigger apartment in the adjacent building, and Nettie found employment as a housekeeper. Her eldest daughter Esther likely started paid work at this time; by 1927 she had a factory job. Esther probably finished junior high school before entering the workforce. Fuller certainly did. Only once he had completed ninth grade in June 1928 did Nettie insist that the family needed his income to meet their expenses and to enable his younger sister to remain in school. Fuller's first job was as a helper for the local iceman, the wages for which he turned over to his mother.⁶⁷

Successfully marshalling children through their schooling required the parental supervision that Progressive reformers assumed single mothers could not provide. They saw 'broken' families such as the Longs as instead unable to check 'wayward' and 'delinquent' behavior. If that had been entirely untrue in the case of the Longs, Fuller would not appear in the legal record. It was in his recreation that he departed from an orderly life. At a dance in the Renaissance Casino, Fuller met fifteen-year-old Ruby Hawkins. Visits to her home on West 140th Street followed; there on January 18, 1928, Fuller and Ruby had sexual intercourse. Several months passed before they met again. One evening in July, Ruby appeared at Fuller's home accompanied by a police officer, who arrested the seventeen-year-old boy on a charge of statutory rape. She was pregnant, and after being taken to court by her mother, had identified Fuller as responsible. He disagreed, certain that Ruby had had sex with other boys, and refused to marry her as she and her mother proposed. Instead, he pled guilty to third degree assault. The judge, having also heard Ruby described by her mother as "an incorrigible, disorderly and unruly girl who kept late hours," clearly gave credence to Fuller's claim, and sentenced him to three years probation rather than imprisonment.⁶⁸

Fuller experienced no other lasting consequences from his sexual encounter with Ruby. He soon lost contact with her and their child, and never paid child support. After a night in jail, he resumed working for the iceman, until he found a better position as a porter. Relations with his family remained intact. Esther reported being "embarrassed but sympathetic." Nettie was less equivocal in her support, denouncing Ruby as "a girl of worthless character [who] had been wholly responsible for all the trouble, through her wiles in inveigling [Fuller]." If those sentiments were to be expected of a mother defending her son, they also reflected

a broadly shared concern with a girl's character that shaped the response of legal officials and the broader community to premarital sexual activity. 'Bad' girls – those, like Ruby, with previous sexual experience and a disregard of parental authority – received little, if any, legal protection, notwithstanding the irrelevance of character in the law. Only boys who fathered children with girls of good character went to prison – usually for less than a year in the 1920s – or, more often, were compelled to pay child support. That double standard, in protecting Fuller from responsibility for his sexual behavior, shielded his family from any destabilizing consequences as a result of his relationship with Ruby.⁶⁹

Aside from his sexual activity, Fuller displayed none of the "waywardness" that probation officers expected of the child of a single mother. Instead, organized activities kept his life in order, activities less often discussed by scholars than the clubs and lodges to which Thompson and Brown belonged. When arrested in 1928, Fuller was playing basketball two or three nights a week for Union Juniors, a team based in the gymnasium at Public School 89, and continued to do so each Fall, performing well enough to try out in November 1930 for the Harlem Rens, then the most famous of the black professional teams based in the neighborhood. Although basketball was his passion, Fuller also boxed, played baseball one summer, and swam, by 1931 working at least one night a week as a lifeguard at the Lincoln Recreation Center on West 146th Street, a complex built in 1930 that included a ballroom and roof garden as well as a pool.⁷⁰ Athletic clubs, an outgrowth of the physical fitness movement of the late nineteenth century, are a feature of black urban life that has also received little attention. Harlem's first, the Alpha Physical Culture Club, had been founded in a church on West 134th Street in 1904; its main competitor, the St Christopher Club, formed part of St Philip's Episcopal Church, with its own gymnasium in the Parish House. And compete the clubs did, in a variety of sports, but in basketball in particular. They also offered opportunities for men to train and to socialize, an alternative to the commercialised amusements that reformers feared threatened the character of black men. Many club members came from Harlem's schools, which began competing in the Public School Athletic League in 1910, and by the 1920s repeatedly won championships in basketball, track and swimming. PS 89, where Fuller played, were city basketball champions from 1928 to 1937, when they lost to PS 139, Harlem's junior high school.⁷¹ Harlem was also home to an interchurch athletic association in the 1920s.⁷²

