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# The Trouble with Sumner Welles: Sexuality, Race, and the Limits of Mythmaking in Queer History

CHRIS PARKES

Sumner Welles occupies a queer place in American history. Despite his prominence, his reputation among diplomatic historians has been overshadowed by the sex scandal that occasioned his demise. Conversely, he has attracted cursory attention from scholars of the history of sexuality. This article examines that historiographic dialectic. By analyzing literature about Welles, conducting a close reading of sources that catalogued Welles's sexuality, and applying an intersectional lens to the scandal that ended his career, this article seeks to redress historiographic misunderstandings and omissions about Welles. Additionally, this article explores ethical questions historians must contend with when analyzing historical queer figures.

On 18 September 1943, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover sent a memorandum to Attorney General Francis Biddle about a conversation that had occurred a few days earlier at the Warner Brothers Studio in Hollywood, California. According to Hoover's memo, the conversation concerned "the real difficulty between" Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles and his longtime rival Secretary of State Cordell Hull,<sup>1</sup> namely that Welles "had been in the habit of having 'sexual affairs with young negro boys'."<sup>2</sup> These allegations had been relayed via Los Angeles police commissioner Al Cohn, who claimed he had heard them from Hoover.<sup>3</sup> Hoover vehemently denied being the source of the information and used the rest of the memo to denounce Cohn (a man of "unsavory character and utter unreliability"),

<sup>1</sup> J. Edgar Hoover, "Memorandum for the Attorney General," 18 Sept. 1943, National Archives and Record Administration, College Park, Maryland (NARA II), RG 65, Office of the Director, J. Edgar Hoover, Official and Confidential Subject Files, 1924–1972, Box 24, Hoover O+C Files #157 Wells [*sic*], Sumner (Deceased) [1 of 2]. See also Douglas M. Charles, *Hoover's War on Gays: Exposing the FBI's "Sex Deviates" Program* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015), 49–51.

<sup>2</sup> Hoover, "Memorandum for the Attorney General."

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

aver the true source of Cohn's information (an "eastern Senator"), and advise Biddle that Cohn had shared his account of Welles with MGM director Clarence Brown, who then told the actress Irene Dunne.<sup>4</sup> Hoover closed by noting, "I thought you would be interested in this matter, since it does clearly indicate how vicious rumors can be circulated."<sup>5</sup>

Along with Hoover's self-serving impulses, the memo serves as a testament to two major themes in historical accounts of Sumner Welles: sexuality and race. Welles was an infamously fastidious man.<sup>6</sup> Yet the circumstances of his resignation and the scandal that caused it were messy, stemming from ugly prejudices and dynamics of exploitation and discrimination endemic to the United States. These circumstances were fodder for gossip columnists in Welles's day and subsequently for historians, all of whom recounted Welles's scandal as a means of explaining the political machinations of the Roosevelt administration or US foreign policy more generally.<sup>7</sup> Yet Welles's desires, his behavior, and the meanings underlying them hold greater significance for understanding his own sexuality, the subtleties of same-sex intimacy in the 1940s, and the ways historians have written about queer people, than has hitherto been acknowledged.

What follows is an analysis of the intersection of race, sex, and class in mid-twentieth-century America through an examination of the scandal that forced the resignation of Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles. Through a close reading of FBI documents pertaining to Welles and historical accounts of Welles's career, this article argues that the encounters between Welles and the men he solicited reveal a more complicated set of norms surrounding same-sex intimacy than has previously been appreciated. First, Welles's utilization of, and improvisation with, the etiquette of queer sexual solicitation belies traditional historiographic depictions of his sexuality. Second, there was a unique and complicated set of sexual identities and expectations at play in this era, particularly among the African American men whom Welles pursued. Those identities and expectations comprised a sexual ecosystem

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> A probably apocryphal story alleged that Welles wore white gloves as a child while playing. See "The Diplomat's Diplomat," *Time*, 11 Aug. 1941, 10.

<sup>7</sup> See Benjamin Welles, *Sumner Welles: FDR's Global Strategist* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Irwin F. Gellman, *Secret Affairs: Franklin Roosevelt, Cordell Hull, and Sumner Welles* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Christopher D. O'Sullivan, *Sumner Welles, Postwar Planning and the Quest for a New World Order 1937-1943* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Jean Edward Smith, *FDR* (New York: Random House, 2008), 582-83; Frank Costigliola, *Roosevelt's Lost Alliances: How Personal Politics Helped Start the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 74; Ted Morgan, *FDR: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 677-86.

that both afforded Welles opportunities for same-sex intimacy and, paradoxically, all but ensured negative consequences. Third, Welles's canny, if not outright conscious, manipulation of the asymmetries of power between him and his would-be partners raises disquieting questions about the role that structural inequalities play in shaping sexual encounters between queer men of the past. Examining Welles's behavior in this way challenges the normative application by queer historians of a sympathetic interpretive lens when observing the lives of historical queer people.

### THE MIDNIGHT TRAIN: WELLES'S SCANDAL AND HISTORIOGRAPHIC DEBATE

Studying the accounts, context, and implications of sexual intimacy in the past raises a number of tricky methodological questions for historians. First, the very notion of sexuality as a coherent category of analysis runs aground on the jagged inconsistencies of the lived experiences of historical individuals. As Martha Umphrey argued, in a history of queer(ed) people "the paradoxes and complexities, indeed the historical specificity of sexual practices," are central to understanding those historical figures whose intimate lives refused to conform to conventional or stable boundaries, and the contested nature of those boundaries themselves.<sup>8</sup> What counts as a "real" or "important" sexual act, and what significance that act carried for the persons involved at the time, and for historians studying them after the fact, are protean, unfixed, and contingent. In the case of Sumner Welles, the effort by historians to neatly categorize Welles's behavior within a specific sexual identity – or, as will be seen, ascribe it to a pathology – has disavowed such an approach, resulting in significant analytical oversights.

Additionally, ontological and epistemological difficulties inherent in acquiring reliable evidence about a subject as taboo as queer sex present an alternative set of challenges. As Claire Bond Potter succinctly summed up in her 2006 essay on J. Edgar Hoover, "how ... historians ... treat evidence about events that may not be factual, partially factual, or impossible to prove" raises fundamental questions about the nature of the insights it is possible to draw about queer people in the past and how those insights inform political culture.<sup>9</sup> However, despite these challenges, the more scholars examine sexuality as a category of social practice, the more the advantages – indeed, the

<sup>8</sup> Martha M. Umphrey, "The Trouble with Harry Thaw," *Radical History Review*, 62 (Spring 1995), 9–23, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Claire Bond Potter, "Queer Hoover: Sex, Lies, and Political History," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 15, 3 (Sept. 2006), 355–81, 358.

necessity – of using sexuality as a lens on historical figures becomes clear. In Welles’s case, the extent of documentation of his sexuality portends an especially rich vein of historical enquiry. With a nuanced close reading, these documents serve as a corrective to homophobic portrayals of Welles by his contemporaries and the generations of historians who replicated their biases. Furthermore, removing the veil of prejudice brings into focus those historical specificities that applied to Welles, the complexities of which have been overlooked by historians unfamiliar with intersectional or queer readings of the past. Examining Welles’s story in this manner adds texture to historical understandings of queer life in Welles’s time, and complicates simplistic historical narratives about the oppression of queer people.

