March 2024

Lay It On The Line: The Life and Music of Gladys Bentley

Bianki Torres

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_2

Part of the Africana Studies Commons, Cultural History Commons, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons, and the Women's History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://doi.org/10.7275/35982575 https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_2/3095

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations and Theses at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.
Lay It On The Line: The Life and Music of Gladys Bentley

A Dissertation Presented

by

BIANKI J. TORRES

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

February 2024

The W.E.B. Dubois Department of Afro-American Studies
“Lay It On The Line”: The Life and Music of Gladys Bentley

A Dissertation Presented

By

BIANKI J. TORRES

Approved as to style and content by:

James Smethurst, Chair

Traci Parker, Member

Cameron Awkward-Rich, Member

Yolanda Covington-Ward, Department Head
W.E.B. DuBois Department of Afro American Studies
DEDICATION

To Monday, my friend.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Traci Parker, for her many years of mentoring, friendship, and support. Thanks also to James Smethurst who has encouraged my passion for music as a professional pursuit worthy of study. Together, their help has been an integral part of my career and I am forever grateful. A special thanks to Cameron Awkward-Rich who inspired the way I do history with just thinking about feelings in class. Much of the work here started in his classroom.

I am in debt to the digital archive of the J.D. Doyle Archives where much of the resource material is from. They continue to make queer history free to access. I’d also like to thank the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division, the New York Public Library Digital Collections, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Thanks to my colleagues Yelana Sims and Biko Caruthers who started this journey with me. A special thanks to Cécile Yézou who planted the seed for this dissertation. Thank you to my friends and family: Paul Fowler, Kym Newberry, Jordón Crawford, Dre Taveras, my cousin Kevin Cruz, my brother and sister, Sander and Perla Torres, and my parents Freddy Torres and Norma Escobar. Mom, Dad, hicieron bien como padres.
ABSTRACT

LAY IT ON THE LINE: THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF GLADYS BENTLEY

FEbruARY 2024

BIANKI J. TORRES, B.A., RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE
M.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST
Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor James Smethurst

This work is a historical biography of Gladys Bentley and her blues music. She was a cross-dressing entertainer from the Harlem Renaissance and performed popular songs with added, sometimes improvised sexual innuendo. This study considers the performances of her recorded and written material as trans music, meaning, that black music provided a platform to determine racial, gendered, and sexual cultural expressions changing over time, however, always rooted in black vernacular culture. Using showbills, promotional material, studio recordings and short autobiography, this study follows Bentley’s career as “male impersonator” and the effects lesbian/gay (queer) culture had on her blues. Also, I demonstrate how trans narratives coincide with Bentley’s personal life and how Bentley’s transition to woman offers scholars to consider how narration and historicization archive ‘trans’ in a way that obscures the nuances of queer performance that challenge and resist cisnormative structures and symbols of power. I refer to Black Queer Studies, Black Trans Studies, music history and biography to demonstrate how Black music culture operates as a “trans analytic.” Understanding Black music as a trans music, offers us a historical culture that finds queerness and gender transgression before Gay Liberation made them legible in public and political discourse.
Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS, .......................................................................................................................3

ABSTRACT, ........................................................................................................................................4

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION........................................................................................................................................8

II. “THERE’S NO BETTER TIME FOR THEM TO START USING A GIRL,”: THE 
    MAKING OF GLADYS’ EXCLUSIVE CLUB (1907-1930).................................................................30

III. BLACK CLUBS AND SILVER SCREENS: “FROM HARLEM I WENT TO PARK 
    AVENUE…” (1931- 1940) ..................................................................................................................59

IV. “AMERICA’S GREATEST SEPIA PIANO ARTIST” OR “THE BROWN BOMBER OF 
    SOPHISTICATED SONGS” (1941-1951) ...........................................................................................90

V. “I AM A WOMAN AGAIN” …FOR THE JUNE-TEENTH 
    JAMBOREE! (1952-1960) ................................................................................................................115

VI. EPILOGUE: “EASTER MARDI GRAS” (SIDE A), 
    “BEFORE MIDNIGHT” (SIDE B) .....................................................................................................144

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....................................................................................................................................150
INTRODUCTION

Gladys Bentley was a Black lesbian musician who played classic blues and jazz songs. She performed in “mannish” clothing, usually a tuxedo and top-hat, and sang popular songs with sexual innuendo considered taboo for the period. Although her fame may have not garnered as much attention as her contemporaries, such as Gertrude “Ma” Rainey or Bessie Smith, Gladys Bentley was just as integral to the classic blues as they were, if not more provoking. Having performed with great Black musicians of the twentieth century, from Ethel Waters to Louis Armstrong, Bentley was passionate and dedicated to being an entertainer, so much so, that her own biographical words mirror that of a lesbian literary work by Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*. Despite Bentley’s performance on stage, some scholars read her life off-stage as an extension of her mannish performance to transgressing racial and gendered expectations. Regardless of Bentley’s intention, Black culture was a platform for her to explore beyond creative endeavors. In other words, Black entertainment provided the means to critique and challenge an anti-Black nation defined by segregation, explore sexuality, gender presentation, and produce Black vernacular art, culminating in Gladys Bentley’s identity, both on and off stage.

Additionally, much of the current scholarship that concerns Gladys Bentley, her music, and performances are focused on her gender-bending presentation, sexually suggestive lyrics, or gender transgressions, the bulk of which is represented by her work until the early 1930’s. She had an extensive career that has been neglected and gives nuance to the trajectory of her creativity and music style. That she dabbled in bebop, R&B, recorded dance tunes, and chose to work with smaller labels indicate her determination to overcome her subjectivity to homophobia and racism using various Black musical genres. Moreover, she continued to produce new music
and perform them despite segregation and queer clubs shutting down by law enforcement. She started during a transitional moment in the Harlem Renaissance and carried over into Hollywood, living a very public gay life until the backlash was too much to endure, and homophobia became a part of American Cold War hysteria. Therefore, her life’s story and her artistic accomplishments offer a compelling glimpse into the life of a very visible Black queer woman, who constantly transgressed gender, sexuality, and racism to make her life livable. Here, I mean that Black queerness, in a context before gay liberation publicly politicized (Black/non-Black) queer life, allowed Bentley a vehicle to maneuver through anti-Black and homophobic systems and challenge those systems by way of Black vernacular culture. Indeed, art imitates life and vice versa. For Gladys Bentley, it was not only a means of survival but of pleasure as well.

Using the frameworks of Black Queer Studies, this work focuses on how Gladys Bentley queers her personal life as much as she queers her performances. Queer, in this analysis, refers to making the familiar unfamiliar, or to refer to E. Patrick Johnson’s work, as “mov[ing] beyond simply theorizing subjectivity and agency as discursively mediated to theorizing how that mediation may propel material bodies into action.”  

This means that queering not only can be observed through discourse in making queer lives visible and possible but also transforming discourses that police queerness to function as a form of resistance. This is not to say that queerness is unnatural or unfamiliar but that it is in opposition to dominant heterosexual ideology. That same resistance can take many different forms that don’t necessarily challenge the very conditions that make Black queer life difficult in the early twentieth century. Instead, queering—or as Johnson calls it, “quaring”—makes Black queer life work against oppressive

---

institutional structures.² This practice is a vernacular tradition, based in Black culture, that allowed classic blues queens to challenge ideas of “inferior Black female subjectivity” while also introducing the American public to Black lesbian culture.³

Black Trans Studies are incorporated into the analysis of Bentley’s material cultural history. Black Trans Studies theories help us to understand the overlapping effects of racialization and sexualization. That such phenomenon can be observed through Black music culture—and exploited by Black entertainers themselves—determines the interchangeability of how Blackness and transness function in Bentley’s blues. More specifically, this work argues that Bentley’s music was a “transversal” music; it anticipated the heteronormativity of Black music genres and styles that would obscure the visibility of Black queer sexuality. Heteronormativity, here, is also racialized; what is feminine or masculine, sexual desire between women and men, family structure, and domestic partnership, and gender-roles (i.e., the public and private expectations of women and men) looks differently for Black people than it does non-Black people. Both, culturally, politically, and historically can manifest in various ways that all reinforce the idea of heterosexuality and binary gender as “natural,” whereas all other sexualities and genders are considered “unnatural.” I borrow C. Riley Snorton’s understanding of transversality as that which “articulates submerged forms of relationalities that need not be visible to have effects.”⁴ Music isn’t visible, it is heard. Literature can be read, performance can be witnessed, and although music can be written down, it is best to listen to it. Bentley’s blues anticipates the sounds of later Black music genres and styles that were rooted in queerness, making those “submerged forms” visible when she appeared on television in the early 1950’s.

² Johnson, p. 139.
³ Ibid, p. 140.
For Snorton, transversality destabilizes the boundaries of categorization even before they are institutionally articulated into record. Here, transversal music, ruptures the boundaries of genre and style as they are racialized by a white hegemonic music industry. Thus, Bentley’s blues obscures those boundaries in its playfulness, shock-value, and innuendo; otherwise known as signifying.

Although Angela Davis has written on the classic blues queens—Black women who sang the blues and popularized the genre throughout the 1920’s—and how their work challenged such notions, much of the analysis is concerned with the lyrical material and its historical context through a Marxist lens. This work adds to that nuance by narrativizing Bentley’s life as an example of queering race, gender, and class (making the familiar unfamiliar), through a transversal blues. In other words, Bentley’s music was a play on conventional popular songs that sexualized and parodied gendered and heterosexual forms of desire while using those very symbols of convention to present unfamiliar symbols of Black sexuality and gender presentation (e.g., a woman in top hat and tails). Because gender is a prominent category throughout Bentley’s life, Black trans studies offer ways to think about gender presentation as more than performance, which, performance here is understood as a “moment of self-reflexivity that has the potential to transform one’s view of self in relation to the world.”\(^5\) Bentley constantly does this beyond the realm of the music industry, in her public and private social life. So, Bentley’s blues challenges Black lesbian subjectivity as it also uses the symbols and practices of identification to fashion new and unfamiliar ways of being, both materially and immaterially.

Style and genre take on specific meanings here too. Genre is determined by the cultural practices and aesthetics that determine a category in a particular time. Style functions as

\(^5\) Johnson, p. 138.
identifying the technical demonstrations of a particular genre. Therefore, style is found in genre, but style does not beget genre. For example, the blues can be found in jazz music (e.g. a song can be played by a jazz band in pentatonic scale), a jazz musician can play the blues, and a blues musician can play jazz. Blues, fascinatingly, has historically, politically, and culturally been both style and genre. For example, writers on the blues, ranging from Charles Chestnutt to Zora Neale Hurston have understood the complexity, ingenuity, and creativity of blues themes: local folklore, symbolism, and mythos of rural Black life. Other writers, such as Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes, have captured the sound of Black people that have shared and experienced the places in which the blues were made or referred to. Apart from its literal uses, the blues determine a tradition of reference to Black life in both rural and urban environments and the folklore associated to each. Consequently, that tradition and its literary uses are what allow Bentley to create and live her queer life while also adding nuance to the genre, meaning, her style shaped the genre.

