

# Gathering up the Social Nightlife Columns in the African-American Press

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Article abstract

In the 1920s, the modern “nightlife” column emerged as a regular feature of metropolitan newspapers in the United States and other countries. This article looks at nightlife columns in the African-American press. Its central focus is the coverage of the urban night in the *Inter-State Tattler*, a weekly periodical published in Harlem between 1922 and 1932. It suggests that, in the African-American press more generally, during this period, one sees the emergence of many of the varieties of the nightlife column. This emergence is particularly evident in the writing of the journalist Geraldyn Dismond, whose writing is a central focus of the article.

## GATHERING UP THE SOCIAL

### *Nightlife Columns in the African-American Press*

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This article examines a selection of nightlife columns published in the African-American press from the early 1920s through the late 1940s.<sup>1</sup> The *Inter-State Tattler*, a Harlem-based weekly periodical, is a central focus of this article, in part because of its importance in offering multiple variations of the nightlife column during a period in which the enduring characteristics of the genre were being defined. Our examination of the *Inter-State Tattler* will enable us, as well, to reconstruct a key period in the career of Geraldyn Dismond, who served as the periodical's Managing Editor from 1927 to 1932 and was the author (often pseudonymously) of many of its key examples of nightlife journalism. Dismond, we suggest, was a key figure in the development of journalistic forms and styles for covering the night life of cities. More broadly, it will be argued, the African-American press of the 1920s and 1930s offers an understudied corpus in which journalistic treatments of the urban night became the focus of rich experimentation and innovation.

#### From "society" to nightlife

In the June 28, 1929 issue of the *The Inter-State Tattler* – a periodical aimed at an African-American readership across the northeast of the United States – two journalistic genres dealing wholly or in part with the sociability of the urban night are represented. One of these, the column of social news, had long been a staple of newspapers serving racialized communities or small towns. The other, the nightlife column, had only

1. Our examination of these newspapers is based on consultation of on-line repositories of key African-American newspapers held by the Library of Congress as part of its "Chronicling America" initiative, by the ProQuest Historical African-American Newspapers, and by the Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

recently emerged as a coherent and popular form. On page three of this issue, “Social Snapshot” by Geraldyn Dismond carried out the mission of documenting formal occasions within the lives of African-American social and professional elites:

On Saturday evening, the popular Rosey L Swain entertained once again. This time in honor of Marion Thomson, a member of the Howard faculty, and Selma White, a Junior at Howard. Some of the guests played bridge and others danced and then the charming little hostess served delicious salad, sandwiches, cake and plenty of cool, refreshing punch. [...]

Viola Thomas and Lydia McClain entertained the C. Hardings of Chicago, on June 18th, with a surprise birthday party for Mrs. Harding. Among the guests present were: the Kirtos, A. Clarks, Sue Still, Joe Butler, Julia R. Hayes and Alverta Gould of Philadelphia; Ever H. Carrington, Edith Johnson, William D. Heard, Adolph Dobson, Pauline Fisher Wright, Mr. and Mrs. Stancell, J. M. Anderson, Irving Benjamin, George W. Henderson, Doctor R. Foster and Benjamin Green (Dismond 1929).

In an analysis of African-American newspapers in the pre-Civil War period, Erica L. Ball shows how reports on community gatherings in Black communities were judged by readers according to the degree to which they resisted gossip and frivolous commentary (Ball 2014: 101-121). The flatness of tone which followed from this resistance would continue to mark social columns in African-American newspapers well into the twentieth century. Dismond’s “Social Snapshots” ventures into polite praise of the refreshments served at Rosey L. Swain’s social function, but otherwise resists any temptation to engage in judgment or commentary. The principal measure of a social column, it seems, was the extent to which its lists of names were complete and accurate.

We may contrast this rather old-fashioned social reporting with a feature appearing several pages later in the same issue. Here, a journalist calling herself “Lady Nicotine,” in an addendum to the column “Harlem Night-Life” (which itself was unsigned), offers the following description of late-night festivities in Harlem:

We walked around the corner to Pod’s and Jerry’s. What a mob! We got the last table. And the whoopee was grand. Mary Strange is the berries and the gentleman at the piano is the K. O. with me. In the crush were: Teddy Brown, Edna Ellington, Ruth Wells, Gilbert Holland, Hazel Hughes, Puss Saunders, Gomez Whitfield, Oscar Hammerstein, Bertha Lambert, Amy Brown, Arthur Norris, Rupert Marks, George Woods,

Frank Hailstock, Alice Jackson and her lovely niece, Harriet Calloway, the star of the second Blackbird Company. And a zillion I knew not.

