“Lesbian Chic in the ‘20s” by Lillian Faderman – 1990

Introduction

Lillian Faderman is an internationally known scholar of lesbian history and literature, as well as ethnic history and literature. Her work has been translated into numerous languages, including German, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Turkish, Czech, and Slovenian. Among her many honors are six Lambda Literary Awards, two American Library Association Awards, and several lifetime achievement awards for scholarship, including Yale University’s James Brudner Award, the Monette/Horwitz Award, the Publishing Triangle Award, the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives Culture Hero Award and the American Association of University Women’s Distinguished Senior Scholar Award. The *New York Times* names two of her book, *Surpassing the Love of Men* and *Odd Girls* and *Twilight Lovers*, on its “Notable Books of the Year” list.

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Complete Transcript

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[Introduction – unidentified speaker]

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Lillian Faderman: I want to talk today about what I call “lesbian chic” in the 1920s. It’s actually a chapter in the book that I’ve almost finished that Columbia University Press is going to be publishing this winter [*Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 1991]. In that particular chapter I talk about lesbians in various areas of the United States such as Greenwich Village…, San Francisco, Salt Lake City, Utah, but I deal especially with lesbians in Harlem in the 1920s, not only black lesbians but white lesbians as well, and what it became to be lesbian in Harlem at that time.

But I think that today I want to focus just on the area of Harlem, and lesbian life in Harlem, but first, let me give you a bit of a background.

I think that the 1920s really saw something of the proliferation of the lesbian subculture throughout the United States. What I mean by that is not simply lesbians existing in friendship circles but rather lesbians trying to claim some public space for themselves, and it wasn’t yet very widespread but there were certainly pockets of this kind of thing as I’ve suggested. And I think it could happen in the 1920s for several reasons. I think that there was a huge break in the 1920s with what had preceded, and part of that break of course was due to World War I and the disintegration of old cultural values, the divorce from Victorianism that many people claimed. It was a time of

experimentation in various areas, in art, in literature, in music, and I think also for many women in sexuality as well.

That kind of experimentation was assisted by Freud and the popularization of Freudianism and psychoanalysis. And I think that the effect of Freud on lesbians particularly became much more complicated later on. But in the 1920s, it wasn't a negative effect. I think that Freudianism really encouraged the kind of exploration of repressions and suppressed desires.

And then I think that the 1920s was a time when all authority was questioned, for many reasons. It was perhaps like the 1960s. Just as there was a reaction to authority having gotten us into Vietnam in the '60s, there was the same kind of reaction in the '20s, authority having gotten us into another fruitless war, and that was World War I. And then authority passed silly laws, such as the laws of Prohibition.

And so I think that all sorts of things were happening, but particularly a kind of excitement in challenging those laws.

And then in the '20s also there was the effect of feminism. More women were working at that time. That meant that they were able to support themselves, and they had some kind of vestiges of independence, and I think that through feminism, too, more women accepted themselves as sexual creatures for the first time in modern history.

So, with all of this as a backdrop, then, certain places emerged in the United States where lesbianism was more acceptable than it had been ever before, and perhaps ever since, until the 1970s, the decades that followed that.

What I mean by lesbianism, I should say, first of all, is not romantic friendships such as I talk about in parts of *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981), but actually of sexual relations between women. And I found those to be fairly rampant in areas such as Harlem and Greenwich Village, and expatriate Paris particularly.

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I think that Harlem was fairly open to black homosexuality, though not entirely without ambivalence. But I think it was also where many white people felt that they could go, to experiment with homosexuality, and to experiment with other things as well. They could visit marijuana parlors and what was called "sex circuses", speakeasies replete with peepholes, and illegal gin, and things of that nature. Some of the clubs in Harlem were segregated clubs. Clubs such as the Cotton Club, for example, had all black entertainers and an all white audience, and presumably primarily a heterosexual audience. But then there were other clubs that were much more interesting. And they catered to both blacks and whites, and both heterosexuals and homosexuals.