Throughout this study, I will refer to music genres that imply a set of technical skills in style, sound, visual aesthetics, particular references in lyrical content, and were created in specific times and places. For example, the blues, as genre, was popularized in cities but were a rural tradition that travelled with Black migrants leaving the American South. Jazz was an instrumental music born out of New Orleans folk that drastically changed in sound and popularity by the midcentury. Also, jazz can incorporate a blues-style and, however, be distinct from the blues genre. Furthermore, jazz has several subcategories in the genre/style that appear early on in its life, as opposed to the subcategories of blues that appear on a different timeline. Lastly, rhythm & blues is a mixture of several genres in Black music that cater to a different generation than blues and jazz. Moreover, there were differences and similarities that all Black
music genres and styles faced in an entertainment industry dictated by segregation and racism. Much of the histories referenced here derive from the work of music historian Eileen Southern and her *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, and Amiri Baraka’s *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. Both texts not only define genres but consider the historical context of their origins as essential to the styles they produced. Therefore, because style was such a major component to the artistic creativity of Bentley’s performances and life events, it’s imperative to understand how said styles are recognized, read, and remembered. That way, we can read her for her way of queering.

My main argument is that Black vernacular culture, specifically, Black music and the blues, in particular, have also been a trans music. Black music was the product of a race market, rural and urban music created by Black people marketed to Black audiences only. However, when Tin Pan Alley recognized the popularity of Black music culture with its folk, then did a white music industry mass produced Black vernacular culture, while regulating it under the label of “race music” in the twentieth century. Since then, Black music has had to be a transitive culture, meaning, Black material/immaterial culture is the “condition of possibility for the modern world” that is mass-produced, globally influential, and is always the referential to any popular culture. Such a condition requires it to be a place of “non-being” or that which precedes articulation. The blues operated in this way until it was labeled as such by its originators, audiences, and experts. The blues is a trans music because it anticipates the unrecognized as it articulates that which is yet to be heard. How else can the blues be foundational to all American popular music, despite the race, gender, and sexuality of its creators. Therefore, borrowing C. Riley Snorton’s contemplations on “transcapability,” I argue that Black music is a trans music that crosses the boundaries that contain race, gender, and sexuality, temporality notwithstanding.
Gladys Bentley was the archetype of a trans music that made the blues essential to American popular forms.

Black music has been a transitory music in many ways. It has moved with Black people, from rural to urban environments. It has also moved in figurative ways, from sacred to secular. At the turn of the century, Black music moved from plantations, on trains, to vaudeville stages, to speakeasies. It “crossed over” into popular music (always read as white), literally crossing the color line of segregation in the music industry and among audiences. It moved from one generation to another, always sounding new and different while retaining its cultural roots in the blues. It moved a people through freedom songs and gave new meanings to the political resistance sacred music offered during the Civil Rights Movement. It moved American patriotism and culture, through the service women and men that needed a little piece of home abroad, but also from the musicians who toured Europe since the First World War, like James Reese Europe and his 369th Regiment band. Crossing borders is what makes Black music a trans music. Gladys Bentley knew the potential of its transversality to challenge, redefine, and play with race, gender, and sexuality in a way that separated her from her contemporaries of the classic blues.

Other scholars, like Nelson George, have considered the transient uses of Black music as a means “to achieve equality under the law, end overt and covert racism, and acquire firm power” for Black people.⁶ According to George, Black music “is just not as gutsy or spirited or tuned into the needs of its core audience as it once was.”⁷ Such a framework essentializes the “needs” of Black people, “its core audience”, as a monolithic political project. However, these ideas are essentialist and only consider race politics without accounting for gender and sexuality.

---

⁷ Ibid, p. xii.
The needs of Black people have always been nuanced due to the complications race, gender, and sexuality presented throughout American history. Also, to claim that the music is not “tuned into the needs of its core audience” refutes the connection it continues to have with niche subcultural groups. For example, disco derived from Black and brown queer culture in New York and hip-hop was produced out of the gang culture mostly made of Afro-Caribbean and African American youth in the 1970’s. My point here is that Black music—racialized genres of music made by Black people in the twentieth century—has always needed to be anomalous in a context of white supremacy and anti-Blackness. Because of this, Black music is also a trans music, always crossing the borders of categorization that contain identity, politics, and culture.

This dissertation is a cultural history as biography. I chose a biographical structure in honor of Bentley’s unpublished autobiography *If This Be Sin*. Her semi-autobiography in *Ebony*, only a few pages in length, contained many contradicting ideas that resemble the conflict Bentley faced about her queerness. The piece was mostly an apology for her masculine lifestyle, how her family disapproved, her rise to fame, and how heterosexual marriage is necessary for happiness. Her relationships with men are key to her apology for her queer life, although her first few marriages failed, she eventually found success with an industrious entrepreneur, Charles Roberts. I use the narrative to include her voice throughout the following chapters to demonstrate the individual personality to the celebrity. In other words, I wanted to demonstrate who Gladys Bentley was in her own words. James F. Wilson has observed that her autobiography mirrors the plot of *In My Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall, making her personal narrative a performance in and of itself, however, whether Bentley was telling the truth about her life, it was still her choice and her own story. Therefore, I quote her in each chapter to demonstrate how the archive of her life and career *do* reflect the events of her autobiography. That is, the material culture of
her career in music can outline where, when, and what Bentley did with her private life. That the materials and events in her autobiography are shrouded in contradictions parallel the nature of the creative element of Black vernacular culture, specifically, her blues. In other words, her autobiography is a discursive move that rewrites her personal history in a blues form.

Much of the narrative of Bentley’s life here is predicated on showbills, periodicals, and photographs. Although the materials are limited in number, they map out her travels and the spaces she occupied in each moment throughout her career and, sometimes, her private life. Her recorded material is but a fraction of what she claimed to have penned—about 500 songs—that were never published or recorded, likely, due to the nature of her lyrical content as being too explicit for record production companies and a parody of already popular songs. Moreover, the repertoire that does exist after her Okeh recordings of the 20’s, provides a glimpse into the various music styles she incorporated into her act, such as bebop jazz, and much later in life, an early form of rhythm & blues. The few songs that are available, noticeably on independent labels, demonstrate her range on the piano.

While her earlier works are the most recognizable, all her available recorded compositions queer the familiarity of these genres and their sound. In other words, where early rhythm & blues registers as a new music in Black culture that brings young Black and white audiences together (anticipating the rise of rock ‘n’ roll), what does it mean for a Black lesbian pianist to play and sing in a style that desegregates and integrates young audiences? Indeed, she performed in drag when she played the first few recordings on the Okeh label; how did that compare to the presentation of her classic blues contemporaries? If she lived as a Black lesbian woman, why does she write a fictionalization of her early childhood to claim that she was “a woman again”? As Black, as woman, and as lesbian, Bentley gives insight to the ways she
navigated race, gender, and sexuality, which challenged and presented different ways of being raced, gendered, and sexualized. She also recapitulated the validity of those standards as she reinvented them, making her resistance—queering—of these categories a performance in the liminal spaces that connect them. That Black culture provided an avenue to contest oppression and fashion agency by queer means is the basis of this work.

Regarding Bentley’s, sexuality and gender identification, I refer and read her performances as that of a Black lesbian woman. Recent scholarship, such as that of Saidiya Hartman and Jalyn Harris, refer to Bentley using “he/him” pronouns because they are “reclaiming and reaffirming Bentley’s gender queerness and masculinity.” Also, the hormone therapy Bentley begins in the early 1950’s “makes clear that he had abandoned the categories of woman and female decades earlier” validates Bentley’s autobiography. According to Harris, Bentley’s gender queerness refers to her “trans-masculine identity…” I borrow Susan Stryker’s description of transgender, as “people who cross over…the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender.” However, as much as American culture creates ideas of gender contained in specific ideologies, for Bentley, Black culture was a way to undo and redefine gender and sexuality. Hormone therapy and marriage reverted her transition to woman immortalized in her writing. Then, while Bentley lived like a man for most of her life, it’s imperative to consider her transition to woman because she had agency in choosing to do so.

I make note of her pronouns, her transition, and how I read her gender and sexuality because it matters who is creating Black culture and why. Black women used the blues to describe their own experiences that were different from that of Black men at the end of the nineteenth century. Disco was also a genre that made space for black and brown queer

---

8 Jalyn Harris, “Gladys Bentley Leaves Gladys Bentley on Read,” in Feminist Studies, 747, no. 1 (2021) p. 112.
communities in the 1970’s having connections to ballroom culture as well. Such histories, audiences and participants alike, determine why the culture was made and for what purpose. Thus, if Bentley is read as a Black transman, what does that mean for Bentley’s music, cross-dressing, and shock-value during live shows? As a Black lesbian performer, it changes the camp of her lyrics and how her attire is registered. Were her performances shocking because she wore top hat and coat tails or because she sang songs of unrequited love and referred to anal sex for laughs? Her article, “I Am A Woman Again,” is the result of mapping her life as such: from woman, as man, and then woman again.\(^\text{10}\) Her article is a discursive practice of undoing her gender and sexuality. As a result, she died a woman who reconciled her desire for other woman.

To be clear, I do not refute that trans people existed before gay liberation. On the contrary, as a historian, I recognize the importance of transwomen of color who helped initiate the gay liberation movement, specifically, Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera. Furthermore, historians of transgender history trace transness to the mid-nineteenth century. I constantly refer to gay liberation because it changed the way gender and sexuality are understood in a twentieth century context. The movement also made trans visible as political category to an otherwise ignorant (or complacent) public. I acknowledge that the erasure of trans people from history is a part of reinforcing power and legitimacy in cisgender ideology as universal truth/reality; or cisnormativity. However, to call Bentley a transman would be ahistorical to the story Bentley herself told, regardless of whether that story holds true or not (“I Am A Woman Again,” as mirroring *The Well of Loneliness*). Additionally, that she chose to undergo medical treatment to “become a woman again” shows how resolute she was in her transition to the category of woman. In other words, reading her as trans takes away the nuance of how she lived as a man.

---

without calling herself as such. It adds complexity to recording how transness is identified and resembled before the category of trans enters the lexicon.

That is not to say that trans experiences cannot describe the phenomenon that shaped Bentley’s understanding of her own gender and sexuality. Indeed, considering what can be historically read as trans today (e.g., “intersex,” “third sex,” “invert”) does correlate with Bentley personally. This means that although she may have not been called trans by today’s standards, her life and experiences with medical professionals and local authorities do share similarities. Again, the historical context gives nuance to how she faced adversity and the questions that her life engenders regarding race, sex, gender, and sexuality. Therefore, I rely on Black trans studies scholars to explain those connections in the historical record before “trans” appears in public discourse. Certainly, much of the political and medical experiences that effect Black trans lives parallel Bentley’s life, however, this work focuses on the cultural history to make Black queerness livable under the auspices of institutional policing and regulation of sexuality and gender presentation.

Regarding the places Bentley visited, I am relying on the histories of George Chauncey and Nan Amilla Boyd to get a sense of what queer communities were like in the early twentieth century. Focusing on New York City and San Francisco respectively, both studies are interested in the culture that built gay and lesbian communities. Both works do not center the lives of Black people. However, they allow us to understand what gay culture looked like in the context of urban centers at both ends of the country. Chauncey argues that white gay men established a code of mores and norms among queer visible enclaves that determined the gay men related to one another and the spaces they shared with non-gay people. Boyd, on the other hand, talks about the strategies lesbian and gay folk used navigating Prohibition, The Depression, and The Second
World War, furthermore, how those queer communities influenced tourism during those early periods. Bentley toured between the west and east coasts of the United States, making several stops along the way—for example, she meets people who help her in her career throughout the Midwest—and had long tenures in the Ubangi Club (New York) and Mona’s 440 Club (San Francisco). This means she was part of the wider queer communities in each city and part of the context of both studies.

