Shane White, Stephen Garton, Stephen Robertson, and Graham White, *Playing the Numbers: Gambling in Harlem Between the Wars* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

This lively book raises the question of how an industry that employed thousands of African Americans and shaped nearly all aspects of Harlem's interwar black culture could have escaped scholarly attention. We know much about the Harlem Renaissance and black reformers; but until now there has been little written of the daily life of ordinary blacks for whom numbers was a central preoccupation. "Numbers," argue the authors, "was *the* black business." (25) Headed by flamboyant numbers bankers, the numbers business was an elaborate network of banks, runners, and bettors who fuelled the black economy. With this book the authors have finally placed the numbers industry where it belongs—in the heart of Harlem.

Gambling on numbers was not new to the United States in the 1920s. Well before the Great Migration of southern blacks to Harlem, dream books and terms such as "gig" and "saddle" were well known in policy parlors. Even in the nineteenth century blacks played a role in the industry, but mostly as players or owners of small policy shops. By the early twentieth century policy had fallen out of favor, leaving a relative vacuum for the streamlined game using Clearing House numbers that dominated jazz-age New York. The origins of Harlem's Clearing House game are murky, but most sources point to Caribbean migrants, particular Cubans who played a numbers game known as "bolita." Casper Holstein, an immigrant from the Danish West Indies, is often given credit for the innovation of using Clearing House numbers from the New York Stock Exchange, and allowing small bets ranging from one cent upward. By 1924 the relatively marginal practice had become an obsession for Harlemites.

Playing the numbers permeated all aspects of black culture from blues lyrics, to churches, to the writing of Harlem's literary elite. And it also transformed the local economy, providing employment and revenue for large numbers of urban blacks. By linking numbers to the New York Clearing House Holstein insured that the game was fair. But that did not stop gamblers from trying to game the system by detecting patterns in winning numbers. Some blacks sought out guides from the afterlife, by attending spiritualist churches where mediums provided numbers for a small fee. By far the most popular way to discern numbers, however, was from dreams. Dream books during the interwar period were enormously popular and lucrative. To their credit, the authors spend time with these texts, noting how dreams that might predict numbers included race riots, gang fights, and police harassment.

The lucrative numbers business led to violent rivalries. White interlopers continually sought to depose the numbers Kings and Queens. Casper Holstein was even kidnapped by white gangsters, an event covered by the *New York Times*

on their front page. But black resistance counteracted these efforts throughout the 1920s. It was in this period that Holstein and Stephanie St. Clair, or "Madame Queen" as she preferred to be known, dominated the game. Holstein shaped urban black politics by generously funding Marcus Garvey's movement, his native Virgin Islands, and the black fraternal organization the Elks. St. Clair was a more public and elegant figure than Holstein. In her struggle with the mobster Dutch Schultz she used her charm to bring the black press and the mayor's office to her side. She also drew on the racial solidarity of ordinary African Americans who played the numbers daily, beseeching them to only buy numbers from black bankers. Despite this racial solidarity, in the mid-1930s white mobsters finally defeated the black Kings and Queens of Harlem.

Refusing to call numbers gambling part of the "informal" or "underground" economy, the authors instead view numbers as "*the* economy" of black Manhattan. (219) Numbers bankers used modern business practices, with adding machines and well-trained clerks keeping track of bets. Blacks found it difficult to obtain credit in established banks, and many distrusted the banking system. Numbers bankers proved more reliable and less discriminatory, offering small loans to local blacks with low interest rates. And black players viewed the bets they placed as investments, rather than gambling. Prosperous bankers also backed numerous commercial enterprises in the city, especially those in the leisure industry. From Negro League teams to jazz clubs, numbers gambling financed much of black popular culture during the interwar period.

Playing the Numbers reads more like ethnography than a traditional historical monograph. This makes for spirited writing and a comprehensive overview of a central aspect of black economic and cultural life. But the relative lack of analysis leaves several issues unexplored that may dismay readers. The authors never fully discuss the political motivations historians have had for ignoring black gambling. By the 1980s historians sought to counteract notions of black "pathology"; thus, they underplayed any discussion of the informal economy. The authors address this pitfall implicitly by denying that gambling was part of an underground economy and emphasizing the positive impact of the numbers game on black Harlem. Some might argue that their perspective downplays the exploitation of gamblers by numbers Queens and Kings. Although I am sympathetic to the authors' optimistic portrayal of numbers, more analytical ammunition aimed at potential critics who might argue it is a romanticized vision of black urban life would have been prudent. The authors also miss another major significance of the numbers game, the prominence of black women both as Queens and as employees in the numbers banks. African American women found work as runners and clerks in the industry during a period when they were completely excluded from white-collar work in the "formal" economy. This fact bolsters their persuasive argument that the numbers game was an empowering way for ordinary Harlemites to take control over their otherwise uncertain lives.

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