

[Cocktail Party]

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NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Dorothy West

ADDRESS 131 W. 110th St. New York City

DATE Jan. 10, 1939

SUBJECT COCKTAIL PARTY: PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

1. Date and time of interview

Jan. 1, 1939

2. Place of interview

3. Name and address of informant By staff-writer

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Dorothy West

ADDRESS 131 W. 110th St. New York City

DATE Jan. 10, 1939

SUBJECT COCKTAIL PARTY: PERSONAL EXPERIENCE HARLEM HOSTESS.

(Prohibition vintage)

The party was on the fifth floor, but even as we entered the lower hall, we could hear the shouts and laughter. It was a successful party then, for, judging by the volume of voices, the four-room flat was packed. That meant that all invitations had been accepted.

The elevator bore us up and let us out. Our smiling hostess stood in her open door. Behind her was a surge of vari-colored faces, the warm white of fair Negroes, the pale white of whites, through yellows and browns to rusty black.

We brushed cheeks with our hostess, and our mutual coos of endearment fell on the already false air. We entered the smoke-thickened room, brushed cheeks with a few more people, shook hands with some others, and followed our hostess into the bedroom.

A visiting Fisk professor, already bored with the party, had got his length somehow into a boudoir chair and sat pulling on his pipe. He could not leave because he had come with his wife, who would not leave until all the important people had come. Gloomily he uncoiled himself when we entered and, 2 after greetings, assured his hostess in sepulchral tones that he was perfectly happy.

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We laid our coats as carefully as we could on the pile of wraps on the bed. Our hostess fingered a soft brown fur. "Mink," she sighed. "Real Mink." She blew on it for our inspection, then rubbed a fold of it over her rump. "The closest I'll ever get to it, I guess."

She was on the city payroll, had graduated from a first-class Negro College, belonged to a good sorority, had married respectably, and was now entrenching herself in New York Negro Society. There had been one or two flamboyant indiscretions in her past, and so every once in awhile, to assure herself and her home town that she had lived them down, she entertained at a lavish party. She was not yet sufficiently secure to give a small affair. And of all the people lapping up her liquor, hardly one would have come to an intimate dinner. As yet it was necessary for her to give large, publicized affairs. so that everyone felt bound to come out of fear that it might be thought he was not invited.

As we returned to the main room, a woman in cap and apron shuffled up, inexpertly balancing a tray of cocktails. We had not known that our hostess had a maid. Yet the woman's harassed dark face was familiar. We remembered that once before, while we visited with our hostess, there had been a ring at the doorm a voice had called that it was the janitor's wife with a package, and presently this woman's face had appeared.

Our hostess found places for us on the already populated divan. We sat among acquaintances, balancing our drinks. To our left were a public school teacher, two Department of Welfare investigators, two writers, one left left and one right, a "Y" worker, a white first-string movie critic, a white artist and his wife. To our right were two Negro government officials, two librarians, a judge's daughter, a student-red-cap, a Communist organizer, an artist, an actress. There were others. In this room and in the inner room were crowded fully sixty in-coming and out-going people. [??]

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With the exception of the Communist organizer, all of the Negroes were members of Harlem society. Some of their backgrounds began with their marriages or their

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professions. One or two were the unimportant offspring of earnest men who had carved small niches in the hall of fame. Two or three were as celebrated as heir their fathers. Some of them were well-to-do, most particularly where both bushband and wife held well paid jobs. Others had fallen on lean times, but family connections and Home Relief kept them in circulation.

The women in general were light-colored, one of the phenomena of Negro society. Their dress was smart, their make-up skillful. The men were varying colors and soberly dressed. Our hostess had no reputation as a conversationist, and our host, of better reputation where social talk was concerned, was already in his cups. There was no attempt by either to marshal their guests into interesting groups. The crowd was too unwieldy, and our hostess had only probed beneath the surface of a half-dozen men who thought her pretty. She could only dump a newcomer into whatever space was available, and introduce him to the nearest of the sitters. Whereupon the ensuing conversation was either polite or flirtatious, depending upon sex and preference. When a friend found a friend's face in the crowd, navigation was too difficult, and the greetings was confined to a shouted, "How are you?"