By extension, Bentley toured all over the United States. While she usually held long tenures in big cities, she also made stops in smaller areas throughout the Midwest, particularly, Texas. Her touring must have been the source of both pain and pleasure because, on one hand, she was relatively safe from discrimination and prejudice in the Jim Crow South, never staying long enough to encounter trouble. On the other hand, she risked her safety by playing in segregated venues, cross-dressing, and singing sexually suggestive lyrics to white women. The influences she may have encountered can be heard in what little remains of her recorded work during the late 1930’s, early 1940’s. Her piano style was akin to the piano styles being played throughout the Midwest, such as barrelhouse or boogie-woogie piano, both have origins in Texas.

Clubs, especially queer clubs, red light districts, and racialized areas (areas that regulate racial groups due to de facto or de jure segregation), have a politics of their own, whether influenced by outside forces or by the people who regularly occupied or visited those spaces. Kevin Mumford’s *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* and Roderick A. Ferguson’s *Aberrations In Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* discuss the political implications of these spaces in relation to racial groups. Much of Ferguson’s work is concerned with the culture of politics that determine heteronormativity
authority over the ways in which race and sexuality are regulated. His sociological analysis hones in on 1920’s Harlem as a site for this phenomenon. Also, Mumford talks about how dancehalls and other spaces where sex is visible, operate as sites where race and sex are regulated and negotiated, reinforcing the color line in relation to a racialized imagination of heterosexuality as essential to segregation. These studies contextualize the period and places Bentley lived in and worked in as a visible Black lesbian entertainer providing a way to theorize her blues differently than just resistant or transgressive. Instead, we can ask how Bentley’s blues operated to negotiate those macro politics into a performance and maintain some distance and agency from repressive efforts to shut them down. Moreover, how did such repressive strategies influence her commitment to her so-called smut and “lewd” antics on stage?

Black vernacular culture has always been open to new possibilities regardless of their expression. That is partly due to the history of resistance necessary to survive white supremacy and anti-Black terror (i.e. slavery, lynching, segregation). On the other hand, Black vernacular culture was a way to explore newfound freedom at the end of the nineteenth century. The freedom to choose sexual partners, to move from place to place, and determine how Black people can live, makes Black vernacular culture inherently transformative to ways of being and self-discovery. Music was a major part of that exploration. How Black lesbian women experienced the world of the twentieth century was expressed and communicated to other Black people by way of the blues. Angela Y. Davis’ *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* inspires the structure of the analysis in the following chapters, particularly, Bentley’s lyrical work. Davis’ scholarship demonstrates an “emerging feminism” in the lyrical work of early blues women of the 1920’s, many of which were Black lesbian women. So, homosexuality and its expression through the blues has been
understood to be integral to Black vernacular culture in the early 1920’s. I argue that Black culture—more specifically, Black working-class music—has always been a space to articulate the liminalities of gender and sexuality, for Black queer people, before queerness was made public in political, social, and economic discourses in the twentieth century, before gay liberation.

Beginning with Gladys Bentley’s birth, the opening chapter leads up to her first singles by the end of the 1920’s. Her family life sets the tone of her endeavors as a Black lesbian and her affinity to clothing. Such instances are a microcosm of African American life at the turn of the century. Bentley herself negotiates and determines how she maneuvers race and gender when confronted by the institutions of family and school (both private and public life) before she decides to move to New York. It is there that she encounters a varied world of race, class, and gender lines that are constantly negotiated every day. For a young Bentley, New York City was exciting because with all its challenges in urban life, it presented many opportunities as well. For example, Bentley found solace in the gay enclaves of the city, both Black and white, making it easier to find her people, such as literary and musical rising stars. Furthermore, she breaks out into her own persona that reflects how she wanted to present herself public, cross-dressing on stage as an act of self-determination and defiance. The liminal space between convention and dissension, old and new, women and men, gay and straight, Black and white, was how Bentley fashioned herself despite expectations. In other words, Bentley was most successful when she played between the binary of acceptable and unacceptable.

Chapter 1 sets up the material culture of Bentley’s life for the rest of this study. Indeed, clothing was the first things to make Bentley feel comfortable in her own body, face the adversity of people’s reactions to her, and face a cisnormative world that permeated her home,
family, and broader community. Finding her home in New York as a migrant from Philadelphia, also influenced Bentley’s tenacity for creativity and improvisation for her music and her aesthetic. In New York, she was free to wear what she wanted and do what she wanted, and perhaps more importantly, choose her own family. Records such as census reports and birth certificates, coupled with Bentley’s autobiography, demonstrates what her life at home was like. I include surveys of New York City to understand the world that Bentley lived in the early twentieth century. The Harlem Renaissance, gay enclaves, and Prohibition were major influences on Bentley’s environment; thus, I account for these historical periods in how they may have influenced her interest in art and entertainment. Photographs of this time are available as well; indeed, her first profile was taken in the late 1920’s. Other photographic sources, such as Carl Van Vechten’s photography and promotional material, offer primary source material to Bentley’s typical style.

1929 is also the debut of her recorded singles on Okeh Records. The bulk of her repertoire and the subject of interested scholars rely on this material for analysis. While her work is of interest to this study, I only engage in considering her lyrical content as it makes sense to other forms of analysis. Indeed, many scholars have labored over the lyrical content of Black women musicians, such as Daphne Duval Harrison, Bernice Reagan Johnson, Daphne Brooks, and Angela Davis. Nevertheless, I am interested in how the performance of the music (e.g., playing instruments, vocal styles, spaces where music is made, how it is produced and consumed) embodies a quality worth investigating beyond its written material and what that can help us understand about identity and cultural politics. Still, what Bentley first recorded and performed gives insight to how she was similar and different from her contemporaries, during a time the blues were considered an unconventional novelty music.
Chapter 2 analyzes the politics of the clubs she played in and how she persevered despite constant policing. Although she was confronted by local authorities for her suggestive humor and sexual improvisation during live shows, she was also subject to *de facto* segregation of these clubs. In other words, the network in the music and entertainment industry comprised of club owners, organized crime, and white “slumming” audiences determined the level of policing in clubs. Indeed, the city of New York was so concerned with the entertainment industry’s influence over its populace that it became a moral issue of battling indecency for state authorities. Such a task is racialized when the most popular form of entertainment during the Jazz Age is Black working-class music culture: the blues and jazz. Bentley manages to grow in success by garnering the support of influential patrons and traveling the “Chitlin Circuit,” to make it to Hollywood and become a movie star like her contemporaries.

Furthermore, Bentley was being written about extensively. Apart from the inspiration she gave literary writers, such as Blair Niles and Langston Hughes, Bentley caught the attention of media pundits and gossip columnists. Because much of her content was sexualized interpretations of popular songs, threat of copyright infringement must have kept her from recording most of those performances. Also, although recordings don’t exist, witnesses usually account for the song titles and her live shows in brief description, perhaps, to avoid repeating her provocative antics. Moreover, Bentley was constantly touring with a growing production of dancers, singers, and musicians, gaining more notoriety as she toured. By combining the witness accounts of Bentley’s shows and the lineup of any given venue she visited, we can have a clearer picture of what Bentley’s music must have sounded like, without having audio recordings of her live performances. Jazz orchestras were the epitome of large productions for live music and Bentley grew her act in this fashion, meaning, her sound changed and got louder. While we can’t
hear any live recording of those acts, we can determine how loud they needed to be when comparing who she shared showbills with, contextualizing her professional and artistic growth as a musician.

Chapter 3 is concerned with the politics that regulated public space and determined what was permissible for Bentley in Hollywood. During the 1940’s Bentley establishes herself on the West Coast among the lesbian community in San Francisco. She finds some solace among the majority non-Black queer folk at Mona’s Club 440 for some time. However, she still was faced with the contention state authorities had with “indecency” in night life entertainment and, especially, tourism. In San Francisco, the flow of service men and women deploying and returning from World War II put pressure on state and local efforts to police tourism. Part of this, as Nan Amilla Boyd argues, was to control a visible queer community there that was growing in economic and political power. Queer clubs and bars were how lesbian and gay communities in San Francisco garnered physical space and secured their visibility for a time. This meant that while racial segregation and white fascination with Black entertainment determined the lines between race, class, and gender in New York, sexuality, wartime nationalism, and public opinion determined those same lines in San Francisco.

Additionally, Bentley’s music changed from her classic blues renditions to an updated exploration of contemporary Black music culture, that is, she recorded songs with upcoming independent music labels that specialized in Black popular music like rhythm & blues and bebop jazz. In 1946, Bentley produced new originals with a new band, The Gladys Bentley Quintette. The quintet was a drastic change from the large orchestras and revues of the previous decade, demonstrating Bentley’s awareness to the decline of swing jazz and its popularity. She adapted to the emerging new thing at the time, bebop, while adding her own contribution to the music. Her
piano style began to have hints of boogie-woogie piano that was originally from Texas. She deputed this new style in an original titled “Boogie’n My Woogie.” Because Bentley changed her band, recorded with independent labels interested in new emerging Black music styles, and changed her piano-playing, indicates her persistence in remaining relevant despite never appearing on film, her reason for travelling west. Hence, this chapter focuses on the institutional powers that governed the categories of race, gender, and sexuality and how those institutions influenced Bentley’s creative endeavors. Although they dampened her dreams of being on film, she was resistant and never faltered as she faced adversity throughout the country.

The final chapter analyzes her writing of her (in)famous autobiography, in *Ebony* magazine, contrasted to her life on stage and recorded music. Titled “I Am A Woman Again,” in the early 1950’s, scholars presume it is the result of sexual McCarthyism during Cold War America. I do not dispute that Cold War politics had an influence over how Bentley presented or fashioned her personal life, however, I believe her priority was her music catalog and claiming ownership over her 500 compositions at the time. Throughout her life, Bentley’s music was her pride and joy irrespective of the challenges it also garnered. Indeed, Bentley was a lesbian performer who led a very public life scrutinized by many institutional forces with real consequences. Yet, her commitment to her career informed much of her choices both publicly and privately as determined by where, how, and who she performed with. Subsequently, her article can be read as an attempt to hide in the closet again, as a lesbian woman, however, regardless of her intention, it’s clear that her commitment to her career took precedence over her subjectivity to institutional power. That is not to negate the very harmful reality homophobia presents to Black queer entertainers attempting to live in a heterosexual or cisgender presentation, Bentley took hormones after publishing her article after all; but to highlight the
agency she had in doing so. Furthermore, what are the differences and similarities to her coming out when compared to other news coverage on other trans and queer people? Considering her music, she composed and recorded songs that are not the focus of Bentley historians. They were singles published in the late 1940’s and 50’s that did not garner much publicity or commercial success, however, these singles are essential to understanding how Bentley’s blues queers the ideas of gender and sex in her lyricism. I juxtapose her music style and lyrics to that of Billy Tipton and Willmer “Little Ax” Broadnax to show how Black music as trans music expands ideas of masculinity, femininity, racialized sex, and gender performance.

Moreover, I demonstrate how Bentley decisions in the last decade of her life were deliberate and practical, considering how she managed her career. Also, she appeared on television for the first time after her transition to woman. Given that she appears on a daily variety show, plugs her autobiography titled If This Be Sin, and performs a popular jazz song, her television appearance holds so much meaning. What does it mean to have a queer entertainer appear on television, during Cold War America, after living a queer life? How are national identity and citizenship secured through cisnormative presentation as institutional legitimacy? What are the racial dynamics in the narratives of queer people who are publicly outed? How does their gender presentation assure them legitimacy? These questions guide my analysis when accounting for Bentley’s final music recordings. Published by Flame recording label, her sound is reminiscent of an early rhythm & blues that inspired the appropriative rock ‘n’ roll. While Bentley made efforts to change her unconventional life to a “normal” one, her sound remained queer. In other words, her music preserved its unconventionality through style and genre even though her personal life became the image of cisnormative institutionalized legitimacy (e.g., marriages with men, becoming an ordained minister, and wearing dresses instead of tuxedos).
her final years, Bentley’s blues remained queer (unfamiliar) and transitive (a condition of possibility for modernity).