It was five before the hot chocolate was out of our blood and we remembered that Alberta had a rehearsal at two; Eunice, a class at nine; and I, a review to write (“Lady Nicotine” 1929).

In our first example (“Social Snapshots”), the list of people attending social gatherings or receiving guests is presented with few markers of historical period or linguistic fashion. (Only the indications of marital status of the women mentioned reveal the column as clearly from a distant past.) In Lady Nicotine’s report, in contrast, the text moves with seeming ease to weave vernacular and slang between its own list of names. Some of this slang is now antiquated but broadly remembered, like the exclamatory “whoopee”; other examples – like “the berries” (a term of the 1920s describing someone with positive qualities) – have long faded from use. These terms mark the text with the linguistic creativity and invention of a specific historical moment. They join with other aspects of the paragraph – the author’s expressions of pleasure, for example – to convey the energy and effervescence of urban night-time sociability. A simple list of participants at a night-time gathering is transformed into a “scene,” a tableau of intimate festivity. These names are absorbed within a narrative of sociability in motion, an account of the search for amusement in the late-night city. In its closing moments, the column reflects on the reporter’s own arrival at the end of the night, stimulated by chocolate and weighed down by the responsibility of writing a review.

In fact, both “Social Snapshots” and the addendum to “Harlem Night-life” had been written by the same person – Geraldyn Dismond, a journalist who, by this time, was widely respected as a chronicler of social life among African-American elites.<sup>2</sup> Also known professionally as “Gerri Major” (the name given to her as an adopted child) and “Mrs. H. Bingham Dismond,” (a legacy of her first marriage, which lasted from 1917 to 1933), Dismond wrote society and nightlife columns between the early 1920s and late 1940s for many of the key African-American newspapers, before accepting permanent editorial employment in the New York offices of the Chicago-based magazines *Ebony* and *Jet*.

While her “Social Snapshots” was one of the most long-lasting of features in *The Inter-State Tattler*, Dismond used the name “Lady Nicotine”

2. Dismond’s 1976 book, *Black Society*, signed by Gerri Major, the name to which she returned later in her career, is a history of middle-class African-Americans achievement and the social networks which sustained it (Major 1976).

to sign the stories of nightlife meanderings and gossipy discoveries with which she filled a column titled “Between Puffs.” The tone and focus of “Between Puffs” capture Dismond as both observer of others and chronicler of her own immersion in Harlem nightlife, as in this example from the February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1932 issue:

The popularity of Clarence Robinson and Marjorie Sipp was proven beyond a doubt Friday night by the crowds that milled about in Yeah Man to welcome him back to the Avenue. You really couldn’t stir them with a spoon – not that anybody felt like trying it. What with being alternately soothed by Miss Sipp’s sweet notes and stimulated by this and that, it was a great evening (“Lady Nicotine” 1932).

While, in the social column, names are the key journalistic currency, arranged to stand out against the most minimal of connective language, in the nightlife column names recede behind the evocation of situation and atmosphere. Names become tokens of moments spent in the broader flow of night-time experience.

### The *Inter-State Tattler*

Although the layout and organization of *Inter-State Tattler* resembled those of a magazine, the periodical was originally published in the large, broadsheet format of newspapers.<sup>3</sup> The publication had been launched in 1922 as *Hotel Tattler*, apparently seeking a readership among African-Americans who worked in the hotel industry, though its reach was much larger. After briefly changing its name to *The Tattler*, in 1924, the periodical re-emerged in 1925 as *The Inter-State Tattler*, its new title suggesting something of the mobility of people, culture and ideas within African-American life. From 1924 onwards, its cover logo showed radio waves sending signals to cities across the United States (Figure 1), offering an image of intermedial connection which set the magazine within busy networks for the circulation of information and sensation.

In its earliest years, the *Hotel Tattler* had been dominated by social columns of the sort exemplified by Geraldyn Dismond’s “Social Snapshots.” The issue dated October 22, 1922, for example, featured columns on social events in Boston (Massachusetts), Washington, D.C., Corona (New York) Waterbury, (Connecticut), Cleveland (Ohio), Charleston (West Virginia), South Richmond (Virginia) and more than a dozen other cities or towns. By 1927, however, *Inter-State Tattler* had come to focus increasingly on

3. For one of the few available accounts of the history of the *Hotel Tattler* and *Inter-State Tattler*, see Anderson (2017: 126-127).



Figure 1. Logo, *Inter-State Tattler*, February 27, 1925, p. 1. New York Public Library, digitized collections.

Harlem (and New York City more broadly). Reports on the night worlds of bars and nightclubs edged out much of the older coverage of society lunches and club meetings. In the late 1920s, the *Tattler* went further than other African-American newspapers in experimenting with a variety of styles and forms for reporting on the social and cultural life of Harlem at night. By the early 1930s, it would participate, alongside other papers, in a golden age of the Harlem nightlife column.