(8:13)
I think, for adventurous white people, Harlem was not only a place to go slumming, but it was also an arena where they felt that they could act out their enchantment with the primal and the erotic. There was certainly a kind of racism about that, I think. We can see it in all sorts of areas. On

Broadway, for example, it was thought that if Broadway [i.e. the Theatre] wanted to do something sexy, the best way to do it would be in Negro guise. So there was a famous white blues singer of the period called Libby Holman. She did a show-stopping number called “Moanin’ Low”, but she did it in black face. I think it was just part of popular culture. *Collier’s Magazine* at that time, for example, said about Harlem that Harlem had become a synonym for naughtiness.

(9:12)
But I think other things were going on too. I think many white people found Harlem sexually enabling because it gave them permission to express what they couldn’t express in other places. And I think, especially for white people, to acknowledge their homosexuality they went to Harlem because they felt there were clubs there that didn’t precisely cater to gay people, but would really welcome their presence, even if it was just as one more exotic drawing card to the tourists.

(9:49)
Also, some white people – white homosexuals – went to Harlem because, as one character says in an interesting novel that was written in the early ‘30s, that talks about Harlem in the 1920s, a novel called *Strange Brother*,—he says that blacks like homosexuals “also live under such heavy odds, it made a bond. In Harlem,” he says, “I found courage and joy and tolerance. I can be myself there. They know all about me, and I don’t have to lie.” So I think that, from white perception anyway, for black people in Harlem, whether they indulged or not, they appeared to be more willing than the white world was in the 1920s to accept homosexuality as a fact of life.

(10:46)
I found a number of novels written by black novelists that dealt with Harlem in the 1920s, and in most of those novels we see little glimpses of lesbian and gay life. There’s one, for example, by a Harlem Renaissance writer by the name of Claude McKay, a black writer, who wrote a novel called *Home to Harlem* in 1928, and he presents in there two characters. One is a very educated black man by the name of Raymond, and the other one is a black man who isn’t educated, by the name of Jake. But they’re both working together on a Pullman train. Raymond is a waiter, and Jake is a kitchen porter. Raymond, in the novel, is reading another novel by Daudet called *Sappho* and he explains to Jake, “It’s about a sporting woman who is beautiful like a rose. Her lovers call her Sappho. Sappho was a real person, a wonderful woman, a great poet. Her story gave two lovely words to modern language: sapphic and lesbian. Beautiful words.” And Jake says, “What’s that there ‘lesbian’?” “Lovely word,” Raymond says. “That’s what we call bull dyker [sic] in Harlem,” drawled Jake. “Them’s all ugly women.” “Not all.” “And that’s a damn ugly name. Harlem is too rough about some things.” “Bull dyker,” Raymond sneered.

(12:13)
But I think that what’s significant about this is that at least there’s discussion that there frequently wasn’t in white literature. And the image is partly negative, from Jake’s perception, but of course totally positive from Raymond’s perception.

(12:30)
I ran across another novel by Wallace Thurman called *The Blacker the Berry*. This was published in 1929, again by a black writer. The lesbian characters in that novel are just sort of part of everyday

life in Harlem. There's just no moralizing about them at all, and the main character is a straight man who hangs around with a creole lesbian. The main female character, Emma Lou, in one scene is room-hunting, and I think this is a fascinating scene. She meets the woman who's the director, the owner of the boarding house, Miss Carrington, and we're told Miss Carrington places her hand on Emma Lou's knee, puts her arm around her waist, promises, "Don't worry anymore, dearie. I'll take care of you from now on." And tells her, "There are lots of nice girls living here. We call this place the Old Maid's Home. We have parties among ourselves and have a good time. Talk about fun. I know you'd be happy here." Well, Emma Lou doesn't accept this, but I think the important point is that there's a whole boarding house full of women in Harlem who do accept it and who have a fine time together.

(13:50)
There's another novel by Carl Van Vechten with the rather unfortunate title of *Nigger Heaven*. The term comes from the fact that in segregated cities in the movie theaters, black people frequently sat in the upper balcony, and they themselves jokingly, ironically, sarcastically, refer to that as "nigger heaven." But Van Vechten's novel came out in 1926, and that's I think a very interesting picture of the ways in which heterosexuals and homosexuals mixed in Harlem. We're told about one bar, for example, called Atlantic City Joe's, that's said to be full of bull dykers, but also heterosexual couples go there because it has their favorite dance floor, and there's a good deal of amiability between heterosexuals and the lesbians.