Clearly a talented athlete, and possessing what his probation officer, N. E. White, described as an "enthusiastic manner," Fuller's range of activities enmeshed him in this sports culture. Its contribution to his life went beyond occupying his time: he participated seriously enough to neither smoke nor drink. Fuller did, however, continue to attend dances and movies, and to spend time with girls, by 1930 keeping company with a high school girl of 'good character,' but did not get involved in any trouble that came to the attention of the authorities. Throughout his probation, Fuller also had steady employment, progressing from labouring to work that offered the opportunity to learn the same trade as his father, printing. Early in 1931, after much cajoling by his probation officer, he enrolled in evening school classes in mathematics and science at CCNY – and joined the track team. Organized sport, combined with steady work, a long-term girlfriend and renewed education, provided a web of relationships tying him to both his family and community life in Harlem.⁷³

Long's father lacked such a strong relationship with his family. While Fuller lived in the same residence for the three years he spent on probation, the household within those walls went through a variety of forms that belied that apparent stability. Fuller snr. twice rejoined the family, first in April 1929, only to leave three months later, and again in August 1929, on that occasion staying for just over eighteen months. Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier noted that black deserters, drawn "by sympathetic ties," often returned to their families, even after as much time away as Fuller snr., who had been gone for eight years. That behavior "often taxes the patience of social workers whose plans for their families are constantly disrupted," Frazier reported.⁷⁴ Such frustration highlights how much more fluid and flexible households were than reformers recognized. Some of the men labelled as deserters had not abandoned their families, but instead had merely separated from their wives or had stopped supporting them. As a result, the boundaries between female-and male-headed families were not fixed.⁷⁵ Women like Nettie also found their husband's comings and goings as taxing as did social workers, although a man's return could ultimately be a relief to them. Her husband's second departure forced Nettie back to the Domestic Relations Court, and then to confront him in late July, when she fainted, and had to spend several days in Bellevue Hospital. She attributed that "breakdown" to the "terrific mental strain" she had been under. The sources of that pressure are evident in the changes that she described to the probation officer once Fuller snr returned: he took over payment of the furniture bills, provided adequately for the household, and caused her son's behavior to improve.⁷⁶

Fuller snr's contributions lasted only a year. In August 1930, he lost his job, then became ill and was hospitalised, after which he was able to find only odd jobs. The contributions of the children once again became the key to the family's stability. Fuller snr's diminished economic contribution exposed his lack of emotional ties to his family. In an unusually unguarded report to his probation officer, Fuller complained about his father staying out at night, and his inclination "to be shiftless and disgruntled."⁷⁷ Motivated in particular by a concern to ensure his youngest sister did not have to leave school as he had, he became the family's main support. Fuller assumed progressively more responsibility when his father first left the family for the third time, and then, in April 1931, died. Both Nettie and the probation officer recognized that, although the Longs were still demographically a single parent household, Fuller had taken his father's role as the main breadwinner, stabilizing, if not repairing, his broken home.⁷⁸

If this extended picture has the advantage over a snapshot of showing that single parent families could develop family economies that stabilized them, it is important not to reify that picture. The file leaves open the question of just how long such an arrangement could last. As early as 1929, Fuller was talking of marrying his girlfriend, a move that could have transformed his family relationships.⁷⁹ At best, marriage would have diminished the support he could offer his mother; at worst, it could have led him to leave the household, just as his father had done. While children maturing into wage earners could strengthen single parent households for a while, that development obviously held within itself the possibility that children would be drawn into other relationships that strained family ties.

Roger Walker epitomized the disorganized life that reformers expected Long to lead. Born in Asheville, North Carolina, Walker's home was broken up by the

death of both his parents when he was thirteen years of age. An only child, his grandmother took him in, but in his second year of high school, at age sixteen, he left to find work in New York City. He went first to an aunt living on West 153rd Street, who provided him with a home for two years. When she and her husband returned to the South, Walker became one of the lodgers ubiquitous in Harlem households. For all their pervasiveness, lodgers remain a shadowy presence in the historical literature about Harlem, visible only in aggregate, and as unnamed, unidentified figures in the households of the Thompson, Brown and Hamilton families. Walker's time on probation offers a glimpse of lodging from the inside. In his case, the move to lodging outside his family initiated a life of constant change that saw him move through a dizzying array of fourteen residences and nine jobs in the next four years. For most of that time, he lived a precarious existence, with few ties that went beyond his daily existence and pursuit of pleasure. However, Walker did form some relationships, and over time these helped his life become more stable.⁸⁰ As we saw, Frank Hamilton extended this lifecycle full circle, moving from rooming to an apartment of his own when he married, and back into rooms when that marriage broke down. These longer views remind us that lodging was not always a permanent state, but could be a stage in an urban life.