Part of the theoretical work included here shows how transversality, as discursive praxis and cultural performance, makes Bentley’s repertoire a trans music. Considering the fungibility of Blackness and transness in Black Trans theory, its critique on the mechanisms of articulation and archive of gender and flesh, I consider how appositional Bentley’s music and performances (public and private) were to categorization. In constantly being transient in audibility and visibility, Bentley’s life and music are the archive of trans music performance. Bentley exploited the liminality of category and created nuanced performances from the adaptability of Black music. Theater and performance scholar James F. Wilson understood the liminality of Gladys Bentley, her challenge to race and gender as convention, and performance as emancipatory for queer bodies. Bentley can never be known because she always subverted expectation. The following narrative is not a definitive telling of Bentley’s life, however, a focus on how Bentley’s blues is a display of trans music made possible through Black culture.

Throughout her life, Gladys Bentley has lived most of it on stage, in clubs, speakeasies, homes, and large venues. Much of her recorded material is tame compared to witness accounts of her improvised popular covers that included sexually suggestive lyrics. While she crafted her persona as a cross-dressing celebrity, it allowed her to publicly express her sexuality in a fashion suitable to her. Eventually, the policing of her performance and appearance led her to actively reclaim a womanhood she felt she lost. Her professional career was still her pride and joy, despite her eventual transition back to living like a heterosexual woman. Her nuanced performances and unique style in aesthetics made her a symbol of rebellion against the conventions of gender and sexuality in the early twentieth century, however, she was able to
fashion herself as such by way of Black cultural traditions, such as the blues. Therefore, Bentley’s blues offered a platform to transgress but also determine the boundaries of race and gender before those categories entered the political discourses of gay liberatory politics in the 1960’s and Black feminism articulated the relationship between them in the 1970’s. Bentley’s life and music is an account of how queer subjectivity was an exchange and negotiation between the categories of race, gender, and sexuality, and the very institutions that govern the conditions in which they are found. However, Black music made those negotiations possible and created space to make racialized queerness possible.
CHAPTER I: “THERE’S NO BETTER TIME FOR THEM TO START USING A GIRL,”: THE MAKING OF GLADYS’ EXCLUSIVE CLUB (1907-1930)

Gladys Bentley was born on August 12, 1907, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to George L. Bentley and Trinidadian-born Mary C. Mote.11 She was born at 9:30 a.m. at 1713 Vine Street, ward 15, under the name Helen Bently.12 Her mother was 23 years old when she gave birth to Gladys and her father was a 24 year-old carpenter.13 According to Gladys, her “strange private life” was the result of not having an immediate bond with her mother.14 As an “unwanted child,” Gladys made efforts to gain her mother’s recognition.15 The first of four children, Gladys noticed her adherence for her mother’s attention at an early age because, as she tells it, “there are mothers whose yearning for a male child goes ungratified…” As a result, “mothers…let their daughters know, either openly or insidiously, that they are unwanted.” Perhaps Mary Mote was bitter about having a daughter because she had lost her first child, Harry Mote, sometime after Gladys was born. Mary Mote was employed doing housework and lived at 857 N. Watts Street while George Bentley lived separately at 1833 Lombard.16 Harry was born March 26, 1903; however, he does not appear in future records again suggesting he may have died at a young age.17 Mary desperately wanted a boy. She prepared for one and feeling that her prayers were unanswered, felt “Girls,” Gladys said about her mother’s feelings, “…were fated for trouble.” Mary’s neglect of Gladys was compensated by her grandmother for the first six months of her

---

13 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
life.\(^{18}\) Mary had to be persuaded to nurture her first-born daughter. Little did anyone know what kind of trouble Gladys would find throughout her life.

When Wilbur L. Bentley and George L. Bentley, Jr. were born—in 1910 and 1911, respectively—they answered Mary’s prayers and distracted her from her disappointment with Gladys.\(^{19}\) As the family grew, George sought out employment as a laborer at a box factory.\(^{20}\) Mary Bentley, born in 1913, was the youngest of the four children and Mary Mote’s youngest daughter. Gladys grew to resent her brothers during childhood because “they were admired” whereas she “was scorned.” Between 1916 and 1917, Gladys began to wear her brothers clothing after years of conflict between the three of them.\(^{21}\) By 1918, the family had moved to 1012 Euclid Avenue.\(^ {22}\) Feeling her mother’s dismissal as contempt toward Gladys’ gender, wearing her brothers’ clothes was a way of “getting even with them.” Soon, she began to “feel comfortable in boy’s clothes than in dresses.” Her father was no comfort either. Mary would often turn to George, Sr. to get Gladys to stop wearing her brothers’ clothes. She remembers avoiding her father, uncles, “and all the rest of the males who came into my home.” For Gladys, it was clear since she was a toddler; “I never wanted a man to touch me.”\(^ {23}\)

Clothing would become a major point of hardship for Gladys because her family disapproved. School was no haven for Gladys’ outfits either; “teachers had sent me home to put on dresses several times” she recalls. This was followed by harassment from her peers which didn’t deter her from her choice of dress—“I had withstood the fun poked at me by my

\(^{18}\) Bentley, p. 96.


\(^{21}\) Bentley, p. 96.

\(^{22}\) George Leonard Bentley, United States Registration Card, order number 3386, (1918).

\(^{23}\) Ibid.
schoolmates who followed me in the street.” Bentley cross-dressing as a child growing up in Philadelphia was a spectacle to others. But she felt so comfortable in “boy’s clothes” that she had to negotiate her outfits with family, finally conceding to wear “middy blouses and skirts” to school. As a child, Gladys adhered to her own sense of self that culminated in her gender presentation or her “subjective sense of fit (or lack of fit) with a particular gender category”. For Gladys, it was between being a boy or a girl. Although she recognizes her gender expression as having been “born different” this idea changes throughout her life, subsequently believing “‘different’ people are made, not born.” Whether she would reference emotional trauma from her family as crucial to gender presentation or “inborn physical characteristics”—such as her maturity or large body—she understood that her difference was always present since childhood.

It was only a matter of time, when her gender expression was represented by her brothers’ clothes, that she felt comfortable with herself. This would carry over into her adult life as resembled by her tuxedo outfits that were her typical stage presentation. It elevated her larger-than-life persona for her risqué act and protected her self-confidence and reassured her determination. Therefore, as much as the transgression of cross-dressing was a source for much of Bentley’s challenges, it also allowed her to feel safer in being who she wanted and acting in a manner that fit for her. In other words, Bentley’s choice of clothing transgressed conventional gender expectations (including, by extension, sexual desire) and affirmed an unconventional gendered self; a liminal space that allowed creativity and nuance for Bentley. She would continue to inhabit liminal spaces throughout her life, whether it was through the experiences of racial, class, or gender dynamics.

25 Bentley, p. 96.
26 Stryker, p. 21.
Not only were clothing a way of shielding her from harassment, but it also made Bentley comfortable with her physical body. Recognizing herself as having “always been large and stocky”, she attributes her body to being “older in mind and intuition, than other children.” This carries over into an intimate display of affection for her teacher; “Sometimes, she would let me comb her long, beautiful hair.” Gladys remembered having dreams about her teacher after spending days admiring her during school and helping her organize the classroom, all the while wondering why she was “so attracted to her.” Such intimacy frightened The Bentleys and, as a result, Gladys was taken “from doctor to doctor.” Where family compromises failed for the “normal existence” The Bentleys wanted for their daughter, medical professionals would surely provide answers for Gladys’ behavior.

Cross-dressing in the early twentieth century had legal repercussions. The practice of “wearing gender a-typical clothing,” cross-dressing has historically had several uses beyond resisting cis-gender presentation. According to Susan Stryker, “it could be a theatrical practice…part of religious ceremonies, or part of celebrating public festivals and holidays.” Regardless, in the United States by the late nineteenth century, several municipalities outlawed the practice. Wilmington, Delaware (less than thirty-five miles from Philadelphia) prohibited the wearing of dress of the opposite sex by 1856 and in Newark, New Jersey by 1858. Consequently, the threat of arrest (or worse) for a young Gladys Bentley was a real concern.

Gladys’ reading as transversal in this work goes beyond her clothing. In other words, she cannot be reduced to merely a cross-dresser and requires a revision of her gender presentation as more than subversive. Cross-dressing, according to Miqqi Alicia Gilbert, requires two cultural conditions: a binary gender system—a “social and formal set of standards that distinguish

---

27 Bentley, p. 96.
between the two genders and, ipso facto, the two sexes”—and “a prohibition, legal and/or social, against gender ‘impersonation’. ”

Both conditions were present in Bentley’s life, particularly when considering the persecution cross-dressers faced throughout the 1920’s. However, where Gilbert determines a cross-dresser as one who “refuses one gender and moves back and forth at will [emphasis mine],” Gladys eventually subjects herself to injections of estrogen later in life as an attempt to become a “woman again.” This, coupled with her experience “from doctor to doctor” throughout her childhood, determine Gladys Bentley’s gender presentation at times against her will, whether she chose to be subversive or not. Several factors involving her fame, legal disputes, and personal life determined Gladys’ gender presentation despite her own desires.

Eventually, Gladys left Philadelphia for New York in 1923 at the age of sixteen. New York must have seemed like a haven for her because cities “provided the crucial circumstances for gay communities to take shape.”

The beginning of the Jazz Age, the growing urbanization of black people throughout the country, and women’s victory to vote challenged social expectations of gender and sexuality during the early twentieth century. Harlem in the 1920’s was one of the largest northern urban epicenters of black culture. Eric Garber, one of the first historians to take interest in Gladys Bentley, places her within gay culture in Harlem, which was in opposition of racial progress and “an easy target for exploitation” by white organized crime and the city’s administration.

Although very little research has been collected on “the social history of cross-dressing or the public expression of transgender feeling,” gay communities

---

30 Bentley, p. 94.
31 Stryker, p. 48
32 Ibid, p. 49.
would have provided safety and opportunity for people who sought different ways to express their gender. Moreover, “homosexual desire and gender variance were often closely associated” so it would make sense for Gladys to feel at home in Harlem’s gay subculture.

The “sporting life” or “the life,” as it was commonly known in the 20’s, was more visible in Harlem than its counterpart, Greenwich Village. George Chauncey’s *Gay New York* historicizes gay culture as it was made and understood by gay men, however, his insights into Harlem’s gay community can depict the world Gladys had entered as a migrant from Philadelphia. Harlem was a place for the “sporting life”—a world of vice that entailed “posh nightclubs catering to white tourists, to earthy jazz halls for interracial sophisticates, to smoky basement dives frequented by hoodlums, prostitutes, and female impersonators.” Many whites would enjoy “slumming” to cabarets and small after-hours clubs,” to consume black music and culture, especially, after Carl Van Vetchen’s 1926 novel that sensationalized Harlem’s nightlife. But where white patrons dictated the segregated music scene in Harlem clubs, Harlem gay life complicated the divisions between race, class, and gender. Much of its complexity is determined by the proximity shared by various migrants coming from rural Southern towns, both wealthy businesspeople and successful professionals who shared the same spaces as the poorest. Nevertheless, sexuality, depending on object of desire, determined how racial and class divisions would be maintained. The music scene of Harlem was a commonly shared space between black and white patrons, gay or straight, rich, or poor. Yet, as much as the racial and gendered boundaries were negotiated and tested, they were also refined and maintained in formal public

---

34 Stryker, p. 50.
36 Garber, p. 54.
37 Chauncey, p. 246.
spaces, such as clubs, churches, and public houses. However, Prohibition made lawlessness a site where such dividing lines were challenged and open for interpretation.