Lady Nicotine's "Between Puffs" made its first appearance in the *Inter-State Tattler* in November 1927, appearing alongside another column, "Up-Town New York," signed by a "Nighthawk." A lively exchange between the two authors, recounted in the Nighthawk's column of January 13, 1928, invoked the fatigue which later nightlife columnists would occasionally complain was a hazard of the profession:

The Nighthawk very recently inquired of Lady Nicotine if she had observed that he had slowed up considerably in the past half year or so. "Remember what a glutton I was for punishment? Can you recall how I used to wring and twist in and out of the night clubs about three years ago? I'm a changed man! Regard me – an exemplary character! Give the little hawk a hand." "Yes," yawned Lady Nicotine, between puffs. "That wringing and twisting three years ago is what's slowing you up now." ("Nighthawk" 1928).

In February 1929, the *Inter-State Tattler* introduced a new column, "Harlem Night-Life," which sometimes extended over a full page. Its logo – a streetscape of well-known Harlem nightclubs (Figure 2) – anticipated the graphic forms of later nightlife column headings in its contrasting play of darkness and simulated neon. "Harlem Night-Life" would occasionally be credited to Gene Matthews, though his name and the column itself would frequently disappear from the periodical. In an early, unsigned column,

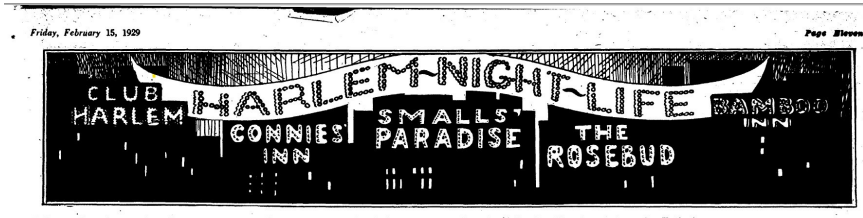


Figure 2. Logo, “Harlem Night-Life” *Inter-State Tattler*, February 15, 1929. New York Public Library, digitized collections.

the opening of “Harlem Night-Life” is faithful to one of the conventions of nightlife reporting, the narrator’s account of arrival at a nightclub and acquiescence to the rituals of being granted entrance:

Up on the outer reaches, far enough to be intriguing, near enough to Mr. I. R. T.’s convenient vehicles of speedy travel, but away from the Great Whalen Way is situated the famous Lenox Avenue Club. To be precise, it is exactly on the corner of 143rd Street and Lenox Avenue, the main entrance just forty feet from the spot where 143rd crosses the Avenue. To make the thing appropriate and to make your correspondent a prevaricator, the pleasure seeker at this nifty rendezvous must needs climb stairs ere he reaches the sacred spot. But the climb is worth the effort. Listen – Friday night beg pardon, I mean Friday evening, we sauntered over to the Club and after being duly recognized, gained admittance. (Unsigned 1929)

The details of location and protocols for entry to the Lenox Avenue Club might serve, of course, as useful information to readers of “Harlem Night-Life,” but we are far, here, from any merely useful listing of nightlife options. In 1930, Gene Matthews was replaced as the credited author of “Harlem Night-Life” by the cultural journalist Frank Byrd, who reduced Matthew’s atmospheric narrativization in favour of the sort of informational content desired by readers looking for entertainment options. Byrd made the column much more a compendium of recommended night-time attractions than a vehicle for personalized accounts of nights on the town. In this excerpt, from Byrd’s column of March 28, 1930, the nocturnal atmospheres which, for “Lady Nicotine” and Gene Matthews, emerged almost organically to cloak evenings spent in mobile sociability, are here reduced to the calculated ambiances of nightlife locations being promoted:

If you enjoy the soothing effect or soft, crooning, jazz melodies, the graceful, rhythmic movements of soft, brown bodies perfecting every detail or the modern dance, a quiet, restful atmosphere together

with tasty, Southern food, in short, if you are in search of a first class evening of entertainment, by all means visit the Lenox Club tonight (Wednesday). In case you don't know, their new floor show makes its initial bow tonight with new songs and dances that will be, judging from all former precedents, one of the high spots of Harlem's current nightlife offerings. The management has good reason, incidentally, to be proud of its establishment.