Sumner Welles was born on 14 October 1892 in New York City.<sup>10</sup> He was the scion of one of the most esteemed and wealthy families of the American Gilded Age. Educated at Groton Preparatory School under the strict tutelage of its infamous headmaster Endicott Peabody, Welles matriculated to Harvard University. At both schools he became acquaintances with much of what would become the governing elite of the United States thirty years later, including Averill Harriman, Dean Acheson, and others.<sup>11</sup> He also acquired this elite’s belief in public service and progressive idealism, which impelled him to become a committed acolyte of Wilsonian progressive foreign policy and to apply for a position in the State Department in 1915, his application being endorsed by then Assistant Secretary of the Navy, and fellow Groton and Harvard alumnus, Franklin D. Roosevelt.<sup>12</sup> Over the next thirty years, Welles rose through the State Department’s ranks, achieving the position of Undersecretary of State, in which he served from 1937 to 1943. Because he got along better with Roosevelt than with the actual Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, who was often incapacitated by tuberculosis, Welles served as *de facto* Secretary of State for much of 1940–43. In that role Welles left a profound mark on American foreign policy and diplomatic affairs.<sup>13</sup>

However, Welles’s career in the State Department met an abrupt end in August 1943. Following weeks of speculation and months of mounting pressure on Roosevelt, Welles resigned. Officially, the departure was explained as a

<sup>10</sup> “Welles, Sumner, of New York,” undated, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library (FDRL), Sumner Welles Papers (SWP), Box 261, Folder 3, 1919. <sup>11</sup> Welles, 11–14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 36; The ethos of this rarified social caste doubtlessly left a deep impression on Welles and his worldview. For further discussion see Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Welles’s education, upbringing, and career highlights have been recounted in several historical works. For a purely biographical take of his early life see Welles, 7–38.

consequence of a disagreement between Welles and Hull, but as the aforementioned Hoover letter to Biddle indicated, there was considerably more to the story.<sup>14</sup>

Since 1941 Welles had been the target of a coordinated campaign of rumor-mongering and character assassination, orchestrated by his rival, former ambassador to France William “Bill” Bullitt, alleging that Welles bribed “negro pullman car employees to have sexual relations with him while on the President’s train returning from Speaker [William B.] Bankhead’s funeral.”<sup>15</sup> The rumors were true. The FBI had investigated Welles in response to complaints by Pullman porters working for the Southern Railway Company. Roosevelt was made aware of the report but chose to quietly bury it and keep Welles on regardless.<sup>16</sup> However, knowledge of the incident circulated discretely among Southern Railway management and staff, eventually making its way to an ally of Bullitt’s, Assistant Secretary of State R. Walton Moore.<sup>17</sup> Bullitt confronted Roosevelt about the contents of the report in April 1941 but was rebuffed.<sup>18</sup> Still, Bullitt persisted and over the next two years raised the issue in discussions with Cordell Hull, Attorney General Francis Biddle, and Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes.<sup>19</sup> By summer 1943 Bullitt’s subterranean campaign had reached critical mass, with Senators on the Senate Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program (aka the Truman Committee) allegedly discussing the possibility of removing Welles.<sup>20</sup> Secretary of State Hull, who resented Welles for his close relationship with the President, used the imminent controversy to force the issue with Roosevelt.<sup>21</sup> Faced with Hull’s growing anger and

<sup>14</sup> Gellman, 318.

<sup>15</sup> “Memorandum of Conversation with Secretary Ickes,” 23 July 1941, Yale University Library Manuscript Collections (YUL), William C. Bullitt Papers (WCBP), Group No. 112, Series No. VI, Box 210, Folder 217.

<sup>16</sup> “Memorandum of Conversation with the President,” 23 April 1941, YUL, WCBP, Group No. 112, Series No. VI, Box 210, Folder 217. <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> “Memorandum of Conversation with Secretary Ickes,” 23 July 1941, WCBP, Group No. 112, Series No. VI, Box 210, Folder 217; untitled memorandum dated 5 Jan. 1943, WCBP Group No. 112, Series No. VI, Box 210, Folder 217; untitled memorandum dated 19 Jan. 1943, WCBP Group 112, Series No. VI, Box 210, Folder 218.

<sup>20</sup> Telemeter titled “WASH FROM LOSA 6 2 755 P,” 2 Sept. 1943, NARA II, RG 65, Office of the Director, J. Edgar Hoover, Official and Confidential Subject Files, 1924–1972, Box 24, Hoover O+C Files #157 Wells, Sumner (Deceased) [1 of 2].

<sup>21</sup> Accounts of what precipitated Welles’s resignation at this precise moment are contested. Cordell Hull insisted in his memoirs that Roosevelt had “decided on his own” to remove Welles. However, accounts by Irwin Gellman and Jean Edward Smith (citing Hull’s memoirs) insist Hull had threatened to resign unless Welles was removed. The precise sequence of events is not immediately evident from examination of the relevant source material. See Cordell Hull, *The Memoirs of Cordell Hull*, Volume II (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1948), 1230; Gellman, 317; Smith, *FDR*, 583.

the possibility of the rumors about Welles becoming public, Roosevelt capitulated, accepting Welles's resignation on 16 August 1943.<sup>22</sup>

The story outlined above, or some version of it, has been recounted in varying detail over the past forty years by dozens of historians studying Welles's career. Yet in every case, historiographic debate about Welles has remained "muted."<sup>23</sup> Some historians have elided or misrepresented his sexuality and the scandal that brought his career in government to an end.<sup>24</sup> These elisions have come in many forms: outright denial, ignorance, or homophobic explanations of Welles's behavior as aberrations caused by alcohol or mental illness. Consequently, crucial details about Welles's personal life have been left unexamined. Conversely, other scholars have limited their analyses of Welles to recounting the details of the events that led to his resignation, and noting their relevance to sociopolitical trends regarding the treatment of queer people generally.<sup>25</sup> The accounts of Welles's sexual encounters themselves have been overlooked as resources for historians wishing to interrogate the dynamics of same-sex intimacy during Welles's time. Addressing these oversights offers a multitude of historiographic and historical insights. It serves as a rebuttal to the homophobic calumnies unfairly heaped upon Welles for his sexuality, and places him firmly in the roster of (in)famous queer people in the United States, rather than an aberration or an afterthought. Meanwhile, adopting such an approach refocusses attention on the crucial interplay of sexuality with social mores and norms of etiquette and behavior at the time, particularly those of race and class, underscoring the deftness and perspicacity Welles employed when navigating the treacherous terrain of seeking same-sex intimacy in the 1940s, and the problematic implications of that navigation for any historiographic reassessment of Welles's legacy.