Speakeasies were more than impromptu and illegal bars during the 20’s—they were also spaces for “sexually charged behavior” between straight, lesbian, and gay men. Cabarets, basement speakeasies, and “rent parties” were some of the spaces where Harlem gay culture could be free of white employers or black bourgeoisie. Because of this underground subculture, gay men often would dare to appear in drag. One such drag queen, Cyril Lightbody, opened a café on Seventh Avenue in December 1930 to much success—Gladys Bentley would frequently perform on Seventh Avenue throughout the decade. Regardless of drag’s frequency in Harlem, police surveillance and legal consequences were still high risks for public drag. In February 1928, police arrested 30 men for simply being in drag at Lulu Belle’s on 341 Lenox Avenue near 127th Street. Other drag queens, who were defiant towards police after their sentence of “sixty days in the workhouse,” would mock the officers that arrested them. Nevertheless, many still faced persecution for drag such as the 27 unlucky drag queens that were arrested during a police raid in 1932, also on Seventh Avenue.

Because drag is such a public display of transgressing gender, during the 1920’s, it was a performance of unyielding by gay men in New York. Following Gilbert’s logic on cross-dressing, women involved in such acts were usually applauded for their resistance to sexism/patriarchy, however, “she may well be attacked for trying to rise above her ‘rightful’ place.” Although drag and cross-dressing are sometimes conflated, the former is usually a performance for an audience,

---

40 Ibid.
41 Ibid, p. 249.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid, p. 250.
44 Gilbert, Keywords, p. 66.
whereas cross-dressing is more personal; a choice in privacy. For Gladys Bentley, her eventual celebrity allows her personal way of dress to be put on display and celebrated for its audaciousness and provocation to race and gender expectations. For white patrons who frequented the Harlem clubs, she was an attraction but, usually, openly “black gay men and lesbians had to negotiate their presence” in Harlem’s shops, clubs, and churches.45

Regardless, Bentley was often dressed in short blazers and fedoras when she was not performing. In public, the clothes and who she was accompanied with differentiated her from being considered a drag king. Bentley was frequently in the company of women, Black and white, as witnessed by friends, gossip columnists, and news correspondents. For a large woman to be in the company of other women, race notwithstanding, is daring for the 1920’s. However, it is precisely because Bentley was found in the company of Black and white women, beyond the walls of speakeasies, clubs, and rent parties, distinguished her as a “male impersonator” to future witnesses. In other words, if public life was a masculine domain and Bentley deliberately occupies it with women while wearing blazers and ties, reflects her obscuring the lines between gender and race. For black men to be found with white women in public usually leads to lynching, however, Bentley transgresses those norms while displaying nuanced images of racialized sexuality. It was likely that rent parties were one of the places Bentley was able to fraternize with women and step out with them.

It is likely that Bentley made her living by performing at Harlem rent parties; private spaces that were tailored to emulate the speakeasies and night life of public venues during the 20’s. According to Bill Chase from The New York Age, “they were a necessity for countless folk who had no luck in hitting numbers and had to find some more reliable means of staying on good

45 Chauncey, p. 248.
terms with their landlords.” Rent parties were a black institution informally organized to
negotiate housing, provide entertainment that would be otherwise inaccessible to black people,
and, for desperate renters, to find possible financial safety nets. Amiri Baraka’s *Blues People*
registers rent-parties (or “pay-parties”) as the site of boogie woogie piano popularity. Boogie
woogie derived from ragtime piano, however, where ragtime emulated “white pianistic
techniques,” boogie woogie was distinguished by its “rolling” blues rhythms. In other words,
boogie woogie referenced the blues styles of the early twentieth century, making pianists play in
percussive and rhythmic styles rather than “melodic or harmonic variations” that was typical of
ragtime.

Boogie woogie is also associated to the American South and Midwest. According to
Baraka, early blues singers recognized it as “a ‘Western’ piano” that came from mining and
lumber camps in the region. Thus, boogie woogie was tied to labor. Where ragtime was a Black
interpretation of European melodies and written down, boogie woogie was an improvisational
piano-style. This was what differentiated the two, one was based in European styles of music and
written down and the other was improvised because it was “a special social status” to play “the
various Chittlin’ Struts, Gumbo Suppers, Fish Fries, Egg Nog Parties” or pay-parties. Unlike
rent-parties, pay-parties were all about the pianist, if they could keep the party going through
their playing, they would eat and drink for free, from one party to another. They were also a way
to boast about Black cultural foods as well. The point here is that boogie woogie was a
socializing music, as opposed to the technical composing ragtime required. For Bentley, boogie
woogie’s improvisational component and socializing aspects would be alluring to her as a

---

47 Baraka, p. 114.
48 Ibid, p. 115.
migrant from Philadelphia. Both genres are representative of class culture because ragtime was an interpretation of European classical music and boogie woogie was a product of leisure from labor; a labor of love.

Although Gladys Bentley’s first few records would emulate the classic blues queens of the 20’s, songs such as “Worried Blues,” “Big Gorilla Blues,” and “Red Beans and Rice,” feature her vocals over a blues piano. Her other songs feature her singing accompanied by acoustic guitar. Nevertheless, boogie woogie could describe Bentley’s later-style throughout the following decades, like that of Fats Waller. For Baraka, many of the boogie woogie pianists that honed their skills at rent-parties were not recorded, except for Clarence “Pine Top” Smith, Eurreal Montgomery or Hersal Thomas.49 However, Gladys Bentley was not the only black woman pianist of her time. Louise Johnson was a pianist that recorded for Paramount Records by 1930, having travelled with such blues legends as Charly Patton, Son House, and Willie Brown.50 It isn’t until the success of Bentley’s debut with Okeh records that she hones her skills on piano throughout the 30’s, playing torch songs, sentimental love songs about unrequited love. This shift was also, in part, due to the constant shutting down of clubs and regulating of her lyrics that she encountered later.

It is no surprise, then, Gladys Bentley resembled the style and sound of classic blues queens. Having migrated to New York like her rural southern contemporaries, she must have identified with blues stars such as Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and, her protégé, Bessie Smith. They were the biggest stars at the time, and they were both open about their lesbian relationships. Bentley was successful at an audition for a Broadway agent and, as a result, recorded four

49 Ibid, p. 117.
records, eight sides of which were not printed until the end of the decade.\textsuperscript{51} The first singles she recorded were published by Okeh Records that include: “How Long-How Long Blues,” “Moanful Wailin’ Blues,” “Ground Hog Blues,” “Worried Blues,” “Wild Geese Blues,” “How Much Can I Stand?” “Big Gorilla Blues,” and “Red Beans And Rice,” all printed on 10-inch shellac discs between 1928 through 1929.\textsuperscript{52} She was then listed on Okeh Record’s advertisements that featured various blues and jazz acts such as Victoria Spivey and Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five.

Okeh studios had been recording black artists since Perry Bradford, a black composer and musician, introduced Mamie Smith to the General Phonograph Company in 1920.\textsuperscript{53} Okeh Records, a subsidiary to General Phonograph, were the first recording company to capitalize on black entertainment with Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues,” recorded in August to successful sales estimated in the hundreds of thousands.\textsuperscript{54} The success of Mamie Smith ushered in a decade of publishing black folk music—the blues—as it was performed by black women such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, Ethel Waters, Sippie Wallace, among many others. Even notable male guitarists recorded with Okeh as well, such as Lonnie Johnson. What made Okeh significant beyond their capitalization of black culture and commercialization of black rural music was that their marketing strategies targeted black audiences. The “race market,” as Ralph Peer, an Okeh recording manager called it, was a profitable endeavor throughout the decade. Other recording companies like Columbia, Paramount, and the Radio Corporation of America (RCA Victor), followed suit.\textsuperscript{55} By 1927, record sales in the “race market” were at approximately

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{51} Bentley, p. 96. \\
\textsuperscript{52} Wilson, p. 164. \\
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid, p. 56. 
\end{flushleft}
104 million units. If “race records” proved to be lucrative, it also meant Black consumerism held a significant purchasing power, so much so that it was fundamental to the spread of blues music throughout the country.

Okeh Records were also responsible for marketing jazz as a white American music. The Original Dixieland Jazz Band (an all-white band) were the first jazz musicians ever recorded in 1917 and, by 1920, Paul Whiteman was commonly billed as the “King of Jazz.” Therefore, it is no surprise Bentley would be an Okeh star by 1928 and his performance style was akin to blues music, resembling the classic blues queens of the decade. An Okeh advertisement featured a large profile of “Gladys Bentley; A New Blues Star” of “Extra Heated Blues”. The blues served as an opportunity for record companies to capitalize on black rural southerners arriving to northern urban centers, bringing black rural culture with them. For Bentley, however, her signature sound was recognized during her debut because her first recordings were advertised as “low-down excitement.”

Consequently, Gladys Bentley was something of a typical blues woman vocalist at first. “How Long-How Long Blues,” “How Much Can I Stand?” and “Ground Hog Blues,” represent lyrics that focus black women’s experiences with love and sexuality that are essential to the blues. According to Angela Davis, apart from practicing personal and sexual freedoms that were impossible during slavery, blues music also “contradicted mainstream ideological assumptions regarding women being in love” throughout the early twentieth century. Moreover, black women’s blues also challenged the domestic expectations that were crucial to middle-class white

---

56 Ibid, p. 61.
58 Pittsburgh Courier, January 5, 1929.
women’s social world that mapped onto all other women as well. For example, “Ground Hog Blues,” is one example that challenges notions of middle-class domesticity because infidelity was seldom a matter of public scrutiny: “Hey you onesie-girl, don’t tell nobody else/ You can’t keep a man in this world by yo’self.” Similarly, “How Much Can I Stand?” is a lament to a cheating lover: “One time he said my sugar was ‘so sweet’/ But never eats dessert to go across the street,” moreover, how the narrator suffers physical abuse, “Said I was an angel, he was bound to treat me right/ who in the devil heard of angels that get beat up every night?”

Davis asserts that songs advising women about relationships were more common than songs regarding “female competition.” Whether they were a lament of unrequited love or how women should conduct themselves in relationships—for example, “Ground Hog Blues,” concludes with turning to the bible for guidance about a cheating man: “I went to church on Sunday like all good women do/ First thing I seen in the bible, ‘Mama, don’t be nobody’s fool’,”—women’s blues was instructional. Such advice was a way for working-class black women to build community when middle-class values, as represented by black women’s club organizations, were organized partly to defend “against pervasive charges of immorality and sexual promiscuity” as found in blues music. In other words, with the success of progressive activism by black women’s clubs organizations, such as the National Association of Colored Women or the National Council of Negro Women, middle-class women were meant to embody the standard of race pride that working-class women were expected to follow. While Davis observes that black women’s blues represented poor women’s experiences despite club women’s

60 Ibid.  
63 Davis, p. 53.  
64 Ibid.  
65 Davis, p. 44.
ideology “with assumptions about the inherent inferiority of poor—and especially sexually assertive—women,” Gladys Bentley’s blues pandered to both because her performances were that of spectacle and modesty.66

Gladys’ time in Harlem must have been a sanctuary compared to growing up with her family who frequently questioned her behavior. She was far from the prying eyes of her neighbors, the several doctors she was made to see, and classmates that recognized her as “different.” Throughout the following years, Bentley has been pictured wearing the typical dress styles for women during the 20’s: fur coats and wool cloche hats. Early photographs of her, such as Carl Van Vechten’s personal collection, capture her in this way. William Edward Elcha, a black photographer of actors to both stage and screen, was hired by The Majestic Theatrical Circuit, Inc. in 1928.67 Elcha was known for his photographs of musicians and took the first known photograph of a young Gladys Bentley.68 Her headshot shows her facing the camera at an angle. Her hair is pressed in flapper-fashion and her chest is bare. The same photograph would also be used for her promotional debut for Okeh Records that same year. Such photographs show that Bentley was still knowing herself because, in later years, she would usually be seen in full dark suits and wide brimmed hats; she was only 21 years of age at the time.

