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Documenting the Dissin's Guest House:
Esther Bublely's Exploration of Jewish-
American Identity, 1942-43

Vriean 'Breezy' Diether Taggart

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Documenting the Dissin's Guest House:
Esther Bubley's Exploration of Jewish-
American Identity, 1942-43

Vriean 'Breezy' Diether Taggart
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This thesis considers Esther Bubley's photographic documentation of a boarding house for Jewish workingmen and women during World War II. An examination of Bubley's photographs reveals the complexities surrounding Jewish-American identity, which included aspects of social inclusion and exclusion, a rejection of past traditions and acceptance of contemporary transitions. Bubley presented these residents, specifically the females, as modern Americans shedding the stereotypes surrounding their Jewish heritage and revealing their own perspective and reality. Through their communal support as a group sharing multiple values these residents dealt with multivalent isolation all while maintaining their participation in mainstream American cultural norms.

Working for Roy Stryker in the Office of War Information, Bubley provided a missing record of a distinct community in America to be included in the larger collection of Farm Security Administration and Office of War Information photographs. These photographs provide insight into Jewish-American communities and shed light on the home front of America during World War II. Furthermore, Bubley's photographs illustrate how these Jewish-Americans reacted to World War II and reveal both the unity of a nation at war and the isolation of social exclusion in America.

Keywords: Esther Bubley, FSA/OWI photography, Roy Stryker, WWII, Jewish Identity, American home front, Reform Judaism, Dissin's, boarding house, Washington, D.C.

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Introduction

With the outbreak of World War II in 1939 and the United States involvement in 1941, Washington, D.C. experienced an unprecedented population growth as crowds of young people arrived seeking work in a budding war industry.¹ “Washington had been a small, sleepy town. Then came all these people and housing became scarce,” explained Roselyn Silverman, a resident working in Washington during the war years.² Silverman continued, “But I was fortunate; a friend was here and living at Dissin’s Guest House, a boarding house run by a wonderful couple who catered to Jewish young people.”³ Lack of housing was widespread, as the population increased by 21%, leaving most potential tenants willing to put aside social propriety and live in over-crowded situations while others found housing with family or friends. In 1942, photographer Esther Bublely captured the resulting housing shortage when she documented a complex of boarding houses called the Dissin’s Guest House.

In 1941 Bublely, the daughter of Jewish-Russian immigrants, moved from her home in Minnesota to New York eventually finding her way to Washington and to the offices of Roy Stryker, head of the Office of War Information’s (OWI) photographic section, where she gained employment.⁴ With aims to impress Stryker and to attain a better position, Bublely documented the Dissin’s Guest House. In the years leading up to America entering the war in 1941 Washington became a center for war production, resulting in a large influx of people from all over the United States. From 1940 to 1945, Washington’s population rose from 663,000 to

¹ Miller and Gillette discussed government employment in Washington, which increased from 140,000 in 1940 to 276,000 by 1942. Previous to the war Washington, D.C was made up of bureaucrats and middle-class white men and women. Frederic M. Miller and Howard Gillette, Jr., *Washington Seen: A Photographic History, 1875-1965* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 157-198.

² Roselyn Dresbold Silverman, “World War II in Washington: Life at Dissin’s,” *The Record* (1997): 42.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Bonnie Yochelson, “Esther Bublely: A Biographical Sketch,” http://www.estherbublely.com/bio_frame_set.htm (accessed November 15, 2011).

800,000.⁵ The Dissin's House was advertised as a place for young Jewish people to live and offered both room and board for men and women seeking housing in the limited housing market. As a glimpse into the collective lives of a Jewish-American community, the Dissin's House photographs provide insight into the American home-front atmosphere and the conflicts involved in living and working in Washington as a Jewish-American.

While Bubley has received greater attention since 1998, the Dissin's Guest House photographs require greater investigation as they constitute a glimpse into a community of Jewish-Americans. The most important literature pertaining to Bubley's documentation of the Dissin's Guest House includes discussions of gender and social class but overlooks issues related to Jewish identity. In 1998 Leslie T. Davol wrote "Shifting Mores: Esther Bubley's World War II Boarding House Photos" which discussed the unique boarding house environment as a private space allowing women to take on new societal roles.⁶ Paula Rabinowitz's article "Already Framed: Esther Bubley Invents Noir" in 2004 argued that Bubley framed the female tenants of the Dissin's House as participants in the Noir movement of the 1940s.⁷ Jacqueline Ellis examined Bubley's images of working class women in her book *Silent Witnesses: Representations of Working-Class Women in the United States* (1998). Ellis' discussion included images from some of Bubley's other projects and one image from the boarding house documentation.⁸ Similarly, Melissa A. McEuen mentioned the boarding house documentation project in her article "Exposing Anger and Discontent: Esther Bubley's Portrait of the Upper

⁵ First quoted in Miller and Gillette, 182, but also found in Leslie T. Davol, "Shifting Mores: Esther Bubley's World War II Boarding House Photos," *Washington History* 10, no. 2 (1998): 45. Davol's discussion discussed the "shifting mores" seen within Bubley's images. Davol argued that gender roles and social conventions were changing in the 1940s and the boarding house provided a unique site for redefining those roles.

⁶ Davol, 44-62.

⁷ Paula Rabinowitz, "Already Framed: Esther Bubley Invents Noir," in *Black & White & Noir: America's Pulp Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 25-59.

⁸ Jacqueline Ellis, "Revolutionary Spaces: Photographs of Working Class Women by Esther Bubley 1940-1943," *Feminist Review* 53 (Summer 1996), 92. Also see Jacqueline Ellis, *Silent Witnesses: Representations of Working-Class Women in the United States* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 1998).

South During World War II” and discussed one of Bublely’s image from the Dissin’s House project in terms of the figure’s social class isolation.⁹

While multiple scholars have discussed the Dissin’s House photographs, none of them have investigated the boarders’ Jewish-American identity. This omission requires more examination to reveal a greater understanding of these photographs as their Jewish-American culture was a pertinent aspect of these figures’ identities. This thesis examines Bublely’s photographs of the Dissin’s House and by so doing will argue that she explored the complexity of a Jewish-American identity in her photographs. This analysis will contribute to the scholarship on the Dissin’s House photographs by including discussions of Jewish identity affected by gender and social class exclusion. Bublely’s documentation includes some of the tension felt by the Dissin’s House residents and shows a Jewish community acculturated into mainstream American tradition. By and large, Bublely depicted the residents of the Dissin’s House as mainstream Americans, rejecting stereotypes of Jewish cultural tradition and presenting her own community as a part of prevailing American culture. These photographs provide a representation of the home and social life of a Jewish female war worker in a moment of transition. Through examining Bublely’s photographs this Jewish-American identity can be better understood, thus resulting in a more diverse view of American communities during World War II.

Bublely’s Beginnings: The Office of War Information

The Dissin’s Guest House documentation was conducted during Esther Bublely’s involvement with Roy Emerson Stryker and the OWI photography division, which had its roots in the Historical Section of the Resettlement Administration (RA) and the Farm Security

⁹ Melissa McEuen, “Anger and Discontent: Esther Bublely's Portrait of the Upper South During World War II,” in *Searching for Their Places: Women in the South across Four Centuries* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 243.

Administration (FSA). The RA was established in 1935 as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal to provide aid to rural America during the Great Depression. As part of the RA, the Historical Section provided documentation of aid and programs throughout the United States. As head of the Historical Section, Roy Stryker hired a group of photographers and directed their undertakings to create a record of government activities and a visual documentation of America.¹⁰ In 1937 Stryker's office transferred into the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in the Department of Agriculture.¹¹ Stryker continued to send FSA photographers on assignments across America with shooting lists requiring certain subjects and objects to be photographed, focusing on small town, rural America. Used for news and press releases, the FSA photographs originally fulfilled a propagandistic purpose creating public perception and awareness of poverty and social needs during the 1930s and 40s.¹² Photographs by FSA photographers, such as Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, Arthur Rothstein's *Fleeing a Dust Storm*, and Walker Evans' photograph of Allie Mae Burroughs, have become icons of the Great Depression and emblematic of human suffering and hardship of the period (fig. 1, 2 and 3). In 1941 reporter Edward Stanley wrote of the FSA photography unit, "Future historians who write about what has gone on in this country during the past decade will find in Stryker's files complete evidence of how many millions of Americans lived."¹³

The attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, propelled America into the Second World War, jumpstarting widespread social and economic changes across the country. Due to

¹⁰ Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan, *Documenting America: 1935-1943* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 3. Also see Michael Lesy, *Long Time Coming: A Photographic Portrait of America, 1935-1943* (New York: Norton & Company, Inc., 2002), 224.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹² This propagandistic approach was discussed in Michael L. Carlebach, "Documentary and Propaganda: The Photographs of the Farm Security Administration," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 8 (Spring 1988): 6-25. Carlebach argued that the FSA's photographs were propagandistic but also documented the time period as well. For more information on the FSA in general see Hurley, F. Jack, *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972).

¹³ Edward Stanley, "Roy Stryker, Photographic Historian," *Popular Photography* (1941): 28-29 and 100.

budget cuts and criticism within Congress Stryker's photographic division folded into the OWI in 1942.¹⁴ Continuing to operate under the direction of Stryker, many of the OWI photographers focused on documenting the war effort.¹⁵ Since the OWI was designed to supply the public relations agencies of the government during World War II, it is considered to be largely propagandistic photography. Furthermore, the OWI photographers concentrated on home-front activities related to the war effort and the effect of war on society.