Where Welles's sexuality merited mention in works of diplomatic history it has unerringly been cast as unimportant, undesirable, or both. The first major work examining Welles's entire career, a posthumously published PhD thesis by Frank Warren Graff, asserted,

Nothing can be gained from a discussion of these rumors and whispers about Welles' personal life. The only reason this problem is mentioned in this study at all is: first, the rumors prevented the President from brushing aside Hull's complaints as he had done so many times before; secondly, once the rumors began to spread, they impaired Welles' effectiveness as a diplomat.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Welles to Roosevelt, 16 Aug. 1943, FDRL, SWP, Box 152, Folder 4.

<sup>23</sup> O'Sullivan, *Summer Welles*, x.

<sup>24</sup> See note 7 above.

<sup>25</sup> See Charles Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis 1940–1996* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1997), 17–18, 81; David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 65–67, 71.

<sup>26</sup> Frank Warren Graff, "The Strategy of Involvement: A Diplomatic Biography of Sumner Welles, 1933–1943," PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1971, 419 n. 68.

Despite the evidently contradictory assertion that “nothing can be gained” from examining Welles’s scandal while acknowledging its interpretive significance for Welles’s “effectiveness as a diplomat,” Graff at least acknowledged that sexuality played a role in Welles’s career. Even that marginal acknowledgment of Welles’s sexuality was absent from two other early pieces of scholarship, both of them analyzing Welles’s Latin American policies, as well as more focussed studies of Welles’s 1940 peace-seeking “Mission to Europe.”<sup>27</sup>

A different tack was adopted in the 1997 biography of Welles by his eldest son Benjamin. Though unabashed in acknowledging the existence of Welles’s same-sex desires, the younger Welles went out of his way to demonstrate that his father’s pursuits of same-sex intimacy were accidental, superficial, or the product of being “physically and emotionally exhausted ... [w]eary and in his cups.”<sup>28</sup> Benjamin quoted a contemporary of his father’s to assert that Welles “recoiled from anything even suggestive of homosexuality” during his time at Groton and carried on “multiple love affairs, almost all with women nine or ten years older” in Paris, where Welles lived during his early twenties.<sup>29</sup> The emergence of Welles’s “latent bisexuality” during a posting to Argentina was interpreted as the influence of “a favorable environment,” according to a source reflecting later on Welles’s behavior, adding, “Respectable married men of high position, like [Welles], gave vent to deviation ... his preference for men was always there, only controlled by shame and a Puritan ethos. In Argentina, he found a different attitude and he let the reins slip.”<sup>30</sup> Projecting his own prejudices onto his father, the younger Welles scoffed at Argentines of this period who “turned to drugs and homosexuality for stimulation,” and insisted that Sumner “was repelled by the homosexuality then prevalent among the French upper classes.”<sup>31</sup>

Such conspicuous straightwashing of Welles conflicts with the totality of evidence about his personal life, much of it contained (and derisively dismissed) in the biography itself. From an early age and throughout his life Welles pursued a variety of relationships with women and other men, in some cases developing deep and intimate connections.<sup>32</sup> At Harvard Welles shared a room with Harden de Valson Pratt, who was later investigated by

<sup>27</sup> See Thomas M. Millington, “The Latin American Diplomacy of Sumner Welles,” PhD dissertation, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, 1966; Gail Hanson, “Sumner Welles and the American System: The United States in the Caribbean, 1920–1940,” PhD dissertation, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1990; J. Simon Rofe, *Franklin Roosevelt’s Foreign Policy and the Welles Mission* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007); Stanley E. Hilton, “The Welles Mission to Europe, February–March 1940: Illusion or Realism?”, *Journal of American History*, 58, 1 (June 1971), 93–120.

<sup>28</sup> Welles, *Sumner Welles*, 379. <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 13, 29. <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 58–9. <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 58, 29.

<sup>32</sup> Welles married three women during his life: Esther Slater, Mathilde Townsend, and Harriette Post, siring two children by the first. Though Welles’s attraction to women



the FBI for being a suspected “pervert.”<sup>33</sup> When traveling in France the year he graduated from Harvard, Welles had repeated encounters with a local man who presented Welles with expensive gifts, but whom Welles later rebuffed.<sup>34</sup> In his later years, Welles invited his younger male “valet” to live with him – a “psychopathic bisexual” named Gustave van Hamme whom the younger Welles found to be a “malignant influence.”<sup>35</sup>

Most notably, at Groton Welles befriended a “small artistic boy” named Ives Gammell.<sup>36</sup> Gammell and Welles became close, spending time together through university and traveling to France following graduation.<sup>37</sup> The two remained friends for decades, corresponding regularly. When Welles was forced to resign his post in 1943, Gammell wrote wistfully to Welles of how their times together in Provincetown and Paris had given him “the first hint that there existed a world into which I might fit.”<sup>38</sup> Of Welles’s resignation, Gammell tellingly commented, “I picture you resting on your laurels and waiting to move into the next square – I suppose you are a queen now and can move in any direction across the board.”<sup>39</sup>

Other works that acknowledge the presence of sexuality in shaping Welles’s fortunes have displayed a noticeable heterosexist and homophobic bias. In 1995 Irwin Gellman wrote a tripartite biography of Welles, Franklin Roosevelt, and Cordell Hull, analyzing how the dynamics between these men shaped US foreign policy. Gellman’s treatment of Welles’s sexuality was direct but loaded. According to Gellman, Welles was “deeply troubled with his masculinity,” he “engaged in clandestine bisexual behavior,” and “when intoxicated, he let down his inhibitions and propositioned Negroes for homosexual interludes.”<sup>40</sup> This allegedly darker side of Welles led to the “charges of immorality [that] ... precipitated his ouster.”<sup>41</sup> Gellman also recounted the final years of Welles’s life with a litany of salacious rumours based on “[c]onfidential sources who did not wish to be cited.”<sup>42</sup>

Gellman’s reproachful language and judgmental conclusions set the tone for subsequent scholars. The most recent work on Welles, Christopher O’Sullivan’s 2009 *Sumner Welles, Postwar Planning and the Quest for a New World Order 1937–1943*, described Welles as “a deeply troubled man

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comprises an indisputable component of his personal life, the contours of those relationships are tangential to this article’s analysis. See Welles, 37–38, 114, 369.

<sup>33</sup> Welles, 24–25; memorandum for the director, 4 Sept. 1942, NARA, RG 65, Office of the Director, J. Edgar Hoover Official and Confidential Subject Files, 1924–1972, Box 24, File 156, Washington Field Division–Misc. Info to File 164, Wiretapping, Use of in FBI, Hoover O+C Files #157 Wells, Sumner (Deceased) [1 of 2]. <sup>34</sup> Welles, 29.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 368, 364, 372.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 24, 28–29.