In June 1929, Bentley was billed alongside the Hall Johnson Choir for the New York City Federation of Women’s Clubs at the Renaissance Ball Room.69 Eric Garber claims that one way black lesbian and gay entertainers found community was in “Harlem’s predominantly

68 Edward Elcha, “Gladys Bentley,” accessed on May 4, 2022. https://www.flickr.com/photos/147039490@N04/33831890068/in/photolist-2jf5R5B-TxBhes-bDkPMh-2jf5U7-2jfRNhv-6vH5Cy-9coHvj-8vaBrp-2jKUFeD-ThTb
heterosexual entertainment world.”

Hall Johnson himself was also privately gay. Included as an “extra midnight feature,” Bentley is one of the performers that were unique from the choir and concert singers also billed, such as concert singing contralto Adelaide Smith. Although Angela Davis observes the classist elements between classic blues queens and black women’s club organizations, Bentley pandered to both with her blues music and performance. In other words, Bentley was a blues musician that understood the importance of blues as a culture of self-determination that was defined by many different facets of black life; be they considered low-art or hegemonic middle-class values of modesty. Bentley must have found value in contradicting ideas for the sake of exploring the capacities of black expression through her blues music.

Kevin Quashie’s thoughts on black public life during the Harlem Renaissance demonstrate the nuances black womanhood had on black political consciousness in The Sovereignty of Quiet. Marita Bonner’s essay, “On Being Young, A Woman, and Colored,” published in 1925 for The Crisis, offers a glimpse into how a young black woman “might have: the desire to be free and to revel in both the thrills of the modern world and the spoils of her education and youth.” The essay meditates on the expectations of an exterior patriarchal and white supremacist social world that determine gender and domesticity while conveying the “excitement and agency” found in the personal desire for a career, a home, or a husband; i.e. middle-class values. Therefore, Gladys Bentley must have seen the usefulness of performing for the New York City Federation of Women’s Clubs as a blues musician. Bentley contradicts the narrow understandings of class dynamics in black life that were limited by racism and sexism or,

71 Ibid.
73 Ibid, p. 29.
as Kevin Quashie calls it, “the facts of black publicness.” Instead, Bentley still brought blues music and its assertion of black lesbian sexuality into a space of progressive modesty.

Nevertheless, the spectacle of Harlem’s nightclubs was where she felt at home. By September 1929, Bentley is playing regularly at The Clam House in Harlem. At the time, she was frequently playing “He’s Got Somethin’…” which was never recorded. When the Stock Market Crash plunged the country into economic strife, Harlem entertainment was effected as well. Bentley managed to continue making a living and was even featured in a column for the *Niagara Falls Gazette* in 1930. The column details the economic recesses of “regulars” and their patronage, replaced by tourists, however, The Clam House maintained Bentley’s act as “its only attraction.” The article describes her as a “bulky piano player and singer of low-down ditties” suggesting that Bentley continued to be regarded for her signature vulgarity.

She also made appearances in Pittsburgh—returning to her native Pennsylvania after six years—when she performed at the Elmore Theater. She was billed as an “Okeh record star” by then. The “Hottentots of 1930” was the name of the show that Bentley was featured in; a dance revue which was a showcase of vaudeville acts that were commonly held at the Elmore. The theater was a typical stop for black musicians travelling between New York and Chicago during the Twenties. By 1932, sales had dropped to 6 million copies sold from the staggering 104 million just five years prior. The decline was detrimental to blues women and recording

---

78 “‘Hottentots’ Making Whoopee At Elmore Theater This Week,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 23, 1929.
79 Ibid.
81 Harrison, p. 61.
companies such as Okeh and Columbia. Likewise, segregation contributed to the limitations of black musicians’ access to the music industry. Though the blues was popular in black communities throughout the 20’s, segregation—*de facto* and *de jure*—confined black public life in theaters, dance halls, radio stations, and record stores, among other private and public spaces in everyday life.\(^{82}\) Furthermore, white escapism and their racial ideas of blackness contributed to maintaining segregation, making Harlem entertainment a spectacle of white consumption. However, radio sets wouldn’t make more of an impact until the 1930’s when they were more affordable, radicalizing the reach of black popular culture overall.\(^{83}\) But between the Clam House, local radio, and Okeh record sales, Bentley’s debut got off to a successful start after living in New York for just four years.

Bentley’s Okeh hits were also heard on New York’s WPCH radio show throughout 1930. Record sales began to decline during the Depression, however, radio play accommodated the trend. Radio broadcasts in the 20’s and 30’s was limited regarding Black music. Big bands such as Duke Ellington’s and Chick Webb’s orchestras were some of the few that acquired live air time, however, such broadcasts were not aimed to Black listeners as it was to fulfill the demand of jazz’s rising popularity to white audiences.\(^{84}\) In fact, programming targeting Black audiences was intended to sell products, “day or night, to promote pork chops, chitlins, secondhand furniture, patent medicine, and anything else thought to appeal to blacks*[sic]* [emphasis mine].”\(^{85}\) Thus, radio waves were imbued with race ideology that was as segregated and appropriative as the music industry. In this way, the technologies that helped Black music grow in popularity

---


\(^{83}\) Humphrey, p. 136.

\(^{84}\) George, p. 11.

\(^{85}\) Ibid, p. 11-12.
were also demarcating the boundaries of race and class because the radio was “the leisure time of poor and working-class blacks, and to entrepreneurs” like white businessmen looking to exploit Black musicians.86

According to Amiri Baraka, the hiring practices of the rising jazz bands also contributed to the segregation of radio waves. For example, Benny Goodman, billed as the so called “King of Swing,” hired some of the music’s most notable talents, such as Teddy Wilson, Lionel Hampton, Cootie Wilson, and Charlie Christian.87 However, many of these musicians were an attempt to nurture an “authentic” sound in white jazz bands, eventually, building white jazz musicians’ credibility to the music, in turn, effecting the music’s transition from “race music” to “swing jazz” by the 1930’s. Racialization—the inclusion of race ideology in an otherwise benign category—of genre and style was the result of institutions and industries that commodified Black vernacular culture. Conversely, Black musicians were able to maintain a career in music by playing with white bands during economic instability which further entrenched the racial coding of American music. Regardless, Bentley would reach the height of her career the following decade, partly, due to her sharing showbills with big band orchestras, Black and white.

The eight Okeh record sides are the first catalog in Bentley’s repertoire of recordings. They can give us a glimpse into the spectacle that must have been her signature vulgarity during live performances in Harlem, according to many eyewitness accounts and fictionalizations of her stage persona in the following years. Despite these records, Bentley managed to continue performing in clubs and private parties on Park Avenue. She understood that although her records were “a gratifying success,” she also found that live performances and constant gigs were

86 Ibid, p. 12.
87 Baraka, p. 164.
profitable compared to “sit[ting] around proudly on one’s laurels as a new recording artist.”

After sitting in for entertainers in Harlem’s clubs, she received a tip at Connie’s Inn one night, The Mad House on 133rd Street needed a pianist. “But they want a boy,” her friend advised her. She replied, “There’s no better time for them to start using a girl,” however, the boss was reluctant. After a successful display of her talents on the piano, “My hands fairly flew over the keys,” she remembered a white patron paid her five dollars to continue playing. The boss of The Mad House hired her that night.

Gladys Bentley attributes much of her success in clubs to her attire. With “immaculate white full dress shirts with stiff collars, small bow ties and skirts, oxfords, short Eton jackets and hair cut straight back,” she was a handsome piano player that maintained this look for the following years. A night club map of Harlem’s speakeasies, created by Elmer Simms Campbell in 1932, features Gladys Bentley playing the piano at The Clam House except, on the map, it is indicated as “Gladys’ Clam House”. In it, she is wearing a tuxedo and top hat as well. Her formal attire is symbolic of her spectacle and modesty. As much as her boogie woogie piano playing was indicative of blues culture and its association to non-normative sexuality, her refined dress was, at times, satirical of urban sophistication. At other times, her tuxedo and top hat were a genuine masculine presentation that allowed her “smut” to be received as merely performance. Therefore, because Bentley’s cross-dressing was public and private, always changing depending on where she was, indicates her attire was more than gender transgression, but also, a display of black modernity as it was resembled by urban middle-class life in New York.

88 Bentley, p. 94.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
91 E. Simms Campbell, “a night-club map of Harlem,” Yale University Library Digital Collections (1932).
Black urban life in New York City was a hub of intellectual thought during the 1920’s. Known as The New Negro Movement by participants or The Harlem Renaissance by historians, the cultural and political production of black people is undeniably a major influence on black lives. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett posit, the period was a generational shift of how the race should present itself to a white America to successfully demand the securities of American democracy. These efforts blurred the lines between culture and politics and indicate the extent of risk involved in shaping the public image of black people throughout the world. By the time Bentley arrives to New York in 1923, the Harlem Renaissance was entering a phase led by civil rights organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League (NUL), that had strong convictions about black culture and its production.92 Toward the end of the decade, Bentley must have been influenced by a change in leadership described as a “rebellion against the Civil Rights Establishment on the part of many of the artists and writers whom that Establishment had assembled and promoted.”93 Gladys Bentley certainly caught the attention of the latter because her performance and persona offered a template for fictional characters in some of their literary works.

For Baraka, the Harlem Renaissance was an attempt of the Black middle-class to distinguish itself from others, specifically, poor, working-class, and incoming migrants to northern urban centers. Also, Black culture, its representation of Black people, and popularity in mainstream society, read as white society, was a central part of early civil rights efforts during the period (e.g., The Niagara Movement, Talented Tenth, NAACP). The pursuit of art, especially literature, according to Baraka, was a middle-class privilege. Yet, the blues “has been able to

---

93 Ibid.
survive the constant and willful dilutions of the black middle class,” because it is the “lowest
classes” who carry Black vernacular culture forward regardless of what forms it takes. In other
words, the blues retains its accountability to represent the lives of Black people because of its
roots in a class of Americans that have suffer the most economic disparity without catering to
privileged classes. Thus, the blues, as style, genre, immaterial, and oral tradition, remains
“unaltered” in its transversality.

For example, Black Swan records, founded by Henry Pace, was the first Black-owned
recording company of the 1920’s; its brightest star was Ethel Waters. At first, Black Swan
recorded many blues performers, however, under the pressure of Black businessmen concerned
with the politics of a Black music label, Black Swan’s popularity waned because of their shift
toward “the dignity of its musical tastes…” Eventually, the company was sold to Paramount, a
white company, which exploited the popularity of blues music and its creators. The point here is
that class dynamics influence the transition of Black vernacular culture into the mainstream
(white society), as much as Black cultural creators are responsible for its everchanging style.
Ethel Waters would eventually sing popular tunes and torch songs, sometimes in drag (tuxedo
and top hat), ultimately, shifting her artistry away from blues music. Gladys Bentley on the other
hand, remained within blues styles and aesthetics even in the following decade when she shared
the stage and played with big jazz bands.