The act that brought Walker into the legal system highlights the precarious existence of a single lodger. In October 1930, out of work for two months and with no money, he hid in a telephone booth in the Clinton Pharmacy on Lenox Avenue. Once a clerk locked up for the evening, Walker emerged and stole \$32 from a bag in the counter. Before he could escape from the store, a security guard saw him moving around inside. Forcing his way in, he found Walker hiding under the counter. The nineteen year old would have been fairly easy to find; standing five foot, ten and half inches tall and weighing 144 pounds, he was the largest of the men we have discussed. His crime reflected knowledge of how drug stores operated that he had gained from working in one. Walker's last job had been as a soda dispenser in a pharmacy six blocks north on Lenox Avenue, owned by the same man as the store he tried to burgle.⁸¹

Soon after being released from prison and placed on probation, Walker found work as a kitchen hand in a luncheonette on Seventh Avenue. Within a month, poor business led to his being laid off, beginning again the cycle of irregular, short term employment that characterized his life in Harlem. None of his subsequent jobs lasted longer than a year, several only one or two months. Apart from a week's work in a restaurant in Penn Station in midtown, he labored in restaurants and drug stores along Lenox and Seventh Avenues. Walker was unusual in living his life almost entirely within Harlem's borders; Thompson, Brown, Hamilton and Long were typical of the vast majority of residents in having to leave the neighborhood to find work.⁸²

Walker changed residence even more often than he did workplace. The two sets of movements were not unrelated. On at least one occasion, he moved because unemployment left him unable to pay the rent. Relocating was not, however, Walker's only means of securing housing when out of work. He maintained some relationships notwithstanding the fact that he continually shifted about. When his aunt returned to the South, he shared a furnished room with his cousin Curtis, five years older and also a restaurant worker. The two men had an agreement that in the event that one was out of work, the other would pay the entire

rent. In July 1931, eight months after Walker began his probation, he and Curtis quarrelled, and separated. Although later reconciled, they never again lived together during Walker's probation. Nonetheless, Curtis, who by November 1931 had a steady job as manager of a bakery on Lenox Avenue, remained in regular contact with Walker and continued to help with money when he was unemployed.⁸³

Various unnamed friends replaced Curtis as Walker's roommate and also provided financial support. Those friendships did not result from the organized recreation or religious activity that created community ties for Thompson, Brown and Long, but from leisure activities like those in which Hamilton forged his relationships. Although, like Hamilton, Walker had lived in Harlem for only a relatively brief time, in his case it was more the nature of his work that left him without connections to social and community groups. Walker worked long hours, usually including evenings and Sundays, the very times most organizations met. His hours even impeded his relationship with his probation officers, often causing him to fail to report, or at least providing him an excuse for not doing so. Walker spent much of his time outside work at the movies, attending four or five shows a week. In doing so, he joined the mass of Americans, black and white; even during the Depression, tens of millions still attended movies. Harlem's movie theaters, which ranged from the select, and clean, Renaissance Theater with its reputable orchestra to the filthy, smoke filled Franklin with only an electric piano providing music, showed second and third run features to black audiences; the more adventurous could venture down to 125th Street to see first run features with predominantly white audiences, at least until the 1930s, when the spread of black settlement changed the complexion of the street.⁸⁴ Walker's spending on movies appeared excessive to his probation officer, particularly since it left him unable to save money.⁸⁵ Thrift seemed a necessity in light of the volatility of Walker's employment, but the officer's perspective overlooked the reality of his living arrangements. Doing much more than sleeping in a shared bedroom, likely furnished with no more than beds, a stove for heating, a chair, a lamp and perhaps a bureau, was impractical. For lodgers, the surrounding streets and stores functioned as part of their home; restaurants and chop suey joints were their dining rooms, speakeasies, billiard halls and movie theatres their parlors and sitting rooms.⁸⁶ It was from that world of leisure that Walker drew his friends. His cousin, and at least one of his landladies, labelled those friends "undesirable." The terms in which Walker defended them suggest that label meant his friends did not have jobs, and were concerned only with pleasure. He insisted to the contrary that they did have jobs, and the support that they offered him tends to endorse that claim. However, it seems clear that, like him, they did not have the education of some of Hamilton's friends, or the concern with thrift and restraint that probation officers and better-situated residents of Harlem saw as desirable in young men.⁸⁷

