

**The Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments: The Power of Space in the Shaping of Harlem's  
Black Class Identity**

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## Introduction

Nella Larsen Imes, a famous Harlem Renaissance novelist, heard the siren call of New York City long before 21<sup>st</sup> New Jerseyites realized there was more than the crabgrass frontier of suburbia. The cultural and social opportunities of 1920s Harlem overshadowed her comfortable Jersey City home, separated from the tip of Manhattan by the Hudson River. At heart, she was a writer and aspired to make it into a professional career. The art scene for a black author flourished uptown where the large black population gave Afro-Americans a platform to express themselves. As Harlem residents often said, “I’d rather be a lamp post in Harlem than the mayor of Atlanta.”<sup>1</sup> Already embedded into inner circles of popular writers of the time and with a husband who could boast to be only one of thirty-nine African-Americans to hold a doctorate degree, the couple offered both the creativity and education of the black elite. She set her eyes on the Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, already home to the well-known W.E.B. Du Bois, a symbol of status within the neighborhood’s crumbling housing market.<sup>2</sup>

Dunbar was home to the black upper class and while Nella Imes and her husband had the background to support their bid for entrance her husband’s salary could not support the costs. Finding alternative housing suitable to their social class was very difficult. When she was finally successful in securing respectable housing, she remarked that this was “a relief to all friends of ours. A convenience, too, to them, as well to us.”<sup>3</sup> Nella Imes believed her fifth-floor walkup to be a step up from her house in New Jersey because of its location, but after the money started coming in after her first successful book she immediately applied to live in Dunbar. The

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<sup>1</sup> Thadious M. Davis, *Nella Larsen, novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: a womans life unveiled* (Baton Rouge, La: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 223.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 222

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

comforts of a newly constructed building holding African American royalty was on par with the symbolic status she could convey to her peers and the rest of Harlem. Only living within its walls could provide sufficient proof of her success.<sup>4</sup>

Harlem itself was a status symbol powerful enough for the Imeses to relocate themselves to a neighborhood requiring a reduction in their standard of living. They knew finding an apartment that limited the mix of classes and was not in a state of disrepair would be a difficult enterprise. Society heavily discriminated against their race with little room for mobility or acceptance by white groups. What they did have was their character, the ideological theory of respectability a motivating force behind many black social movements. Nella Imeses could write her books comfortably from New Jersey but in order to achieve success in the eyes of the black community she had to become a member of the right social groups and interact with the symbols that would give proof of her acceptance within the black elite. Her determination to find a space within Dunbar within this context would be expected.<sup>5</sup>

W.E.B. Du Bois wrote many novels on black culture from the standpoint of a sociologist, *The Souls of Black Folk* and *The Philadelphia Negro* the studies most heavily drawn from for this paper. He offered a unique perspective as he studied his own people, allowing for a more nuanced view of African-American issues of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century than a white counterpart could offer. He delved into the causes of black poverty and perceived immorality going beyond the predetermination of racial biology still offered by white scientists during this time period. His views on the black condition would become important in understanding his motives during his residence in the Dunbar Apartments.

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<sup>4</sup> George Hutchinson, *In search of Nella Larsen: a biography of the color line* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2006), 268.

<sup>5</sup> Davis, *Nella Larsen*, 223-224.

W.E.B. Du Bois did not contain his legacy to his formal writing. The University of Massachusetts Amherst digitally archived thousands of his letters, bringing Du Bois to life in a way his books could never do. His personal concerns and struggles revealed themselves in this writing. His correspondence with the manager of the Dunbar Apartments gave details about the day to day operations of the complex difficult to find within newspaper articles. Without his correspondence, the interworking of the Dunbar Apartments could not be understood for no other source offered such detail. Due to the nature of his intellectual aspirations it was also possible to understand how he could apply the recommendations he made in his sociological works to the Harlem community.

*Not Alms But Opportunity* by Touré F Reed argued that the Urban League, an organization created to empower African-Americans by providing economic aid within their own neighborhoods used the theory of racial uplift as an influencing dogma. He argues such a morally based ideology promoted improvement of the impoverished more for the benefit of the upper crust than to enfranchise lower classes.<sup>6</sup> The Dunbar Apartments acknowledged the truth of such motivations but also work to understand the more symbolic space at play. The apartment complex conveyed a message to the entire community and worked to improve Harlem in more ways than housing for the elite.

David Harvey attempted to compartmentalize space using a tripartite division of his own creation. His theory was necessary to understand how the Dunbar Apartments could interact on more than a physical basis. Space is a word of greater depth and complexity than a brick and mortar structure. It is argued to be as complicated as concepts of culture and nature. These

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<sup>6</sup> Touré F Reed, *Not Alms but Opportunity: The Urban League and the Politics of Racial Uplift, 1910-1950* (United States: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 3.

categories are “absolute”, “relative”, and “relational”. Absolute space fits most within the simplified term commonly associated with the word, as it is “fixed and we record or plan events within its frame”.<sup>7</sup> Relative is concerned with the relationships of objects.<sup>8</sup> Relational becomes more complicated because it involves the relationship not just between objects, but space and time.<sup>9</sup> The intricacy of the word is most realized with this division as “an event or point in space cannot be understood by appeal to what exists only at that point. It depends upon everything else going on around it (although in practice usually within only a certain range of influence). A wide variety of disparate influences swirling over space in the past, present, and future concentrate and congeal at a certain point to define the nature of that point.”<sup>10</sup> These definitions can be difficult to absorb so an example of how they are applied can be useful in discerning their meaning. Think of a house. Its physical structure and existence under law characterizes the absolute. The location’s connection to places of employment, services such as electricity and water, and the money that makes its existence as a dwelling sustainable are all examples of relative space.<sup>11</sup> Then there is its “relationality to global property markets, changing interest rates, climatic change, the sense of what is or is not a historic building, and its significance as a place of personal and collective memories, sentimental attachments, and the like.”<sup>12</sup> These three terms provide the foundation to explain how an apartment building could hold more significance than a place to rest one’s head at night. This thesis will engage with this theory in attempting to explain the symbolic power of the Dunbar Apartments.

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<sup>7</sup> David Harvey, "Space as a Key Word" (speech, Marx and Philosophy Conference, Institute of Education, London, May 29, 2004), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Class is nuanced. Many Western countries have a long tradition of marking citizenship by land ownership, affecting their ability to vote. A system inherently unequal for land is a limited resource. Yet for most of these countries it was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the restriction on suffrage lifted. A rich merchant would be viewed as part of a lower class than the impoverished gentleman hanging onto part of his ancestral lands. During the Gilded Age the sudden rise to millionaire upstarts, some with working class backgrounds, disrupted the traditional elite class by forcing an adaption to their convictions to make room for the forceful hand of a nouveau riche who made up for their lack of social standing with wealth. African Americans could not make distinctions as easily because they were not in complete control of their own social sphere in the early 20th century. Whites imposed a glass ceiling creating restrictions on the jobs they could pursue, ability to attend an institute of higher education, and neighborhoods they could live within. Furthermore, the black community was heavily reliant on the approval of whites to mark success, complicated by the issue of generalization. The crimes of the impoverished were a burden on the black elites, dragged down by the discrimination of the whites who refused to discern the diversity of the black population. Without the ability to accumulate the same representations of wealth and class as their counterparts, symbolism was a powerful aspect for distinguishing black class identity during the early 1900s.

Harlem represented the clashing forces within black identity. Discrimination artificially limited residence within New York, restraining Afro-Americans to a limited number of neighborhoods within Manhattan, Harlem representing the most popular settlement. Here the impoverished recently moved from the South and the intellectual leaders of the race could be found within a single apartment building. The elites distinguished themselves under a theory of respectability. It allowed them to place a boundary between themselves and the masses migrating



into the city boundaries, an idea reliant on an image of high moral aptitude. It worked within the discriminatory ideas of whites while also seeking to improve both their standing and that of the black race in general. The theory provided the upper class a framework in which to carve out a niche for themselves. The famous writer and tenant of Dunbar, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the manager of the complex, Roscoe Conkling Bruce represented the two main forces within the project who through their engagement of the space tried to influence the uplift of the black race while also pushing a particular image of themselves. This thesis seeks to argue that the Dunbar Apartments allowed the upper crust of black Manhattan society to both reinforce a distinct classed society as well as to use the symbolic space as a vehicle to create a black identity based on self-improvement.