(14:49)
Also, in Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*, he depicts a Harlem nightclub that's blacks and whites, and straight and gay, and the black heterosexuals are not at all disturbed by the sexual mix – they rather like it – but they are disturbed because they say the "ofays" will be "nosing it out", and we'll have to take a back seat. The white people will be coming in, and that they don't like, although the sexual mix they're comfortable with.

(15:20)
I think that in all of these novels, the relationship between straights and gay people is friendly enough, although sometimes perhaps a little ambivalent. Some of the novels quote blues songs, for example, that seem to suggest some razzing on the part of heterosexuals. There's one that goes, "There's two things in Harlem I don't understand, that is a bull-dyking woman and a faggoty man. Oh baby, how are you? Oh baby, what are you?" But it seems to me that that kind of open heterosexual ambivalence was much healthier than the suppression of the subject that was characteristic in later decades such as the 1950s. It at least permitted discussion and examination such as the kind that we saw between Jake and Raymond.

(16:13)
There's one more novel, *Strange Brother*, that presents a mixed night club, and in that novel the white heterosexual character June says she wants to see the other Harlem. She's taken to a place called the Lobster Pot that was based on a place that actually existed in Harlem called Clam House. We're told that the Lobster Pot is vibrant with variety, both in color and sexual orientation. Let me just read one description. We're told that three white women had just taken a table next to several Negro dandies. "One of the whites was a girl rather lovely with delicately chiseled features

and short dark hair brushed severely back from a smooth low forehead. From the waist up she was dressed like a man in a loose shirt of soft white silk and a dark tailored coat. She sat with one arm around the woman beside her." The most prominent figure in this particular novel is a woman by the name of Sybil who is actually based on a black piano player in Harlem, a transvestite woman. Sybil in this novel has a beautiful vitality. We're told that Sybil "fills the room with her vast energy and performs as though to live was so gorgeous an experience that one must dance and sing in thanksgiving. She seemed possessed by an excitement that she communicated to everyone in the room." And we learn that she lives with another woman. She calls the other woman her wife. We learn that they were married in a ceremony and that she wore a tuxedo and the other woman wore a bridal veil and orange blossoms. And a white character says about them, "They're happy and nobody they know thinks any the less of them." We're also told that they're saving money with which to adopt a child. That certainly suggests that they have a good deal of openness in the community.

(18:16)
I discovered that these nightclubs that are depicted in the novels all had their counterparts in reality. I found places such as the Clam House, Barbara's Exclusive Club, which was actually owned by Gladys Bentley, Connie's Inn, The Yeah Man, The Garden of Joy, and all of these were black and white and straight and gay, male and female clubs in Harlem during the 1920s.

(18:47)
I think that the situation often meant that women who were committed lesbians would sometimes meet heterosexual woman and bisexual women who weren't committed to lesbianism as a way of life, but who were interested in sexual experimentation, just trying it on, taking advantage of this free spirit of Harlem in the 1920s. They often – if we can believe the literature – they were often married, or they were looking for a husband. I found another novel by John Dos Passos, *The Big Money*, that was actually written in the '30s but talks about the 1920s. There he has one section that begins in a bar that's both black and white and straight and gay and he presents two characters, a man by the name of Dick Savage and a woman by the name of Patricia Doolittle, and the puns of the names are intended. They start out at this Small Paradise, this black and white bar that's primarily straight. And Patricia Doolittle says that she wants more, that this isn't enough exoticism for her. She implores Dick, "Do take me someplace low. I'm the new woman. I want to see life." And they end up in this black totally gay and lesbian basement bar, and in the beginning they dance perfunctorily with each other, but then we're told that Patricia dances with "a pale pretty mulatto girl in a yellow dress" and Dick dances with a brown boy in a tight suit who calls himself "Gloria Swanson." Well, when Dick forces Patricia to leave before she's ready, she screams at him, "You spoil everything! You can't think of anybody except yourself. You'll never go through with anything." Suggesting, of course, that she does want to go through with something with her pale, pretty mulatto dance partner, as Dos Passos describes her. But what we learn is that after Dick takes Patricia home, he comes back by himself and he picks up not only "Gloria Swanson" but Gloria Swanson's friend, "Florence Nightingale", and takes them both home. Unfortunately they mug him and that's the end of the scene, but I think that the point is a very important one, and that is that people who were presumably heterosexual went to Harlem to be homosexual.