In 1941 the OWI's purpose evolved from focusing on the documentation of rural America to including urban communities, thus creating a more accurate record of war-related activities and of America as well.¹⁶ One of the better-known photographers of the OWI was a young man named Gordon Parks who contributed to the OWI's focus on urban America. With encouragement from Stryker, Gordon Parks, an African-American photographer from Kansas, documented the streets of Washington, focusing on African-American neighborhoods and communities for the FSA file in 1941 setting a precedent for Bubley to follow.¹⁷ Stryker sent Parks as an insider to his own communities, perhaps using Parks' connection to this American group to obtain more diverse photographs. Parks said later of this experience, "...I was a Negro and Roy I think taught me to use that disadvantage in an intelligent way instead of striking back with violence any longer, and so I put it into the camera."¹⁸

It was in this vein that Bubley considered her own community and began to analyze the tensions felt by Jewish-Americans. Before her documentation of the Dissin's House Stryker

¹⁴ Fleischhauer and Brannan, 1-5.

¹⁵ Lesy, 465.

¹⁶ Ibid, 322 and 465.

¹⁷ Ibid, 118-119.

¹⁸ Research Collections, "Oral History Interview with Gordon Parks, 1964 Dec. 30," Smithsonian Archives of American Art, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-gordon-parks-11480> (accessed April 18, 2013).

hired Bubley as a laboratory technician in the fall of 1942 for the newly established OWI.¹⁹ Similar to the women in the Dissin's House, she was a second-generation immigrant who grew up in the Midwest and came to Washington seeking work after graduating from her studies at the Minneapolis School of Design.²⁰ Wanting to be more than a lab technician, Bubley caught Stryker's attention as a photographer by documenting the Dissin's House in December of 1942 through January of 1943. Her relationship to her sister Enid, a tenant of the Dissin's House, gave Bubley access to this community. After completing the Dissin's House documentation Stryker soon hired her for official assignments for the OWI in September of 1943. Bubley's promotion proves that she had captured something that resonated with Stryker, perhaps due to the shortage of photographs recording Jewish-American communities within his documentation up to that point.²¹ Bubley provided this missing record and did so with a yearning to include these Jews within the narrative of American identity as modern Americans.

Throughout her career, Bubley often focused on urban life, children, and the working class. More specifically, she captured the isolation of working class women, as seen in her image *Girl waiting for a pickup in the Sea Grill* from 1943 (fig. 4). She also investigated issues of race as seen in the image *Bus Trip: Greyhound Bus Terminal, NYC In the waiting room* from 1947 (fig. 5). In many ways the Dissin's House documentation project is indicative of Bubley's photographic documentary aesthetic, which focused on representing and capturing societal

¹⁹ Lawrence W. Levine and Alan Trachtenberg, "Cross-Country Bus Trip," In *Documenting America, 1935-1943*, ed. Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 312. Also see Yochelson, "Esther Bubley: A Biographical Sketch."

²⁰ Yochelson, "Esther Bubley: A Biographical Sketch." See also Levine and Trachtenberg, 312. For more on Bubley's background see Davol, 46. Davol discussed how Bubley spent two years at Superior State Teachers College and then one year at the Minneapolis School of Design. Bubley had been interested in photography since high school as she participated on the Yearbook staff.

²¹ Levine and Trachtenberg discussed how Bubley was given the assignment of the "Cross-Country Bus Trip" which she completed in September of 1943. Sometime after Bubley documented the Dissin's Guest House Stryker brought her on as a photographer but because she lacked a driver's license her work was limited. The Cross-Country Bus Trip is considered her first substantial and best-known assignment. Levine and Trachtenberg, 312.

issues. Integrated within the boarding house community Bublely used the camera as a way to understand her subjects and present them in an accurate way. Historian Andrea Fisher stated of Bublely, “She had set out with the 1930’s hope for the photograph as a potential lever towards necessary social reform. The photograph was, for her, an instrument of purpose and of understanding.”²² The resulting images of the project at the Dissin’s House illustrate Bublely’s purpose for her photography as they reveal the complexities facing Jewish-Americans. As a Jew, Bublely saw the conflicts that she and her own friends and family encountered as female Jewish-Americans in 1940s America and sensitively portrayed that understanding in her documentation.

The Dissin’s House and its Residents

The Dissin’s House was a complex of three buildings located on 2013 Massachusetts Avenue NW, 1511 and 1513 20th Street in Washington, D.C. As seen in Bublely’s image, it was a non-assuming building within a comfortable and affluent residential neighborhood (fig. 6).²³ An elderly Jewish couple, Adolph and Anne Dissin, operated the houses from 1939 until 1963.²⁴ The main house was a former mansion that had been broken up into 21 different bedrooms for triple, double and single rooms.²⁵ The women lived on the upper floors while the men lived on the lower floors.²⁶ The dining room was on the second floor while the living room and main

²² Andrea Fisher, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Women* (London: Pandora, 1987), 124.

²³ Roselyn Silverman was a tenant at Dissin’s Guest House and in 1997 provided a description of her time spent at the boarding house in the 1940s entitled “World War II in Washington: Life at Dissin’s.” She is identifiable in the photographs taken and she is the only tenant who has published anything on her experience that has been discovered. Silverman, 42. Some other identifiable figures within Bublely’s photographs are Esther Bublely’s sister, Enid Bublely, and Enid’s eventual husband, Milton Raines. Information on the identity of the figures was provided by an interview with archivist Tracy Schmid, communicated to Vriean D. Taggart, August 14, 2012, New York City.

²⁴ Jean Bublely, “Dissin’s Boarding House Waitress Identification,” Humanities and Social Sciences Net Online, <http://h-net.msu.edu/> (accessed February 4, 2013). While it has not been unequivocally proven that Adolph and Anne Dissin were Jewish, their operation of a boarding house like Dissin’s House strongly supports that they were. ²⁵ This is a primary document assumedly written by Esther Bublely as a summary of her boarding house project. “Life in a Boardinghouse in Washington D.C. Photographs by Esther Bublely,” ca. 1942-43. New York City: Esther Bublely Archive.

²⁶ Silverman, 43.

kitchen were situated on the first floor along with the only telephone in the entire house.²⁷ Meal service consisted of breakfast and dinner every day of the week with brunch and supper on Saturday and a Sunday breakfast.²⁸ Renters were charged \$35 a month, which included a room with maid and meal service.²⁹ Most of the boarders at Dissin's House were government clerks who came to Washington for employment.³⁰

The Dissin's House was indicative of the atmosphere in America as more than 7 million women joined the 11 million women already in the workforce previous to the war.³¹ During this time Washington became a thriving center of available, war-related jobs that now offered women well paid opportunities within the Army, the Navy, in factories, and as secretaries or clerks. The Dissin's House reflects this growth as some of the Jewish workers involved in the war industry found a home there. According to one resident of the Dissin's House:

The country was gearing up for war. It was called the 'nation defense effort' and young men and women, many of them college graduates, were coming to Washington from all over the country. After all, where else could you earn \$28 a week?³²

War related jobs with the government were especially attractive when compared to working as a waitress or in other similar jobs, which paid around \$14 a week.³³ As a result many workers migrated from rural parts of America, indicating that several of the Dissin's residents likely

²⁷ "Life in a Boardinghouse in Washington D.C. Photographs by Esther Bublely."

²⁸ Silverman, 43.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ "Life in a Boardinghouse in Washington D.C. Photographs by Esther Bublely."

³¹ McEuen, *Making War Making Women: Femininity and Duty on the American Home Front 1941-1945* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 1. According to Emily Yellin in *Our Mothers' War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II*, "Almost 50 percent of all adult women were employed in this country at some point during the height of war production in 1943 and early 1944, a larger percentage than ever before." Emily Yellin, *Our Mothers' War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 47

³² Silverman, 42.

³³ Yellin, 41.

transitioned from a rural environment to an urban one.³⁴ Many of the occupants of the Dissin's House were being paid more than they ever had at any other job, making their life in Washington a modern transition into one as workingwomen.

Dissin's House Jewish Identity

The Dissin's House brought these Jewish-American residents together at a time when society was plagued by whispers and actual violence of anti-Semitism. News of Jewish persecution in Europe was building in the 1930s but by the 1940s a perceptible oppression could be felt by American Jews as well. Jewish-Americans heard news of anti-Semitism promoted by the Nazi regime as early as 1933 and the discrimination ravaging the lives of European Jews, as evidenced by the devastation of Kristallnacht in 1938.³⁵ Early indicators of the Nazi objectives to exterminate the Jewish population would have made America extremely inviting, increasing the likelihood of these residents' desire to cut their ties to the Jewish global community and instead link themselves with mainstream American culture. Likely second-generation immigrants, the Dissin's residents would have felt the tension surrounding their Jewish heritage. Buble's images of the Dissin's House show the complexities of a boarding house, which was identified as a place for Jews in the outbreak of World War II.

As Jews, the Dissin's House boarders were connected to both Jewish and American culture, requiring them to navigate through stereotypes and discrimination within society. By 1940, Washington housed a Jewish community of around ten thousand immigrants, a small proportion of the city's overall population.³⁶ As minorities in Washington Jewish immigrants

³⁴ According to David Brinkley in *Washington Goes to War* women were anxious to conform their "Alabama" and "Minnesota" styles to Washington fashion, implying many of them came from all across America and most likely smaller towns. David Brinkley, *Washington Goes to War* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1998), 108.

³⁵ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 20-21.