The first chapter will establish the two main characters in this paper, Roscoe Conkling Bruce and W.E.B. Du Bois. It seeks to explore their background and experiences leading up to their move into the Dunbar Apartments in order to establish their preconceptions, ideology, and insecurities of their place within the elite. This chapter will also engage with the ideological differences between Du Bois and Booker T. Washington important for understanding the arguments influencing decisions on respectability and uplift. The second chapter will focus on the apartment complex itself, using Harvey's theory of space to help connect an experimental housing project to the larger movement of respectability and uplift in play within the Harlem community. Bruce, representing the Dunbar management, and Du Bois's interactions within Dunbar will be discussed. Finally, the third chapter will explore the aftermath of Dunbar. It will determine whether the original aims of the housing project came into fruition in the ways its creators expected. This chapter will also discuss how Du Bois and Bruce managed the changes to

Dunbar and the economic situation of the Great Depression, emphasizing the fragility of social classes and the theory of respectability.

The Dunbar Apartments are an overlooked part of Harlem history, mentioned in few books and then only briefly. It was influential in shaping the neighborhood and stood as a tool to help create black identity. A housing complex is not as romantic as the large protests and speeches given during the Civil Rights movement of both the 1920s and 1960s, but its relationship with the black community was no less significant. The Dunbar Apartments played an important role in structuring how the theory of respectability could provide Afro-Americans with an identity outside of the racialized views of white society.

## Chapter One: The Key Players

“My wife and I...have abounding faith in the masses of our own people. Quick to sense our emotional attitude toward them, they have always liked us and been eager to please us.”<sup>13</sup>

Roscoe Conkling Bruce was optimistic about his move to Harlem. In his mind, he saw a conglomeration of lost souls without leadership because the intellectuals within the city were too wrapped up in trying to earn the approval of white society. Bruce wanted to offer those lower classes friendship. This contrasted against the role of his new position as Resident Manager of the Dunbar Apartments, a housing cooperation that required a rigorous background check and references proving a highly-regarded character. As he interrogated applicants, looking for any flaws that would make them unacceptable or indicate inability to pay the monthly costs his real prejudices revealed themselves.<sup>14</sup>

The same man who wrote of a favorable relationship with the masses had left Washington D.C. to the chants of “No More Bruce!” and “Bruce Must Go!” from picket lines outside public schools all around the city. Their signs expressed the details of their animosity. The Parent’s League, 2,000 strong, protested Bruce in the name of their children who attended the segregated school district in the national’s capital in 1919. Maybe with Roscoe Conkling Bruce, both a Harvard graduate and African-American, promoted to Assistant Superintendent of the Colored Schools of the District, they felt their children were in capable hands. A highly-regarded member of the black community and supported by Booker T. Washington himself, he

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<sup>13</sup> Kenneth W. Rose, "PARTNERS IN HOUSING REFORM: THE APARTMENT DEVELOPMENTS OF JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER, JR., CHARLES O. HEYDT, AND ANDREW J. THOMAS" (speech, New York History, Cooperstown, NY), 14.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 14-15

appeared a symbol for children to aspire towards if they too worked hard in school.<sup>15</sup> His involvement in a scandal would call into question the divide between the upper crust of black respectability and the masses below. It was a symptom of a larger movement known as uplifting that would formalize itself into organizations such as the Urban League. The desire to create a respectable black community promoted the upper class while also forging a more stratified classed society.

This chapter will first establish the different ideologies of W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. It will then look at the theory of respectability and uplift in relation with the main organization perpetuating such actions, the Urban League. Roscoe Conkling Bruce worked within the League and it would hire him to run the Dunbar Apartments as they had a role in its opening. The next sections will explore the background of Bruce. From an outsider's point of view Bruce was not an upstanding member of the community, entrenched in many scandals, but he remained black royalty and put in charge of Dunbar. This chapter will explore how such a duality could exist where a man could be hated by the black masses, but put on a pedestal by the elite. Chapter one will serve to show respectability was an ideal based on symbolism, an outward moniker rather than a simple reflection of one's material wealth or high moral standing.

W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington found their place in history as opponents, decades of debates and not so carefully masked insults within their writings the basis of their relationship. Their ideologies marked two different schools of thought yet the basis of their ideas did not differ significantly. Education was a key point of contention between the two, an important vehicle in establishing a skilled black race that could engage meaningfully in the country's work force and intellectual circles. Washington embraced technical schools, but "Du

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<sup>15</sup> C.M. Tanner to W. E. B. Du Bois, May 1919, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

Bois consistently believed in the power of education. People would remain in chains unless they understood that they need not be.”<sup>16</sup> Without further consideration Du Bois’s emphasis on the liberal arts and Washington’s on industrial skills would appear antithetical, but each ideology relied on the other to support its application. Higher education was not a feasible pursuit for all black children due to such factors as individual intelligence and financial mean. Du Bois acknowledged an alternative education in industrial training was suitable for some groups. White society already limited white collar and high paying work for blacks, making the job market competitive. Washington saw the merits of higher education as well, sending his daughter to Wellesley College. He sought out college graduated intellectuals to aid him in projects. The two different forms of education were not a rigid boundary.<sup>17</sup>

The schools of thought instituted by each black intellectual created a different idea of how the race could improve, reflective of the educational system each supported. Du Bois believed the black race could be uplifted through the Talented Tenth, a name given to the small minority of college-educated African Americans.<sup>18</sup> Tasked with the duty of improving the black race, Du Bois described their role as “leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people. No others can do this work and Negro colleges must train men for it. The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men.”<sup>19</sup> This was a top down approach that contrasted with Washington’s belief that those at the bottom of society could rise up from

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<sup>16</sup> *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 568, The Study of African American Problems: W.E.B. Du Bois's Agenda, Then and Now (London: Sage periodicals Press, 2000), 104.

<sup>17</sup> Jacqueline M. Moore, *Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the struggle for racial uplift* (Wilmington (Del.): Scholarly resources, 2003), 61.

<sup>18</sup> J. Battle and E. Wright, "W.E.B. Du Bois's Talented Tenth: A Quantitative Assessment," *Journal of Black Studies* 32, no. 6 (2002), 654.

<sup>19</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," in *The Negro problem: a series of articles by representative American Negroes of today*, by Booker T. Washington (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), 75.

their own self-improvement hence the desire to instill skills applicable to higher paying industrial work. That did not mean Washington resisted a learned class as he himself fell into the category and employed black college graduates. Du Bois was not against the bettering of the poor, but supported an elite class that could both help guide the masses and use their platform to organize the fight for equal rights on a political front.<sup>20</sup> This was their main point of contention. Du Bois believed Washington was too complicit in the legal racism and discrimination by white society. The idea of working with whites instead of against them yielded nothing more in the eyes of Du Bois, “disfranchisement, legally-enforced segregation, and the withdrawal of aid from black institutions of higher learning.”<sup>21</sup> Du Bois’s labeled Washington as submissive to the will of white society.<sup>22</sup> These ideologies shared similar ideas and while applied differently, both focused on the theory of respectability and uplifting. It would become the basis for creating a black class system, dispelling the idea that an entire race could be so easily homogenized.

African American respectability, also known as uplift or elevation, is a concept that originated from before the Civil War. Slavery and colonization in Africa throughout the 19th century found support in biological explanations for the inferiority of the black race. Within the United States emancipation did not mean the end of racism. Scientists and doctors simply repackaged it in order to back up demands for segregation and economic slavery. With the approach of World War I military involvement in Africa created an interest in the physical and psychological differences of the so called “darker races”. Phrenology gave evidence for mental illness, criminal behavior, limited intelligence, and biological inferiority. It supported the homogenizing of the entire race, stamping them all with high susceptibility to moral

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>21</sup> Ramón G. Vela, "The Washington–Du Bois Controversy and African-American Protest: Ideological Conflict and Its Consequences," *Studies in American Political Development* 16, no. 01 (2002), 96.

<sup>22</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Brooklyn, NY: Restless Books, 2017).

degradations.<sup>23</sup> Du Bois explored the concept of race and in his study of how it separated into different categories, he found it went beyond a perceived difference in outward appearance. It was deeper for the “whole process which has brought about these race differentiations has been a growth, and the great characteristic of this growth has been the differentiation of spiritual and mental differences between great races of mankind and the integration of physical differences.”<sup>24</sup> Under such a theory the color of their skin designated a particular form of mental aptitude, linking any signs of degradation as inherently part of their race. African-Americans had to set themselves to a higher standard, becoming more educated, religiously involved, and sound of character than their white counterparts yet receiving only a fraction of the credit. This became known as respectability which by definition meant “that one had, through dint of individual industry and perseverance, cultivated one’s inner character sufficiently to harvest the rewards of material success. Most importantly, this potential was available to all”<sup>25</sup> Du Bois believed the social and economic failures of blacks resulted from a combination of white discrimination and a problem in the morality of African-Americans. He implored the Negro Academy to spread his battle cry: “UNLESS WE CONQUER OUR PRESENT VICES THEY WILL CONQUER US; we are disease, we are developing criminal tendencies, and an alarmingly large percentage of our men and women are sexually impure.”<sup>26</sup> It was the responsibility of the respectable and intellectual men of their race to uplift the immoral because they did not only impose a negative image on themselves, but the entire black community. Only with the continued efforts of the race to solve their moral imperfections could a correction be made in the “Negro Problem”, the term

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<sup>23</sup> Patrick Rael, *Black identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 179-180

<sup>24</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Conservation of Races* (Boston: MobileReference.com, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Rael, *Black identity*, 131.