(21:32)

Biographies of the period suggested a similar kind of picture, of particularly wealthy white people going to Harlem to see and taste life, particularly in Harlem gay bars and lesbian bars. The singer that I mentioned earlier, Libby Holman, and her lover, a woman by the name of Louisa DuPont Carpenter, who was heir to many of the DuPont millions, were said to have gone to Harlem almost nightly for a period of time wearing identical men's suits and bowler hats. And they were joined there apparently by other women celebrities and high-livers, many of them who were bisexual but who came to Harlem to be lesbian, women such as Jeanne Eagels, who was the first Sadie Thompson in "Rain", and Beatrice Lillie, the actress, Tallulah Bankhead whenever she was in America, Marilyn Miller, who was sort of the quintessential Ziegfeld girl, a woman by the name of Lucille LeSoeur, who became much more famous later on under the name of Joan Crawford, and many other women whom the public thought of as being heterosexual but who were in fact bisexual and went to Harlem to be bisexual.

(22:59)
Sometimes they went to a place called the Lafayette Theater, where Bessie Smith, who was a bisexual blues singer, would sing. Sometimes they went to sex circuses. There was a famous one on 140th Street that was run by a madam by the name of Helen Valentine, and often featured lesbian acts. Of course all of this was for some people, I think, a kind of racism, as I've suggested. It was as though they could behave in Harlem as though nothing really mattered, as though their skin color would serve as a sort of armor and make them impervious to the […] or insults. And I think for some of them, they felt that the greater vitality that they thought they saw in black people permitted them to reach into areas of their own psyches, to discover and act on desires that they might have suppressed elsewhere. But the songs that they heard in these Harlem nightclubs really didn't do much to foster the love of lesbianism as the concept of lesbianism as a love that did not speak its name. The image in those blues songs wasn't always totally positive but it was always very exciting and sort of funky and delicious. It was often very assertive. There's one that was very famous at the time that has since been recorded by a lesbian feminist singer, I think it was Chris Williamson. It was originally recorded by Ma Rainey in 1928 and was called "Prove It on Me Blues." It's a fascinating song because the singer there sort of toys with her audience. She implies that she really is a lesbian, that she's interested only in women. But she insists that until she's caught in the act, no one can prove anything about her.

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It's really sort of a song of lesbian pride at the same time that it recognizes the social stigmatization of lesbians. Let me read the lyrics to you. I wish I could sing. It's much better when sung. "They say I do it, Ain't nobody caught me, Sure gotta prove it on me. Went out last night with a crowd of my friends. It must have been women 'cause I don't like no men. It's true I wear a collar and a tie, like to watch while the women pass by. They say I do it, ain't nobody caught me, you sure gotta prove it on me. Wear my clothes just like a fan. Talk to the girls just like any old man. 'Cause they say I do it, ain't nobody caught me, sure gotta prove it on me." It was originally released by a race records company, a company called Paramount, and I found a very interesting advertisement for it in the *Chicago Defender*. It was sort of an illustrated advertisement. It was a picture of a plump black woman who looked very much like Ma Rainey. She was wearing a man's hat and a tie, vest and jacket, but she was also wearing a skirt and high heels, and I understand from the few informants that I've been able to contact who were in Harlem in the 1920s, that that was the usual dress for

butch lesbians. They weren't able, didn't feel free to wear pants, so they would wear drag from the waist up, and traditional women's clothes from the waist down.

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Anyway, in this picture, the butch lesbian – perhaps Ma Rainey – talking to two entranced feminine flappers, and then in the distance, observing them, there's a policeman. And the copy really tries to pique the potential buyer's salacious interest by hinting at the possible autobiographical nature of the material. The copy says, "What's all this? Scandal. Maybe so, but you wouldn't have thought it of Ma Rainey. But look at that cop watching her. What does it all mean?" Well, Paramount apparently thought that the potential buyer would know what it all meant, and would want to buy the record for that reason, to be excited by the implication.

