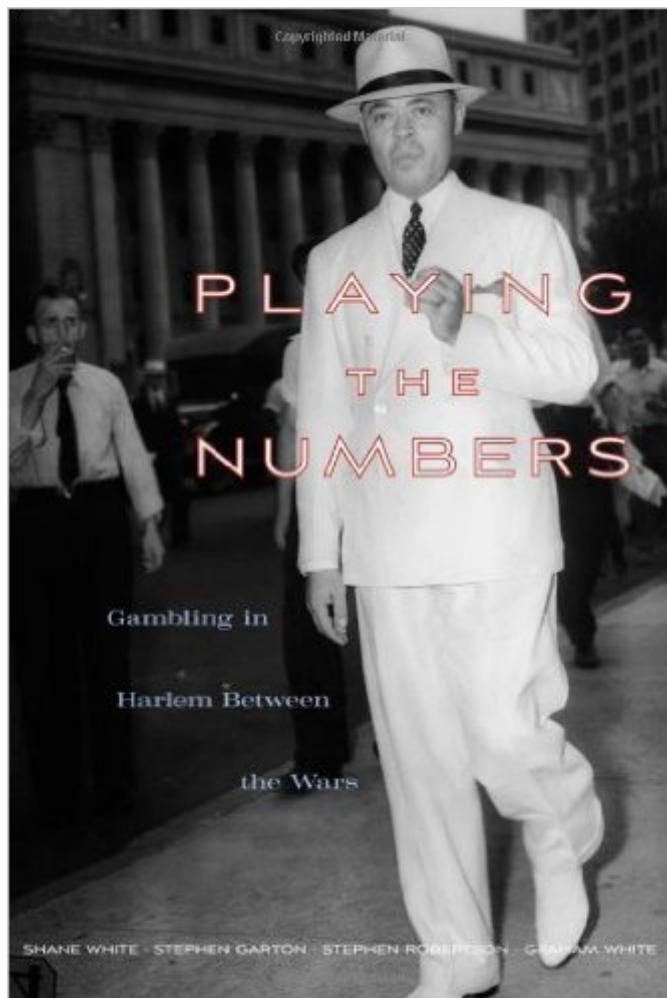


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# Playing The Numbers: Gambling In Harlem Between The Wars



## Synopsis

The phrase "in the 1920s" evokes images of the Harlem Renaissance, or of Marcus Garvey and soapbox orators haranguing crowds about politics and race. Yet the most ubiquitous feature of Harlem life between the world wars was the game of "numbers." Thousands of wagers, usually of a dime or less, would be placed on a daily number derived from U.S. bank statistics. The rewards of "hitting the number," a 600-to-1 payoff, tempted the ordinary men and women of the Black Metropolis with the chimera of the good life. Playing the Numbers tells the story of this illegal form of gambling and the central role it played in the lives of African Americans who flooded into Harlem in the wake of World War I. For a dozen years the "numbers game" was one of America's rare black-owned businesses, turning over tens of millions of dollars every year. The most successful "bankers" were known as Black Kings and Queens, and they lived royally. Yet the very success of "bankers" like Stephanie St. Clair and Casper Holstein attracted Dutch Schultz, Lucky Luciano, and organized crime to the game. By the late 1930s, most of the profits were being siphoned out of Harlem. Playing the Numbers reveals a unique dimension of African American culture that made not only Harlem but New York City itself the vibrant and energizing metropolis it was. An interactive website allows readers to locate actors and events on Harlem's streets.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book is both a cultural study of the people who played the Numbers, and a history of the game.

The latter was, to me, more interesting than the former. We learn about the evolution of the Numbers from the earlier "policy" game, the biographies of the early Numbers bankers and the later "Kings" and "Queens" of the game after its rapid expansion in the 1920s following the adoption of Clearing House totals as a perhaps incorruptible source of random numbers. Among the most amusing parts of the book are the discussion of how black New York's fascination with this game trickled into the lives of uncomprehending white Americans, as employees of the New York Clearing House were bombarded with calls and letters from black Numbers players looking for an edge, and newspapers printed financial statistics of no interest to anybody but numbers players. The book loses steam when the gangsters Dutch Schultz and, later, the Italian Mafia, intruded on the game. The authors end the tale entirely around the late 1930s, though it continued to be played for decades. Those familiar with Harlem know how important the Numbers were; more than one source says that over 50% of all economic activity in the neighborhood derived from the game as recently as the 1970s. However, I've read dozens of books about Harlem, including Francis Ianni's Black Mafia, and no other book covers this topic nearly as well as this one.

The Best book on the New York Numbers Game. Takes the reader through every facet of the Numbers game and how it exploded across America before there was a state lottery. Next best is Bankers, Writers and Runners.

GREAT

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