<sup>38</sup> Gammell to Welles, 15 Dec. 1943, SWP, Box 146, Folder 7.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Gellman, *Secret Affairs*, x, 56.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 392–8, 452 n. 45.

who wore different faces for different occasions and different people.”<sup>43</sup> Tellingly, O’Sullivan identified “the lurid nature of the real reasons behind his abrupt resignation in August 1943” as stemming from an incident where “an intoxicated Welles propositioned several black male porters.”<sup>44</sup> The emphasis on intoxication, as well as the ascription to Welles of a bifurcated, Jekyll-and-Hyde personality, reappears consistently as a trope in the attempts to explain how Welles’s seemingly unassailable position and promising career ended in such tragic fashion.

One way or another, all the academic work focussing on the career of Sumner Welles deliberately quarantined his queer sexual behavior away from the rest of his life. When not denying its existence outright, scholars have repeatedly imputed motives to Welles’s same-sex attraction that denied its authenticity, invoked it as a calumny on Welles’s character, or equated it to mental illness. In this manner, generations of historians have replicated the same homophobic discourses that destroyed Welles’s career in the first place.

#### A BRIEF ENCOUNTER: THE TREACHEROUS GROUND OF QUEER SEXUAL ETIQUETTE

Dropping the homophobic bias of preceding generations allows an altogether different depiction of Welles’s sexual interests and pursuits to emerge while opening an avenue for deeper understanding of the milieu in which Welles’s pursuits were conducted. Along with dispelling the slanderous conflation of nonheterosexual sex with alcohol use or mental fragility, such an approach challenges traditional historiographic portrayals of Welles’s sexuality by revealing how deeply he was imbricated in the queer subculture of the era.

The events that set in motion Welles’s eventual removal from office occurred on the night of 17–18 September 1940. Welles, along with President Roosevelt and most of the rest of the Cabinet, were traveling back to Washington, DC from Jasper, Alabama after the funeral of House Speaker William Bankhead, father of the actress Tallulah Bankhead. During the early hours of 18 September, Welles “inquired of one of the colored waiters as to whether he wanted to make \$15.”<sup>45</sup> Welles invited the waiter to his room, closed and locked the door, and began undressing the man. The waiter in question, a Pullman porter named John Stone, refused

<sup>43</sup> O’Sullivan, *Sumner Welles*, x.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Memorandum, 3 Jan. 1941, NARA, RG 65, Office of the Director, J. Edgar Hoover, Official and Confidential Subject Files, 1924–1972, Box 24, Hoover O+C Files #157 Wells, Sumner (Deceased) [1 of 2].

Welles's advances and left the room.<sup>46</sup> Undeterred, Welles summoned another porter to his room to proposition him, and then another, and another, each time being refused, until he finally gave up.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, a week after Welles solicited the porters on the Bankhead train, Welles took another train from Washington, DC to Cleveland, on which he behaved in a manner nearly identical to that on the Bankhead train.<sup>48</sup> The events of these two incidents were relayed up the chain of command at the Southern Railway Company that operated the two trains. Eventually, word reached FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who launched an investigation.

In addition to providing the fodder for the conspiracy that eventually destroyed Welles, this account, detailed in an FBI report compiled in January 1941, comprises an exceptionally detailed catalogue of the methods and tactics used by an elite white queer man of this era seeking sexual intimacy from black working-class men on a southern train, as well as the real-time reactions of the would-be partners and their contemporaries. It also directly refutes the interpretations by historians who portrayed Welles's encounters as the result of alcoholism, exhaustion, or impulsiveness, thus repositioning Welles as an unmistakable, albeit exceptional, participant in the queer subculture of the era.

To begin with, Welles's solicitation of the Pullman porters might be more accurately called a negotiation. Welles began his propositions to the porters with a seemingly innocuous question: "Did [you] want to make twenty dollars?"<sup>49</sup> A positive reply would prompt Welles to ask the porter to "take off [their] clothes and stay in here with me twenty minutes."<sup>50</sup> When refused, Welles repeated his entreaty, offering ever greater amounts – up to a hundred dollars, according to one porter.<sup>51</sup> According to at least one of the porters, "Mr. Welles did not state the service which was to be rendered in

<sup>46</sup> Memorandum, 30 Jan. 1941, NARA, RG 65, Office of the Director, J. Edgar Hoover, Official and Confidential Subject Files, 1924–1972, Box 24, Hoover O+C Files #157 Wells, Sumner (Deceased) [2 of 2].  
<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Undated memorandum stamped "53," NARA, RG 65, Office of the Director, J. Edgar Hoover, Official and Confidential Subject Files, 1924–1972, Box 24, Hoover O+C Files #157 Wells, Sumner (Deceased) [2 of 2].

<sup>49</sup> Testimony of Samuel C. Mitchell, 9 Jan. 1941, NARA, RG 65, Office of the Director, J. Edgar Hoover, Official and Confidential Subject Files, 1924–1972, Box 24, Hoover O+C Files #157 Wells, Sumner (Deceased) [2 of 2]; In the various testimonies collected by the FBI, Welles's opening offer to the porter varied, usually in the \$10–\$20 range.

<sup>50</sup> Memorandum for the Director, 23 Jan. 1941, NARA, RG 65, Office of the Director, J. Edgar Hoover, Official and Confidential Subject Files, 1924–1972, Box 24, Hoover O+C Files #157 Wells, Sumner (Deceased) [1 of 2].

<sup>51</sup> Memorandum for the director, testimony of Mr. Dale B. Whiteside, 22 Jan. 1941, NARA, RG 65, Office of the Director, J. Edgar Hoover, Official and Confidential Subject Files, 1924–1972, Box 24, Hoover O+C Files #157 Wells, Sumner (Deceased) [2 of 2].

return for the money,” but had nevertheless made his point clear; one porter, Alexander Dickson, reported to his superior moments after exiting Welles’s room, “you have a cock-sucker up there in Compartment E.”<sup>52</sup>

This coy approach was characteristic of the furtive maneuvering employed by men seeking same-sex sexual contact during this era. Born out of fears of police entrapment, the difficulty of identifying potential partners, and the potential for violent rejection, queer men of this era developed, in the words of George Chauncey, “tactics that allowed them to identify and communicate with one another without alerting hostile outsiders to what they were doing.”<sup>53</sup> Men seeking sexual contact with other men during this time used “codes and subterfuges” and had “attentiveness to the signals that might identify like-minded men” through “styles of clothing and grooming, mannerisms, and conventions of speech” to facilitate their encounters.<sup>54</sup> Queer men also “made use of a number of utterly conventional gestures ... the most common simply involved asking for a match or for the time of day.”<sup>55</sup>

Welles’s behavior on the Bankhead and Cleveland trains recalled these tactics, indicating both Welles’s knowledge of them and his confidence in improvising variations on them in the moment. Welles made not-so-subtle gestures that announced the subtext of his requests and the contact he sought. Welles was, by one account, half naked upon the arrival of the porter.<sup>56</sup> When the porter entered Welles’s room, Welles “got up, closed the door and locked it,” a gesture both subtle enough to imply a desire for privacy and unusual enough for it the porters to mention it in their accounts.<sup>57</sup> Besides the explicit propositions described above, Welles deployed an array of gestures to indicate his intentions. Porter Alexander Dickson reported that Welles spoke with a “feminine accent.”<sup>58</sup> Another porter described

<sup>52</sup> Dickson’s account was relayed through the testimony of his superior, Samuel C. Mitchell. See memorandum for the director, 23 Jan. 1941, NARA, RG 65, Office of the Director, J. Edgar Hoover, Official and Confidential Subject Files, 1924–1972, Box 24, Hoover O+C Files #157 Wells, Sumner (Deceased) [1 of 2].