(27:44)
I found similar songs of lesbian pride in the blues of the 1920s. There's one, for example, by Bessie Jackson called "B.D. Woman's Blues", and it's "Bull Dyker Woman's Blues." It's sort of a cautionary tale to men, saying that they'd better behave, but it's more than that. It's also a song of lesbian pride. The speaker in "B.D. Woman's Blues" complains about the way men treat women. She tells her straight listeners that they can't understand lesbians. But then she also asserts that lesbians just don't need men for anything. She says that bull dykers are sharp and aggressive and tough and financially independent and they're the decision makers in their own lives. Let me just read some of these lyrics to give you a little example of how she goes about making her points. She sings, "Comin' a time, B.D. women, they ain't gonna need no men. Oh, the way they treat us is a lowdown and dirty thing. B.D women you sure can't understand. They got a head like a machine gun, and they walk just like a natural man. B.D women they all done laid their claim. They can lay their jive just like a natural man. B.D. women, B.D. women, you know they sure is rough. They have drunk up many whiskies and they sure can strut their stuff. B.D women you know they work and they make their dough. And when they get ready to spend it, they know they have to go."

(29:18)
Sometimes these blues with lesbian subject matter really seem geared to heterosexual listeners who were going to be judgmental around it. But it seems to me that almost always in those blues there's a subversive message, and that subversive message is that lesbianism really is superior to heterosexuality. There's one, for example, called "It's Dirty But Good" that focuses specifically on lesbian sex and the excitement of the forbidden. "I know women that don't like men. The way they do is a cryin' sin. It's dirty but good, oh yes, it's dirty but good. There ain't much difference. It's dirty but good."

(30:09)
I found yet another one by a gay male singer which is about lesbians, George Hannah, who recorded this in the late 1920s. It's a very graphic song about the role of the clitoris in lesbian love-making, and he suggests in that song that lesbianism actually spread as a result of World War I. He says before the war, "a lot of these dames had nothin' to do. Uncle Sam thought he'd give 'em a fightin' chance. He packed up all the men and sent them on to France. Sent them over there, the Germans to hunt. Left the women at home to try out all their new stunts." Well, their new stunts are primarily mutual stimulation of what he calls "the boy in the boat", which is the title of the song,

obviously a reference to the clitoris. He says, “when you see two women walking hand in hand, just look ‘em over and try to understand. They’ll go to these parties, have the lights down low, only those parties where women can go. You think I lyin’, just ask Tack Ann. Took many a broad from many a man. Face is still wrinkled and his breath smells like soap, still talkin’ ‘bout that boy in the boat.”

(31:25)
Well, lesbian sex on the one hand is equated to “stunts” but on the other hand it’s clear that it’s efficacious enough to take women away from men. I think the whole song has an interesting purpose. On the one hand, the purpose seems to be to worry the male heterosexualists just enough to be provocative. But on the other hand it has this hidden message to lesbians that’s really a celebration of homosexual eroticism.

(32:02)
It’s interesting that many of those songs were sung at heterosexual gatherings, and I’m sure that homosexuals often infiltrated heterosexual gatherings, but heterosexuals were apparently fascinated with the idea of this song. The double message of those songs was often, frequently, communicated through the known bisexuality of the singer. Bessie Smith, for example, frequently sang songs of that nature. She has one song that was called “Foolish Man Blues.” It was all the rage in Harlem in 1927. It was frequently reprinted, in fact, in some of those novels that I referred to earlier. I found variations of “Foolish Man Blues” in the John Dos Passos novel and the Claude McKay novel. The way Bessie Smith sang it was, “There’s two things got me puzzled, there’s two things I don’t understand. That’s a mannish acting woman and a skippin’, twistin’ woman-actin’ man.” But what’s fascinating about this is, it’s called “The Foolish Man Blues.” That is, the speaker is foolish because he’s naïve. He doesn’t understand this mannish-acting woman and this woman-acting man [...]

(33:23)
Such open sexuality, I’ve discovered, wasn’t limited only to the Harlem nightclubs and race records. I found indications, for example, of drag balls in Harlem, like at the Savoy, balls that would welcome both gay men and lesbians, and welcome them to come in drag, but interestingly enough would also welcome heterosexuals as spectators. I discovered one newspaper headline that said “6000 Watch as Queer Men and Women Dance.” But what fascinates me, though, the most about that is I would imagine that often it was like what John Dos Passos described, that is, that there was a real cross-over. These heterosexuals may have come to watch but ended up mixing freely with people who were homosexual and perhaps often making various kinds of contacts with them.