³⁶ Miller and Gillette, 158.

and their children were required to distinguish between two distinct identities.³⁷ For many immigrants the task of assimilation into American culture was even more difficult than finding economic stability.³⁸ Even if the residents of the Dissin's House were not first generation immigrants they inherited the struggle to connect to American traditions as they faced discriminations within America. During the 1940s America was riddled with discriminating sentiments towards Jews, as they were even viewed as a threat to the nation.³⁹ This prejudiced attitude towards Jews resulted in segregation through distinguishing Jews by their physical characteristics and cultural traditions.⁴⁰ Jews had to face the degradation of stereotypes that they were unscrupulous in business.⁴¹ A 1938 survey in *Fortune* revealed that less than 5% of Americans thought that emigration quotas should be raised for Jews to find refuge in America, thus illustrating disinterest towards persecuted Jews.⁴² By the 1930s, all Ivy League and private schools limited the number of Jews accepted, making it difficult for Jews to rise in social class in America as well.⁴³

Bubley's images illustrate this conflict by including elements that allude to a sense of isolation while maintaining aspects of successful assimilation and cultural inclusion. As a female Jew and working class American, Bubley's connection to this group gave her the ability to understand and display a complex group of people through photography. She connected with these borders on many levels as a middle class worker and a female Jewish-American. These

³⁷ Neil M. Cowan and Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *Our Parents' Lives: Jewish Assimilation and Everyday Life* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 68.

³⁸ Howard M. Sachar, *A History of the Jews in the Modern World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 375.

³⁹ Sachar, 381.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Colleen McDannell, *Picturing Faith: Photography and the Great Depression* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 168.

⁴² David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*, vol. 9, *Oxford History of the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 415. For more information on anti-Semitism in America specifically led by women's groups see Yellin, 331-341. Yellin discussed a number of 'mothers' groups that emphasized pro-Nazi sentiment during World War II referenced in McEuen, *Making War Making Women*, 10.

⁴³ Sachar, 385.

aspects of the photographer act as an important part of Bubley's bias. As the photographer she had incredible power to shape the representation of her figures and present them as modern Americans.

While Bubley was manipulating the figures and scenes within her photographs, the group setting in which she was photographing also influenced her actions. As a place of isolated interaction, the Dissin's House boarders acted according to social norms accepted within the Dissin's House and influenced each other. Thus, they created their own identity that was generated by the entire community's perception of each other.⁴⁴ This societal expectation influenced each resident's actions. Bubley would not have been able to escape this social control the group would have had over her activities as a photographer, making her images an accurate representation of the community. The documentation of the community at Dissin's House became a powerful means of depicting Jewish-American identity as long as the photographer was included within that social group. She became a part of these interactions at the Dissin's House and reflected the attitudes and ideals permeating throughout the house. Bubley unconsciously and consciously manipulated the photographs to illustrate an assimilating group of Jews, straddling a divide between Jewish tradition and American modernity.

Reform Judaism and Rejection of Outdated Tradition

Revealing the conflict associated with Jewish-American identity, Bubley showed, through the boarding house photographs, that these boarders were successfully assimilating into mainstream American culture and were attempting to eschew stereotypes connected to their Jewish culture. A holistic examination of the Dissin's House photographs, including around 35

⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977). This thesis applies Foucault's discussion of visible interactions between people as a manifestation of manipulation and influence to the community at the Dissin's House. It is applicable to this boarding house because it was ultimately a group production as Bubley influenced the residents and vice versa.

images, provides evidence of this assimilation, not only through the lack of Jewish cultural markers in the photographs but also their similarity to other depictions of mainstream American women during the 1940s.

The Jewish figures in Bublely's documentation appear similar to images of non-Jewish workers in America, as seen in an OWI photograph taken by Roger Smith depicting a woman entertaining an officer in a hotel similar to the atmosphere at the Dissin's House (fig. 7). Comparable to Dissin's House residents, the woman wears a white-collared shirt and dark military-jacket. Another OWI photographer, Marjory Collins photographed a government secretary in 1943, wearing a style that also resembles Dissin's House occupants (fig. 8). Following her documentation of the Dissin's House, Bublely documented another boarding house, which was well known for female workers, called Arlington Farms. As seen in Bublely's image of three women at Arlington Farms doing their laundry in a cramped space, the interiors of the Dissin's House look similar to the interiors of non-Jewish residences at Arlington Farms, increasing the Dissin's tenants' link to mainstream American culture (fig. 9). Examining these photographs exemplifies that not only did Dissin's House residents have comparable fashion tastes to mainstream American workingwomen but their private dwellings appear similar as well.

The Dissin's residents not only looked similar to mainstream American war workers but they also lacked any symbols in their home that would link them to Jewish culture. Jewish religious markers such as a copy of the Torah, Jewish books on the bookshelves, a Menorah, or any typical orthodox clothing such as prayer shawls or head coverings (Tallit or Kippah) are not visible within the photographs, either because the objects were not present or because Bublely edited them out to deemphasize their significance.⁴⁵ In comparison to Bublely's depiction Ben

⁴⁵ Ilona Klein, "Jewish Identity," email communicated to Vriean D. Taggart, 2013. For more information on symbols within a Jewish home see Morris N. Kertzer, *What Is a Jew? A Guide to the Beliefs, Traditions,*

Shahn created a mural in 1937-38 for a community center in Roosevelt, New Jersey as part of his service to the FSA and his own social realist agenda, which exemplified a stereotypical yet sympathetic depiction of Jewish immigrants (fig. 10).⁴⁶ The first panel of Shahn's mural depicts Albert Einstein stepping off a walkway from a boat, escaping Nazi Germany on American soil. Typical of Jewish orthodox tradition Einstein's mother was depicted with her head covered yet Einstein was not depicted as a stereotypical Jew. Rather than displaying Einstein with his head covered Shahn highlighted Einstein's forehead, perhaps alluding to his genius, imbuing him with importance. Einstein was depicted as the most prominent figure stepping off of the boat in the composition while the depiction of Einstein's mother reflects a stereotypical portrayal of a Jewish woman. Shahn chose to make her more recognizable as a Jewish immigrant to increase sympathy for the incoming immigrants as other panels of the mural venerate their work ethic and perseverance.⁴⁷ Rather than appearing similar to Ben Shahn's depiction of a Jewish woman, Buble depicted her fellow Jews quite differently but also sympathetically. Through visual conclusions alone it would be impossible to designate the Dissin's House boarders as 'Jewish.' However, according to a Dissin's resident, "On Friday nights, we attended services at Washington Hebrew Congregation."⁴⁸

Washington Hebrew Congregation was known for reforms within religious practices. As early as 1869 services there were spoken in English rather than Hebrew.⁴⁹ Many members left

Practices of Judaism That Answers Questions for Both Jew and Non-Jew (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 1-91 and 171-72.

⁴⁶ "Ben Shahn," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 14, no. 4/5 (1947): 2-47. For more on Ben Shahn see Frances K. Pohl, *Ben Shahn* (San Francisco: Pomegranate ArtBooks, 1993). Also see Susan Chevlowe's catalog entitled *Common Man, Mythic Vision: The Paintings of Ben Shahn*, written for an exhibition held at the Jewish Museum in New York City in 1998-99. Susan Chevlowe, *Common Man, Mythic Vision: The Paintings of Ben Shahn* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁴⁷ Pohl, 19.

⁴⁸ Silverman, 44.

⁴⁹ Washington Hebrew Congregation, "Our History," http://www.whctemple.org/our_history.htm (accessed February 6, 2013). For a general description of the Washington Hebrew Congregation written in the 1940s see

the congregation because of these radical reforms and eventually the Washington Hebrew Congregation began to be associated with the movement of Reform Judaism.⁵⁰ Especially successful in America, Reform Judaism had its roots in the Enlightenment and rejected the ceremonial and archaic laws of Judaism, encouraging Jews to transition into the modern era.⁵¹ These reforms moved away from wearing religious clothing, eliminated certain prayers, Torah chanting, changed Sabbath services to Sunday, and promoted women's rights within religious practices beginning in 1846.⁵² Contemporary to the Dissin's House boarders, "The Columbus Platform" was announced by the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1937, which stated, "Reform Judaism recognizes the principle of progressive development in religion... Judaism welcomes all truth, whether written in the pages of scripture or deciphered from the records of nature."⁵³ Responding to the Nazi threat reformists argued that integration and assimilation were essential for survival in an era of uncertainty for Jews.⁵⁴

Attending a synagogue like Washington Hebrew Congregation that promoted Reform Judaist ideals illustrates that the Dissin's House residents were at least aware of, if not active in reformist ideas involving Jewish orthodox tradition. This congregation would have promoted assimilation and encouraged members to feel comfortable to reject certain aspects of past tradition while still maintaining their connection to Jewish religion and heritage. Participating in

Federal Writers' Project, *The WPA Guide to Washington, D.C.: The Federal Writer's Project Guide to 1930s Washington* (New York: Random House, 1983), 292.

⁵⁰ Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington, "Jeremy Goldberg's Washington: Through the Lens," <http://www.jhsgw.org/exhibitions/online/goldberg/photographs/washington-hebrew-congregation> (accessed February 6, 2013).

⁵¹ W. Plaut Gunther, *The Rise of Reform Judaism* (New York: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1963), 10. See also Marc Lee Raphael, *Judaism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) 48-49. According to Raphael, "The American environment—with its absence of tradition and its sense of individualism, nonconformity, and pregnant possibility—encouraged a spirit of experimentation."

⁵² W. Plaut Gunther, 253. Also see Raphael, 49. For more information on orthodox clothing see Kertzer, 91-92. For more information on Reform Judaism see Kertzer, 10-12.

⁵³ Central Conference of American Rabbis, "The Columbus Platform," <http://ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/guiding-principles-reform-judaism/> (accessed February 6, 2013).

⁵⁴ Ofer Shiff, *Survival through Integration: American Reform, Jewish Universalism and the Holocaust* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004), 103.

Reform Judaism helps to explain the lack of religious symbols within the private dwellings of the Dissin's House, thereby creating a community accepting of assimilation and religious revolution to find acceptance in mainstream American culture.