<sup>53</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890–1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 187. See also Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 107. <sup>54</sup> Chauncey, 180, 188. <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>56</sup> Testimony of Samuel C. Mitchell, 9 Jan. 1941, NARA, RG 65, Office of the Director, J. Edgar Hoover, Official and Confidential Subject Files, 1924–1972, Box 24, Hoover O+C Files #157 Wells, Sumner (Deceased) [2 of 2].

<sup>57</sup> Testimony of Luther A. Thomas, NARA, RG 65, Office of the Director, J. Edgar Hoover, Official and Confidential Subject Files, 1924–1972, Box 24, Hoover O+C Files #157 Wells, Sumner (Deceased) [2 of 2].

<sup>58</sup> Memorandum for the director, 23 Jan. 1941, testimony of Alexander Dickson, NARA, RG 65, Office of the Director, J. Edgar Hoover, Official and Confidential Subject Files, 1924–1972, Box 24, Hoover O+C Files #157 Wells, Sumner (Deceased) [1 of 2].

how “when he went into Mr. Welles’ compartment [Welles] slipped behind him, closed the door of the compartment, opened his ... tie and began to unbutton [his] coat and told him to take off his clothes and get on the bed.”<sup>59</sup>

That Welles’s behavior was consistent with the intricate world of cruising and illicit contact engaged in by other queer men of this period is revealing enough in its own right. Yet in important ways Welles’s behavior deviated from these patterns in ways that reveal the peculiarities of the situation in which he was placed and the complex intersection of norms about race and class operating within in it. The most significant deviation was in the location Welles chose for his encounter. In general, queer men of this era, in Chauncey’s words, “made tactical decisions about the safest places to meet,” usually places that were sufficiently well trafficked that potential partners were plentiful but the anonymity of the crowd was maintained.<sup>60</sup> Welles clearly did not employ this tactic. He chose a confined and highly conspicuous space to pursue his desires: an overnight train transporting the President of the United States.

The reasons for this were manifold and by-products of the unique class position Welles occupied. As a prominent diplomat – in 1940 he was acting secretary of state – Welles occupied a supremely elite position in the American social hierarchy. This placed additional obstacles between Welles and his ability to seek same-sex intimacy. His notoriety prevented him from attending parties or frequenting establishments that were specifically for queer people. Conversely, Welles was also limited in his ability to seek more discreet locations. As a public official, it was far more difficult and far more important for him to maintain the anonymity on which many same-sex sexual encounters were based. Thus the choice of a railway carriage staffed by porters renowned for their discretion, with the protection of, but not direct oversight by, the Secret Service, was not an altogether bad idea.

Whether interpreted as the breathtakingly irresponsible act of a high-ranking civil servant, or the cry for help of a desperately lonely man, Welles’s attempts to solicit same-sex intimacy in September of 1940 were undoubtedly deliberate actions, possibly planned in advance, and certainly executed with practiced legerdemain. Belying historians’ attribution to Welles of moral weakness or alcoholism to explain these encounters, a more nuanced reading of the FBI report on Welles paints a picture of sophisticated queer coding and flirtation deployed with confidence and aplomb.

<sup>59</sup> Memorandum, 23 Jan. 1941, testimony of William F. Kusch, NARA, RG 65, Office of the Director, J. Edgar Hoover, Official and Confidential Subject Files, 1924–1972, Box 24, Hoover O+C Files #157 Wells, Sumner (Deceased) [1 of 2]. This testimony was relayed through the porter’s colleague, William Kusch.

<sup>60</sup> Chauncey, 189.

## BETWEEN DOG AND WOLF: REHABILITATION AND INTERSECTIONALITY

However, despite his facility with the arts of seduction, the location and objects of desire Welles chose, as well as the manner in which he pursued them, possessed countervailing dynamics that exposed Welles to danger while simultaneously offering him the opportunity in the first place. The Pullman porters who were the objects of Welles's desire were not typical 1940s-era railway employees. Pullman porters were extraordinarily well trained, particularly if they were assigned, as David Perata has written, to "special cars and assignments, such as serving presidents, visiting dignitaries, entertainers, charter groups, and the like."<sup>61</sup> For the trains used to carry Franklin Roosevelt, special porters were specifically assigned for their loyalty, professionalism, and discretion. Indeed, the FBI report on Welles quoted "[o]fficials of the railroad Company" that "the Pullman Company employes [*sic*] and the dining car employes [*sic*] on this train were selected for service thereon because of their long services, their dependability, reliability and good reputations."<sup>62</sup> Between the years of service, the 127-page training manual issued to them, and the higher-than-average wages (plus tips) they received, Pullman porters were far from the average train employee, or the average African American.

For Welles, the professionalism and discretion of the Pullman porters operated at cross-purposes. In some respects, there was reason for Welles to believe he would be able to approach the Pullman porters with the expectation of getting what he desired without repercussions. Pullman porters were renowned for their obsequiousness and their willingness to perform extra tasks requested by customers, often demeaning ones.<sup>63</sup> As Jack Santino has written, "Porters worked for tips: they had to hustle and force themselves to swallow a thousand and one indignities a day and worse."<sup>64</sup> Beyond this, the circumstances and style of the Pullman porters lent themselves to exploitative and intimate interactions while underscoring the expectation of discretion.<sup>65</sup> The Pullman porter "was friend and confidant to a class of wealthy white passengers, and at the very least, he witnessed their behaviors, their sins and indiscretions,

<sup>61</sup> David D. Perata, *Those Pullman Blues: An Oral History of the African-American Railroad Attendant* (Ruthven, IA: David D. Perata Studios, 1996), xx.

<sup>62</sup> Memorandum for the director, 23 Jan. 1941, NARA, RG 65, Office of the Director, J. Edgar Hoover, Official and Confidential Subject Files, 1924–1972, Box 24, Hoover O+C Files #157 Wells, Sumner (Deceased) [1 of 2].