In 1932, the final year of the *Inter-State Tattler's* existence, a new column, "Nite Life Shadows," by Maurice Dancer, captured the extraordinary effervescence of Harlem night culture at this historical moment, as in this example:

Like the mongrel we are, we enter the Cave in search for scandal. We are greeted by Doris Rheubottom, James Webster, George Howe, Catherine Perry (wife of Earl Hines), Marie Davis, Lillian Nelson, Charles "Mutt" Wallace, and Al (Checker Club) Smith ..... one flight up, we knock and the door opens on Howard Elmore, Frances Smith and Billie Griffin sipping away ... enters the wayward Clint Moten ... Dolly Rush, Roscoe "Red" Simmons's ex-heart is the "number" queen ... Knocking at another door which fails to open, we learn behind the portals are Alice Bowen and the Harlem playboy, Charles Kelsey ... We say "hello" to Ollie Schumacker ... Jap Branch enters with her pockets bulging with \$1, \$2 and \$5 bills ... having cleaned up in a crap game over at "Dick's" and tells us that Billy Maples could spend it all ... We ankle over to "Dick's" to find Jackie Mabley, Lillian Young and Frank Newton around the "21" table. (Dancer 1932: 9)

By 1932, columns in the style of Dancer's "Nite Life Shadows," which recounted nightlife as a series of visits and encounters, would be a staple of large numbers of African-American newspapers. With the demise of the *Inter-State Tattler* in 1932, Dancer himself contributed the columns "Stage Struck" and "Harlem Night by Night" to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a prominent African-American newspaper for which Geraldyn Dismond, in the mid-1920s, had written both a "New York Society" feature, under her married name, "Mrs. H. Binga Dismond," and (as Geraldyn Dismond) a column of political cultural commentary with the title "Through the Lorgnette."

The key backdrop to the effervescent nightlife covered in these publications was, of course, the Harlem Renaissance, that period of intense literary, cultural and political activity which had made Harlem the symbolic centre of African-American life. While both the chronological and geographical boundaries of the Harlem Renaissance are the focus of ongoing revision (e.g., Sherrard-Johnson 2015; Perry 1982), it is common to see its consolidation and dissipation as transpiring between the conclusion



of World War I and the mid-1930s. The lifespan of the *Tattler*, in its successive incarnations, was coterminous with the period now regarded as that of Harlem's greatest cultural vitality and influence.

Nevertheless, the *Inter-State Tattler* and Geraldyn Dismond herself enter accounts of the Harlem Renaissance only rarely, and as sources of commentary on other figures rather than as themselves key forces in this cultural ferment of the period.<sup>4</sup> Seth Clark Silberman notes how longstanding prejudice has cast the *Tattler* as a gossipy, salacious sideshow to the Harlem Renaissance, rather than as a key force in linking the political and cultural struggles of the time to the social energies and spaces of encounter which sustained such struggles. Indeed, one of Geraldyn Dismond's last contributions to the *Tattler*, just before its demise, deploys the nightlife journalist's familiar evocation of festive atmospheres to offer a sharp, sarcastic critique of elite white "slumming" at a party intended to raise money for its host:

And what a crowd! All classes and colours met face to face, ultra-aristocrats, bourgeoisie, Communists, Park Avenuers galore, bookers, publishers, Broadway celebs, and Harlemites giving each other the once-over. The social revolution was on. And yes, Lady Nancy Cunard was there all in black (she would) with twelve of her grand bracelets. The only person missing was Carl Van Vechten who lost an opportunity to turn out a reel that would make King Vidor look like an amateur (Dismond 1932).

The reference here to King Vidor's 1929 film *Hallelujah*, criticized on its release for its paternalistic view of African-American forms of social and religious celebration, captures the delicate position in which Dismond found herself, as chronicler of a vibrant Harlem nightlife which risked becoming an exotic spectacle for those who came from outside it.

### The emergence of the nightlife column

Since the emergence of the periodical press, exploration of the nighttime of cities has generated a variety of genres and journalistic specializations. These include such transnational genres as the journalistic or literary narrative of walking through large cities at night,<sup>5</sup>  *carnets* or chronicles reporting on the social bizz of salons and cabarets,<sup>6</sup> and investigative

4 See, for example, James F. Wilson (2010: 12) and Johnson (2019: 5-7).

5 On accounts of "night walking," see, for example, Turcot (2007) and Beaumont (2016).

6 The vast body of work on these genres within histories of the French press includes Saminaya-Perrin (2007), Dumasy-Queffélec (2011), Thérenty (2006).

reporting which ventured into places of night-time social mixing in search of illicit behaviours.<sup>7</sup> All of these genres would survive into the twentieth century, and residues of each would persist in the nightlife columns which emerged after 1920. However, we may see the nightlife column in more precise terms as a mutation (and occasional synthesis) of two other forms which had stabilized by the 1910s.