An examination of Bublely's images reveals a preference for cultural change and alterations of past tradition. Through her image of the proprietor, Adolph Dissin, at dinner Bublely showed these residents rejecting past traditions and accepting new ones (fig. 11). The Dissin's House was known for serving kosher foods, promoting to Jews a place where they could easily continue to practice this cultural tradition. Originating from Jewish Orthodox traditions, Jews followed 'kashrut,' or dietary laws pertaining to the guidelines outlined in the Torah referred to as the practice of eating 'kosher food.'⁵⁵ Adolph Dissin was symbolic of this cultural tradition as he provided it for these residents. Bublely's caption of this image of Adolph Dissin, "The proprietor of this boardinghouse watches the service at dinner" indicates the cultural importance of a traditional dining setting that included an authority figure and kosher food. This image includes three women enjoying dinner at the Dissin's House dining hall. Each figure appears engaged in conversation but ignoring the looming, albeit pleasant, figure of Adolph Dissin. The setting appears staged due to the figures' placement and postures. Bublely likely posed the figures in the given configuration, placing Adolph in the back of the composition. As the proprietor he is emblematic of tradition as he watches over his residents eating, assumedly, the kosher prepared food that he advertised. Yet, the women in the forefront of the composition, who draw the dominant focus of Bublely's lens, overshadow Mr. Dissin. Revealing Bublely's

⁵⁵ Kosher tradition evolved throughout the twentieth century as Jews adapted to their surroundings in America. Joan Nathan, "A Social History of Jewish Food in America," in *Food & Judaism*, ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon, Ronald A. Simpkins, and Gerald Shapiro (Omaha: Creighton University Press), 1-12. Whether the Dissin's House followed an orthodox method of cooking is unknown, but it is recognized that the Dissin's advertised their kosher food practice, which most likely had become acculturated to American cuisines and food availability.

intent, this photograph alludes to a preference for the modern American workingwoman rather than the traditional elderly figure.

While breaking tradition and accepting modern ideas, these women at the Dissin's House could have maintained their respectability because of the advertised rules. A Dissin's House resident, Roselyn Silverman, who would be photographed by Bublely, described the social atmosphere at the boarding house, "There was plenty of dating, but no co-habitation. I met my husband at Dissin's and several of my friends met their spouses there, too. No one in our group ever dared to think of having a sexual relationship without first standing before a rabbi in a marriage ceremony."⁵⁶ Silverman further explained, "Mrs. Dissin was a strict housemother. No men were allowed on the upper floors..."⁵⁷ According to scholar Melissa McEuen many women desired to live in circumstances where a matron or landlady preserved the respectability of young single females, similar to the Dissin's House.⁵⁸ McEuen wrote:

In residences operated by women for women only, rules were designed to uphold the occupants' respectability and moral character. At the Lodge for Girls...the lodge keeper, Miss Engle...kept track of her renters' evening forays by requiring them to sign out on leaving and to sign in when they returned home.

This illustrates the precarious position females were in to find housing that preserved their respectability. While it was a predicament for many women, the tenants at Dissin's rejected this respectability by ignoring the mandated rules and did so in favor of experimenting with breaking down traditions.

Bublely's image *Drinking Couple* illustrates residents' desire to reject conventions and former traditions by socializing with the opposite sex in a bedroom setting, which the boarding house facilitated easily (fig. 12). While boarding houses had been in operation in Washington

⁵⁶ Silverman, 43.

⁵⁷ Ibid. For more information on female housing conditions in the 1940s see McEuen, *Making War Making Women*, 104.

⁵⁸ McEuen, *Making War Making Women*, 104.

since the nineteenth century, they became popular with the onset of World War I and flourished during World War II.⁵⁹ Single men and women could admissibly live within the same boarding house, but on separate floors since living together in the same room was still morally risqué in the 1940s.⁶⁰ Co-habitation would even have been against Reform Judaist beliefs in the 1940s.⁶¹ Sexual co-habitation was also against Dissin's House regulations, yet from Bublely's photographs it is obvious that men and women spent time in each other's bedrooms, possibly alluding to other transgressions as well. As opposed to segregated apartments or hotels, these co-ed spaces allowed for private interactions between tenants, which reinforced romantic relationships and increased feelings of inclusion within modern society. In the photograph *Drinking Couple*, a man leans against a couch or headboard of a bed while a woman intimately leans against the man's shoulder. The couple happily share a drink together, an obvious rejection of the rule that forbade women in men's rooms and vice versa. It is evident that residents loosely followed this rule, as also seen in Bublely's photograph of a man and woman conversing together just outside a tenant's room in the hall (fig. 13). A light fixture on the wall separates the couple, shrouding their faces and the rest of the composition in darkness. The couple is situated in the boarding house hall rather than their room, yet the doorway the female figure occupies is open, alluding to the eventual consent to the man to enter. In the photograph Bublely captured a transitory and ambiguous moment where decorum could either be rejected or remain in place. The darkness encloses the couple with a sense of intimacy and secrecy alluding to residents' desire to straddle different beliefs, possibly breaking rules of decorum while others only got close to breaking

⁵⁹ For more on the popularity of boarding houses in America see Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 146-51. Strasser related the rise of boarding houses in America due to the industrial revolution and the rise of wage labor. As society transitioned from farming self-sustaining farms to industrialized jobs, boarding houses became a popular form of housing. By 1910 the practice of boarding had declined but was revived by World War II. Strasser, 146-51.

⁶⁰ Miller and Gillette, 190.

⁶¹ Reform Judaism evolved to condone co-habitation in the late twentieth century. For more information see Kertzer, 147-49.

them. The Dissins were the arbiters of tradition and by breaking their rules the residents rejected those beliefs rooted in what they might have seen as outdated attitudes. In light of these tenants' connection to Reform Judaism, these residents wanted to break down the stereotypes surrounding Jews as a peculiar people who wear head coverings and prayer shawls and rather present themselves as modern women and a part of mainstream America.⁶²

The Dissin's House residents connected themselves with mainstream American culture by participating in the leisure time spent at night. Bublely's image *Undisturbed Sleeper* reveals these female residents expanding their previously defined spaces for leisure. This photograph depicts a woman sleeping while a bridge game continues to go on late into the night (fig. 14). The figure in the foreground slumbers on one of three beds contained within the room. Her face appears before the viewer with her eyes closed and seemingly undisturbed. Meanwhile, in the background of the photograph, two men and two women continue to interact and play a game of bridge, a common American pastime rather than praying or reading the Torah. Bublely captured both acts going on simultaneously emphasizing the uncomfortable effects of inviting other residents into the bedroom space. One woman shares her private sleeping space with a group participating in leisure activities, illustrating the challenges of the workingwoman who used the night as a time for leisure. In the 1940s American women participated in leisure activities outside the private sphere of the home more frequently, expanding a female's typically accepted spheres for leisure. Many women were finding leisure activities within the public sphere as well.⁶³ The Dissin's House illustrates the larger attitude of women pursuing new ways of spending their time within the confines of the private sphere as well, which included activities with the opposite sex. The transition towards new spaces and times for leisure suggests the modernization of Jewish-

⁶² Kertzer, 90-91. See Kertzer's discussion on Jewish orthodox clothing.

⁶³ McEuen, *Making War Making Women*, 74.

Americans as a collective community, providing the support necessary to reject past traditions of propriety.

Combined with an association with Reform Judaism, their rejection of traditional rules and pastimes suggests that these Jewish-Americans, specifically the women, at Dissin's House took part in the transitional atmosphere of Washington, allowing them to reject past stereotypes and participate in mainstream American culture. Bublely's photographs of the Dissin's House boarders emphasize the tenants' participation in the larger community of Washington rather than their Jewish communal identity. Their Jewishness is not showcased in these photographs, but instead their American identity is highlighted.

At Dissin's: Cultural Ties within the Boarding House

While residents of the Dissin's House rejected certain practices, they did not completely remove all traces of their traditions based in Jewish identity and conventions of the past likely due to their sense of community at the Dissin's House. The former resident mentioned previously, Roselyn Silverman, referred to having a rabbi at her own wedding, which suggests that some of the residents expected to have a Jewish wedding, emphasizing their desire to navigate and choose for themselves the traditions they would continue and what they would shed aside. These choices illustrate that the Dissin's House residents were straddling a rift between traditions of the past and the modern reforms they pursued, illustrating the tension between their Jewish and American connections, and Bublely emphasized this conflict in the photographs.

The Dissin's House reinforced this divide since it was a site for a Jewish community to congregate, dividing them from mainstream American society. The Dissin's House residents felt a sense of inclusion and cultural support through their shared housing at the boarding house. The image, *Dining Hall*, illustrates a shared Jewish cultural tradition and is indicative of the leisure

time and space shared by the boarders of the Dissin's House (fig. 15). These shared aspects of intimate life established the community as a surrogate family. The residents shared two meals together almost every day of the week similar to the amount of time they might spend with a family member if they were living at home. As evidenced by the figures in the *Dining Hall* image, meal times were social rituals that occurred multiple times a day, increasing familiarity between renters.

Shared intimacy can be seen in another image by Bublely, which depicts women waiting for a shower. The *Shower Line* image illustrates that these women shared daily routines together underscoring the idea of a familial community (fig. 16). This photograph depicts three women waiting next to a bathroom door along a staircase. Each figure wears a bathrobe and clutches toiletries in their arms. Their hair appears disheveled and their grumpy faces exude unsociability. According to the caption of this image, "The schedule for use of the boardinghouse bathroom is worked out so that each person has eight minutes in the morning. It is social suicide to ignore the schedule and cause a tie-up like this." While this was a normal part of being within a boarding house and having roommates, these shared, mundane, and intimate rituals served to strengthen the residents' sense of familial belonging, as connections were supported by their shared Jewish culture. Bublely's reference to 'social suicide' suggests a level of conformity present within the Dissin's House community. With an understanding of their Jewish-American ties these women were unified and became similar through the Dissin's House community.