<sup>63</sup> Larry Tye, *Rising from the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 2–3, 93.

<sup>64</sup> Jack Santino, *Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle: Stories of Black Pullman Porters* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 70.

<sup>65</sup> Perata, xiii.

and sometimes, their tragedies.”<sup>66</sup> For all these reasons, Welles might have had a reasonable expectation of success in pursuing a clandestine sexual contact through payment and stealth.

However, unbeknownst to Welles, the Pullman porters were, in fact, among the most hazardous potential partners to solicit for a clandestine rendezvous. One aspect of the Pullman Company’s employee discipline and training included the use of “undercover agents” (also called “spotters” or “spies”) to observe and test the porters’ work performance.<sup>67</sup> Usually their focus was on standards of service such as cleanliness or taking of fares, but “[m]any were of a sexual nature: female spotters, for example, would attempt to lure unsuspecting porters into their drawing room.”<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, as Pullman porters tended to be highly trained and well regarded within the black community, they were less likely to risk their jobs even for an exceptional tip.<sup>69</sup> As one Pullman (not on the Cleveland nor the Bankhead trains) remembered, “this job is business to me, I gotta wife at home and two children and I know if I steal, if I fuck around with the women, I’m gonna get fired. What I’m [*sic*] gonna tell my wife?”<sup>70</sup>

Thus, faced with the porters’ baseline objection to having gay sex, the oddness and gossip-fueling notoriety of Welles’s offer, the extensive training and awareness of Pullman-employed “spies,” the fear of professional repercussions, and the conspicuity of serving on a presidential train, Welles’s attempt to procure sex from Pullman porters in September 1940 confronted an exceptionally formidable wall of resistance and suspicion. The fact that these conditions existed when Welles solicited the Pullman porters all but guaranteed that his relatively well-practiced and furtive approach would not be held in confidence behind a screen of Pullman porter discretion.

Considering Welles’s encounters on the Bankhead and Cleveland trains from the perspective of the African American men he propositioned opens additional avenues of interpretation and reflection beyond those related to Welles’s sexuality itself. Specifically, Welles’s behavior foregrounds the interplay of the dynamics of same-sex intimacy with dimensions of race and class. A close analysis of the behaviors, assumptions, and intentions of the participants in Welles’s encounters reveals the complicated and treacherous terrain of social norms at play in the early to mid-twentieth-century United States.

Same-sex intimacy in 1940s America was no straightforward matter. As noted above, queer men of this era developed a sophisticated code for recognizing and entreating one another for intimate encounters. Adding a further layer of complication, many of the men who deployed this code were not

<sup>66</sup> Santino, 81.

<sup>67</sup> Tye, 103. See also Santino, 27.

<sup>68</sup> Perata, xxiii.

<sup>69</sup> Tye, 77.

<sup>70</sup> Perata, 97.

sexually aroused by other men, nor did they consider themselves to be homosexual. Writing specifically of mid-century Mississippi but with wider interpretive relevance, John Howard documented “the experiences both of men like *that* – which is to say, men of that particular type, self-identified gay males – as well as men *who like that*, men who also like queer sex, who also engage in homosexual activity or gender nonconformity, but do not necessarily identify as gay.”<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Margot Canaday’s investigation of the US federal government’s attempts to categorize sexual abnormality, which unwittingly helped reify the very categories it had set out to regulate, noted the “murkiness” that Americans confronted when attempting to delineate “abnormal” sexual behavior from other forms of “deviance” during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>72</sup>

Of particular salience to Welles’s attempts to solicit sex, Barry Reay’s detailed study of masculinity and sexuality in mid-century New York unearthed dozens of testimonies of men whose sexual lives possessed “boundaries that did not quite conform to the sexual rules that historians have come to expect.”<sup>73</sup> Men classified as “trade” “might have sex with women, fairies (effeminate men), or queers (homosexuals). Their public persona was that they assumed the male role and used the fairy or the queer much as they would a woman.”<sup>74</sup> Such men existed in a liminal space between contemporary definitions of homosexuality, bisexuality, and heterosexuality. “A fairy was a fairy not because she (he) engaged in what we would term homosexual activity but because she (he) was the passive partner or woman-like. Men went with fairies much as they went with female prostitutes.”<sup>75</sup> These roles and the boundaries between them were inflected or blurred by dynamics of class, gender, and social convention. “Sexual expression,” Reay wrote, “of a man’s masculinity or effeminacy might have economic value ... acts and identities that we might assume to be heterosexual or homosexual had very different sexual meanings, including the possibility that two men could engage in a sexual act with only one of them considered ‘perverted.’”<sup>76</sup>

The crucial point here is to note how the contours of sexual identity in Welles’s time, while operating in a legal and social regime more restrictive

<sup>71</sup> John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), xviii.

<sup>72</sup> Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 95. Canaday’s work in its entirety is an effort, in her words, at “tracing the ‘accretion’ that over time results in the modern notion of homosexuality as defined by sexual object choice.” *Ibid.*, 12. This process, which Canaday argues only concluded in mid-century, necessarily infers that (homo)sexual categories prior to mid-century were more protean.

<sup>73</sup> Barry Reay, *New York Hustlers: Masculinity and Sex in Modern America* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 66. <sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 15–16. <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 43. <sup>76</sup> Reay, 39.



than later decades, nevertheless offered possibilities for same-sex intimacy among a surprisingly wide array of potential participants. Men who sought same-sex intimacy might not conform to contemporary stereotypes about homosexual men, nor were those who might be classified as heterosexual necessarily impervious to the possibility of engaging in sex with other men under the right circumstances. Moreover, as Reay's study indicates, the existence of this complex ecosystem of queer sexuality was the subject of scientific study and vernacular reporting, both in the press and via word of mouth. Even among non-participating straight men, the existence of "fairies" and "trade," and the putative opportunities available through them, both carnal and financial, were known and recognized.

Recognition of this knowledge and the dynamics associated with it was detectable in the FBI report on Welles's encounters, in particular in the incredulity and skittishness of the porters whom Welles propositioned. Porters described Welles as "queer," noted that he spoke in a "feminine accent," or averred that Welles was not a "he-man."<sup>77</sup> One porter, when asked to recount Welles's propositioning of him, reported that he thought Welles had asked him to come into his compartment so Welles could "French" him – a widely used slang term for oral sex.<sup>78</sup> Knowledge of the existence of "trade" and the transactional opportunities associated with it was detectable in the dynamic between the porters themselves and their line managers during the FBI interviews. When porter Elmer Stephens gave his testimony about being propositioned by Welles, he was "kidded" by the train's baggage master, who was present for the interrogation, for having "turned down fifty dollars to suck a nice, clean dick."<sup>79</sup> Though it is not clear from the accounts whether the baggage handler was also propositioned (or had ever been), it nonetheless points to an element of common knowledge among the train staff that such offers could happen and that accepting them was not an entirely unthinkable experience.