One antecedent of the nightlife column was the “Society” or “social news” section of newspapers, which chronicled the associative life of communities, typically through reports on events attended by people of acknowledged social prominence. These columns were also a staple feature of the society magazines which had existed since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, best represented in the United States by the magazine *Town Topics*, whose various columns reported on the weddings, banquets, vacations and festive soirées of high society. In Geraldyn Dismond’s “Social Snapshots,” like the reports from other cities which filled early issues of the *Hotel Tattler*, we see the persistence of such columns well into the twentieth century.

If the “society” column is one key antecedent of the nightlife column, the other is the column of theatrical news, often written from the perspective of “backstage.” In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, New York-based periodicals covering the entertainment industries began to feature columns in which useful information of a professional character – their principal commodity – was mixed with other forms of reporting explicitly offered as gossip. In 1910, *Town Topics* introduced a column titled “Broadway Banter,” first credited anonymously to “The Itinerant,” and then, after 1912, to a columnist identified as “The Night Owl.” In 1910, as well, the entertainment trade magazine *Billboard* introduced the short-lived feature “Broadway Brevities,” with the subtitle “News and Gossip of Professional People and Events Gleaned Along the Great White Way.” The weekly journal *Variety*, which, since its launch in 1905, covered the worlds of theatre, film and live entertainment, would likewise mix news and gossip in recurrent features like “At the Cabarets” and “Personalities,” both of which were introduced in the years between 1910 and 1920. While all of these columns contained items we might consider usefully informational – announcements of new shows or developments in performers’ careers – they might also hint at infidelity or suspicious sexual orientations, ruptured friendships or marriages, and reversals of social or financial standing.

In 1920, a struggling vaudeville performer named Walter Winchell began writing short paragraphs of back-stage gossip for the entertainment

7 For an overview, see Walkowitz (1992).

industry newspaper *The Vaudeville News*. The success of this feature led to his being hired, in 1924, to write a column on nightlife, with the title “Your Broadway and Mine,” for the newly launched New York newspaper *The Evening Graphic*. Winchell’s success led to his hiring in 1929 by *New York Daily Mirror*, where he initiated a regular column of nightlife gossip which was distributed by newspaper syndicates around the world and helped to popularize the genre. By the end of the 1920s, New York’s daily newspapers, almost without exception, had launched columns in which coverage of entertainment news was tied to a journalist’s exploration of the night-time worlds of culture and sociability. The “Broadway columnist” or “night club columnist” took shape very quickly as a distinct journalistic figure. In their close ties to the worlds of nightlife, these columnists were seen as one symptom of the rise of what would quickly be called “jazz journalism,” a form of writing marked by the rhythms of brief, sensational items rather than the ornate displays of literary erudition typical of earlier reporting on culture and social life (Bessie 1938; Straw 2008).

From the society columns of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the nightlife column inherited the imperative of listing the names of those to be found at gatherings of the social elite. From the backstage gossip column, it carried on the practice of offering readers access to private, controlled places in which new kinds of celebrities intermingled. What distinguished the nightlife column from both of these was a tendency towards narrativization, such that lists of names and brief gossipy “items” were integrated with reports of journeys through the night worlds of bars, theatrical openings and fashionable restaurants. The context of American Prohibition (1920-1933), which saw endless experimentation in the invention of new kinds of social spaces (like the nightclub itself), enhanced the appeal of the nightlife column, which drew much of its energy from the ways in which the night had become a time of restless change and invention.

### The Harlem nightlife column

In his 1943 book *‘New World A-Coming’: Inside Black America*, the Black journalist Roi Ottley looked back at the proliferation of Harlem nightlife columns in African-American newspapers during the previous decade and a half:

Nearly every large publication has a column titled “Harlem,” in which the doings of coloured café society are recorded for the edification of those in the hinterland. Much of this output is done in the manner of

the Broadway gossip columns. Thus so-and-so in the Negro press becomes the “Black Walter Winchell,” the “Black Danton Walker,” or, at the very least, the “Black Ed Sullivan.” (Ottley 1943: 282-283)

Winchell, Walker and Sullivan, the three white “Broadway” journalists to whom Ottley refers, were well-known chroniclers of New York’s nightlife. While Ottley did not name the Black columnists who were their equivalents, a list might have contained the following names: Ted Yates, whose column “This is New York” was syndicated by the Calvin Service to such African-American newspapers as *The Advocate* (Portland, Oregon), and the *Cleveland Call and Post*; Alvin Moses, whose column “Nightlife in New York,” was syndicated across the United States by the Associated Negro Press; Sid Thompson, author of the column “Harlem,” which appeared in the *Philadelphia Tribune*; and, with briefer runs, Edgar Grey, author of “Harlem After Dark,” which ran in the *New York Amsterdam News* in 1926-1927 and J. A. Billboard Jackson, whose “Around Harlem” appeared in the Baltimore-based (but nationally circulated) *Afro-American* between 1924 and 1926. Outside of the specialized African-American press, a white journalist, Clifford Mack, contributed columns with the titles “Harlem Heat” and “Neath the Harlem Moon” to two short-lived, sensational New York publications, *Scandals* and *Broadway Tattler*, which appeared (and quickly disappeared) in 1933. In 1939, the tabloid-sized but culturally ambitious weekly *Manhattan* included a regular column, “Harlem Town,” by Michael Turner, who in the previous year had written the regular feature “Harlem Parade” for the African American *New York Amsterdam News*.