In another image depicting a group of women, Bublely explored the importance of communal space and the increased familial sentiment created by the proximity to each other within intimate spaces (fig. 17). Within this image, Bublely captured five women occupying a single, cluttered room to emphasize how space was intimate within boarding houses. In the

photograph a woman sits on the edge of a bed while two others lay on it in different directions. The back of another woman occupies the entire left side of the image creating a sense of confinement within the composition. On the right side of the photograph, a lamp in the foreground obstructs the face of another female figure. The room is littered with every-day objects including a rack with laundry drying on it in the corner. All these objects and figures demonstrate how spaces were shared within boarding houses and the resulting bonds that formed because of this intimacy.

The crowded aspects of a boarding house reinforced familial relationships, which was strengthened by their shared Jewish-American Identity. As both men and women came from all over America to Washington many social conventions, specifically within housing conditions, became acceptable enhanced by the atmosphere of war, which allowed more freedoms within the private sphere due to residents sharing intimate spaces outside a traditional home environment.⁶⁴ Bublely's photograph of the five women in a bedroom, paired with her image of three women sharing a bathroom, adequately sums up the private life of boarding house members (fig. 17 and 18). The image of three women in a bathroom depicts two women sharing a sink, one woman with a towel wrapped around her head while another woman uses the bathtub for her own hygienic routine (fig. 18). Bublely framed the composition of the three girls by including the doorframe of the bathroom. The darkness of the doorway and frame emphasizes the confined space of the bathroom. The only light source in the composition comes from within the bathroom illustrating the close proximity between the three women. Within the caption Bublely wrote, "Those who are not too modest save time by tripling up in the use of the boardinghouse bathroom." Bublely accentuated the limited space of the boarding house and the intimacy shared between boarders.

⁶⁴ Miller and Gillette, 181.

Just as shared space increased the strength of relationships between residents, the leisure time spent together in the private confines of the boarding house reinforced the Dissin's House as a surrogate home. This space, where leisure time was spent and relationships were created, was important to individual self-identification for women.⁶⁵ Bublely's photographs captured many groups interacting together. These activities increased mutual feelings of familiarity and kinship between residents leading to some of these residents to marry and create families of their own. Within Bublely's photograph, *A Bridge Game*, two men and two women sit together at a table engaged in a card game, the same group depicted with the sleeping figure in *Undisturbed Sleeper* (fig. 19 and 14). The women sit across the table towards the background and the men are positioned in the foreground with their backs to the viewer. Bublely captioned the photograph, "After dinner a bridge game goes on nightly in the largest room in the boardinghouse." Bublely's caption clarifies that this practice routinely took place in the evenings, reinforcing habitual social bonds, which led to even stronger bonds being formed in actual familial units. Due to the ties made from intimate living spaces and shared values as Jewish-American women, these residents felt a sense of community and Bublely showcased these ties in her photographs of the Dissin's House. Considering these aspects of the boarding house images can thus increase understanding of Jewish-American communities and the values the Dissin's House residents shared.

Dissin's House as a Site of Racial and Social Class Segregation

While the Dissin's House provided a place of community the boarding house became a site of segregation because it attracted Jews. Since the late-nineteenth-century, boarding houses in America appealed to immigrants who came without land ownership requiring some other form

⁶⁵ Eileen Green, "Flexible Work, Disappearing Leisure? Feminist Perspectives on Women's Leisure as Spaces for Resistance to Gender Stereotypes," in *Gender, Space and Identity: Leisure, Culture and Commerce*, ed. Cara Aitchison and Fiona Jordan (Eastbourne: Leisure Studies Association, 1998), 111.

of housing.⁶⁶ Workers who established themselves found housing, advertised to family and friends the best places for them to find boarding accommodations and thus united together as racial communities.⁶⁷ This practice established a method for creating neighborhoods of immigrants, which also created racial divisions. In the 1940s, Jewish, Italian and African-American communities dotted Washington.⁶⁸ These divisions, discussed in the context of Esther Bubley's images, reveal the Dissin's House as a sanctuary for Jews looking for housing in a safer, more desirable area because of the surrounding neighborhood. The Dissin's House was a mansion in an affluent area that converted into a boarding house.⁶⁹ Each member of the Dissin's House was a member of the working lower class and most shared similar working experiences, as they all were governmental clerks.⁷⁰ A Dissin's House tenant described a restaurant within the neighborhood where "none of us could afford to eat."⁷¹ This suggests that the neighborhood was alienating because of its connections to the upper class. This lack of affluence reinforced social segregation so that the workers could not afford to enter into establishments within their own neighborhood. Bubley's image of a woman looking out of the window of her boarding house room also displays alienation within the boarding house perhaps caused by social class and racial discrimination (fig. 20).⁷² The cropping of the composition situates the window frame so that it is the central focus of the composition. The light exposes the buildings outside and makes the female figure an anonymous voyeur of the world below. According to the caption of this

⁶⁶ Strasser, 151.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Miller and Gillette discussed the racial communities within Washington in the 1930s, which included Jews, Italians, and blacks. Miller and Gillette, 158-9.

⁶⁹ The neighbors that surrounded the residents of the Dissin's House included Alice Roosevelt Longworth as well as Cissy Patterson, who had a part in the *Chicago Tribune* wealth. Silverman, 42-46.

⁷⁰ "Life in a Boardinghouse in Washington D.C. Photographs by Esther Bubley."

⁷¹ Silverman, 46.

⁷² See Ellis, "Revolutionary Spaces: Photographs of Working Class Women by Esther Bubley 1940-1943," 92. Ellis discussed this specific image of a boarding house resident that shows a woman looking towards the mansions across the street (fig. 20) and argued how the figures in Bubley's images create their own "subjecthood" despite their social class.

photograph, “Boarders often speculate on the identity of the house across the street. They like to think it belongs to the President of a South American steamship line.” The anonymity of the main figure increases the sense of longing within the composition. The contrast between the darkened room and the clearly visible house outside the window creates a visible barrier between the working class woman and the upper class mansions outside. Her sense of inclusion within the Jewish boarding house would have increased exclusion felt by the surrounding neighborhood. The figure did not fit in and was therefore left to dream of feelings of inclusion exacerbated by her social class, gender and her Jewishness. Bublely’s photograph and written text both display the aspirations of a woman hoping to be included in another class and group of society.

Not only did exclusion come from the neighborhood surrounding the Dissin’s House, it came through the dominating culture of the entire city as well. Within the rapidly evolving metropolis of Washington, the occupants of the Dissin’s House felt the effects of urban social exclusion.⁷³ The restricted social, cultural and housing options within the city of Washington created alienation and isolation for the Dissin’s House boarders.⁷⁴ As a space advertised towards Jews the prospective renter automatically assigned him or herself to that sphere because they would be included. This led to Jews gathering in one place and creating divisions within the neighborhood.

While fighting to be included in typical American cultural values the female tenants’ own connection to Jewish culture intensified feelings of exclusion. Bernice Sains Freid, a military war

⁷³ Brinkley described the problems facing women working for the government. He wrote, “They were paid far less than almost any men working for the government in a city whose living costs were high. They were far from home. They were lonely. Occasionally the war agencies tried to help. Leon Henderson used his own money to set up a no-interest loan fund at the OPA for young women who ran out of cash awaiting their first pay check. Other offices appointed what on a college campus might have been called a dean of women, whose job it was to talk with new women employees, some of them as young as sixteen, and counsel them on how to deal with their problems: homesickness, fatigue from working at boring, repetitive jobs six days a week while spending evenings in small rooms stumbling over their roommates’ suitcases strewn around the floor.” Brinkley, 244-245.

⁷⁴ Ali Madanipour, “Social Exclusion and Space,” in *The City Reader*, ed. Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout (London: Routledge 1996), 185.

worker training at an American military base, often felt isolated by her Jewish heritage and wrote in 1944:

After I was here 2 weeks, I suddenly felt very lonely, a real melancholy swept over me that I couldn't shake off. This went on all day. Suddenly I realized what was bothering me. It was Friday night. It wasn't a rabbi or a synagogue I needed. It hit me that I was the only Jew on the campus, and there are 200 of us. I didn't dare tell my superior officer; she wouldn't understand. I felt I couldn't tell my 2 room mates, nice Christian girls, who would think I was peculiar.⁷⁵

This woman felt her differences and was isolated when she could not communicate with other Jews, further distinguishing her from mainstream America. Bublely's image *Out for a Good Time* illustrates the effects of social exclusion upon the Dissin's House boarders because of their social class and perhaps their Jewish identity (fig. 21). In this image a woman sits alone in a bedroom smoking a cigarette. In the center of the composition she is slumped against a wall, clothed in a floral print dress, sitting beneath a shelf with a small banner tacked to it reading "Out for a good time." Echoing FSA photography Bublely employed irony to enhance the meaning of this image. This female figure is not out for a good time and she often would have been excluded from a number of social activities because of her race, gender and social status within her own neighborhood. The light source shines down on her figure from the left side of the photograph shrouding her face with shadow, emphasizing a drab, darkened and even lonely space. In this image and others by Bublely a sense of melancholy is ever-present. Paula Rabinowitz explained this melancholy as an illustration that these women were 'femme fatales'

⁷⁵ In their book, *We're in This War, Too: World War II Letters from American Women in Uniform*, Barrett and Litoff included an experience related by Bernice Sains Freid's who discussed her involvement in Yeoman School at the United States Naval Training Station in Oklahoma. Freid recounted trying to find someone else Jewish in Oklahoma. After finding someone, she wrote, "I was cured instantly. Every Sat. night a Jewish family entertains us at their home... We sing songs around their piano mostly." Then she wrote of her next assignment, "I pray I'll get San Francisco. I wouldn't dare ask for a naval air station. I don't dare take a chance on being the only Jewish person in a place again." Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, *We're in This War, Too: World War II Letters from American Women in Uniform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 64-65.

and were sexually repressed, lacking male relationships.⁷⁶ Yet, this loneliness could also be linked to the exclusionary forces impacting the Dissin's House boarders.⁷⁷ In this light, the Dissin's House was a desirable place to live to combat those feelings of loneliness yet also was the cause of feeling isolated from mainstream American society.