<sup>26</sup> Du Bois, *The Conservation*.

given for the friction with white culture.<sup>27</sup> It was through such a theory that the elite could distinguish themselves from the masses, creating an upper class that could rely on more than financial means, important when whites put restrictions on their ability to accumulate wealth.

The call for uplift and respectability made by intellectuals such as Du Bois formalized itself into organizations created to help bring about change in black cities, the centers of poverty. After decades of conventional proposals by black activists that neither had the funds nor leadership to make any significant change, they created the Urban League in 1909.<sup>28</sup> It focused on the present situation of the black community, seeking immediate socio and economic relief through social service programs. The League used its power and influence to help find employers willing to take on black workers, but they expected even more from the those they sought to help. Their main tenant for self-improvement: handouts only worked on a temporary timeline, but teaching people the skills necessary to live without aid could last a lifetime.<sup>29</sup> Two folded was the issue because not only was their poverty a reflection on their moral character, but of the entire race. If the black elite could establish a society with a successful working class it would push white society to acknowledge that the black race was not a uniform population of impoverished criminals. The League tackled many fronts such as the housing and job market, which discriminated against African-Americans of all social and economic backgrounds.<sup>30</sup> The idea of respectability was not perfect for while it encouraged self-help among the community, supplying help to the impoverished rather than relying solely on white institutions, this ideology led to problematic moral views toward the poor seen even amongst destitute white communities.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Reed, *Not Alms But Opportunity*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 29.



Du Bois was an important tenant within the Dunbar Apartments, but the man who ran its operations was Roscoe Conkling Bruce. His story within black intellectual ideology came before his position within the housing complex. Bruce's relationship with Du Bois began with a personal slight by Washington that started more than two decades before Dunbar would open. When W.E.B. Du Bois was still making his name in the world and formalizing his ideological theories on race he decided to pursue the position of Superintendent of Negro Schools for Washington, DC. The encouragement to apply came from Booker T. Washington himself. In a letter to Washington, Du Bois sought an endorsement as Washington wrote many letters urging Du Bois to apply before the position was gone. The letters between the two suggested respect if not friendship, but Washington offered his support while campaigning for a different candidate. He did not trust Du Bois to remain in check and malleable to Washington's control.<sup>31</sup> When the position reopened a couple years later W.E.B. Du Bois was once again a candidate, but the discord between the two men no longer hid under false compliments. The city of Washington offered him the job, but Du Bois remarked how a member of Booker T. Washington's political machine "took the matter straight to President Theodore Roosevelt and emphasized the 'danger' of my appointment. He never forgot the 'danger' of my personality as later events proved. His offer was never actually withdrawn, but it was not pressed, and I finally realized that it probably would not have gone through even if I had indicated my acceptance."<sup>32</sup> The position would instead fall to a follower of Washington named Roscoe Conkling Bruce. His role within the school district became an important case study for the application of respectability and uplifting with the black communities.

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Aiello, *The Battle for the Souls of Black folk: W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and the debate that shaped the course of civil rights* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2016), 93-95.

<sup>32</sup> Du Bois, W.E.B. *Dusk of Dawn: an essay toward an autobiography of a race concept*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014, 94.

Roscoe Bruce, a follower of Washington and the man who secured the job Du Bois sought, was African-American royalty. He was the sole child of two very distinct and wealthy family lines. After the Civil War, his father, Blanche K. Bruce took ownership of a large plantation and amassed a fortune.<sup>33</sup> He went on to run for Senator of Mississippi, his win marking the first African-American to serve for an entire term in the upper House. No less distinguished, his mother, Josephine Bealle Bruce, née Wilson, was the daughter of a well-known doctor and author, writer of “Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia by a Southerner” which promoted the existence of an elite black society.<sup>34</sup> Bruce was a gifted student, finding a place in Phillips Exeter Academy and excelling at Harvard as the President of the University Debating Council and a Phi Beta Kappa. He graduated with honors and the majority elected him class orator.<sup>35</sup> He married Clara Washington Burrill, a Radcliffe College graduate. Later she would graduate from Boston University Law School with honors, one of five women to do so, and elected as Class Day Orator, at the time the only woman to receive the award.<sup>36</sup> Between his education and family he was a symbol of black respectability and upper class status. When a scandal challenged his reputation the reactions from both classes would give enlightenment for how the theory of uplift and respectability was actualized within black society.

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<sup>33</sup> Andrew Glass, "Freed slave presides over Senate: Feb. 14, 1879," POLITICO, <http://www.politico.com/story/2008/02/freed-slave-presides-over-senate-feb-14-1879-008508>.

<sup>34</sup> Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: the Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 4-5.

<sup>35</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, “Memorandum in re Roscoe Conkling Bruce”, May, 1940, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>36</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, “Memorandum in re Clara Burrill Brice”, May, 1934, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

Bruce impressed Washington with his academic prowess so when he became interested in pursuing a career in education Washington used political influence to secure a position.<sup>37</sup> As a follower of Washington's ideology Bruce advocated vocational training over higher education.<sup>38</sup> The parents of the students who attended his schools within D.C. were enraged by his policy, forming the Citizens Committee in 1909 and calling for his removal. Bruce refuted their actions by explaining "The Negro peasant is wholly unprepared for the complications, the competitions, the moral stress of city life and little or no provisions is made to train him in the arts and industries by which he might sustain himself. Memphis, Atlanta, Washington, New Orleans, Louisville, Baltimore, St. Louis, Philadelphia, and New York...in not one of these cities does there exist a trade school for Negroes comparable to the Barob de Hirsch School in New York City for immigrant Jews."<sup>39</sup> He wanted these parents to understand that when their children entered the real world there would be no provisions to make up for what they did not learn in school. If they did not know a useful trade no formal institution would supply them with one because they were thought even lower than a poor, Jewish newcomer. This was reality for not every child had the resources to attend university so if they did not leave his school district with a translatable skill they would become bottom feeders, unable to achieve economic independence. His actions were highly reflective of the theories of respectability spouted by both Du Bois and Washington. If Du Bois held the job a greater emphasis on the possibilities of higher education would undoubtedly exist, but he too would acknowledge the limited route it

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<sup>37</sup> Booker T. Washington to James Dickens McCall, January 21, 1902, Louis R. Harlan and Raymond w. Smock, eds, *The Booker T. Washington Papers*.

<sup>38</sup> Rose, "PARTNERS IN HOUSING REFORM".

<sup>39</sup> C.M. Tanner to W. E. B. Du Bois, June 1919, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

offered. Bruce respected higher institutes of learning as he was a graduate of Harvard and pushed his children to attend.<sup>40</sup>

Bruce's battle with the Washington D.C. public would help define the symbolic basis of respectability. Newspapers described Roscoe Bruce in 1915 as the most despised man in the city. As the black community's animosity grew his relationship with the Board of Education, a primarily white organization, remained in good standing.<sup>41</sup> He was still Assistant Superintendent in 1919 when everything unraveled. The Board of Education gave Professor H.M.D. Moens, an ethnologist, permission to take photos of pupils within the colored schools in the name of science. What Moens failed to mention was the necessity of nude photos.<sup>42</sup> The public discovered the pictures and the details of the scandal became worse with every revelation. A teacher not only posed nude, but she solicited female pupils and other young women to take part in the study. Moens degraded himself further by entering into a romantic relationship with an underage girl. A special agent of the Department of Justice testified that "Prof. Moens admitted that he had certain illicit relations with a girl by the name of Helen Saunders and committed unnatural acts with her; that he, Moens took two naked poses of Miss Saunders, which were offered in evidence. His testimony was too revolting to print."<sup>43</sup> The court found him guilty, but it was not enough to appease parents. The administration welcomed Moens into student's lives so the parents went after the one responsible for ensuring safety within all of the colored schools, Roscoe Conkling Bruce.