We listened to line conversation around us. A tall unattractive girl on our right had assumed an affected pose. She languished on the divan and blew puffs of smoke through a cigarette holder. Her large foot pivoted on its ankle. She surveyed it dreamily. Her father was a man of importance, and although she had neither beauty nor charm, she had constituted herself the year's number one Negro debutante.

The young [leftist?] writer was talking to her around our backs. He had brought her to the party. Generally one of the artist group squired her. They were indifferent to her lack of prettiness and liked her father's liquor. She boasted of her escorts to her sorors who expressed no envy. They were quite 4 content with their younger beaux who were marrying men.

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The writer said, "Will you serve as a sponsor for the dinner then? Your name will look good on the stationery. I can come up tomorrow and go over a guest list with you."

She smiled at the toe that protruded through the space in her shoe for its protuberance.

"I've two other dinners that week, you know. Three will give me such a crowded calendar. But for you —, and your guest of honor is quite celebrated, isn't he?"

"Very," he said enthusiastically. "He's been in the papers and a lot. The critics rave about him. I'm going to read his book as soon as he gives me the copy he promised me."

"I'll expect you tomorrow night," she said, "Come at dinner time. Father will want you to sample his latest concoction. Keep the rest of the evening free, will you? My sorority is - ah - having a dance at the Renaissance. There's no tax, Maybe you'd like to look in."

"I'd love to," he exclaimed, " but I can't! I've a meeting at nine, important. Anyway," he added helpfully, "I haven't got a tux."

Her eyes returned to her toe, but this time they were sorrowful.

Cocktails, little sausages on toothpicks, black and green olives, cheeses with crisp little crackers, two-inch sandwiches, went in continuous file around the room. Our hostess had a fine array of liquor with impressive labels on the improvised bar. Once she had recommended her bootlegger to us, but we had stopped his visits when we found his labels were often not yet dry and no two like bottles had similar tastes. Since most of the people were connoisseurs no more than we were, they [eagerly?] drank the badly cut liquor and got high.

The actress, from a chair-backed hassock, surveyed the room with 5 disdain. She was playing in a downtown hit! Her hair went up and her nose turned up, and even her lips was slightly curled. She was light-skinned and lovely and remote as a queen among her

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subjects. Ten years ago she had been a gamin and her accent had been Harlem. Now offstage she was indistinguishable from a throaty Englishman.

We bent to flick our ashes in the tray she was holding in a graceful hand, our mouths open for a pretty compliment. She withdrew her hand in horror and we let our ashes fall on the floor. Her eyes asked us elegantly, "Have we met?"

The white movie critic started toward her, the white artist's wife on his arm. The actress smiled and smiled.

The woman said, "My husband and I saw your show last night. We thought you were marvelous."

"How kind!" said the actress.

"My paper gave you quite a plug," said the movie critic proudly.

The actress smiled and smiled again. All of them beamed at each other.

"I'm so-o-o sorry," the actress murmured, "that we haven't been introduced. May I have the pleasure of your acquaintance?"

The movie critic told her his name and introduced the artist's wife. In a moment they were as chatty as old friends.

We had come at a late hour, and when it was an hour past the scheduled time for the party's end, the crowd gradually began to thin. Our hostess's hair-up had drifted down and her trailing gown had been trampled on. She struck a graceful pose at the door, and her meticulous phrases sped each departing guest.

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We had not seen our hostess in several months. She urged us to stay for a little chat. When the last guest had gone, she dispatched her husband and the janitor's wife with borrowed chairs and hassocks and end tables and ashtrays to various flats in the house.

She sat down, shook her shoes off, and pulled the rest of her hair down. She lifted her arms and wrinkled her nose.

"I put four on the card, 'cause I know colored folks, and I knew they'd start coming around six. I didn't even plan to take my bath until five. I start sweating so quick. And then at four sharp here come two white folks. I forgot they don't keep c. p. time. Well, I jumped into this, and did my hair and face, and I know they thought my party was a flop, because nobody else came until around five, and they left before six."

We said it was the best attended party we'd been to in a long time.

She fanned herself under the arms.

"It was kinda nice, wasn't it?" she agreed. Then she chuckled softly. "You notice how Doctor Brown's wife kept looking at me? She knows he likes me. She only came to keep her eye on him. She'd have to go some to keep her eye on me! You notice that good-looking chap with his wife, one wore the sleazy green dress?" She smiled meaningfully. "Well, she's just up for the holidays, but he's here for the winter."