Likewise, a younger generation of literary figures of the Renaissance focused much of
their work on the black working-class, as romanticized by writers such as Langston Hughes. For
Bentley, this also meant that the Harlem Renaissance artists would hone their attention on
working-class spaces, speech, and every-day lives, widening the scope of artistic merit and black

94 Baraka, p. 131.
95 Ibid, p. 129.
representation. Such a transition in literary and artistic subject matter inspired Bentley to also observe other areas of black culture that were not considered typical or standard in black urban life. She was also experimenting in different styles of black music beyond boogie woogie piano and classic blues. In March 1930, The Washboard Serenaders recorded “Washboards Get Together,” and “Kazoo Man.” The two sides were published by the Victor Talking Machine Company label in New York and although Bentley is not credited on the 10-inch shellac disc, it is presumed that she provided the scatting vocals on “Washboards Get Together.” The song is described as a “fox-trot,” which was a dance craze developed and invented by none other than James Reese Europe, who signed on to the Victor label in 1914.96

While scatting’s origins are debated among jazz historians, Louis Armstrong’s “Heebie Jeebies,” is understood to have popularized the craft for the music industry.97 “Heebie Jeebies,” was published by Okeh Records in 1926, the same label Gladys was on three years later. The song was also a fox-trot so it would be fair to say she may have found inspiration from him when she recorded “Washboards Get Together,” in 1930 with The Washboard Serenaders. She scats on almost half of her debut Okeh sides as well, such as “How Much Can I Stand,” “Worried Blues,” and “Moanful Wailin’ Blues.” Moreover, she was featured in the same catalog as the Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five in 1928 to promote her “Moanful Wailin’ Blues,” and “How Long-How Long Blues.”98 The point here is that Gladys Bentley was open to versatility in her style of music. She was not a jazz musician or a blues vocalist but both, while open to exploring other facets of black music, she explored the liminal space of black culture by playing both blues and

97 Bruce Crowther, Mike Pinfold, Singing Jazz; The Singers and Their Styles (San Francisco: Miller Freeman Books, 1997) p. 32.
98 Pittsburgh Courier, October 27, 1928.
jazz. This tenacity for experimentation in sound is what carries her piano playing forward in the following decades, although her popularity diminishes from its height in the 30’s.

1930 also marked a “highly publicized” marriage for Bentley with a white woman. According to Eric Garber, Bentley invited gossip columnist Louis Sobol to her wedding. When he asked who the “lucky man was to be” she clarified, “’Man’? Why boy you’re crazy. I’m marryin’—and she named another woman singer.”

A 1930 New York census lists Gladys Bentley as the head of household and a Beatrice Robert as a lodger. Both are indicated to be from Pennsylvania and black. Only Bentley was employed as an actor in the theater industry. Beatrice Robert was unemployed. It is unclear what this relationship was or if it was a way to hide the highly publicized New Jersey civil ceremony Garber and Wilson claim. Either way, Bentley was well-off enough to have her own place and house someone else at the same time. She grew fond of one of the many young women—black and white—she was often seen with and likely shared a domestic intimacy with Beatrice Robert.

That same year, Gladys Bentley was known by her stage name, Barbara “Bobbie” Minton. When Bentley changed her name, it “marked a new iteration of self.” Scholar Kai M. Green calls naming a tool, used by transgender and gender queer people, to disassociate from their name given at birth. Although Barbara is gendered as feminine as Gladys, however, Bobbie can occupy both feminine and masculine naming. Furthermore, Green situates naming as “an essential component of a black feminist ethic,” thinking about how the category of “woman” has historically excluded African American women from women’s rights. Also, naming as a tool was also marking the transition to freedom for many formerly enslaved Black people, thus, naming

---

99 Garber, p. 58.
“validate[s] that which was already present, yet unnamed.” Therefore, the name Barbara “Bobbie” Minton, is not exclusively a disavowal of Gladys Alberta Bentley but a transformative temporality.

Likewise, consider the naming of Black vernacular culture once it is commodified by capitalist institutions. For example, to racialize music genres, efforts had to be made in the music industry to literally “race music.” That is, the label “race music” described folk music created by Black people, advertised to include a variety of styles such as foxtrots, ragtime, blues, and jazz. Naming, depending on who or what is doing the naming, suggests power to redefine, self-determine but also capture, demonize, and pathologize. So, when Bentley names herself Barbara Bobbie Minton, she is queering the performativity of naming because it can be hidden as part of her performance while it is still a performance of power not historically given to African Americans. The name she chooses troubles the gendering of names demonstrating how Bentley’s queerness is always situated in liminality. As she grew in her career, she was referred to by other names, proving that naming is powerful but limited and dependent to affirmation. Therefore, naming is a collective experience as it is individual.

Consequently, The Mad House changed its name to Barbara’s Exclusive Club. The Mad House paid her a salary of $35 weekly. That is where she also met Carl Van Vechten who “typified the upper-class white liberal of his day.” He patronized Harlem while admiring its burgeoning culture and “loved the ghetto’s pulsating music and strapping young men,”

101 Green, p. 77.
102 Ibid, p. 79.
104 Bentley, p. 94.
supporting the works of Langston Hughes and Claude McKay to name a few. So enthralled was he with black culture that he had Bessie Smith, “Empress of the Blues,” perform for a private party he hosted in 1928, with notable guests like George Gershwin in attendance that night. Vechten was one of Bentley’s first “top-drawer society” patrons that supported her while at The Mad House. His support drastically raised her weekly salary to $125.

Vechten seemed to be genuine in his relationship to Bentley beyond the patronization of his liberalism. He saw her perform several times at The Clam House in 1929. That following year, he also fictionalized her in his novel *Parties*. Vechten namelessly fictionalizes her as a pianist who “does her hair so her head looks like a wet seal and when she pounds the piano the dawn comes up like thunder.” He also saw her at many private parties, one of which was thrown by blues singer Clara Smith and another by Eddie Wasserman, where Vechten met Cole Porter. Vechten admired Bentley so much that he gifted her the all-white tuxedo she is known for today. In November 1930, he hosted a cocktail party and had hired her to play piano. Langston Hughes was one of the guests that night and was inspired so much by Gladys Bentley that he remembers her fondly in his 1940 autobiography, *The Big Sea*.

Remembering Harlem during the 20’s, Hughes affectionately recalls the small venues Bentley performed at before her rise to stardom. She “played a big piano all night long,” he remembered, “literally all night, without stopping—singing songs like ‘St. James Infirmary,’ from ten in the evening until dawn, with scarcely a break between the notes, sliding from one

106 Ibid, p. 139.
107 Ibid.
108 Bentley, p. 94.
109 Ibid.
111 Wilson, p. 177.
112 Ibid.
song to another…”[113] Her live performances were a powerhouse of “musical energy” coupled with her cross-dressing display; a “large, dark, masculine lady, whose feet pounded the floor while her fingers pounded the keyboard—a perfect piece of African sculpture, animated by her own rhythm.”[114] For Hughes, Bentley’s rhythm was a representation of the primitivism that was a spectacle in Harlem entertainment. She also embodied a diasporic art that was associated to raw “power” or the “continuous underbeat of the jungle.” Hughes only mentions her hands and feet but thinking about the rhythm—the all-encompassing display of musical power associated with African art—one can imagine Bentley’s hips swaying to the music while also holding firm as she played the piano.

Erica Rand considers the hips as the “place in the unfortunate system of classification that enshrines hierarchized biological features as the essence of racialized sex.”[115] She explains that there is a “cis-skeletal privilege”—how “bone structure and supporting physical characteristics…facilitate the gendered shape you want to present”—are read, hidden, moved, and archived. Additionally, hips can display this racial and sexual categorization of gender in entertainment. Where she discusses these readings through twentieth century sports, the same can be applied to music performance, both sports and music are theatrical variations of entertainment. For Bentley, as witnessed by Hughes, her hands and feet were the exhibition of “jungle rhythm” coupled by her skin color, size, and gender-presentation (e.g., “masculine lady”). Bentley’s hips, connecting her hands and feet, stabilize racialized sound, gender, and

---

[114] Ibid.
class, meaning, her performance and body play into the ways categorization begets race, gender, and class while queering those categories through Black musical performance.

For example, Booker T. Washington in *Up From Slavery*, recounting his visit to a cabin of a formerly enslaved family, was astonished to their owning one fork and a “sixty-dollar organ!”\(^{116}\) However, as Eileen Southern suggests, the organ (or piano) symbolized independence and freedom to choose an instrument and learn to play; to invest or hope that the next generation will experience more creativity. Thus, the piano came to symbolize a futurity of freedom from chattel slavery, the radix of white supremacy, anti-blackness, and race. Bentley, choosing to play the piano, symbolized the liminal space between representation of economic status and racialized freedom, without disavowing either in her performance. Also, in playing the blues, a music considered working-class entertainment for Black and white audiences, she was able to reinterpret the gendering of Black musicians as fungible. Music historians tend to gender the archetypes of vocalists, instrumentalists, and their music. For example, as music historians have shown, many vocalists were women and instrumentalists were men, Ma Rainey or Bessie Smith and Robert Johnson or Charley Patton as epitomes of both archetypes. Bentley was both vocalist and instrumentalist, representing her position as always in the liminality of race, gender, and class by way of performance. So, although her body, such as her hips, could be hidden by top hat and coat tails while carrying the physical attributes of a “large, dark, masculine lady,” Bentley used both to display the instability of race, gender, and class, exacerbating the performativity of her sexuality.

Much of the material culture presented here demonstrates the layered facets of Bentley’s world, her career, and her personal life. Although some of her extraordinary events cannot be

corroborated, such as her marriage, other exploits show how she was a nuanced performer alongside her contemporaries. Additionally, her sound and performance were captured by literary artists that dramatized her music playing and late night improvised engagements. With the help of her debut recordings, her piano-style and vocal talents depict a boisterous, fast-playing, cross-dressing entertainer who did not shy away from the spotlight. Indeed, she reveled in it and wanted more. Moreover, she made familiar blues tropes—unrequited love, romantic advice, blues structures and sound—unfamiliar during a time of unprecedented Black cultural popularity. She occupied the liminalities of race, gender, and sexuality, while using the symbolic representations of every category to demonstrate the flexibility and transitory capability of Black vernacular culture.

Gladys Bentley was a hit, she dominated The Clam House, The Mad House, and won favor with some of Harlem’s elite. She even associated her talents to middle-class progressive black club women and recorded a substantial number of songs within the four years of her time in New York. Throughout her journey into the city, Gladys was a lonely girl looking for validation and belonging. She happened to find it in Harlem’s underbelly, night clubs and gay and lesbian enclaves, that took her in for the person she wanted to be, whether that was Gladys Bentley or Barbara “Bobbie” Minton. Regardless, her piano playing was a way of shedding the trauma of growing up different in Philadelphia and reinventing herself—however she saw fit—as the big personality she wanted to become, choosing new family along the way. Yet, the 1930’s would bring new successes and challenges for Bentley, broadening her horizons while confronting backlash and conservative legal approaches to her signature smut. In the following years, she toured the country often, while evading legal disputes, and even tried to take her career from the performance stage to the silver screen. It is really in the coming decades that
Bentley makes her mark in music beyond the short-lived novelty of the classic blues queens and the race market.
CHAPTER I: BLACK CLUBS AND SILVER SCREENS: “FROM HARLEM I WENT TO PARK AVENUE…” (1931-1940)

As much as Prohibition characterized the speakeasy culture of the Roaring Twenties, organized crime proliferated as a result. Since 1923, Harlem was considered as the “Port Said of the eastern seaboard of North America,” according to historian Gerald Horne. While liquor was under the control of organized gangs, the places that sold it were subject to their violence. Cab Calloway remembered attacks on The Plantation Club—then owned by a British-born racketeer, Owney Madden—by rival gangs that owned The Cotton Club during the 20’s; “…as long as the underworld controlled liquor,” Calloway recalled, “they controlled a number of clubs in Harlem as well.”  