Moens' study stemmed from the black bourgeois' desire for acceptance within the white community. They were willing to put aside logical reasoning and open up the black community

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<sup>40</sup> Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 146-147.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>42</sup> "Opinion piece on the Moens Case," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), April 05, 1919.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

to a dubious study from an unknown, irrelevant professor because the results could benefit their own social class. The attention of a white, charismatic man who put on the airs of culture flattered the sensibilities of those desperately clinging onto any acceptance. As the cartoon depicted the white cat could ask anything and there would always be mice, representing the educated and socially prominent blacks, ready to abandon decency to appease this creature. On the sideline sat the innocuous masses disinterested in the false flattery, refusing to transform themselves in the meek characters of their superiors. Who wins out in the end?<sup>44</sup>



It was not enough to hate the idea of an upper class who thought they knew best. Bruce became the physical manifestation of everything wrong with the black elite. A Parent's League formed in order to push a formal investigation into Bruce's actions during his time as Assistant Superintendent. Witnesses attacked his character, a serious accusation as the Board fired a teacher on the premise of insufficient patriotism. Bruce became labeled as a drunk.<sup>45</sup> A principal

<sup>44</sup> "Opinion piece", Washington Bee.

<sup>45</sup> "The Washington public school situation", United States Senate (Resolution 310), ca. 1920, 2-3.

who simply smelled of liquor lost his job yet Bruce remained untouched.<sup>46</sup> The position of Assistant Superintendent called for competence and Moens's ease in moving throughout the colored schools was a reflection on Bruce's inability to control and supervise his inferiors. The opposition went so far as to say this was not just negligent, but Bruce knew of Moen's actions since 1917. It was only when the parents pressured him that he began to take action.<sup>47</sup> A prime example of the black community's opinion of him, claim true or not. They believed he preferred to stay in the favor of a corrupt and abusive white man than provide aid for the masses, his own people.

The case against Bruce was not significant for the details of the Moens case, any scandal would suffice, but that the hatred of the masses did not touch his respectability even under such extreme conditions. The black community criticized Bruce's close relationship with the mainly white Board of Education during his career. When it came between bending to the will of the public or dismissing their Assistant Superintendent the Board refused to fire Bruce. It was a statement that respectability was more important than any opinions of the lower classes even if they were directly affected by his actions. The Parent's League consisted of 15,000 members and they threatened the removal of their children from school



if they did not replace Bruce.<sup>48</sup> The Board ignored their demands and found he remained both efficient and qualified.<sup>49</sup> Other prominent members of the black community stood up in support

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>48</sup> C.M. Tanner to W. E. B. Du Bois, May 1919.

<sup>49</sup> Madeline G. Allison, "The Horizon," *The Crisis*, 1920, 8.

of Bruce. W.E.B. Du Bois was not a friend, but when a fellow upper-class member of society was under threat he had no qualms in giving a defense. He used his popular magazine, *The Crisis*, as a platform and wrote, “Public hearings have been held, public speeches made, public accusations printed and in each case Mr. Bruce has conducted himself like a gentleman, with rare poise and perfect courtesy. He has answered his accusers thoughtfully and clearly, and has twice or three times been openly vindicated by judicial bodies which would seem to have had no bias in his favor.”<sup>50</sup> He focused on Bruce’s demeanor, his poise and courtesy, a perfect gentleman. In Du Bois’s mind there was nothing more important for improving the black cause. The Parent’s League protested under the tagline, “The interest of 18,000 colored school children is greater than the interest of 1 man.”<sup>51</sup> In the eyes of maintaining the integrity of the black upper class the two statements needed switching. In the end he did resign but only because the protests made operations difficult. He did not leave in disgrace, but under the promise of a different job by the Board. The League succeeded in ridding him from the post, but not in destroying his character which remained untouched.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, "Opinion of W.E.B. Du Bois," *The Crisis*, October 1920, 262.

<sup>51</sup> C.M. Tanner to W. E. B. Du Bois, April 1919, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>52</sup> Roscoe Conkling Bruce to John Van Schaick, Jr., December 13, 1920, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

## Chapter Two: Symbolic Space and the Dunbar Apartments

Roscoe Bruce opened the letter to discover it was yet another complaint from his tenant about the behavior of his neighbors. This one detailed loud machinery from the apartment below, what he feared to be a bootleg operation (it was just a washing machine).<sup>53</sup> He had no restrictions in his criticism, voicing his discontent freely and often. Under most circumstances an overly attentive neighbor would be a natural consequence of living in the close quarters of an apartment building and would hold no other significance. Yet these accusations reveal more than just a disgruntled resident because W.E.B Du Bois, the famous African American activist and author, penned them during his time in the Dunbar Apartments, a building complex that set out to redefine how blacks interacted with housing and their community. Only the black upper class could afford the majority of the apartments in the complex, but the symbolic power of the project encompassed the entirety of black Harlem.

Central Harlem contained the majority of Manhattan's black population, roughly 75% or 190,000 individuals by 1930. The housing was rundown and lacked amenities yet African Americans overpaid heavily compared to the same prices asked of whites for similar residences.<sup>54</sup> The Harlem Committee of the New York Tuberculosis and Health Association studied the buildings to determine if they were dilapidated or had inadequate plumbing. Central Harlem reported 52,938 dwellings and found 16,588 to be in poor shape, or 31.3%. The density of individual apartments was also recorded, the number indicating overcrowding was 1.5. This number represented the persons per room. Of the units reported, 10.6% had a number 1.51 or

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<sup>53</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois to "Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, Inc.", May 11, 1928, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28.



greater. Comparing it with the other health districts in Manhattan showed it to have the highest numbers reported for both categories. Harlem housing was in the worst shape and the most overcrowded.<sup>55</sup> The Urban League broke down the cause of their housing conditions into two parts. They believed “prejudice and ignorance prevented whites from distinguishing between respectable and dissolute blacks, thus leading many whites to exclude Afro-Americans from their communities through acts of violence and/or restrictive covenants.”<sup>56</sup> If they were allowed to expand elsewhere this would help take pressure off the limited housing and following the laws of supply and demand would relieve some of the overcharging. Alternatively, investment in the area by building newer housing could have aided the higher classes. Instead they were forced to mingle with the lower classes in unsuitable living conditions. The second factor looked internally rather than at white discrimination, blaming the behavior of black residents. They did not know how to conduct themselves in urban life and let their dwellings fall further into disrepair.<sup>57</sup> Their solution was to improve housing by working with landlords and real estate developers as well as to focus on improving the character of the community, but such “endeavors ultimately reflected the class concerns shaping the League’s ideology as well as the practical limitations of its particular brand of uplift.”<sup>58</sup> This culminated in the cooperative housing project named the Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments.

The New York Urban League lobbied for investments from philanthropists willing to take part in a project that would redefine the Harlem housing experience. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. agreed to finance the project as he too wanted to promote self-sufficiency and personal

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<sup>55</sup> New York Tuberculosis and Health Association, *Socioeconomic Conditions and Tuberculosis Prevalence in New York City, 1956*, 1956, 12.

<sup>56</sup> Reed, *Not Alms But Opportunity*, 29.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

investment in one's home among the Afro-American community.<sup>59</sup> Unlike the traditional format of landlord and tenant it was both a cooperative and garden apartment complex. Instead of renting, the tenant was a stockholder. They entered their lease with a down payment and then a monthly payment that included both interest and maintenance costs.<sup>60</sup> Cooperative housing was unique because it occupied a middle ground between renting and homeownership. To buy an apartment involved securing a loan from a bank and then having to manage the maintenance, insurance, and so on of said housing. In Harlem, residents had limited access to credit and likely did not feel financially secure enough to commit to decades of payments. On the other side of the spectrum renting involved making a payment every month and encouraged no sense of involvement in the building. Cooperative housing sold a stock of the company which gave the buyer a right to a specific unit in the building. The stock was paid off in a similar fashion as a mortgage. While run by a Board of Directors all shareholders had a voice in the decisions of the building. Maintenance fees were part of their monthly payment so they did not have to pay for the labor of repairs, encouraging them to keep their apartments in good shape. Unlike renting, cooperatives garnered equity. For Dunbar, in 22 years a tenant could pay off the entire project and have about \$6,600 in equity. This financial housing system intended to be a stepping stone for the black community to homeownership and suitable housing, creating a sense of respectability for those who could secure a unit.<sup>61</sup>

The physical organization and architecture of the Dunbar Apartments, as well as its existence as a cooperative, created the absolute space necessary for respectability. The complex

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>60</sup> Dunbar Apartments, proceedings of Landmarks Preservation Commission, New York, July 14, 1970, [http://www.neighborhoodpreservationcenter.org/db/bb\\_files/DUNBAR-APTS.pdf](http://www.neighborhoodpreservationcenter.org/db/bb_files/DUNBAR-APTS.pdf).