(34:34)
Well, why could this happen in Harlem? I think for several reasons. One reason I think it could happen as far as black people were concerned is that the tone, at least for the wealthier classes in Harlem, for the middle and upper classes, seems to have been set pretty much by a fascinating black woman by the name of A’Lelia Walker. Her mother made millions of dollars by inventing and marketing something called Madame Walker’s Hairspray mix process, and A'Lelia was the only heir. And she was a really interesting woman who gave these lavish salons much like Mabel Dodge’s salons in Greenwich Village and Natalie Barney’s salons in Paris at the time. And she was very fond

of homosexuals, both men and women. I suspect that she was probably bisexual herself, although she married several times. But I think that at least two or three of her husbands were gay men if not bisexual. But she also surrounded herself with these handsome women and rather effete men, and kind of insisted on a tolerance for them. I think a lot of Harlemites who might otherwise have voiced disapproval of certain kinds of manners and pursuits that they might have thought were strange really learned to guard their tongue if they wanted the goodwill of A'Lelia Walker.

(36:15)
Well, A'Lelia was at one extreme in her elegance, and at the other extreme was a singer that I've alluded to before, another fascinating woman by the name of Gladys Bentley, who was a black woman, an entertainer, again a transvestite. Sometimes she sang under the name of Bobby Minton. She weighed 300 pounds. She often appeared on stage in drag but not only on stage. She walked around Harlem in drag. She would wear — she wouldn't be limited to looking masculine from the waist up. She would wear full-dress men's suits and ties and hats and everything else. But I think she could get away with it because she drew all of these illustrious customers, and the Clam House where she entertained was big because of her. And then she sang all over the United States in supper clubs that had previously been segregated. She integrated those supper clubs.

(37:20)
I discovered a fascinating bit of gossip about her. I did this interview with a wonderful woman who has just died within the last year, a woman by the name of Mabel Hampton, a black woman who was also an entertainer in Harlem in the 1920s and '30s, and Mabel told me that Gladys was actually bisexual but felt that it wouldn't be good for business if she let the heterosexual part of her life be known. She thought that this lesbian image was just so outré, just so outrageous and wild that it helped to draw people to her as an entertainer. I'm certain that Mabel was right, not only because she knew Gladys Bentley well but also because of an article that I found in 1952 in *Ebony* magazine. It's really sort of a sad article. I'm not sure how much of it to believe, but apparently Gladys Bentley decided in the '50s to practice the other side of her bisexuality, and she became heterosexual. The article that I discovered in *Ebony* magazine had the title "I Am a Woman Again" and the subtitle was "Fabulous entertainer tells how she found happiness in love after medical treatment to correct her strange affliction." It talks about this hormone treatment that she had been taking that not only enlarged her infantile uterus but made it possible for her to stop being interested in women and to marry heterosexually, not only once but twice. So she must have gotten a lot of hormones. She promises in that article that she's going to write a book on her experiences – fortunately she never wrote that book – but she said that that book would help others who were "trapped in a modern-day 'Well of Loneliness' and she said that she believes that writing such a book would help her feel "free and give me some redemption from my sins."

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The article is replete with these very sad pictures of this once fantastic woman, now in a house dress doing things like bending over a stove, cooking and making beds, doing dishes and the captions on those pictures say things like "Miss Bentley prepares to make home-coming hubby comfortable." I guess it's really significant because it shows how far the 1950s traveled from the 1920s, how far from those images of the B.D. woman, the narrator who talks about "I want the

whole world to know. It's true I wear a collar and a tie. I like to watch women pass by." It's certainly a distance of light years.