One relationship offered the promise of a more stable, rooted existence. Among those with whom Walker spent his leisure was a steady girlfriend, Laura Farrell, a nineteen-year-old domestic servant. His probation officer, N. E. White, discouraged Walker from marrying Farrell "because his job is of such a nature that he cannot count too strongly upon it," and "he should be in a more stable position before he took on added responsibilities." By January 1933, however, the couple refused to wait any longer. Walker answered the probation officer's argument by asserting that Farrell had a steady job, giving them a combined income

sufficient to “make a go of it.” That claim made clear that marriage would provide him with the family ties enjoyed by Thompson, Brown and Long. He also employed a common strategy, admitting that he had had sexual intercourse with Farrell, and now feared that she was pregnant. It worked. A memo from White’s supervisor, whom Walker had pushed the probation officer to consult, advised that in light of the couple’s sexual activity, marriage was necessary to “stabilize them in their relationship.”⁸⁸ Married in January 1933, Walker set out to “build a stable family unit,” moving into an apartment on West 146th Street with his wife – who, it turned out, was not pregnant — and her married sister and husband. However, marriage did not immediately end his mobility: the household relocated five months later, and soon after, Walker lost his job. However, in October 1933, his fortunes took a turn for the better. Walker secured one of the best jobs available in his line of work, as a waiter in a Pullman dining car travelling between New York City and Chicago. His last report, mailed from Chicago, described a visit to the World’s Fair, but entertainment no longer consumed all his income. When a probation officer made a final home visit, he learned from Walker’s sister-in-law that he had just sent money home to his wife.⁸⁹

The end of Walker’s probation was clearly not the end of his life in Harlem. Given the erratic nature of his employment, and the further economic upheaval looming in the following years, we cannot even be sure that his circumstances settled for long in this form. In fact, we can confidently hazard a guess that they did not. However, the dynamic pictures of Harlem lives offered by probation files, unlike the static snapshots in census records and sociological studies, highlight the fact that such upheavals in family relationships, residence and employment did not necessarily destroy individual lives in Harlem. Relationships with spouses, children, siblings and cousins sustained individuals; so too did friendships made in nightclubs, speakeasies, dances and movie theatres, and membership of churches, fraternal organizations, social clubs, and sports clubs and teams. So dense was that web for some Harlem residents that the fraying or breaking of any one connection did not unravel their life, but merely reshaped it. The five lives examined here show that as much as the exhilaration of being in a black metropolis, where African Americans and West Indians could succeed, might have lifted the residents of Harlem above the tragedy of their surroundings, it was the organizations and bonds they forged that helped them manage the social reality of living in overcrowded, deteriorating, disease infested housing, subject to the racism of white police, politicians and employers. It was community and social ties that made Harlem in the 1920s not a slum, but a place where ordinary blacks could make lives sufficiently rich and dynamic to survive even the early years of the Depression.

Department of History
Sydney, 2006
Australia

ENDNOTES

The research and writing of this article were supported by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant (DP0343148). Many thanks to Ken Cobb, Leonora Gidlund and the staff at Municipal Archives in New York City for their help and patience in accommodating our research in their collections over a period of several years. The article benefitted from a searching critique by the Sydney American History Reading Group; thanks to Frances Clarke, Clare Corbould, Michael McDonnell and Blanca Tovias.