<sup>61</sup> "Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, Inc.," Roscoe Conkling Bruce to W. E. B. Du Bois, August 27, 1928, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

consisted of six independent U-shaped buildings, occupying the entire block from 149th and 150th Streets and Seventh and Eighth Avenues. Andrew J. Thomas designed it, emphasizing simplicity yet avoiding aloofness by breaking up the massive wall surfaces. He utilized the concept of garden apartments by creating a large interior court filled with shrubs, trees, and flowers. It served as a respite from the noise and a place to take in fresh air. The playground served a similar purpose, aiming to keep children off the street so they could be protected and less likely to get into mischief. A way for the residents to keep from mixing with their less savory neighbors.<sup>62</sup> In 1928 it boasted 511 apartments, about 2,400 rooms, a doctor's suite, a



Figure 1 - *The Better Homes Manual* by Blanche Halbert

dentist's suite, and eleven stores. This included a bakery and a bank. Each apartment had some variation of a kitchen, dining room, living room, bedroom, and bathroom.<sup>63</sup> Within the project there was also a nursery and a cellar for storage.<sup>64</sup> Most importantly this was all new. The statistics mentioned before show how much of the housing was in complete disrepair, with no mention

of the varying stages of decomposition of the rest. Dunbar's very creation signified hope for Harlem that real estate developers would realize there was a population of middle-class black residents who could not only afford the housing, if given a market valued price, but respect their residences by taking an interest in the upkeep.

<sup>62</sup> Dunbar Apartments, Landmarks, 1.

<sup>63</sup> "Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, Inc." to W. E. B. Du Bois, August 27, 1928.

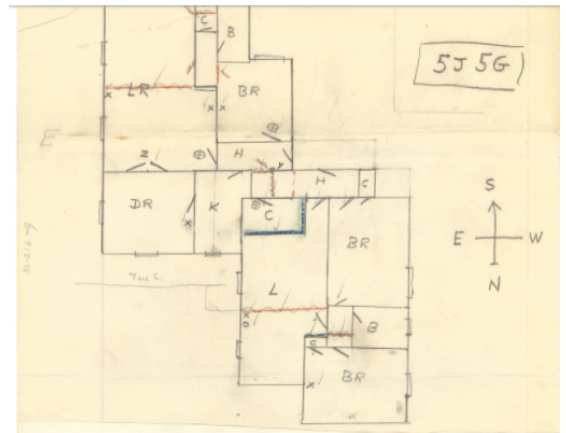
<sup>64</sup> "Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, Inc.," General description of the Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, August 27, 1928, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

Thomas designed Dunbar with modest rooms, not because he wanted to maximize the amount of families who could live within the complex, but rather as a way to enforce respectability within the community. The Urban League found that overcrowding was just as high in large apartments because families would offset the more expensive rent by taking in lodgers.<sup>65</sup> The Urban League wanted to avoid the “lodger-evil” as they were “an additional source of household disorder” and “contributed to the deterioration of Harlem’s tenements by failing to assist in the general maintenance of the

residences. Lodgers, moreover, threatened the privacy and moral integrity of the family.”<sup>66</sup> With small apartments, averaging 3.5 rooms, but also available from 4-7, this evil could not be brought in. It was also against the lease to do so.<sup>67</sup> Yet there was always an exception to the rule. W.E.B.

Du Bois became interested in taking up residence in

Dunbar before it even began taking applicants. Du Bois was a perfect characterization of respectability, a prominent member of the NAACP, editor of *The Crisis*, and an author of many books and essays. He dedicated much of his work to combating prejudices and stereotypes about the black community. Large apartments went against the rules of Dunbar, but when Du Bois wanted a 9-person apartment, requiring two different units to be combined, his demands were met. He had the money and reputation to get his way even though Du Bois himself admitted he was going against the rules and believed the purpose of the project was not aimed toward



<sup>65</sup> Reed, *Not Alms But Opportunity*, 51.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

professionals.<sup>68</sup> Their ease in accommodating a change in space implied they were more than welcome to the idea.

The implications of Dunbar went beyond the physicality of what was provided to those living within or the implications of its design, but extended to the community of Harlem as a whole. Respectability was not just about the middle-class establishing their superiority and creating distance from the lower classes, but using their influence to help uplift the lower classes economically and morally. This connection with the rest of the neighborhood represented relative space. Du Bois remarked that he did not think the apartments were for the professionals, suggesting some original implication that it would be advertised toward the more economically repressed. In reality the cost meant only those in the higher paying jobs could afford it and the character referrals necessary in one's application kept the morally inept out, the two groups uplifting targeted.<sup>69</sup> A sample of 300 Dunbar residents found only 3% working as unskilled labor while 30% were clerks, 16% porters, 7% chauffeurs, 8% post office letter carriers and teachers, and 3% apartment superintendents.<sup>70</sup> Roscoe Bruce, assisted by his wife served as the gatekeeper. Dunbar attracted thousands of applications, too many for Bruce's original selection process requiring him to visit possible residents in their own homes. He compromised with in-office interviews and recommendations he thoroughly checked out. He reported to the public that "the sporting fraternity, daughters of joy, the criminal element are not wanted, and in fact will not be tolerated. Families of exemplary habit and character are sought, those that sincerely desire to secure and help maintain a wholesome environment in which to live and are seriously

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<sup>68</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois to "Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, Inc.", November 7, 1927, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>69</sup> "Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, Inc.," Roscoe Conkling Bruce to W. E. B. Du Bois, September 19, 1927, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>70</sup> Reed, *Not Alms But Opportunity*, 54.

ambitious to own their own home.”<sup>71</sup> Unable to offer everyone in Harlem a lease, it set out to use its space in other alternative means. It created social services such as a bank and vocational placement services.

W.E.B. Du Bois used his writing as a means to express his sociological findings on the black condition. One particular case study in Philadelphia led him to make certain conclusions on black habits and why this created a particular strain of social and economic conditions. Without the same space constraints as Manhattan, Philadelphia allowed African-Americans more variety in neighborhoods and social separation, though still highly limited. They had a greater access to home ownership than their New York counterparts, but 94% remained renters. Du Bois pinpointed one reason as the “Negroes distrust all saving institutions since the fatal collapse of the Freedmen’s Bank.”<sup>72</sup> The government chartered this bank to aid African-Americans during the post-Civil War period and with its failure access to credit required for investments in home ownership became less accessible. The community needed a bank that did not only have a strong financial backing, but could help overcome the fear of past failures of black oriented financial intuitions.<sup>73</sup> In Harlem, African-Americans had very limited options in terms of banking. Many would not service them and the ones that did often charged unequal interest rates. Almost all, especially in the north, were owned and run by whites so too much distrust to use the banks in the first place existed. Instead many relied on informal means of credit and savings.<sup>74</sup> On a small,

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<sup>71</sup> Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library, “Sketches of New York: The Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments”, New York Public Library Digital Collections, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/a45261f0-6d3d-0133-f8a5-00505686a51c>, 8.

<sup>72</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: a social study* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 184.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Charles Gerena, “Opening the Vault,” *Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond Region Focus* (Spring 2007): [http://www.richmondfed.org/publications/research/region\\_focus/2007/Spring/pdf/economic\\_history.pdf](http://www.richmondfed.org/publications/research/region_focus/2007/Spring/pdf/economic_history.pdf).

individual level this could be enough to scrape by in life, but was not sufficient to get a loan for a house or a line of credit for a business. Dunbar's ownership and role in management was significant to the community. Roscoe Bruce implored Du Bois to give his advice on the details of the project and reminded him the bank should "be designed to build up the Negro business community but its racial significance should not be unduly stressed."<sup>75</sup> Du Bois knew the powerful impact of such an institution and advised Bruce to hire employees not only based on their financial skills. They would also need "a genuine interest in the sound and wholesome development of the Negro business community" and a "wide acquaintance with the people of Harlem".<sup>76</sup> The bank would establish itself under Dunbar, giving it the backing of a Rockefeller, and have the management of local black Harlem residents with a personal interest in the success of the institution. The elite in Philadelphia were unable to aid the masses significantly because the difference in their income was narrow and financial security was not a given.<sup>77</sup> The existence of this bank allowed the general black population of Harlem a means to save their money outside of small financial schemes and gave the black elite the security required to start looking inward at the problems of their own race, the very aim of uplifting the Dunbar project encouraged.