(40:47)
Well, it's really hard to know, I think, how many of those women that I've been talking about, who came to Harlem particularly to be lesbian, were really committed to lesbianism as a way of life. But I discovered some other interesting information. There was one book that was published in 1929 by a sociologist by the name of Katherine Bement Davis. The book is called *Factors in the Sex Lives of Twenty-Two Hundred Women*. And she discovered, her questionnaire was not aimed at lesbians specifically at all but she just sent the same questionnaire out to 2,200 women, and it had a few questions about emotional relations with other women. One said, for example, "Have you ever experienced intense emotional relations with other women as an adult?" 50.4 percent of the women who responded said that they had. And then there was another question about whether those relations were either sexual or recognized as sexual in character. And about 25 percent of those women, who were sort of randomly selected, said that their relations were either sexual or recognized as sexual in character. She unfortunately doesn't say how many of those respondents actually chose to commit themselves to lesbianism as a way of life. But I think it's clear that many women were having lesbian sexual experiences in the 1920s. I imagine that many of those, if they had had the Kinsey Scale available to them would have ranked themselves as something like a 2 or a 3 on the Kinsey Scale and wouldn't have called themselves lesbians.

(42:41)
But while the number of women who were committed to lesbianism was probably not very large in the 1920s, I think it's clear that a lot of women did experiment with it, for a number of reasons. And I want to suggest some of those reasons now. I think that one reason that so many women felt free to experiment with lesbianism at that time is that they often regarded it as being not different from romantic friendship in the 19th century. It simply took on another dimension, a sexual dimension. But they wouldn't have called it, even though it was sexual, they wouldn't have called it lesbian. I think some women felt free to experiment with lesbianism because it was for them a kind of maybe a brief sloughing off of restrictions on women's sexuality, and I think that they felt that those restrictions were representative of restrictions on women's freedom in general, and so it was one more area in which they would challenge restriction.

(43:56)
I think that some women felt free to experiment with lesbianism in the 1920s because for them it was a kind of acting out of repressed impulses such as Freud and psychoanalysis, which was so popular at that time, seemed to give them permission to do. And I think that many women were really encouraged by the public fascination with lesbianism. It really stopped being "a love that dared not speak its name" and began to be, at least for a short period of time, a relationship that women who were adventurous could feel free to deal with. I think many of those women who had homosexual experiences later married. Many of them may have felt much less obliged to make a choice between homosexuality and heterosexuality as women have in eras that we're more familiar with. Certainly in the 1970s with the pressure of lesbian feminism, women felt that bisexuality was not an option, that they had to choose to be lesbian or to leave lesbian feminism.

And then I think that many women simply had to be at least partly heterosexual in the 1920s for a number of reasons. Financial, of course – many women were not self-supporting. If they wanted children in the 1920s they didn't have the option of artificial insemination and would have to get married. I think women in the 1920s still felt in more conventional areas a lot of social pressure, much more than we can imagine today. But in any case it's clear that by the 1920s, in some circles, to have a lesbian experience no longer meant, as it had at the beginning of the century and in the late 19th century, when the sexologists first came to define lesbianism, it meant then, if you had a lesbian experience, you were probably a man trapped in a woman's body. In the 1920s, I don't think it meant that.

(46:14)
I suppose that women who were committed to lesbianism as a way of life must have found this new lesbian chic somewhat baffling as well as amusing and annoying. I want to end by quoting one other book of 1928. This was by Djuna Barnes, it's called *Lesbian* [sic] *Almanack*. [The correct title is *Ladies Almanack*.] It's kind of a satirical in-group portrait of a circle of lesbians, in which she presents there a woman by the name of Dame Evangeline Mussel, who was really a fabulous American expatriate, Natalie Barney. Natalie Barney had become a lesbian at the turn of the century before it was chic to be a lesbian. But she observes in *Ladies Almanack*, "In my day" that is, at the turn of the century, "I was a pioneer and a menace. It was not then, as it is now, chic" in the 1920s "but as daring as a crusade. For where now it leaves a woman talkative so that we have not a secret among us, then it left her in tears and trepidation. Then one had to lure them to the breast, and now you have to smack them front and back to wean them at all."