1. Court of General Sessions Probation Department Case File (PDCF) 11076 (1928), Municipal Archives, New York City. We have changed the names of all the individuals and families who appear in the legal records we discuss in this article, other than the probation officers.
2. *Ibid*; *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920*, ED 1440, Sheet 44B; *New York State Census, 1925*, Block 1, ED 33, AD 21, 11.
3. Irving Halpern, *A Decade of Probation: A Study and Report* (Montclair, 1969 (1939)), 42-4, 78-84. Halpern was the Chief Probation Officer for the Court of General Sessions.
4. David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York, 1981); Lawrence Levine, Review of David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, *American Historical Review*, 87, 2 (April 1982): 552. For a recent example of such scholarship, see Jeffrey Perry, *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883-1918* (New York, 2008).
5. E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro in the United States* (New York, 1949); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (South Bend, 2001 (1939)); Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* 2nd ed. (New York, 1971).
6. Osofsky; Marcy Sacks, *Before Harlem: The Black Experience in New York City Before World War I* (Philadelphia, 2006); Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, "Or Does It Explode? Black Harlem in the Great Depression" (New York, 1991); Edgar Grey, "The New Negro Slavery in Harlem," *Amsterdam News* (May 13, 1925): 16.
7. Shane White, Stephen Garton, Graham White, and Stephen Robertson, *Playing the Numbers: Gambling in Harlem Between the Wars* (Cambridge, Mass., forthcoming 2010), chapter 2; Michael A. Lerner, *Dry Manhattan: Prohibition in New York City* (Cambridge, 2007), 199-226.
8. Lewis, 109-113.
9. James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York, 1930), 165.
10. Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York, 1976); Joe Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat* (Urbana, 1985); Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-1930* (Urbana, 1987); James Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago, 1989); Richard W Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945* (Bloomington, 1992); Albert Broussard, *Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West, 1900-1954* (Lawrence,

1993); Kimberley Phillips, *Alabama North: African-American Migrants, Community and Working-class Activism in Cleveland, 1915-1945* (Urbana, 1999); Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, *To Place Our Deeds: The African American Community in Richmond, California, 1910-1963* (Berkeley, 2000); Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill, 2001); Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley, 2003). Harlem in the 1920s has not been the focus of such a study, although Marcy Sacks has written about the previous decades and Cheryl Greenberg about the subsequent decade.

11. Halpern, 29, 70.

12. We examined all the files from 1925, and the last 16 boxes from 1928 and from 1930, a sample of 1660 files, finding 341 blacks, almost all men (women made up only five percent of all those investigated by the Probation Department from 1927 to 1936 (*Ibid.*, 280-81)). Of the forty-two individuals in our sample placed on probation, seventeen were married (forty percent), of who nine experienced a marital breakdown while under supervision, fourteen were adolescents or young adults living with family (thirty-three percent), of who nine lived in single parent households, and eleven were lodgers (twenty-seven percent). For more on these records, see the "Sources" page of our "Digital Harlem: Everyday Life 1915-1930," at <http://www.acl.arts.usyd.edu.au/harlem/>.

13. Roi Ottley, "New World A-Coming" (1943), cited in James Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill, 2005), 115. We are following Gregory in using the term 'Black Metropolis' to try to redirect attention to what was present in black neighbourhoods, not what they lacked; Gregory, 114-16.

14. Irma Watkins-Owen, *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900-1930* (Bloomington, 1996), 13.

15. *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920*, ED 1440, Sheets 44A, 44B, 45A, 58B, 59A, 59B; *New York State Census, 1925*, Block 1, ED 33, AD 21, 10-12; *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*, ED 31-997, Sheets 19A, 19B, 21B, 23A, 23B, 24B.

16. Twenty-six of the thirty-two households were West Indian. *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920*, ED 1440, Sheets 44A, 44B, 45A, 58B, 59A, 59B.

17. Watkins-Owen; Osofsky, 131-35.

18. The family he was visiting did not appear in either the 1920 or 1930 Federal Census schedules. In 1930, the residents of the building in which they resided included equal numbers of African American and West Indian households.

19. Sacks, 112.

20. Record of Supervision (hereafter RS), 26 February 1929; 12 March 1929; 27 March 1929, PDCF 11076 (1928).

21. In 1920, the census enumerator found lodgers in fourteen of thirty-two apartments. *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920*, ED 1440, Sheets 44A, 44B, 45A, 58B, 59A, 59B. In 1925, eighteen of thirty-one households are recorded as having lodgers. *New York State Census, 1925*, Block 1, ED 33, AD 21, 10-12. In 1930 nineteen of the twenty-five households had lodgers, an increase even if there

were none in any of the households the enumerator missed. *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*, ED 31-997, Sheets 19A, 19B, 21B, 23A, 23B, 24B.

22. New York Urban League, *Twenty-Four Hundred Negro Families in Harlem: An Interpretation of the Living Conditions in Harlem* (May 1927) (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library).