The janitor's wife came back. She was frankly dragging now. Her cap was at a comic angle, but she did not look funny. She stood respectfully before our hostess. I could see that one of her shoe-laces was black and the other was white, ink-stained black.

"I'll see you [saturday?]," said our hostess to her cheerfully, though this was Sunday. "That all right? I won't have a penny until then. Pouring liquor down all these darkies cost a lot. They'll talk about you if your drinks are scarce. Saturday noon, I'll see you, Flora."

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The woman covered her embarrassment with a painful smile. "That's all right," she said.

She turned to go. When she reached the door, our hostess jumped up suddenly, called to her to wait, rummage in her bathroom, returned and thrust some silk pieces in the woman's hands.

"Will you do these for me, Flora? I'll pick them up Saturday when I pay you."

When the door shut behind Flora, our hostess came back and said triumphantly, "I'll give her a few cents extra, and I'll save a dollar's washing. We're going to two affairs this week, and that dollar'll mean taxi fare. I hate to come home late at night in a subway with a lot of funny looking derelicts."

We said we hadn't been anywhere in weeks and hoped that she'd have a good time.

Our hostess said we ought to get out more, and she tried to interest us in the affairs she was planning to attend. One was for Spain, the other for China, both causes worth supporting. She spoke with feeling of the pogroms in German Germany . It was obvious that she kept abreast of the international situation.

We asked her what she thought of the Gaines decision.

She said she hadn't seen any reference to it in her paper, and she read the paper daily.

We said it had been given front page space in the Negro weeklies for the past two weeks.

She laughed and answered that she only read the society pages of the Negro papers because of their poor journalism. The society reporters were no better, but at least you kept up with what the darkies were doing. As an afterthought she asked us what the Gaines decision was.

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We explained that it was a Supreme Court Decision whereby a [southern?] state must either admit a Negro student to its university or build a university of 8 equal standards for him.

She laughed and said she hoped they'd build one. She was tired of her present job and she was a qualified teacher. She'd like to go South a teach a group of good-looking male students.

Her husband returned. It was obvious that he had had another drink or two in somebody's flat. It had made him hungry.

"Any food, female?" he addressed his wife. "None of these scraps." He surveyed with distaste the dainty sandwiches. "Got any greens left?"

"Greens and spare ribs, have some with us?" she asked.

We thanked her but said we really should go.

Her husband looked at us a little belligerently. He was born in the South, and he said that he yearned for it, but he never got any farther than his government job in Washington even on holidays.

"You don't like colored folks cooking?" he asked.

We said that we loved greens and spare ribs and named all the other [southern?] dishes and said that we loved them, too.

He smiled at us paternally and said that he wished we were all down South, celebrating the New Year right, with black-eyed peas and hoghead.

"My mother," he reminisced happily, "would turn her house inside out for my friends. You folks up North got a lot to learn about hospitality. You all buy a quart of gin, a box of

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crackers, and a bottle of olives, and throw a couple of white folks in, and call it a cocktail party.”

Our hostess stood in her stocking feet and drew herself up grandly. “You're drunk,” she said coldly. “Go and eat.”

Gravely he bade us goodnight and walked away with unsteady dignity.

Our hostess went to the door with us in her stocking feet. Again we thanked her for a lovely party.

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She surveyed her tumbled rooms complacently.

“I'll clean up and take a bath, and turn on the radio and do my paper. I'm speaking Wednesday at the Young Matrons' meeting. I'm going to talk on the evil of anti-Semitism. There is some anti-Semitism in Harlem which should be scorched at the start. How you like that for a subject?”

We told her we didn't think there was any anti-Semitism in Harlem as such. There was only the poor man's resentment of exploitation by the rich. It was incidental that in this particular instance that one was black and one was Jewish. Black workers and Jewish workers did not hate each other.

“Maybe,” she said brightly. “But I still think it's a good topic for a paper. Last month some dumb cluck read a paper on child care. Who can afford to have a child now anyway? I want to give 'em a paper on something current.”

We urged her to go and put her shoes on before she caught cold. We brushed cheeks all around.

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When we got back home, we wondered as usual why we had gone to a cocktail party.