While the Dissin's residents faced exclusion within their neighborhood, the female boarders also faced opposition in their search for housing. Washington provided a prime example of how women were discriminated against within housing accommodations all across the country.⁷⁸ In 1944 government agencies were trying to mitigate the discrimination landlords practiced against women in favor of male residents.⁷⁹ Many landlords complained that women were untidy, sloppy or they did too much laundry since women stereotypically owned more clothing.⁸⁰ Bublely documented women's laundry tasks in her image of her sister, Enid (fig. 22). She sits on the edge of a bed in the foreground of the composition. Behind her is a display of the lengths women went to keep their crowded spaces tidy. Instead of filling the closet with personal items or storage these women placed a hanging rack full of laundry in the closet enabling them to

⁷⁶ For more information see Rabinowitz, 225-29.

⁷⁷ McEuen, "Anger and Discontent: Esther Bublely's Portrait of the Upper South During World War II," 243. McEuen argued of a boarding house photograph (fig. 21), "Bublely's photograph seems to suggest that her melancholy subject must live vicariously, experiencing adventure and romance through radio broadcasts, while pressed under the weight of a powerful message that urges her to seek excitement outside the boundaries of her drab residence-hall existence." This thesis argues that this kind of isolation suggests that these women were excluded from certain activities derived from their gender as argued by McEuen but in light of their Jewish identity this image is further complicated by exclusion created by race.

⁷⁸ McEuen, *Making War Making Women*, 107. McEuen offered a discussion in her chapter on "Pleasant Aromas and Good Scents: Cleansing the Body Politic" that illustrated the kind of pressure women were under to cleanse the body from anything uncontrollable, which promoted the idea that women were somehow dirtier than the opposite sex. Through advertisements specifically for soap, women were encouraged to contain body odor, clothing odor and, in essence, the female body itself. McEuen, *Making War Making Women*, 100-132. For more on women's bodies during the war and the stigmas associated with cleanliness see Marilyn E. Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality During World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 2008). See Hegarty's chapter specifically titled, "Reservoirs of Infection: Science, Medicine, and Contagious Bodies" which discussed how Women were seen as unable to control their sexuality and thus women in uniform were given the label of 'loose woman' and it was a substantial societal concern. Hegarty, 61-84.

⁷⁹ Mercedes Rosebery, *This Day's Madness: A Story of the American People against the Background of the War Effort* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1944), 111.

⁸⁰ McEuen, *Making War Making Women*, 107-108.

keep their laundry contained. Within the shadow of the closet corner stands a woman behind the drying rack almost invisible from view except for the white of her collared shirt. While doing laundry she stands inside the closet as if hiding the act of cleaning her clothes. This photograph resonates with despondency due to the figure situated in the foreground. Her face is shadowed, perhaps from the figure of the photographer herself, her head is tilted down and her shoulders are slumped. Her eyes appear half open, as she looks downward. Bublely's depiction of a depressed woman doing laundry connects the mundane tasks of laundry with the females' private bedroom spaces, making their living conditions more uncomfortable and cramped. Containing one's hygienic practices was important for these women to keep many city landlords happy.

The females in the Dissin's House felt within housing and the work force as females, were excluded from certain establishments in their own neighborhood because of their social class and must have felt the isolating effects of their own unique identity as Jews. In light of these conflicts Bublely's photographs become representative of how these tenants negotiated between spaces and roles that might have been limited. Bublely also highlights the effects of these exclusionary practices upon the Dissin's House boarders within her photographs, calling attention to the resulting conflict and tension.

Participating in Mainstream American Roles and Trends

The female tenants at the Dissin's House participated in many mainstream American activities and roles that would have enhanced their connection to their American identity rather than their Jewish Identity. Many of the women at Dissin's House had loved ones, significant others, or spouses fighting in the war, as illustrated by multiple photographs in Bublely's documentation which demonstrate that these women were sending men off to war as American soldiers. This is specifically illustrated by the small photo on the wall above a boarder's desk

seen in Bublely's image of former resident, Roselyn Silverman (fig. 23). Bublely photographed this woman sitting next to a desk, fastening a bracelet to her wrist. The desk is covered in objects, which include a small figurine of a bride and groom. Just above the desk, the wall displays a photograph of the figure's husband. Bublely captioned the image, "This girl met her husband at the boardinghouse. When he was drafted, she moved back into her old room. His pictures decorate the dresser and wall." Silverman worked for the Navy, participated in the home front effort and even sent her spouse to war, suggesting loyalty to America. This same sacrifice is seen in Bublely's documentation of a woman at Arlington Farms, a popular boarding house in Washington, where her desk also displays a photo of her loved one fighting in the war effort (fig. 24). Through Bublely's image at Dissin's House she declares Silverman as an ideal American by emphasizing her sacrifice, one who was willing to lose her husband for the nation's cause. Bublely's deliberate treatment of the secular objects displayed in the image of Roselyn Silverman highlight the objects' importance in the individual lives of these residents. These objects symbolize the residents' resolute desire to promote themselves as participators in the American home front.

For the Jewish females living at Dissin's, assimilation was made easier by their inclusion within America's war effort on the home front. Office workers were needed to organize the bureaucracy of a government at war. Women were called upon to work in the military in the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps and the Women Appointed for Voluntary Emergency Service, but many were also employed as office clerks and secretaries.⁸¹ Washington had a variety of jobs that needed to be filled and much of the work, especially clerical work, was linked to war

⁸¹ Davol, 49.

production and organization.⁸² This emphasized a communal, nationalistic unity that would have united these different people working for the war effort as American workers. Most of the tenants at Dissin's were probably government clerks, which included them in the unified American wartime identity and contributed to their involvement in mainstream America.⁸³

Depicting a participation in American mainstream culture, Bublely's images show figures dressed in wartime fashion, reinforcing their inclusion in the war effort. While all of the images were taken within the private space of the boarding house itself, the image of two men lying down interacting with two women displays the office wear that would have been worn by women during the war (fig. 25). This photograph elucidates how these female workers would have felt included in the American cause. The female on the far right dressed in a black suit jacket and collared shirt sifts through a newspaper as she sits on the edge of a bed occupied by a man also dressed in appropriate office attire. This female figure positions herself with the men, even within a private setting, illustrating the residents' acceptance of modern trends. This photograph illustrates that these Jewish women were participating in the transitional atmosphere of wartime America, increasing their level of assimilation. Bublely created this composition through lighting effects and framing the figure, implying her control and decisions as the photographer.⁸⁴ From the right side of the composition, outside the picture plane, an artificial light illuminates the face of the female figure in the background. Bublely critically thought about her compositions, using artificial spotlights in some cases, to emphasize these Jews as members of fashionable American society.

⁸² McEuen discussed in her book *Making War Making Women* that while the war production and organizations subsumed a large part of the female work force (specifically in Washington) the lack of men due to the draft left other job opportunities open as well, such as a sales clerk or bank tellers. Melissa A. McEuen, *Making War Making Women*, 59.

⁸³ "Life in a Boardinghouse in Washington D.C. Photographs by Esther Bublely."

⁸⁴ Davol briefly stated that Bublely manipulated the photographs of the Dissin's House. Davol, 48.

Participation in mainstream American fashion trends is also seen in Bublely's image of a woman bent over a set of drawers listening to the radio wherein the woman displays herself in a simple, masculinized shirt-dress that coincides with fashion magazines depicting women of the 1940s (fig. 26). According to Beverly Gordon, "The styles that emerged [in America] were increasingly practical and informal and bore a fresh New World imprint that celebrated the 'pioneer' spirit, including a romanticization of 'hard' (blue collar) work and the American West."⁸⁵ The American fashion world promoted "blue collar" work wear for women, which caused women's fashion, specifically day-wear, to become more utilitarian and nationally unified. The 1940s audience saw propaganda posters, read *Vogue*, and other fashion materials, and found an underlying ideology of national American pride embedded within the advertisements. Imitation of the fashion world would have encouraged the Dissin's boarders to include themselves within the popular wartime styles and connect themselves to American trends.⁸⁶ Fashion consumption connects communities together through shared commerce, tastes and styles furthering acculturating Dissin's House residents.⁸⁷ An example of acceptable office wear was depicted in 1938 in an image advertised in *Harpers Bazaar* that captured a model in acceptable and fashionable daywear, specifically for the workingwoman (fig. 27). Bublely's images juxtaposed against any fashion magazine or government propaganda poster of the 1940s would showcase a direct correlation, illustrating that the Dissin's House women were participating in war production and wartime fashion in America therefore emphasizing their American identity rather than their Jewish identity.

⁸⁵ Beverly Gordon, "Showing the Colors: America," in *Wearing Propaganda: Textiles on the Home Front in Japan, Britain and the United States, 1931-1945*, ed. Jacqueline M. Atkins (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 239.

⁸⁶ Georg Simmel, "'Fashion' (1901)," in *The Rise of Fashion: A Reader*, ed. Daniel Leonhard Purdy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 290.

⁸⁷ Christian Garve, "'On Fashion,'" in *The Rise of Fashion*, ed. Daniel Leonhard Purdy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 66.