23. RS, 3 February 1930, PDCF 11076 (1928).

24. Five of the thirteen households had lodgers, including the Thompsons (although their lodger, mentioned in the probation file, does not appear on the census schedule). *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*, ED 31-994, Sheets 16A, 16B.

25. West Indians resided in six of the thirteen households. *Ibid.*

26. Greenberg, 31-4.

27. RS, 13 October 1932, 27 December 1932, PDCF 11076 (1928).

28. RS, 12 September 1930, 19 February 1931, PDCF 11076 (1928).

29. John Bodnar, Roger Simon, and Michael Weber, *Lives of Their Own: Blacks, Italians and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900-1960* (Urbana, 1982), 91-2.

30. Phillips, 140.

31. For example, see Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1986), 67-72.

32. RS, 27 May 1931, 23 October 1931, PDCF 11076 (1928).

33. RS, 21 March 1933, 2 May 1933, 12 June 1933, PDCF 11076 (1928).

34. RS, 20 November 1931; 16 November 1932, PDCF 11076 (1928). For visiting by West Indians, see Garrie Ward Moore, "A Study of a Group of West Indian Negroes in New York City," (MA thesis, Columbia University, 1923), 30.

35. PDCF 15872 (1930).

36. Southern migrants resided in seventeen of twenty-four households enumerated in 1920, and twenty-one of twenty-eight households in 1930. Of those southern migrants, in 1920, twelve came from Georgia, twelve from Virginia, and fifteen from other states; by 1930, one third came from South Carolina, one third from Georgia and Virginia, and one third from other states. *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920*, ED 1440, Sheets 25A, 25B, 53A, 53B; *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*, ED 31-995, Sheets 6B, 7A, 7B, 18A. The 1925 New York State Census schedules recorded only an individual's nationality, not the state in which they were born.

37. RS, 12 May 1931; 17 November 1931; 14 January 1932; 29 March 1932, PDCF 15872 (1930).

38. Watkins-Owens, 72-73, 169; David Fahey, "Social Fraternal Organizations," in *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed Cary Wintz and Paul Finkelman (New York, 2004), 1132-35; Baxter Leach, "Short Outline of Fraternal and Social Organizations," "Negro Organizations," Roll 3, W.P.A. Writers Program Collection (WPA) (Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Culture, New York City).
39. RS, 14 October 1931, PDCF 15872 (1930).
40. RS, 1 July 1931, PDCF 15872 (1930).
41. Osofsky, 113-17; Sacks, 179-86; Cynthia Hickman, *Harlem Churches at the End of the 20th Century* (New York, 2001).
42. RS, 26 May 1932; 31 May 1932; 16 June 1932, PDCF 15872 (1930).
43. Leach.
44. RS, 23 June 1932; 22 June 1932; 9 September 1932 PDCF 15872 (1930). As recently as the previous year, family ties had imposed obligations rather than offering sustenance, when Perry had been forced to miss several months of restitution payments in order to pay the cost of hospital care for his father. RS, 15 March 1932, PDCF 15872 (1930).
45. RS, 29 July 1932, 12 August 1932, 27 October 1932, PDCF 15872 (1930).
46. RS, 29 July 1932, 5 August 1932, 19 August 1932, 9 November 1932, 8 December 1932; 16 December 1932, PDCF 15872 (1930).
47. Jeffrey Adler, "'We've Got a Right to Fight; We're Married': Domestic Homicide in Chicago, 1875-1920," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 34,1 (2003): 27-48.
48. RS, 14 October 1931, PDCF 15872 (1930).
49. RS, 11 November 1932; 18 November 1932; 31 January 1933; 3 February 1933; 24 February 1933, PDCF 15872 (1930).
50. Preliminary Investigation, 2 August 1928, PDCF 10934 (1928). For examples of other cases in which marriages broke down, see PDCF 1213 (1925), PDCF 10945 (1928), PDCF 15829 (1930). For a discussion of jazz age black youth, see Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill, 2004), 173-83, and Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago, 2009), 227-9.
51. Preliminary Investigation, 2 August 1928; RS, 3 December 1928, 27 December 1928, 15 June 1931, PDCF 10934 (1928).
52. RS, 23 November 1929; 25 November 1929, PDCF 10934 (1928).
53. RS, 4 March 1930, PDCF 10934 (1928).