Perhaps more tellingly, the negative reaction of the propositioned porters was founded on a variety of objections, many of which went beyond pragmatic and transactional considerations. These objections implicitly drew on awareness of the existence of a complex taxonomy of sexual identities and activities

<sup>77</sup> Testimony of William F. Kusch, 12 Jan. 1941, NARA II, RG 65, Box 24, folder: Wells, Sumner (deceased) [2 of 2]; memorandum for the director, 23 Jan. 1941, testimony of Alexander Dickson, NARA II, RG 65, Box 24, folder: Wells, Sumner (deceased) [1 of 2]; testimony of James L. Hewitt, 23 Jan. 1941, NARA II, RG 65, Box 24, folder: Wells, Sumner (deceased) [2 of 2].

<sup>78</sup> Memorandum for the director, 23 Jan. 1941, testimony of James L. Hewitt, NARA II, RG 65, Box 24, folder: Wells, Sumner (deceased) [1 of 2].

<sup>79</sup> Memorandum for the director, 23 Jan. 1941, testimony of Elmer C. Stephens, NARA II, RG 65, Box 24, folder: Wells, Sumner (deceased) [1 of 2].

present during this era. After the aforementioned porter Stephens was “kidded” about turning down Welles’s offer, he took an explicit stand against the very concept of participating in such an act. According to the FBI agent taking his testimony, Stephens “replied that he would not accept five thousand dollars to do such a thing.”<sup>80</sup> This exaggerated, vaguely melodramatic denial points to a countervailing dynamic: offers of sexual solicitation may not have been unknown, but they could nevertheless elicit an indignant reaction, reminiscent of the moral condemnation espoused toward queer sexuality in wider society. Stephens’s subsequent statement reified this dynamic by invoking yet another layer of discursive understanding about the relationship between sexuality and class, the nature of (sex) work, and how queer “trade” placed men in compromising and ambiguous situations which could nevertheless carry enormous significance: when questioned why he had turned down Welles’s offer of sex, Stephens exclaimed, “You have to work three years to become a carpenter or a bricklayer but it takes only one suck to make a cock-sucker.”<sup>81</sup>

Mr. Stephens’s conclusion spoke to the protean nature of the sexual landscape on which he and his fellow porters interacted with Sumner Welles in late 1940. Same-sex intimacy was taboo and illegal, but discussion of it could be jocular and puerile. Behaving in a “queer” fashion could be transactional without denoting any greater significance with regard to identity, and it could also be an ineffable and indelible category that marked a person for life. In this manner, close examination of Welles’s encounters demonstrates how, in 1940s America, the boundaries between straight and gay, or trade and fairy, elided and collided with unpredictable results.

The analytical context provided by Chauncey, Reay, Canaday, Howard, and other scholarship about the sexual underworld of the early twentieth-century United States leaves one crucial dimension of Welles’s encounters unilluminated: race. The legal and social worlds occupied by the men propositioned by Welles were characterized not only by the sexual mores of the time, but also by the rigid Jim Crow racial caste system. For Welles and the Pullman porters of the Cleveland and Bankhead trains, two separate systems of strictly policed regulations on behavior overlapped to produce an intersectional space that carried peculiar dangers for all concerned.

Queerness and blackness in American society operate in a complex dialectic, one which scholars from many fields have spent great energy trying to decipher.

<sup>80</sup> Memorandum for the director, 23 Jan. 1941, testimony of Elmer C. Stephens, NARA II, RG 65, Box 24, folder: Wells, Sumner (deceased) [1 of 2].

<sup>81</sup> Memorandum for the director, 23 Jan. 1941, testimony of John S. Kissock, NARA II, RG 65, Box 24, folder: Wells, Sumner (deceased) [1 of 2].

Writing of mid-century Mississippi, John Howard described how queer life, “in keeping with broader cultural conditions, was racially polarized,” while also noting that “[p]arallel black and white queer realms cautiously intermingled after the early sixties.”<sup>82</sup> Perceptively, Howard also observed that “before [the 1960s], same-sex interracial intercourse usually involved advances by white men of privilege on their black class subordinates,” a dynamic which Welles’s encounters with the Pullman porters reflects identically.<sup>83</sup> Scholars of the sociological dimensions of black sexuality have postulated an inherent incompatibility of blackness with “normal” sexual identities in American society. According to Roderick Ferguson, “sociological arguments about the socially constructed nature of (homo)sexuality index the contemporary entrance of white gays and lesbians into the rights and privileges of American citizenship” in a manner that explicitly and implicitly excludes black men and women from achieving the same privileges.<sup>84</sup> In this light, the Pullman porters of 1940, like black men of virtually any generation of Americans, possessed a sexual identity only insofar as they were objects for the white man (Welles) who desired them.

A different perspective emerges from historical explorations of the intersection of blackness and queerness, notably literature on the “down low” culture of ostensibly straight black men who engage in same-sex intimacy. Jeffery McCune saw the pursuit of same-sex intimacy by black men as part of “an epistemology – a knowing and doing outside of the common eye, or more aptly the scenes of surveillance” – that could be traced back through centuries of oppression of black people by white Americans and their institutions of enforcement.<sup>85</sup> Though this insight was meant to explicate consensual encounters between black men, the principle of seeing black sexuality imbricated in systems of white oppression can be applied to a variety of circumstances. In a similar vein, Kevin Mumford observed that “the status of being black and gay involved not only sexual prejudice and defamation but also racialization and misrecognition,” indicating that when confronting attempts to label or categorize their sexuality, black Americans were impressed into an ineluctable process of redefining their sexual personhood to suit white Americans’ needs.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Howard, *Men Like That*, xiv, xvi.

<sup>83</sup> Howard, xvi. Howard’s observation that the “queer movement more often consisted of circulation rather than congregation” in the South chimes with the location of Welles’s encounters with the Pullman porters as well. *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>84</sup> Roderick A. Ferguson, “Race-ing Homonormativity: Citizenship, Sociology, and Gay Identity,” in E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, eds., *Black Queer Studies* (London: Duke University Press, 2005), 52–67, 53.

<sup>85</sup> Jeffery Q. McCune Jr., *Sexual Discretion: Black Masculinity and the Politics of Passing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 6.