(47:38)
I think that lesbianism and the lesbian experience wasn't as chic again for at least fifty years, that is, at least until the 1970s with the advent of lesbian feminism. Well, I'll stop here, but if you have any questions …

[applause]

Moderator: Go ahead with your questions. I'll pour you a little water in case -

Question: You mentioned at the very beginning about finding people to interview. Was this because of the age factor, because of the race factor, because of people not coming out even now…
[sound becomes inaudible]

LF: No, I think it's primarily the age factor, of women who were around then would be in their 80s now and 90s now. There weren't very many left. I did find a number of white lesbians that lived in other areas of the United States who are in their 80s and 90s now, and they told me a bit about life in the 1920s and '30s particularly. I was able to get some information about Greenwich Village, for example, in the 1920s. [inaudible]

(49:02)

There was an interesting study that I came across, of a woman who had been a social scientist, who lived in Salt Lake City, as a lesbian, a middle-class lesbian in the 1920s and '30s. And she interviewed a group of women in her social circle and asked them questions about their lesbianism. Some fascinating insights. For example, they absolutely hated *The Well of Loneliness*. They thought that Radclyffe Hall got it all wrong and that it had nothing to do with their lives. They didn't think they were suffering at all, like Radclyffe Hall's Stephen Gordon and the other lesbians, their suffering. They felt that they were very well adjusted, Many of them were in happy, committed relationships. She does talk about some problems with alcoholism among some of the group. That was the only problem that she could identify that was seriously consistent in the group. It's hard to think, I think, of lesbians living in Salt Lake City in the 1920s and 1930s but apparently they managed to function very well. Many of them were social workers, professionals in one area or another.

Question: Is there any place in the country where a woman would be bothered if she appeared on the street in men's things?

(50:32)
LF: You mean today? Possibly in a small town. But there are no longer, as far as I know, laws against masquerading. There were in the 1950s. I came out in the 1950s into the gay bar culture and I remember one of the first things that I learned there is that if you wanted to dress in drag, you had to have at least three pieces of female apparel. Of course it wasn't hard to do. A few pieces of underclothing and socks and you could get away with it. But the women in the bar were very careful to do that because they were very cognizant of the fact that they could be arrested for masquerading. I don't think women have trouble now. It seems to me that dress in general is fairly unisex, although it's becoming less so. I've always liked to wear dresses. I went through a stage in the 1950s where I didn't. I decided after that in the '60s, I was, as far as other women were concerned, I was sort of out it in the '60s and '70s and part of the '80s because women wore pants then. It's no longer the case. I think lesbians now wear dresses. But no, I could imagine that in a tiny town somewhere in the South perhaps that's very conservative a woman might have a hard time.

Question: But don't you think that if they wore a complete man's suit – I mean, there's one thing to wear jeans and a shirt, something like that, but to wear a really obvious man's suit, I would think that women might have a problem and might have comments.

(52:26)
LF: Yeah, but it seems to me that unless it were actually men's shoes and everything else- It could be a tailored suit, male and female dress so much alike, or at least was in the '80s, again, as I say, it's becoming a bit different. I think women in most places can probably get away with it.

Moderator: One of the interesting personalities you mentioned was A'Lelia Walker. It's my understanding that she had a place in Harlem and then a place out in the country. Was it your understanding that she would do these salons or grand gatherings at both locations, or more one than the other?

(53:11)
LF: No, I think at both locations, and it seems to me, from what Mabel Hampton could tell me, was she had salons where she had – what was the term? – Russian princesses and French grand dukes or something like that. Then apparently she had other kinds of gatherings. Mabel told me that she was taken to one gathering by a white friend of hers, in fact, and she said that you had to be well-dressed and cute to get in, and she described the gathering as a kind of orgy. I don't know if French grand dukes and Russian princesses participated in those orgies, but it seemed from what Mabel was saying that there were several kinds of parties. [inaudible]

Question: I don't have a question but I'd like to make a comment. I've been in California all my life, I was born here, but I was here in the '20s, and you've certainly done a wonderful research, because I was there in those times, and the musicians and songs were extremely interesting to me, and I heard Gladys Bentley [mentions a couple of radio stations] and also KHJ, and I remember her appearing in a tuxedo, and she sang very high soprano, [inaudible] I was not aware of this *Ebony* article but I remember one of the announcers telling "I've got news for you. Gladys Bentley has become a woman." So that struck a chord there. And also I thought one thing that you didn't mention that might be also significant. [inaudible]

(55:47)
LF: Yes, I think you're right, that women got the vote in 1919, that they were moving into professions, and there were places for them in colleges and higher education that there hadn't been before. It certainly did make them feel more independent, and I think made possible more of this lesbian subculture.

[Lecture concludes]