54. RS, 23 November 1929; 12 December 1929, PDCF 10934 (1928).
55. RS, 23 June 1930, PDCF 10934 (1928).
56. RS, 18 May 1931, 29 July 1931, PDCF 10934 (1928).
57. RS, 25 July 1930, 11 August 1930, 8 October 1930, 14 October 1930, 18 October 1930, PDCF 10934 (1928).
58. RS, 25 July 1930, 8 August 1930, 11 August 1930, 5 September 1930, 10 September 1930, 11 September 1930, 15 September 1930, 22 September 1930, 29 September 1930, 7 November 1930, 16 January 1931, 7 March 1931, PDCF 10934 (1928).
59. RS, 9 March 1931, PDCF 10934 (1928).
60. RS, 10 July 1931, PDCF 10934 (1928).
61. Grey, "New Negro Slavery."
62. RS, 14 October 1930; 12 December 1930; 26 January 1931; 30 January 1931, PDCF 10934 (1928).
63. Adler; RS, 2 February 1931, PDCF 10934 (1928).
64. RS, 30 January 1931; 2 February 1931; 5 February 1931; 2 March 1931; 4 May 1931; 5 August 1931; 26 October 1931; 4 November 1931, PDCF 10934 (1928).
65. RS, 26 January 1932; Discharge from Probation, 14 March 1932, PDCF 10934 (1928)
66. Bodnar et al. On single mothers relying on their children for income, see Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence* (1988; London, 1989), 98.
67. Preliminary Investigation, 30 August 1928, PDCF 10882 (1928).
68. *Ibid.*
69. RS, 9 December 1929, 12 December 1929, PDCF 10882 (1928). Stephen Robertson, *Crimes against Children: Sexual Violence and Legal Culture in New York City, 1880-1960* (Chapel Hill, 2005), 95-135.
70. RS, 29 October 1928, 15 March 1929, 13 June 1929, 13 September 1929, 13 January 1930; 22 May 1930; 7 November 1930; 14 November 1930; 19 December 1930; 28 August 1931, PDCF 10882 (1928); "Sports," Roll 5, WPA.
71. James Gardner, "The Negro in Sport," "Sports," Roll 5, WPA; Bob Kuska, *Hot Potato: How Washington and New York Gave Birth to Black Basketball and Changed America's Game Forever* (Charlottesville, 2004), 11. For the role of sport in urban black communities in the north, see also Davarian Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration and Black Urban Life*, (Chapel Hill, 2007), 194-232.

72. *Amsterdam News*, 8 January 1930, 14.
73. RS, 14 November 1930; 19 December 1930; 4 May 1931, 18 May 1931; 15 June 1931; 15 July 1931, PDCF 10882 (1928).
74. Frazier, *Negro Family in the United States*, 340.
75. Gordon, 90-1.
76. RS, 25 July 1929, 2 August 1929, 6 September 1929, 20 September 1929, 9 December 1929, PDCF 10882 (1928).
77. RS, 27 February 1931, PDCF 10882 (1928).
78. RS, 6 April 1931; 20 April 1931; 4 May 1931; 1 June 1931; 15 July 1931; 29 July 1931; 28 August 1931, PDCF 10882 (1928).
79. RS, 27 September 1929, PDCF 10882 (1928).
80. PDCF 15630 (1930).
81. Investigation for Court, 27 October 1930, PDCF 15630 (1930).
82. RS, 3 December 1930; 20 December 1930, PDCF 15630 (1930).
83. RS, 20 December 1930; 29 July 1931; 20 November 1931; 18 March 1932, PDCF 15630 (1930).
84. Wallace Thurman, *Negro Life in New York's Harlem* (Girard, Kansas, 1927), 35-37.
85. RS, 18 November 1931, 5 April 1932, PDCF 15630 (1930).
86. Paul Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (Berkeley, 1994), 126-27.
87. RS, 12 January 1932; 20 January 1932; 29 January 1932; 14 June 1932, PDCF 15630 (1930).
88. RS, 6 January 1932; 12 January 1932; 17 January 1933; 4 April 1933, PDCF 15630 (1930).
89. RS, 24 January 1933; 9 March 1933; 4 April 1933; 9 October 1933; 20 October 1933; 23 October 1933, PDCF 15630 (1930).