The badly paid and limited work was a hindrance on the moral and economic character of blacks. In Du Bois's study he found the economic situation of the race as the foundation of many of the sociological issues. For example, the difficulty in finding work with a suitable pay led to a delay in marriage which then affected sexual morality in the city. He pointed out that large families with many children, a family makeup that created overcrowding and poverty, came from

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<sup>75</sup> Roscoe Conkling Bruce to W. E. B. Du Bois, May 18, 1928, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>76</sup> Roscoe Conkling Bruce to W. E. B. Du Bois, May 24, 1928, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>77</sup> Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 178.

irregular sexual contact outside of marriage.<sup>78</sup> Another factor was the need for women to enter the workforce, leaving their children unwatched. Without parental guidance, their manners and morals degraded. These children would represent the black race when they grew older so the management wanted to aid in cultivating respectability. In September 1928, Dunbar management announced the Vocational Guidance and Placement Bureau in order to combat the lack of job access. Roscoe Bruce, in conjunction with the Dunbar company, created a free service that set out to orchestrate connecting applicants to suitable jobs. The Civil War brought about high levels of resentment towards blacks living in New York for fear of increased competition in an already competitive job market. After the war, and the end of slavery, a delicate understanding established itself in terms of displacement. This was not a new way to control black mobility or employment, but it occurred at a marked rate during this time. When the economy was at a low or jobs were difficult to come by it was understood white immigrants could displace Afro-Americans from their occupation. If they worked in a field that became prosperous they had no opportunity to economize on their fortune because whites would take these jobs, forcing them down the rung to lower paying options.<sup>79</sup> The notion then that management which used its power to negotiate things such as fair burglary insurance, inflated within black communities, would put their full effort behind finding suitable employers was empowering.<sup>80</sup> The Vocational Placement Service wrote to *The Crisis* explaining their endeavors and emphasized they were looking for “jobs of some educational value with a rising wage.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 166.

<sup>79</sup> Herman D. Bloch, *The Circle of Discrimination* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 34-35.

<sup>80</sup> "Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, Inc.," Circular letter from Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, September 1928, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>81</sup> "Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, Inc.," Dunbar Apartments to *Crisis*, October 17, 1928, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.



While the service was said to have preference for helping Dunbar residents, an application showed they were still open to the greater community. One man, James Crogman Arnold, lived on 75 St. Nicholas Place and was able to submit an application during 1932. This was in the middle of the Great Depression yet they were opening themselves up to helping those outside of the complex. In order to economically uplift there needed to be jobs. Dunbar not only used its space to connect with the neighborhood and employers, but also encouraged respectability.

Dunbar set out to house those without any moral impediments, but their ability to manifest respectability among those who lived within as well as the rest of the neighborhood is not understood until relational space is placed within the analysis. This division of space has to do with its significance as a place of personal and collective memories. The management of Dunbar set out to cultivate a collective memory of the project from both its residents and the community within Harlem. In 1927, before it even opened Bruce wrote to Du Bois asking for advice on the admittance of a family applying. He stressed “that the success of this housing project experiment is momentous not only to Negro Harlem but to the entire city of New York; indeed, it has national implications.”<sup>82</sup> It was already understood that whatever the result of the project, success or failure, it would forge a sentiment toward similar endeavors that would have historically lasting implications. Du Bois wrote to Bruce in 1930, two years after its creation to remark on the precedence set. “To bring five hundred colored families together,” DuBois wrote, “of widely differing backgrounds, most of them unacquainted with each other, and teach them to co-operate in the very simple matters of community living, brings extraordinary problems -- no simply of noise, courtesy, subordination to necessary authority and to rules, which while they may seem arbitrary, are absolutely necessary to health and comfort. I cannot see how anyone

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<sup>82</sup> "Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, Inc.," to W. E. B. Du Bois, September 19, 1927.

who has watched this experiment can fail to be tremendous heartened and encouraged by its measure of success.”<sup>83</sup> Whatever its merits or failures the Dunbar sent a message to the city and the country that blacks were capable of investing themselves in their housing, supporting a community, and taking part in something greater than themselves, as each resident was a shareholder.

Personal memories were just as important to relational space as the collective. Moving into Dunbar was a new experience for most Harlemites. Even those with some money were mainly restricted to poor, rundown housing that mixed the social classes. They likely had landlords who cared little for their welfare and in return the tenant did not feel connected enough to their living space to maintain their already poor surroundings. Du Bois was not immune to such living conditions and complained about the rent parties neighboring apartments threw in his previous residence.<sup>84</sup> Dunbar was brand new and had all of the amenities of a modern apartment. Management was attentive because in a cooperative each tenant was a shareholder, contributing part of their monthly payment to supporting upkeep. If they had any problem, any complaint, all they needed to do was write to management who would quickly look into the situation.

Du Bois understood those services very well because from the very onset with his request of altered apartments to fit his needs he knew how to work within system. He utilized this power often, mainly in the form of complaints about his neighbors or the functionality or noise of the appliances in his own apartment. Two days after the loud machinery complaint his victims were the children blocking the entrance with their play.<sup>85</sup> Less than a week after he called out an

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<sup>83</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois to "Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, Inc.", October 21, 1930, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>84</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois to Theodore H, Parker, August 22, 1928, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>85</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois to "Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, Inc.", May 15, 1928, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

apartment who had a loud party late into the night.<sup>86</sup> He told Bruce he must deter such behavior because “if this kind of disturbance is going to be permitted in the Dunbar Apartments, the enterprise will soon lose the excellent reputation which it has started.”<sup>87</sup> Music for Du Bois was sacred, the “most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.”<sup>88</sup> He wanted Dunbar residents to be moved by music while at church or listening to the radio with their family, not using it as an aid for immoral activities in the middle of the night.<sup>89</sup> This was about the collective memory but also about the personal. If one person got away with such behavior, it would signal its acceptance to all, not just in Dunbar but wherever they found themselves later in life. After two years of complaints Du Bois remarked that he sometimes felt he did complain too much, but “tenants are simply afraid to complain. They are frightened at getting the ill will of their neighbors. I dislike that, too, but at the same time, it seems to me that just complaint under any circumstances is a public duty.”<sup>90</sup> He then went on to disparage the garbage collector. Underneath these snarky comments was a desire to teach his fellow neighbors how to live in the way their station should allow. Within badly run apartment buildings they had no say, but Dunbar was giving them a voice, something they may not know how to use. By criticizing every little thing he aimed to show others not to be afraid for this was part of respectability. This was another memory they would bring with them even after

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<sup>86</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois to "Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, Inc.", May 21, 1928, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>87</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois to "Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, Inc.", May 21, 1928.

<sup>88</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 251.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois to "Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, Inc.", September 6, 1930, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

their departure and be able to teach to others. Du Bois believed black's environments were highly influential for it had the "influence of homes badly situated and badly managed, with parents untrained for their responsibilities; the influence of social surroundings which by poor laws and inefficient administration leave the bad to be made worse; the influence of economic exclusion which admits Negroes only to those parts of the economic world where it is hardest to retain ambition and self-respect."<sup>91</sup> He wanted Dunbar to have a positive influence and he definitely made a mark because he complained to Bruce that after notifying the watchmen of a noisy party in the middle of the night, one of the women remarked, "If Du Bois doesn't like this, why in the hell doesn't he get out of there."<sup>92</sup> His neighbors even learned the power of their own complaints when someone commented on the loud washing machine in his apartment to management. Du Bois did not take it well and threatened to leave Dunbar if asked to stop using the device, but in reality, this was cause for celebration. His lesson came to fruition!<sup>93</sup>

Space is powerful. It is more than a culmination of rooms making up an apartment or the location of a building within a neighborhood. The Dunbar Apartments were significant for the message conveyed in both its absolute, relative, and relational space. It embodied respectability and attempted to actualize itself within the Harlem community. The memories and lessons ingrained within those who resided within and in the general area. They became to embody respectability in a new way and spread the claim of racial equality not only among Harlem, but the entire country.

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<sup>91</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 286.

<sup>92</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois to "Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, Inc.", June 7, 1932, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>93</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois to "Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, Inc.", April 20, 1933, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

### Chapter Three: The Fragility of Respectability

The majority of residents in Harlem could not afford the Dunbar Apartments even during the prosperity of the 1920s, but W.E.B. Du Bois was confident in his ability to pay the rent on an apartment modified for his own personal needs. The frequent complaints of his neighbors slowed down in 1933 because his correspondence with Roscoe Bruce took on a different nature. Du Bois could not afford his rent. It began with late payments in which he requested, against policy, for a reduction of his equity to pay off the debt. The corporation was able to concede to his requests for a time, but by 1935 their patience thinned. Du Bois threatened to move out unless Dunbar reduced his rent, but the directors called his bluff with a curt, "Sorry, we can't do this!"<sup>94</sup> They all but begged Du Bois to take a smaller unit within the apartment building, but where reputation may be all that separates one from the masses he could not concede. The increasingly passive aggressive letters between Du Bois and management would continue.

The theory of both respectability and uplift relied on the outwards appearance of economic prosperity. Without a viable market to support black professionals it would be difficult to separate themselves from the laboring working-class, a distinction important to their self-identity. The Great Depression marked a difficult time for the nation and no less so for Harlem. Without economic prosperity, the foundation of the theory of respectability began to crack. The inability of the Dunbar Apartments to exist in its imagined form and the breakdown of its key

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<sup>94</sup> "Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, Inc.", Roscoe Conkling Bruce to W. E. B. Du Bois, January 7, 1935, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

player's characters revealed how reliant black class identity was with its symbolic spaces and characterizations.