<sup>86</sup> Kevin J. Mumford, *Not Straight, Not White: Black Gay Men from the March on Washington to the AIDS Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 5. For a lucid

From the vantage points offered by these historians and social scientists, Welles's propositioning of the Pullman porters assumes a much more sinister tone. By virtue of his social standing, his wealth, and most importantly his race, Welles occupied a position of extraordinary privilege in his interactions with the Pullman porters. As a white man, Welles enjoyed the benefit of the doubt *prima facie* in virtually any legal or reputational dispute between himself and the porters in question. Welles's social standing on account of his wealth and his celebrity as a high-ranking political figure compounded this advantage. Consciously or not, Welles employed these advantages in selecting the timing, location, and objects of his desire. Welles's wealth literally afforded him the ability to solicit, or coerce, compliance out of individuals who might otherwise be unwilling to participate or acquiesce to what Welles wanted, particularly those who were in economically marginal positions and who relied on gratuities to augment their income. For comparison's sake, Welles offered the porters anywhere between ten dollars and a hundred dollars; a Pullman porter's monthly salary in 1936 was \$77.50.<sup>87</sup>

Furthermore, Welles's behavior put the porters he approached at considerable occupational and personal risk. The Pullman Company had little patience for porters who received complaints, particularly complaints of a sexual nature. Indeed, "The Pullman Company was often sued by unscrupulous passengers who saw the company as an easy target for making money by pretending to have been injured while the train was in motion or to have been sexually harassed by a porter."<sup>88</sup> According to one former porter, "If the woman says that you tried to screw her or you did screw her, and then she makes a fuss about it, well, naturally the Pullman Company will pay, regardless of how much it is, in order to squash it. But they gonna let you go."<sup>89</sup> At least one of the porters propositioned by Welles implicitly understood this dilemma and reacted accordingly. William Goins, an attendant on the Bankhead train, "played dumb," when Welles asked him some questions, and "appeared not to want to talk about ... the matter further."<sup>90</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The details of the Pullman porters' encounters with Welles reveal a multitude of insights about this period. First, Welles's behavior shows how deeply queer sexuality was inflected by race and class in 1940s America. Welles's utilization

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and illuminating discussion of these dynamics as applied to a specific historical example see Christopher Phelps, "The Sexuality of Malcolm X," *Journal of American Studies*, 51, 3 (Aug. 2017), 659–90. <sup>87</sup> Perata, *Those Pullman Blues*, 82. <sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 94. <sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>90</sup> Memorandum for the director, 23 Jan. 1941, testimony of Henry E. Sanford, NARA II, RG 65, Box 24, folder: Wells, Sumner (deceased) [1 of 2].

of, and more importantly improvisation around, cruising etiquette were direct consequences of his high status and the racial segregation of Jim Crow America. The already treacherous terrain of queer sexuality that men like Welles had to navigate was contoured by subterranean layers of racial and class-based prejudices, both of which presented their own challenges. These intersections of class, race, and sexuality deserve heightened scrutiny, as their interplay created crosscurrents inverting traditional hierarchies of social power that historians have seldom examined in detail.

Second, Welles's encounters present historians with a significant challenge of historiographic portrayal. To ignore his sexuality or deny its queerness, as generations of historians chose to do, is untenable. Welles's propositioning of Pullman porters in 1940 was neither an aberration nor a remission caused by inebriation or exhaustion. It was an expression of his character and, more importantly, a product of his experiences navigating the complex world of same-sex intimacy in the early twentieth century. Incorporating these facets into historical interpretations of Welles enriches accounts of him and provides a more textured understanding of his perspective.

However, this begs the question of what perspective to ought to be adopted. Viewed from Welles's perspective, the coincidence of mitigating factors at play in September and October of 1940 can induce a degree of sympathy. Faced with limited options to pursue the kind of intimacy he desired, enduring enormous psychological strain from his highly demanding job, and existing in a world in which even the slightest deviation from hegemonic heterosexuality and masculinity was cause for suspicion, Welles's behavior appears all too understandable. Like countless thousands of other queer people then and now, Welles endured hostility, rejection, and ostracization for engaging in the most basic and intimate of acts. The judgmental and heterosexist assumptions adopted, consciously or not, by historians who have described Welles's actions as "lurid" fail to appreciate the treacherousness of the social and sexual terrain Welles was navigating.

When the events of the Bankhead and Cleveland trains are observed from the perspective of the porters, however, an altogether different and markedly less sympathetic picture emerges; it complicates the sympathetic narrative. Welles may have had precious few outlets for same-sex intimacy, but the ones that he chose in 1940 put the objects of Welles's desire in a perilous position. By dint of a racial caste system enforced by vigilante justice, institutional violence, and economic precarity, the Pullman porters Welles solicited took enormous risks by refusing him, despite the taboo nature and illegality of Welles's requests in contemporary law and custom. Welles's social and symbolic capital as undersecretary of state reinforced this while also offering Welles an exculpatory device should accounts of his advances ever become public – an option unavailable to the porters. Furthermore, the strict codes

of conduct that Pullman porters were held to created a devious conundrum for any of them who caught Welles's eye. A porter on the receiving end of Welles's advances would have wondered if this was a genuine opportunity to make an extraordinary amount of money or yet another trap planted by his employer to try to trip him up. If he refused, such a porter would run the risk of upsetting a powerful and unimpeachably respected individual who could easily have the porter fired, not to mention losing out on a considerable sum of money. If he accepted, he ran the risk of being dismissed, losing his livelihood and his ability to support his family, and possibly facing prosecution and imprisonment.

Every generation interprets historical events through the lens of its contemporary values. In Welles's time and for years after, his pursuit of same-sex intimacy rendered him a figure of obloquy to political rivals and historians alike. Decades after the fact, it is tempting to reevaluate Welles's life and the scandal that brought about his professional demise in light of a new regime of social mores. However, it is difficult to discern exactly which social mores ought to apply. Welles was a dutiful public servant whose resignation was precipitated by a deliberate campaign of character assassination that invoked explicitly homophobic tropes. In that respect, his experience resembles that of NASA astronomer turned gay rights activist Frank Kameny, or British cryptographer Alan Turing – both of whose brilliance could not override societal condemnation of homosexuality. However, Welles's manipulation of African American men in a subordinate position in order to procure sex sullies any hagiographic rehabilitation. Particularly in the context of revelations about sexual harassment and recurring examples of unequal, often lethal, treatment of African Americans at the hands of police officers, juries, and everyday American citizens, emblemized by the Me Too and Black Lives Matter movements, Welles's actions appear selfish, entitled, and insidious.

Whatever approach is used, studying Welles's careful trespassing of social and legal norms in the early 1940s offers a challenge and a reminder for historians of all eras about how to study queer people in the past. The story of Sumner Welles does not lend itself to heroizing, but it is unlikely that any queer historical figure – no matter how discriminated against at the time – could live up to later generations' expectations upon close examination.<sup>91</sup> Equally, observing how Welles violated the sexual taboos of his time, and a

<sup>91</sup> For the interpretive framework of heroizing and mythmaking, I am indebted to historian Chris Waters, whose work on "gay icons" was a guiding light. See Chris Waters, "Gay Icons, Queer Pasts, and the Practices of History," public lecture, Goldsmiths University, London, 11 Jan. 2018.

wholly different set of sexual and racial equality taboos today, invites reflection on the ephemeral, circumstantial, and contingent nature of sexuality in general. Sex has never been unconstrained by moral judgment, and the ease with which a given act can be granted permission or subject to condemnation is a choice each generation, and each historian, decides for themselves.

### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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