It is evident within Bublely's images that the boarders in the Dissin's House were attempting to assimilate and conform to the larger American culture, in part, because of markets available to them. These social markets and industries would have made the boarders aware of how to conform to the ideal. According to leisure theorist, Ken Roberts:

The leisure industries do not supply just goods and services. They also market desires, and enable consumers to be recognized as- and to feel like- particular kinds of people as a result of what they wear, eat, drink, what they listen to and watch, and where they are seen and who they are seen with.⁸⁸

By participating in certain activities and buying certain products these Jewish-Americans could feel included in a culture from which they were actively being excluded. Revisiting Bublely's image of Roselyn Silverman in front of her desk showcases this interest in commodities (fig. 23). In this image Silverman is in a private setting, in front of a desk covered with picture frames, a clock and other objects that represent a participation in the commodity culture prevalent within America. Bublely photographed a number of these spaces that included a desk covered in paraphernalia and objects, which created telling inventories of these residents' lives (fig. 28). Rather than an altar dedicated to Jewish cultural markers, these residents fill their space with other products and objects. The lack of previously discussed Jewish markers of identity or religious objects within this inventory of personal objects illustrates this woman's assimilation.⁸⁹ The inclusion of secular objects suggests a desire to fill one's personal space with cultural objects as if it were a consumerist shrine. In *The Washington Daily News* Dixon Donnelly wrote an article in 1941 entitled "Boarding Houses Are 'God's Gift' to Government Girls."⁹⁰ In the article Donnelly interviewed a landlord who complained of the female boarders spending too

⁸⁸ Karl Spracklen, "The Paradox of Leisure," in *The Meaning and Purpose of Leisure* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 18.

⁸⁹ For more information concerning the information obtained from an inventory of photographed objects see John Collier, Jr. and Malcolm Collier, *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), 46.

⁹⁰ Dixon Donnelly, "Boarding Houses Are 'God's Gift' to Government Girls," *The Washington Daily News*, Sept. 12, 1941, 27.

much.⁹¹ This illustrates the shopper's attitude that was prevalent in such an environment as the Dissin's House. Rather than own objects linked to their Jewish identity they bought objects that allowed them to purchase their own inclusion within American society and thereby present themselves as members of fashionable American culture, de-emphasizing their Jewish identity.

Bubley highlighted the American identity of the Jews in her photographs of the Dissin's House, presenting them as modern women unrestrained by past religious traditions and participants in mainstream American trends. Within the photographs, Bubley captured the isolating effects of this participation in American culture as Jewish-Americans. Upon completion of this documentation Bubley must have presented the photographs to Stryker with hopes they would strike a chord in his agenda. The Dissin's House photographs must have resonated with Stryker as a representation of an entire community of Jewish-Americans emphasizing their American culture. These photographs therefore became a part of Stryker's attempt to create a photographic record of American communities.

Conclusion

Bubley's images have become a part of the photographic file Stryker hoped to create, existing now as a collection in the Library of Congress. An exploration of Bubley's documentation reveals the Jewish-American identity as a complex construction of inclusion and exclusion, rejection of past tradition and acceptance of modern transitions, displaying a multi-faceted face of America. At a heightened moment of anti-Semitism and proliferating stereotypes, Bubley reacted and injected herself and her community's identity into the resulting photographs. By highlighting the women's participation in fashionable trends and roles prevalent in

⁹¹ Donnelly, 27.

mainstream American culture Bublely's photographs deconstruct the typical idea of a Jewish-American, shedding light on an entire American community during World War II.

Bublely presented these residents as modern Americans shedding the stereotypes surrounding their Jewish heritage and revealed their conflicts, isolation and loneliness resulting from their navigation through two distinct identities. The Dissin's House photographs act as representations of this group's perspective and reality. Susan Sontag wrote, "Photography is the inventory of mortality" and the Dissin's House photographs are now an inventory of the lives of these Jewish-Americans.⁹² These images must be pulled out of the filing cabinets and revisited to increase understanding of World War II American home front identity. Bublely provided within this file a resonating depiction of one of the faces of America, the Jewish-American. By so doing, her photography must be considered to fully understand the history of America's diverse citizens.

This thesis situates Bublely's photographs within American history and does so with an effort to accurately describe and understand the life of a Jewish-American woman working during World War II. American society has often misunderstood its own communities, reacting with fear, stereotypes, misrepresentation and even mistreatment. In times of war or conflict, these practices increase as a result of fear for the unknown and ignorance of other cultures. Documentary photography of minority groups in America can be a lens towards a more accurate understanding of ethnic, religious, and cultural practices and can lead to a more progressive attitude towards those communities. Bublely's photographs should be appreciated for their significance in documenting Jewish-American communities in a time when Jews were often misunderstood in the United States. Photographs, like those of Bublely, break down ignorant

⁹² Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 70.

practices and help overcome misconceptions, perhaps approaching a more accurate understanding of not only Jewish-American identity, but American identity as well.

FIGURES

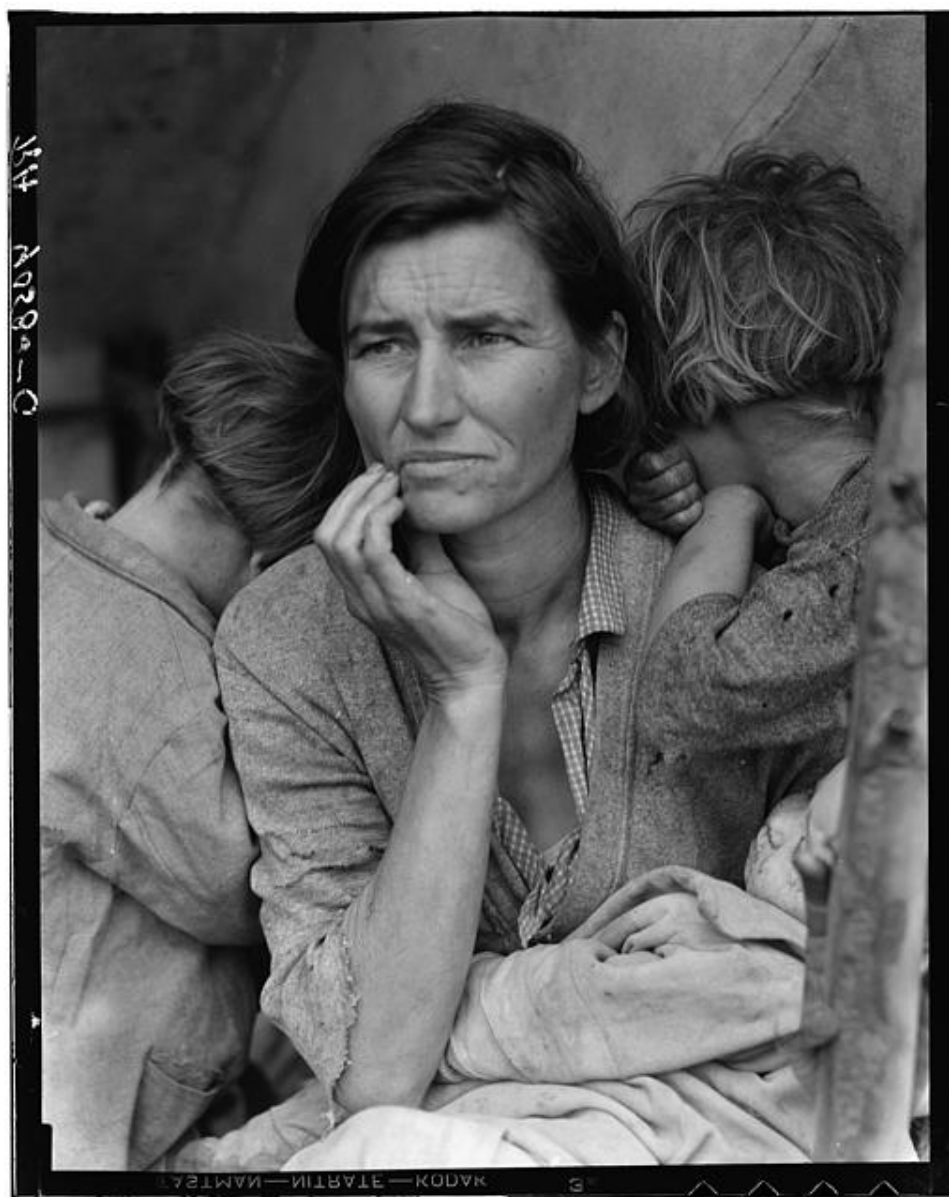


Figure 1, Dorothea Lange, photograph, *Destitute peapickers in California; a 32 year old mother of seven children. February 1936*, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Figure 2, Arthur Rothstein, toned silver gelatin silver print, *Fleeing a Dust Storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma, April 1936*, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