This chapter is broken down into four sections, all categories highly reliant on the theories of respectability and uplift. It will start with the Urban League as this theory is the foundation of its action and then go into the Dunbar Apartments. The next two sections will focus on Du Bois and Bruce.

### The Urban League

The uplift movement quickly transformed from eradicating social issues of poverty to survival. There was little room for questions of morality when families, of both races, starved on the streets. A two-part movement began in which the League provided the basic services of relief such as food and shelter, as well as a more forceful movement to provide vocational aid. Less than six months after the start of the Great Depression 330,000 black wage owners were out of a job. On average cities faced a drop of 34.5% available jobs, Manhattan specifically 21.3%.<sup>95</sup> The national economic stress highlighted the precariousness of the Urban League's advancements because "violent competition between white and black workers comes to the front in times like these to prove the weakness of an industrial system that pushes one group forward at the expense of another."<sup>96</sup> Even if the image of blacks by society advanced beyond poverty stricken criminals the white race would always be priority. The programs put in place benefited the upper-class and their desire to integrate into white society. The League failed to address the underlying issues so

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<sup>95</sup> Guichard Parris and Lester Brooks, *Blacks in the city; a history of the National Urban League* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), 215.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

under societal and economic pressure their program was reduced to desperate acts of charity. Under the test of economic strain their efforts on economic advancement for the general working class revealed itself to be superficial.

### Dunbar Apartments

The apartment complex used space to connect not only with its residents but the community within Harlem. When it served as a symbol of respectability and infused both economic and social programs into the neighborhood this was a positive force. In the first couple years of the Depression it unified, continuing to improve both the lives of its tenants and others who took part in its organizations. The Dunbar National Bank, managed and run by African-Americans, remained open, a sign that Harlem could make it through such a trying period.<sup>97</sup> The shift began when the economic situation of the tenants became ever more precarious, a dangerous situation for Dunbar for at its foundation it was a housing cooperative that relied on the monthly payments to pay off the mortgage on itself and employ the directors. The shifting goals and eventual demise of the housing cooperative would redefine how this space, or lack of, interacted and influenced Harlem.

The Vocational Guidance and Placement Bureau originated to facilitate respectability within Dunbar residents by finding them suitable jobs for their skill levels as well, on a lesser basis, to facilitate uplift for Harlemites. With the Depression, a readjustment in the social agenda was paramount. Even labor positions previously dominated by African Americans were offset by white competition.<sup>98</sup> The Urban League trained the community in skills best suited to finding a

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<sup>97</sup> Bruce to Du Bois, May 19, 1928.

<sup>98</sup> Bloch, *Circle of Discrimination*, 34-35.

position, regardless of their previous skill set. The Dunbar Apartments became “an emergency center for industrial arts training,” as the League, “provided classes in cooking, cleaning, and decorating, as well as courses on management, maintenance, and supervision of buildings. In return for the cheap labor the students provided for the Harlem apartment complex, the League certified those who managed to complete its courses as ‘good industrial risks’.”<sup>99</sup> The skilled working class found they could no longer find positions as the better jobs went to their white counterparts. Domestic service was previously below their perceived intelligence, but this was the new reality both the workers and Urban League found themselves accepting. As a result, the organization used its power to improve the quality of housework. They never attempted to address such issues before the Depression, but in their typical desire to maintain class structures they wanted the upper working-class and middle-class to feel more comfortable in their transitions. The very existence of the training classes gave these ousted workers an outlet so they would not become under stimulated by the demeaning position they found themselves in. In this way, the vocational services no longer represented upward mobility, but complacency. Through Dunbar, the Urban League revealed to Harlem it would only engage its resources to most benefit the upper classes and would no longer focus its attention on combating job discrimination. Instead of fighting to keep black workers in better paying industrial work they compromised by improving lower status jobs. This conflicted with Dunbar's previous image of economic hope as it attempted to fight for better positions, utilizing its influence to force white employers to hire qualified black applicants.<sup>100</sup>

The first outward signs of economic sufferings by Dunbar residents came in 1932, but throughout the Depression the housing cooperative would continue to make concessions in order

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<sup>99</sup> Reed, *Not Alms But Opportunity*, 75.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*



to support its survival. In 1932, the co-op proposed a temporary plan to reduce monthly payments for certain residents. It was only supposed to be in place for a year, but it extended to 1934. The consensus by the building directors to take into account the pressing economic circumstances of even its most prominent residents emanated out of individual letters begging for relief.<sup>101</sup> The Depression did not lift in the coming years and residents fared worse. The corporation needed to pay off its mortgage and employees. While it attempted to delay the inevitable, John D. Rockefeller filed for foreclosure in 1936 with a \$2,000,000 default in payments.<sup>102</sup> He then went on to buy it back for the price of \$1,857,000, making him the owner of the complex, ending the housing cooperative he helped start.<sup>103</sup> The residents of Dunbar felt safe in Rockefeller's hands as he originally invested in the project and was highly regarded for his sacrifice of profit in order to keep the building, and those living within, from financial ruin. Rockefeller lasted about a year before he sold Dunbar to a private company named 320 East Seventy-Third Street Corporation."<sup>104</sup> The building complex was better designed and relatively newer than the typical Harlem housing, but with its hand off to a private corporation there was not much else separating it from the rest of the neighborhood.

The end of the Dunbar Apartments as a co-op was significant to its residents and black Harlem. Rockefeller decided to start the project because "he felt that housing facilities for Negroes were inadequate and that if it could be demonstrated that it was a good investment for capital to build houses for Negroes, other persons of wealth might follow his example."<sup>105</sup>

Harlem had such rundown housing in the first place because white businesses and investors did

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<sup>101</sup> "Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, Inc.", Circular Letter, August 15, 1934, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>102</sup> "DUNBAR APTS. HIT," *The New York Amsterdam News*, October 10, 1936.

<sup>103</sup> "Rockefeller Jr. Buys Back His Harlem Project," *New York Herald Tribune*, November 28, 1936.

<sup>104</sup> "APARTMENT SOLD BY ROCKEFELLER," *New York Times*, November 02, 1937.

<sup>105</sup> "GIVES REASONS FOR DUNBAR BANK CLOSE," *Atlanta Daily World*, May 09, 1938.

not want to put money into a neighborhood associated with crime and poverty.<sup>106</sup> Dunbar set out to fight against those misconceptions by showing that blacks could not only submit to long-term payments, but could prosper under the right circumstances. If not for the Depression it cannot be said either way if such an expenditure could last long-term, but the limited economic opportunities available to the residents so shortly after the opening of the complex did not promote a high chance of survival. When Roscoe Bruce inquired into finding the right people for the building he would always repeat “that the success of this housing experiment is momentous not only to Negro Harlem but to the entire city of New York; indeed, it has national implications.”<sup>107</sup> Its failure only a decade later after it opened its doors would send a strong message to the community and highlighted the cracks in the foundation that made for such an easy breakdown at the first threat of instability.

The Urban League originally conceived the Dunbar Apartments as housing for working class families, offering uninflated prices and management hired for the sole purpose of maintaining the needs of its residents. This never came to fruition, instead becoming a symbol for middle-class respectability that the lower classes could only admire and aspire towards.<sup>108</sup> The building was too well built, hiking the deposit and monthly payments too high for none but the wealthiest in the neighborhood. The 50,000 other families in Harlem who could not afford to live anywhere other than their overpriced and decaying apartments were offered nothing more than symbolic space. If the Urban League truly wanted to improve the conditions within Harlem they could have used the same amount of money to provide housing of a simpler quality,

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<sup>106</sup> Reed, *Not Alms But Opportunity*, 29.

<sup>107</sup> Dunbar to Du Bois, September 19, 1927.

<sup>108</sup> Reed, *Not Alms But Opportunity*, 54.

allowing for more apartments to be made and the working class to actually afford payments.<sup>109</sup> Space with so many nuances was important to prop up the morale of the community and attempt to provide evidence to others that Harlem was a safe place to invest money, but when not even black professionals can afford to live within the apartments than any good it did would forever be overshadowed by its shortcomings.

The National Dunbar Bank closed May 31st, 1938, about six months after Rockefeller sold off the Dunbar Apartments to a private corporation. The reasoning given was straightforward, the bank held a total of \$3,200,000 in deposits and in order to remain profitable there needed to be \$5,000,000. Without proper financing or the backing from Rockefeller, who withdrew his support shortly after giving up Dunbar, its continuation was not feasible. This was not the only bank within Harlem, but it was created by blacks, run by blacks, and supported the black population. The bank employed 35 people and only 6 were white. Another move by the Urban League to support respectability as it trained a black professional class of bankers, providing jobs where others traditionally barred African-Americans.<sup>110</sup> The lack of deposits were a combination of both the limited economic situations of most of Harlem's residents in combination with the avoidance of more prosperous members of the upper-class who preferred to entrust the majority of their money with white banks. Downtown banks moved branches into Harlem and business owners trusted their money within these more established institutions than Dunbar which relied on the support of the working-class who could only maintain small accounts.<sup>111</sup> The bank served as the ultimate symbol of respectability, but the Great Depression

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<sup>109</sup> Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem, the making of a ghetto Negro New York, 1890-1930* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 157-158.

