'It was a frame up': Undercover female police and abortion in New York, 1913-1924

Fairchild Aerial Camera Corporation, Aerial survey, Manhattan Island, New York City Fairchild Aerial Camera Corporation, (New York, 1921).

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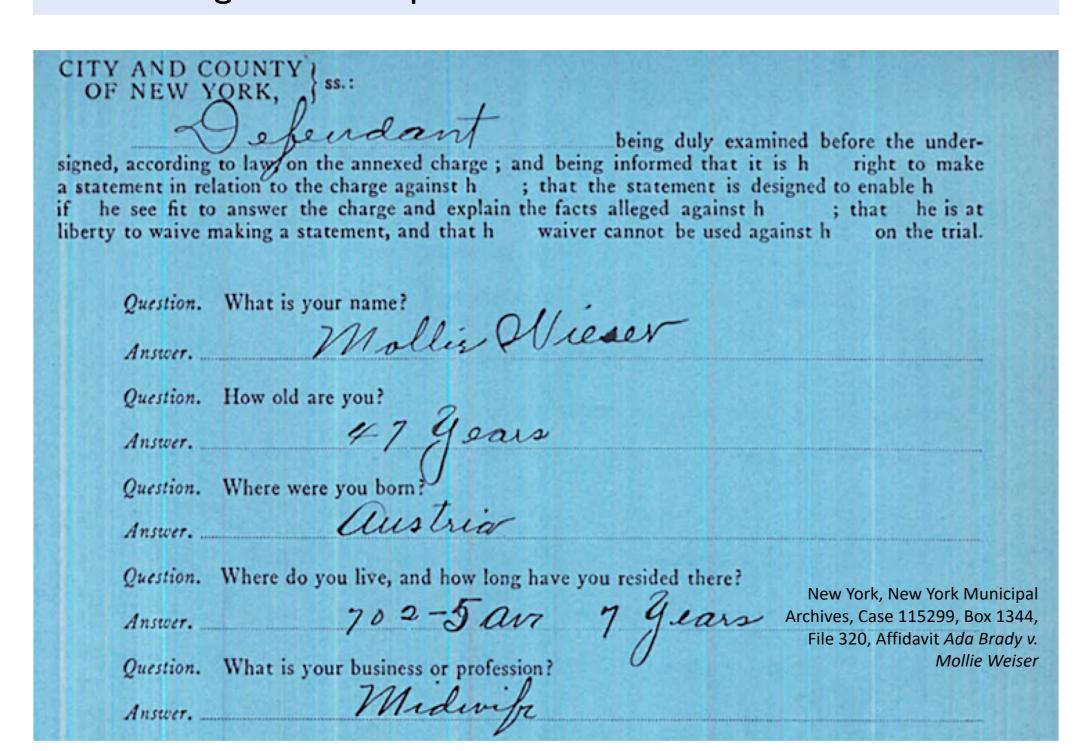
Context

Abortion was criminalized in the late-nineteenth century and remained illegal until reform in the 1960s and 70s. Yet, its meaning, significance, and practice remained contested, and women procured abortions throughout criminalisation.

Between 1913 and 1924, female detectives, police officers, and police matrons in New York City worked undercover to prosecute suspected abortionists.

These investigations particularly targeted female, middle-aged, immigrant midwives.

Disguised as women seeking abortions, these officers approached suspected abortionists often using their native language, submitted to examination, and then arrested and testified against these practitioners.



Research Questions

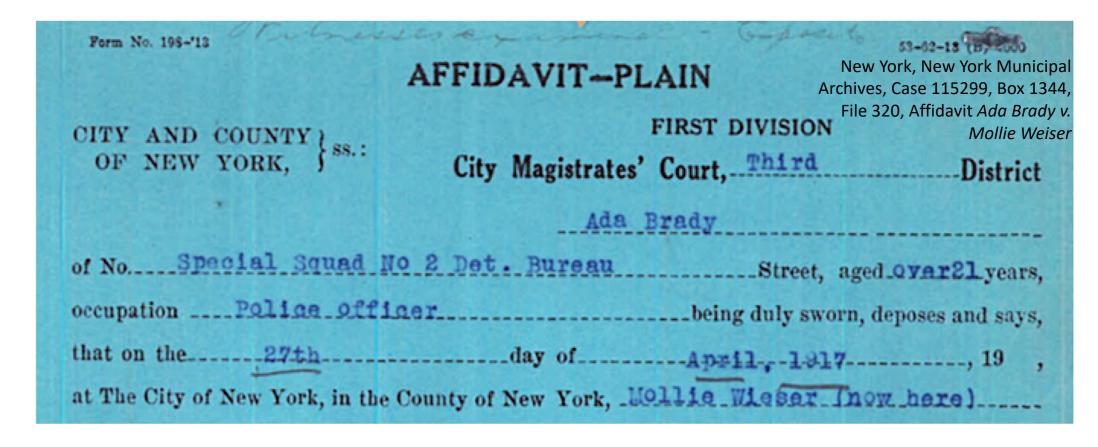
- Police women presented their attempts to procure abortions in police and court testimony. How do these illuminate other women's abortion experiences?
- Why were women seen as especially suited for undercover work? What does it say about these women's professional and personal identities?
- In posing undercover, these women constructed and inhabited a social 'other': who was this? How did they create - and then subvert - community with alleged female abortionists?
- Historians have discussed the gendering of the welfare state: what does this tell us of the gendering of the formation of the legislative, and carceral state?



Women Undercover

These women investigated numerous criminals, including number-runners, fake medical practitioners, spiritualists, and abortionists. When going undercover, women adopted disguises to affect different classes and nationalities. Little discussed in the historiography, the contemporary New York press widely reported on these cases.

Considering female policing of abortion, my project demonstrates the construction of women who procured abortions and the abortionist, as well as the gendering of policing, and cultures of surveillance.



Sources and New Material

Abortion was illegal and these women worked undercover, however the following material documents this practice:

- New York District Attorney Records; affidavits, testimony, evidence
- Trial transcripts of the County of New York
- Contemporary newspaper coverage
- Personal and public writings from female police officers