Roi Ottley himself had begun his journalistic career writing a column, “This is Hectic Harlem” (1933-1937), for the *New York Amsterdam News*. In 1934, the widely syndicated white columnist O. O. McIntyre acknowledged Ottley’s stature in the Black press by referring to him as “Harlem’s Mark Hellinger” (McIntyre 1934). Hellinger was the author of the popular column “All in a Day,” which appeared in the mainstream *New York Daily Mirror*, and he was regarded as one of those who had solidified the image of the New York nightlife columnist as a figure of swaggering, jaded urbanity. O. O. McIntyre’s claim that Ottley was “Harlem’s Mark Hellinger” made clear the sense of separate worlds which structured journalists’ view of white and Black New York, but it was a confirmation, as well, of Ottley’s stature among readers of African-American newspapers.

In the *New York Amsterdam News*, Ottley’s column appeared alongside two other columns covering the social and cultural life of Harlem: “Around

Harlem with Archie Seale,” and “Harlem Sketchbook” by Theophilus Lewis. The latter of these columns was faithful to the conventions of the thematic essay or extended observation, in which a single set of ideas was developed over several paragraphs. Ottley’s “This is Hectic Harlem,” however, epitomized a style of writing and mode of organization which had become emblematic of the New York nightlife column by the early 1930s. Its form, as the following excerpt shows, involved the stringing together of short items – bits of news, brief observations, and instances of subtle, gossipy innuendo. This example moves between places of nightlife gathering, offering the names which are a convention in such columns, but using this fragmentary narrative to make a broader point about visits by white people to Harlem clubs.

### Night Tour

Dickie Wells’ basement speak is the spot to visit if you desire to see the ofay go native ... Saturday night Harlemites travelled to Dickie’s ... Sue Green, Bertha Martin, Orlando Robeson, Donald Heywood were among those watching the superior being romp last Saturday night ... At the 101 Ranch they were on the verge of entering into fisticuffs with the Mose guest ... I marvel at their inflated ego ... They visit a club like the 101 Ranch and definitely believe that they can take full charge ... I find their frolicking crude, coarse and boring ... On the other hand, at the Sunset Beer Garden they present a decorous front (Ottley 1934).

The three-dot ellipses which divide the bits of news, commentary and atmosphere offered here had, by the early 1930s, become a dominant convention in the nightlife or gossip column, one credited to Walter Winchell, though others would dispute his role (Straw 2008). We may see these ellipses as both enhancing and undermining the nightlife column’s evocation of atmosphere. In the sense they provide of restless movement, the dots and gaps capture the nervous excitement of a night on the town; conversely, by reducing a column to fragments, they make the column a series of disconnected jolts in which narrative flow is barely visible.

Sometimes, however, as in “This is New York,” written by Ted Yates and published in the African-American newspaper *The Advocate* (Portland, Oregon) on May 2, 1936, the dots and ellipses are absent:

W. C. Handy, the daddy of the blues, will be honored at Memphis early in May. Jimmie Luneford [sic] and Band is b.o. hit at the Apollo theatre here. The Jesse Rosedale Thompkins Jr’s (she’s Lelia Tetley of the Istmica clubs) have a bouncing baby boy. Thursday nite for the celebs at the Aces Bar & Grill is drawing a large gathering of diversion seekers. Ted

Knownlee, bent on getting his Easter wardrobe, gave his annual “bunny” party last Saturday (Yates 1936: 1).

The style of writing on display here is one which combines efficient short forms (“nite” and “celebs”), abbreviations (“b. o.” for “box office”), and references to phenomena which go undescribed but which it is assumed most readers will be able to identify (Ted Knownlee’s “annual ‘bunny’ party”). The dense clusters of information here are stretched along self-sufficient sentences which in their flow convey a sense of the busy effervescence of New York nightlife. Yates uses none of the punctuational forms – the three-dot ellipsis, the division into short one-sentence paragraphs, the use of asterisks to break up items – which had become common ways of separating individual “items” in columns by Walter Winchell or Roi Ottley. Rather, one has the sense that Yates’ column, weighed down with so many things to report, could not spare the time or space needed to provide such separation – as if even ellipses would disrupt the flow of tightly packed news items about a world so full of events and sensations that narrativization – the story of a night on the town – could not contain them:

In 1937, Archie Seale, a nightlife columnist for the African-American *New York Amsterdam News*, reflected on the challenges of his profession. Like his colleagues who reported on nocturnal Harlem for Black newspapers across the United States, Seale felt pressured to accomplish a set of contradictory goals. His column, “Around Harlem with Archie Seale,” was expected to entertain readers with the sensations of Harlem nightlife while upholding the air of respectability and achievement which African-American newspapers had long sought to cultivate in their accounts of Black community life. Seale wrote candidly of his frustration with the role:

Thoughts of a midnighter: We wonder how many people who read this trivia are as tired of the hightonishness of this pillar in recent columns as we are – we mean the formal manner in which we report that Miss So-and-So is willing to say “yes” to what well-known man-about-town, instead of calling a spade a spade and when we really know the truth of the matter . . . Then, when we get a flash news item about an indiscretion of some well-known we have to pad it so he or she doesn’t get angry. [...]

Ours is not the easy task, as so many might think. We are supposed to entertain you, inform you of the doing of the nightlifers, the hot spots, cabarets, entertainers and people that make up this night world of yours... In addition, we are supposed to keep you hep to the doings of the smart set, and the important people who go to make up the other side of life in this town of ours – and the inside on things that happen behind the scenes... (Seale 1937: 9).

The nightlife columnist was engaged in discursive work which we may consider ethnographic, in the sense which that term has acquired within studies of journalistic genres. “Ethnographic journalism” is usually characterized as a genre whose distinguishing feature is the immersion of the reporter in the worlds and routines which they are covering (Cramer and McDevitt 2004; Hermann 2014). In the work of night-time columnists, we find an implicit understanding of the urban night as a temporal “world” – a “space-time,” as social scientists would later describe it (Fouquet 2017: 85). Archie Seale’s own anxieties about the ambiguity of his role, as both insider and outsider vis-à-vis Harlem’s night worlds, were not unlike those of the academic ethnographer. He was expected to simultaneously report that world’s self-understanding and puncture that self-understanding through exposure of what he called (in the passage quoted above) “the truth of the matter.”

## Conclusion

Roi Ottley’s 1943 account in ‘*New World A-Coming*’ of the proliferation of night-time columnists in Harlem did not mention Geraldyn Dismond. In part, we suspect, this was because the profession had become masculinized, both in the popular imagery of the jaded male nightlife chronicler and in empirical evidence (like bylines) documenting the gender of those engaged to write such columns. The case may be made, nevertheless, that Dismond was just as important as lauded figures like Walter Winchell in the development of the nightlife column as a form. In her own journalism, from the mid 1920s through the early 1930s, we witness the over-laying of the 19<sup>th</sup> century social column and the 20<sup>th</sup> century compendium of celebrity gossip. Both of these are absorbed and transformed in those purer versions of the nightlife column which she published under the name “Lady Nicotine.” Here, the night worlds of Harlem become fluid, mobile social scenes, marked by unexpected encounters and shifting atmospheres. Under Dismond’s supervision as Managing Editor, the *Inter-State Tattler* subdivided the experience of the Harlem night into differentiated forms – including, in addition to those mentioned, a show business insider’s column, “Backstage with Stagestruck” and a naughty gossip feature “The High Hatters.” All of these resonated with each other to produce an image of multi-levelled vitality and collective excitement.

With the closure of the *Inter-State Tattler* in 1932, Geraldyn Dismond remained active in journalism of various sorts, even as her professional trajectory took her into the charity and health sectors and as she remained



deeply involved in radical politics. In 1928, Dismond had told reporters that she was now a communist (Unsigned 1928), and, under her editorship, the *Inter-State Tattler* became a significant supporter of the pan-African leader Marcus Garvey. In the 1930s, she continued to contribute columns on New York society to a number of African-American newspapers, then, in 1939, went to work for the *New York Amsterdam News*. Her final positions were with the leading African-American magazines *Ebony* and *Jet*.

Two journalistic pieces by Geraldyn Desmond, from later stages of her life and career, will allow us to trace some of the transformations of the nightlife column in the United States at mid-century. In the 1940s, having begun to use a variation of her birth name, Dismond wrote a regular column “Around’n’About with Gerri Major,” for the *New York Amsterdam News*. For the April 30, 1949 edition of the column, Major described a night spent immersed in the pleasures of nocturnal New York:

Friday night we ended at the Negro Actor’s Guild dance at the Savoy. We had started at 10 o’clock at City Center where the BMT transit workers had over 900 guests in the large ballroom. Enroute uptown we stopped in the Theresa Skyline for a look-see at those charming ladies who call themselves the Gayettes, and at the Armory we waited patiently for Duke Ellington and his men who arrived after their theatre engagement to play for the A. Clayton Powell Sr. Fund dance.