<sup>110</sup> "Dunbar Bank Will Continue To Operate," *Philadelphia Tribune*, April 28, 1938.

<sup>111</sup> "GIVES REASONS FOR DUNBAR," May 09, 1938.

revealed the upper-class limited their investment in the institution. Its closure was significant, not because Harlemites had nowhere else to do their banking, but because “if the Rockefeller millions could not make an enterprise go in Harlem, the trouble must have been tested before it was acknowledged that the bank had to be liquidated.”<sup>112</sup> This was run by a majority black staff and its inability to maintain adequate funds or attract even their own race represented to both Harlem and New York City they did not have the skills or fortitude for such difficult projects. Instead of uplifting the community it helped bring out the cracks of the ideology governing class interactions. This space symbolized all of the distrust and inadequacies between black professionals and the masses they failed to meaningfully impact.

### W.E.B. Du Bois

His financial troubles were evident to the Dunbar directors in 1933 when it became difficult for him to make his monthly payments. Against the policies of the co-op they allowed him to use equity to pay his backlogged fees, but it turned out to be a temporary solution. By 1935 he wanted, and needed, a reduction in how much he paid each month, going so far as to threaten to leave for he believed he could find a similar sized apartment in Harlem for a cheaper price.<sup>113</sup> Du Bois’s demands about the space he resided within emphasized the fragility of respectability and desire to keep distinction from the lower, working classes.

Du Bois was a respected member of the black community and regardless of their ideological differences, Bruce highly regarded his tenant. For Du Bois to abandon Dunbar

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<sup>112</sup> "TRIPLE TRAGEDY SEEN IN THE FAILURE OF DUNBAR NATIONAL BANK: NOISE AND GLAMUR STILL THERE---BUT HARLEM MERELY SHADOW," *Philadelphia Tribune*, June 09, 1938.

<sup>113</sup> W.E.B Du Bois to Dunbar Apartments, January 2, 1935, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

Apartments during the Great Depression would be a symbolic failure as this was their most elite resident and if he fell to economic failures than the upper-class became no different from the struggling masses. Bruce, and the directors appeared desperate to keep Du Bois within the housing complex. As long as economically feasible they adjusted to his every demand. When it became evident he could no longer afford his large apartment, Bruce tried to find an alternative solution:

We are so anxious for your family group to remain here at the Dunbar that I am wondering whether they could get along with five rooms instead of nine, you authorizing us to re-sell the stock and relet the 4-room apartment. I believe that we could do this rather quickly.<sup>114</sup>

The advice appeared sound, Du Bois would remain within Dunbar allowing the co-op the credibility of having a prominent member of black society and he could keep some dignity by only appearing to downgrade after his eldest children left. He still insisted that he would leave for more suitable housing within Harlem.<sup>115</sup> Management became almost desperate in their desire to keep him. When Du Bois moved into the building he combined two apartments to suit his needs and agreed if he moved out to pay for renovations to separate them once again. Management made it impossible for Du Bois to leave because they could not settle on the price of construction. They spent months arguing over the difference of \$100, Du Bois insisting the directors overcharged him and the directors insisting that if he wants to leave he has no other choice but to pay up.<sup>116</sup> After searching for new housing Du Bois realized there was nothing he

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<sup>114</sup> Dunbar Apartments to W.E.B Du Bois, January 7, 1935, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>115</sup> W.E.B Du Bois to Dunbar Apartments, March 11, 1935, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>116</sup> Roger Flood to Roscoe Conkling Bruce, February 18, 1935, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

could rent. Only then was there a consensus that he would move into a smaller apartment on a different floor. After an agreement to sign the lease on this apartment the issue with the renovations resolved itself.<sup>117</sup>

The insistence of maintaining an image of financial security and refusal to mix with the masses in unsuitable housing reflected an insecurity in his class. His status within Dunbar was a symbol to both his colleagues and the lower classes who, whatever their personal feelings toward his character, knew him to represent a respectable black professional. The years he spent arguing financial issues showed how important it was to use housing as a symbol to prop his credibility. The Great Depression made the elite cling to their emblems of class more so than during the 1920s because for many it was all they had. Professionals suffered alongside the working class, making it just as easy for both to end up homeless on the streets together, a terrifying prospect when one's ideology was built around defining class in relation to economic differences.

### Roscoe Conkling Bruce

If Du Bois's struggles during the Depression represented how important economic distinctions were to maintaining black classes, Bruce's story represents the extent of white influence on respectability. When Bruce went through the ordeal in Washington D.C., he came out relatively unscathed because he had the backing of not only the black elites, but the whites as well, in the form of the Board.

Roscoe Bruce was brought in to manage the co-op, but under private ownership his position no longer existed. Rockefeller dismissed Bruce shortly after buying the Dunbar

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<sup>117</sup> W.E.B Du Bois to Dunbar Apartments, September 16, 1935, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

Apartments. Unlike in Washington D.C., he did not leave as part of a scandal. He had prospects within private companies after his years in charge of the complex, but a couple months later he became involved in another scandal. This time it was his son, Roscoe C. Bruce, Jr. who was “arrested and later convicted of complicity in a fake hold-up that netted \$2,000. He was at the time manager of the Richard B. Harrison apartments in Newark, N.J., victim of the hold-up.”<sup>118</sup>

This was a stigma that the entire family would bear. Reputation was everything especially during the Depression when limited economic backing behind class existed. To be associated with a family member who was not just a criminal, but involved himself in stealing money during such a delicate time period was damning. Bruce could not find work and when he sought help from his white friends they turned their back. Without a reputable character and in possession of limited funds he was no different than the poor, black criminals the uplift movement fought to eradicate. His wife, black and a woman, would find it impossible to get hired as a lawyer. The Bruce family ended up living on welfare. Bruce went from the only son of the most important black family dynasty in the country to one of the masses whom he openly disgusted. Respectability was flimsy even to those born into elite families and the pressures of Depression could easily break the boundaries between the classes.

The difficulties the Dunbar Apartments faced during the Great Depression served a symbol for the overall struggles that defined the black class system. The Urban League was created under the guise of improving the lives of the working class, but the weakness of their stance was evident in the breakdown of their programs under economic pressure. In reality they relied on and supported a professional elite over the real needs of the masses. The issues with

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<sup>118</sup> "Roscoe C. Bruce Exonerated," *Afro-American* (Baltimore), April 5, 1941.

their ideology of respectability and uplift would become evident as the Depression moved to put both the educated and working class on a similar economic playing field.



## Conclusion

The richest and most prominent of the black elite could not compete even with the white middle-class because they relied on different systems of status. White society was not restricted in their ambitions, the upper class depicting their wealth with large summer homes and lavish dinner parties. The highly-restricted mobility of black society did not afford their elite the same outward representation of their status. Instead they traded in symbols. Without the ability to accumulate enough wealth to provide security, they established respectability as a distinguishing factor of their class. A beautiful car could portray the wealth of the white millionaire, but it was more difficult to find physical manifestations for the black elite. This thesis sought to examine how the Dunbar Apartments created a suitable space to fortify the legitimacy of a black upper class and practice the theory of respectability.

Respectability was delicate and as Bruce proved easily destroyed. It created a false sense of safety that crumbled when the Great Depression narrowed the gap between the economic situation of the professionals and the working class. Without a fundamental change in African American's situation such as the retraction of legal segregation the reliance on character to create an economic class had severe limitations. This does not mean it was unimportant in its application because it gave blacks a foundation to create an identity contrasted against white's generalization of their race as criminals. The Dunbar Apartments gave them a vehicle to engage in social reform, an attempt to uplift their race. During a time with such limited resources for them to protest against discrimination, Dunbar, backed by a Rockefeller, made it impossible to ignore the diversity among African-Americans and their capability to function in white society.

The Dunbar Apartments still stand within Harlem, only a couple minutes away from the terminal station for the 3 line. No longer is it a symbol of black respectability within the collective memory of Harlem because the condition of African-Americans is no longer artificially tied to symbolic representations of class. The concepts that made it experimental in the 1920s are lost today. Affordable housing, these actually advertised to the working-class, became formalized under the government which had the resources to spread the concept around the city. The need for a separate space for the black elite became outdated with the removal of legal segregation and discrimination. At least one bank is on every corner, if not more. The Dunbar Apartments were lost in history, but this thesis sets to bring it back into the conversation of black class identity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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