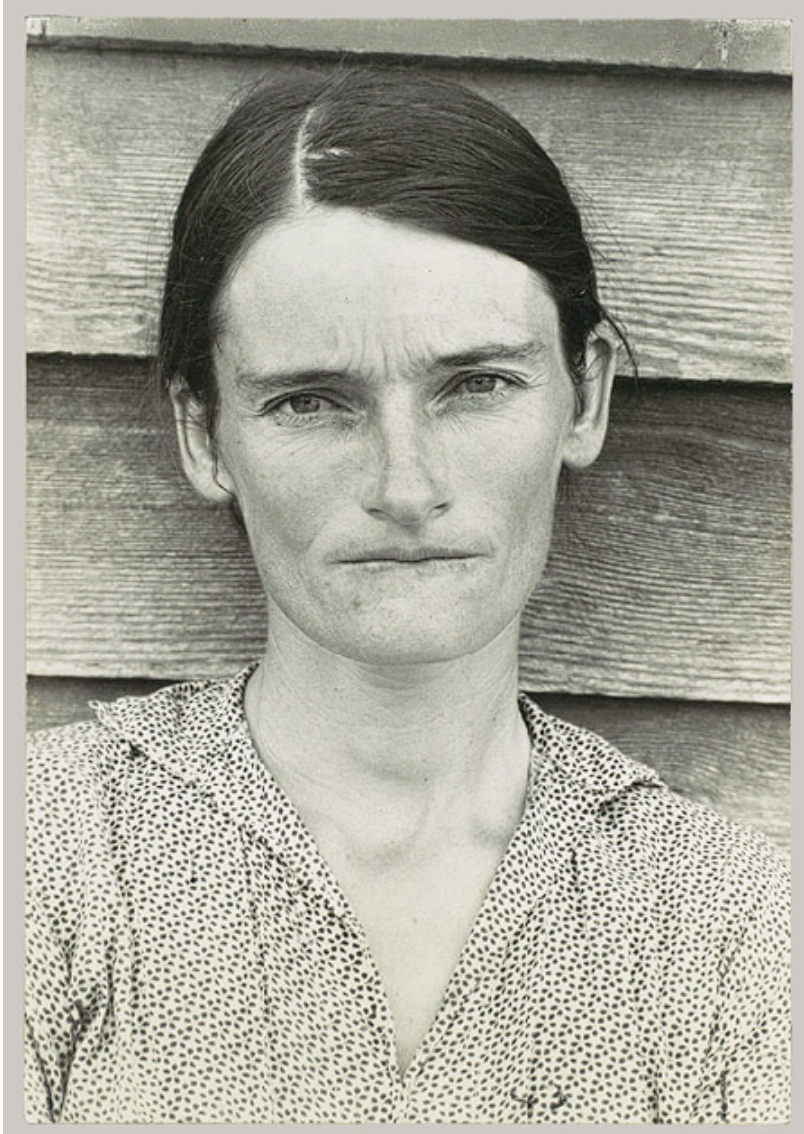


Figure 3, Walker Evans, gelatin silver print, *Alabama Tenant Farmer Wife*, 1936, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Figure 4, Esther Bubley, photograph, *Girl waiting for a pickup in the Sea Grill*, Washington, D.C., April 1943



Figure 5, Esther Bubley, photograph, *Bus Trip: Greyhound Bus Terminal, NYC In the waiting room, July 1947*



Figure 6, Esther Bublely, photograph, *Washington, D.C. An evening gathering in a boardinghouse*, Jan. 1943, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Figure 7, Roger Smith, photograph, *War Workers. Social activities. A government girl entertains her young navy officer friend in "Lovers Lane" nook of Scotts' Hotel, a government hotel for women war workers*, Mar. 1943, Library of Congress Prints and Photography Division, Washington, D.C.



Figure 8, Marjory Collins, photograph, *Washington, D.C.* A government secretary in the *United States Office of Emergency Management (OEM)* cleaning her typewriter, Feb. 1943, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Figure 9, Esther Bublely, photograph, *Arlington, Virginia*. *Washing clothes in one of the laundry rooms at Idaho Hall, Arlington Farms, a residence for women who work in the government for the duration of the war*, June 1943, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington D.C.



Figure 10, Ben Shahn, Mural, Roosevelt, New Jersey, 1937-1938, commissioned by the Farm Security Administration



Figure 11, Esther Bublely, photograph, *Washington, D.C.* The proprietor of this boardinghouse watches the service at dinner, Jan. 1943, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Figure 12, Esther Bubley, photograph, *Washington, D.C. A boardinghouse rule forbids men guest to come into girls' rooms and vice versa (Drinking Couple)*, Jan. 1943, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Figure 13, Esther Bubley, photograph, *Washington, D.C. In the hall of a boardinghouse*, Washington, D.C, Jan. 1943, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Figure 14, Esther Bubley, photograph, *Washington, D.C. A bridge game does not disturb this sleeper (Undisturbed Sleeper)*, Jan. 1943, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Figure 15, Esther Bubley, photograph, Dissin's Guest House, Washington, D.C, (*Dining Hall*), 1942, Esther Bubley Archives website



Figure 16, Esther Bubley, photograph, *Washington, D.C. The schedule for use of the boardinghouse bathroom is worked out so that each person has eight minutes in the morning. It is social suicide to ignore the schedule and cause a tie-up like this (Shower Line)*, Jan. 1943, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

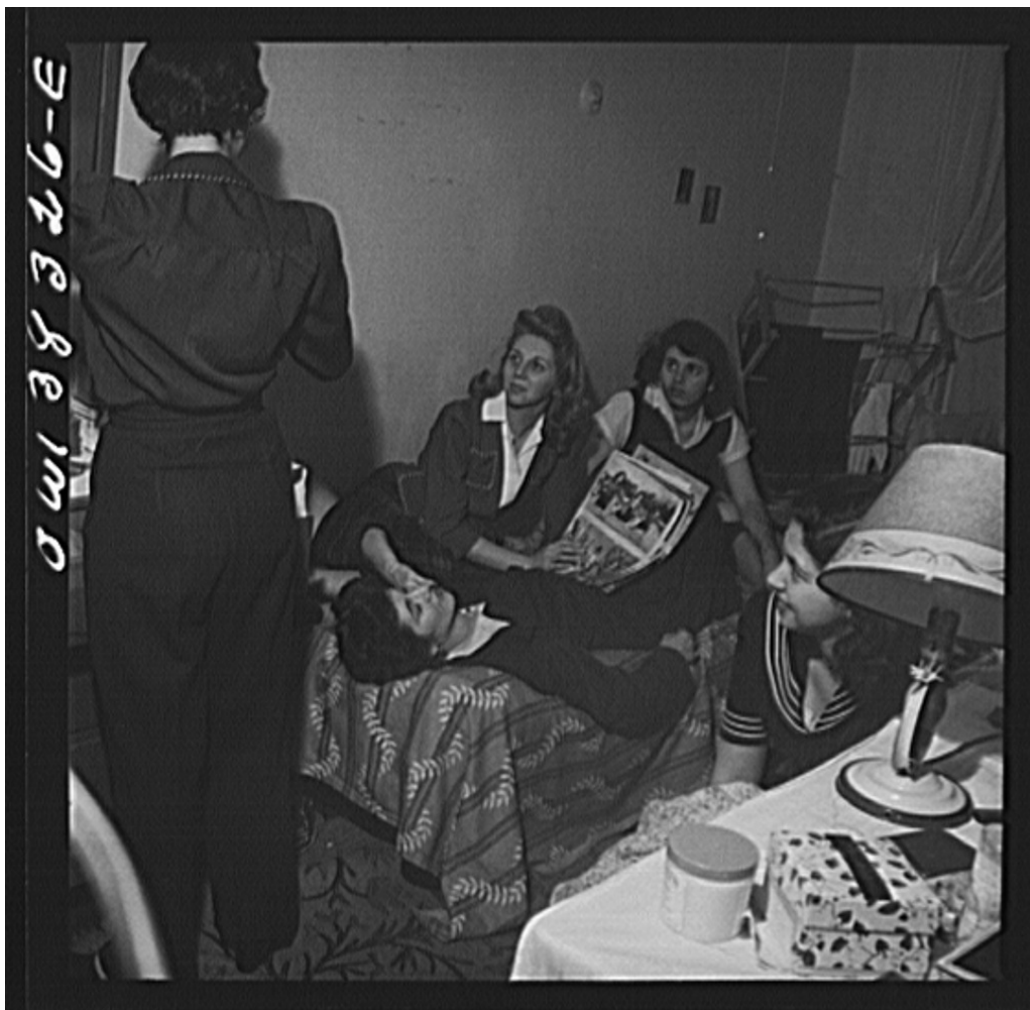


Figure 17, Esther Bubley, photograph, *Washington, D.C. An evening gathering in a boardinghouse*, Jan. 1943, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Figure 18, Esther Bubley, photograph, *Washington, D.C. Those who are not too modest save time by tripling up in the use of the boardinghouse bathroom*, Jan. 1943, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Figure 19, Esther Bublely, photograph, *Washington, D.C. After dinner a bridge game goes on nightly in the largest room in the boardinghouse (A Bridge Game)*, Jan. 1943, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Figure 20, Esther Bubley, photograph, *Washington, D.C.* Boarders often speculate on the identity of the owner of the house across the street. They like to think it belongs to the President of a *South American steamship line*, Jan. 1943, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Figure 21, Esther Bublely, photograph, *Washington, D.C. Listening to a murder mystery on the radio in a boardinghouse room (Out for a Good Time)*, Jan. 1943, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Figure 22, Esther Bubley, photograph, *Washington, D.C. Girl in the doorway of her room at a boardinghouse*, Jan. 1943, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Figure 23, Esther Bublely, photograph, *Washington, D.C.* *This girl met her husband at the boardinghouse. When he was drafted, she moved back into her old room. His pictures decorate the dresser and wall, Jan. 1943, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.*



Figure 24, Esther Bubley, photograph, *Arlington, Virginia*. Mirrors over the dressing table conceals a cabinet which gives girls extra space for their cosmetics, etc., at *Arlington Farms*, a residence for women who work in the government for the duration of the war, June 1943, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington D.C.



Figure 25, Esther Bubley, photograph, *Washington, D.C. A boardinghouse rule forbids men guests to come into girls' rooms and vice versa*, Jan. 1943, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Figure 26, Esther Bubley, photograph, *Washington, D.C. Listening to a murder mystery on the radio in a boardinghouse room*, Jan. 1943, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Figure 27, Martin Munkacsi, Saks Fifth Avenue, Harper's Bazaar, June 1938, Howard Greenberg Gallery, NYC, image published in Rebecca Arnold's *The American Look: Sportswear, Fashion and the Image of Women in 1930s and 1940s New York*



Figure 28, Esther Buble, photograph, *Washington, D.C. Pictures of her husband decorate the dresser and mirror of this boardinghouse resident, Jan. 1943*, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

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