Then we went to the Savoy. Rosetta LeNoire Brown, Billy Butler and Lester Walton quickly helped us to round up visiting celebrities and ladies of pulchritude. Snap, snap – a picture here, a question there, and we were through. We closed up shop – Dummett, his camera, I my note book. And the fun began (Major 1949).


Here again, we see the gathering of multiple bits of information, affect and eventfulness into a compact form which nevertheless draws the reader along an itinerary of night-time movement. Here, as well, we see a weaving together of key institutions and personalities of African-American life, one whose effect is to reveal juxtapositions or interconnections which would be less legible in the more prosaic reporting of ordinary journalism.

Beginning in 1953, Gerri Major contributed a regular column, “Gerri Major’s Society World,” to the pocket-sized African-American magazine *Jet*, the companion to the larger, influential publication *Ebony*. An installment published in *Jet*’s April 25 1957 issue (Figure 3) contains social news tinged with gossip, and some of these elements take us into the social worlds of Harlem. However, the column’s title and the international scope of many



GERRI MAJOR'S

# SOCIETY



*The Dickersons aboard plane.*

**TRAVELOGUE**  
When Kathryn and Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Co. President Earl Dickerson left their Chicago home on a nine-week air tour of Japan, China, Thailand, Singapore, Philippines, India, Iran, Turkey, Lebanon, Italy, Spain and France, they carried only two suitcases and a make-up case. Famous for her packing skill, Mrs. Dickerson's case contained two pairs of shoes, three light-weight wool dresses, an evening gown and an ensemble of three tops and one skirt, a silk evening coat, cotton blouses and skirts, sweaters, four crocheted beanies, and nylon underwear. She took no furs or costume jewelry, wore several pieces of real jewelry.

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**COCKTAIL CHIT CHAT** The major romantic subject of recently-divorced Dr. Hugh Gloster, chairman of Hampton Institute's Communications Center and former Fulbright professor at the University of Japan, is Jean Gilbert, director of the college's Testing Bureau. His minor, is Portsmouth, Va., English teacher, Beulah Harrell . . . Beauty tycoon Meta Cardoza Mounsey, the ex-Follies beauty and first partner of Rose Morgan Louis, the ex-champ's wife,

# WORLD

in the Rose Meta House of Beauty, is opening an interracial salon in Dee Cee's Shipley Terrace section . . . Upon retirement after 44 years as rector of St. Phillip's Episcopal Church, Columbus, Ohio, Herbert W. Smith received the title of rector emeritus, a congratulatory letter from President Eisenhower, and a wallet containing \$1,000 from parishioners. . . Dee Cee's top social club, The Characters, has a white member, UP correspondent James Cunningham . . . And the lily-white Junior League of Dee Cee invited Col. Campbell Johnson, assistant to the head of Selective Service, to address a coming meeting . . . Atlantic City career girl Jeannette Taylor describes an aging East Coast playboy as "a bore with a glass in one hand, a bottle of whisky in the other, and a woman, not his wife, on his mind."

❖ ❖ ❖

**Queen Of Clubs: Chosen "Queen of Clubs"** at the annual benefit for the Northside Center at Harlem's Savoy Ballroom, Martha Springs is crowned by out-going queen Judy Campbell as royal "pages" pay court. The "queen" won a Caribbean trip.



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Figure 3. "Gerri Major's Society World," *Jet*, April, 25, 1937, p. 38-39. Collection of the author.

of the events recounted exemplify a transformation which would mark the gossip column in the latter half of the twentieth-century. While the nightlife column had stitched together the sensations and events of a specific urban locale, gossip columns in the decades following World War II would be more and more assembled from items arriving from distant origins along communicational pathways like the newspaper wire service or the telephone.

Columns like "Gerri Major's Society World" were no longer gathering up the experiential features of localized contexts and circulating them outwards, as had been the case for Lady Nicotine's "Between Puffs" or Roi Ottley's "This Hectic Harlem." Rather, in the post-World War II celebrity column, items were collected from dispersed sources and assembled in new kinds of packages which suggested a global, network-based omniscience rather than a local, urban belonging. The nightlife column, which had presumed its author's immersion in a geographically bounded urban culture of the night, would decline slowly in the second half of the twentieth century. It was a victim, in part, of the declining number of newspapers overall (and of African-American newspapers most dramatically) (Horne 2017: 195; Michaeli 2016: 33) and of a treatment of celebrity personalities

which had less and less to do with the night worlds in which they had once been observed.

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