Madden would eventually own the rival Cotton Club, although, before his triumph, it was owned by Bernard Levy, a bootlegger and numbers banker. White mobsters owning black clubs were not exclusive to Harlem though. When Louis Armstrong arrived in Chicago in 1924, he was extorted for his burgeoning success by white “musical competitors…who resented his popularity.” This means that the music industry was not exempt from hiring questionable muscle to police Black entertainers and their careers. Consequently, Armstrong was eventually under the protection of Joe Glaser, a known member of Al Capone’s organization who managed his brothels.

Clubs like the Plantation Club and Cotton Club were meant to induce comfort to their white patrons by their name alone. While they barred black patrons from entering, such clubs would often hire black performers, musicians and dancers alike, further provoking a nostalgia for slavery in northern urban nightlife. The labor conditions for black employees in such clubs were controlled under the constant threat of harm while advancing colorism in their hiring practices of

---

118 Horne, p. 64.
119 Ibid, p. 58.
female dancers. Thus, “mobsters enforced a system that undergirded Jim Crow,” making organized crime an extension of southern white terrorism that black people fled from. While the Ku Klux Klan terrorized black people in the American South, organized mobsters (bootleggers and gangsters) found themselves at odds with the Klan over control for territory. However, where organized crime was often in opposition to the KKK, these immigrant white gangsters would also recreate the racial dynamics that repressed black people and maintained de jure white supremacy in northern urban centers. Gerald Horne catalogs a notable list of black performers caught in the crossfire, in Harlem and beyond, throughout the period that include Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Lena Horne, and Earl “Fatha” Hines, among many others.

Yet, while organized crime extended the racial oppression of Jim Crow in Harlem, Broadway became a battleground over New York’s reputation as “the entertainment capital of the world,” and indecency—as determined by black lesbian/gay performers—were its target. James F. Wilson regards Harlem as “a site for a certain amount of lawlessness,” where cross-dressing women and men, “bulldykin’ women” and “freakish men,” were typically visible in public while vigilantly monitored by city officials. Harlem’s sporting life was in high demand by the 1930’s from its white tourists looking to explore the “racial and sexual exotica” of its nightlife. In 1934, Jackie “Moms” Mabley, “female impersonators” Sepia Mae West and Sepia Gloria Swanson, were some of Harlem’s most popular acts, according to the New York Age. Broadway would be considered a place for “higher art” that was not found in Harlem, that is, until Gladys Bentley moved to Park Avenue.

---

120 Ibid, p. 54.
121 Ibid, p. 51.
123 Ibid.
Before Gladys made her debut in Broadway, she was being immortalized in gay African American novelist Blair Niles’ 1931 novel, *Strange Brother*. Gladys was so inspirational to Niles that he included the Clam House, however, under the name “the Lobster Pot.”\(^{124}\) She was fictionalized as Sybil, a pianist who was “beating the floor as if it were a drum.”\(^{125}\) More interestingly, Sybil wore “black oxford ties…legs were in grey cotton stockings. A short tight black cloth skirt was stretched taut about [her] heavy thighs. A white blouse and dark coat clothed Sybil’s shapeless torso. And set close to her shoulders was Sybil’s head; with its protruding lower jaw, its flat receding brow, and its hair, oiled and brushed to an unnatural straightness, as though the hair was Sybil’s one vanity.”\(^{126}\) Such an appearance can only be resembled by Gladys Bentley, however, it was not her appearance alone that marked her fictional counterpart. Her ability to demonstrate her fortitude on the piano as a boogie woogie artist was also depicted as “never pausing in the syncopated beat which pulsated through her body, from pounding her feet to the crown of her sleek oiled head.”\(^{127}\) Blair Niles certainly must have seen Bentley live and it is through his fictionalization of her that we can witness her power in live performance, as opposed to relying on her recorded work alone.

Furthermore, Niles’ literary lens invites us to consider the images of “black lesbian” as category and “sissy blues” as praxis that articulate Bentley’s performance. Kara Keeling thinks about the (in)visibility of Black lesbian and gay people as an opportunity for Black queer film to articulate itself against the dominant cisnormative culture of Black images. That is, as Keeling considers the emergence of Black queer film, “as yet another term in the late-capitalist logic of product difference and target markets,” representation, visibility, and a politics of criticism

\(^{125}\) Ibid, p. 41.
\(^{126}\) Ibid.
\(^{127}\) Ibid, p. 42.
accompany the new subjects of visual art that challenge the notions of race, gender, and sexuality. Thus, genre is imbued with political ideology, and I include Black queer characters/writers as challenging the same systems of power that make Black queer figures invisible.

For example, blues women like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, demonstrate the archetype of standard blues singer while also occupying identities of rural migrants. Their blues, although subject to the exploitation of a white hegemonic music industry, at the same time offer an “emerging feminism” through their genre: classic blues. That many of these women were public with their sexuality, “whether received in celebratory or accusatory terms...dissimulates the extent to which ‘black lesbian’ already is the product of a series of exclusions and negotiations” thereby making the blues resistant, liberatory, and a platform for Black queer life. Therefore, Bentley “indexes...a set of lived experiences that are thought to be productive of knowledges that necessarily guarantee a radical politics.” With the nuances of her cross-dressing act and sexual innuendo, Bentley challenges the image of “black lesbian” classic blues queen in her gender presentation and queering of the blues. Though Keeling is thinking about “black lesbian and gay film” as genre, I consider Bentley’s blues as an extension of queering cisnormative logic.

This queering of blues women could have only been achieved through what Kortney Ziegler calls “sissy play,” that challenges dominant constructions of “black female sexuality.” Bentley’s performance did this as much as she displayed her masculine charm with women in

129 Keeling, p. 221.
130 Ibid, p. 220.
public. Sissy imagery “queers the heteronormative portrait of black female subjectivity” by way of submission to domestic servitude.\(^{132}\) Bentley exemplifies this through her domestic situation with Beatrice Roberts according to the New Jersey census and her alleged publicized marriage to a white woman. The point here is that Bentley adds nuance to the image of Black lesbians by embodying the liminality between “masculine drag self-reflected against her strong black woman persona” as depicted by Niles’ and Langston Hughes’ literature.\(^{133}\)

In Blair Niles’ depiction of Bentley, her contemplations of her personal life and identity, come through her singing as well. While June Westbrook, the central character in Niles’ novel, witnesses Sybil’s “sound of her deep man’s voice,” Sybil’s lyrics contemplate her own existence: “Why was I born…Why am I living...What is the good of me by myself?” Because Sybil was based on Bentley, Niles captures the conflict she must have meditated on, after her visits to many doctors, bullying by schoolmates, and gossiping family in Philadelphia was far removed from the success she made in New York. Niles went as far to include Bentley’s supposed highly publicized civil ceremony in 1930 when June hears Ira ask, “How’s your wife, Sybil?” To the character’s inquiries, Sybil replies “Amy’s well, but the management won’t let her come over any more.”\(^{135}\)

Nevertheless, Niles’ depicts Bentley’s sissy play through the character Sybil. June Westbrook was astonished and began to remember her lover’s touch when Sybil’s “deep man’s voice” filled the room.\(^{136}\) Moreover, the effect was complete when Sybil’s voice “unexpectedly…rose to a high falsetto, like a love-cry heard far off in some jungle night.”\(^{137}\)

\(^{132}\) Zeigler, p. 200.
\(^{133}\) Ibid, p. 204.
\(^{134}\) Niles, Strange Brother, p. 57.
\(^{135}\) Ibid.
\(^{136}\) Niles, p. 42.
\(^{137}\) Ibid.
Bentley’s “How Long How Long Blues,” emulates this falsetto and the existentialism of Sybil’s cries. The song is longing for a love lost with depictions of typical classic blues images such as trains, however, when Bentley sings “Sometimes I feel so disgusted and I feel so blue/ I only know, what in this world, baby, just to do?” Her cadence is sad and pensive in the 1929 recording, reflecting Sybil’s “piercingly sweet call” of Niles’ novel. Love, desire, and existential dread demonstrate the vocal transition from a “deep man’s voice” to “a high falsetto” that registers as feminine because it is adverse to the low register that came before. Therefore, where Bentley/Sybil visibly present nuanced images of Black sexuality and gender presentation, they also queer the sound of Black vernacular culture by audibly registering the difficulties of visible queerness as they also add nuance to the image and sound of Black lesbian art, thus, queering “black female sexuality” in a blues context.

But Niles also considers the spaces where Black sexuality is articulated and determined. Later in the novel, June Westbrook visits Harlem, chaperoned by Caleb Austin, who’s masculinity is depicted by his prowess with women. This characteristic that Caleb’s friend, Ira, takes pride in, shows how masculinity is essential to exploring the public spaces of Harlem, represented by rent parties, gambling dens, débutantes’ Charity Ball, and the “Drag Ball.”\textsuperscript{138} The drag ball, “a great masquerade party to which men went in fancy dress—went in the costumes of women,” shows how gender presentation does not reflect the affirmation of sex.\textsuperscript{139} That drag is a public display of gender transgression (men dressed as women) does not challenge the privilege of visibility to masculinity, in that, drag queens are men in women’s costume, according to Niles. I stress this point to distinguish the inherent masculinity of public space despite the visibility of queer bodies, regardless of race or gender. In other words, that Bentley can display her desire for

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.
women (Black or white), in Harlem, does not necessarily transgress the lines of race and gender. The drag ball itself is outside “the normal world” which expected to find “drags.” Moreover, that June Westbrook is taken to these places by Caleb indicates the powers of whiteness in being able to occupy Black queer spaces. Hence, “the normal world” is raced and gendered, however, Bentley/Sybil is found outside of it (in The Clam House/“The Lobster Pot”), transcending the rigidity of categorization in a queer space and through queer performance.

Moreover, “slumming”—white people visiting Black spaces for entertainment—contributed to modernizing the culture of sex in America. Kevin J. Mumford claims the phenomenon “became critical to the rise of American sexual modernism” which he distinguishes from Victorian culture.\(^\text{140}\) Slumming not only depicted the racial dynamics in urban centers but also identified the spaces in which sexual taboos, racialized sex culture, and policing of such activities were found. The “vice district” was a product of systemic regulation, however, the slum was what became of racist policies, and “deteriorating neighborhoods, brothels, saloons.”\(^\text{141}\) These spaces were where modern sex culture derived from regulating social, economic, and cultural lines along ideas of race, gender, and class, what Mumford calls “the interzone.” So, the clubs Bentley performs in operate in a similar fashion, queerness is visible and resist ideas of race, gender, and sexuality through play, while “the normal world” continues in its power to regulate race and gender by way of segregation and policing decency.

In 1932, Gladys’ Clam House was a must-see attraction to Harlem’s nightlife. The speakeasy map described it as “open all night,” typical of Gladys’ work ethic. The following years have Bentley performing at a host of clubs such as the King’s Terrace, Lafayette Theater,

---


\(^{141}\) Mumford, p. 141.
and The Ubangi Club, where her signature smut, top hat, and coattails distinguished her unique performance. Despite Bentley’s connections and success in New York, the obscenity of her lyrical and performative content was being deliberated by the Manhattan Supreme Court, by 1933. She was the focus of a legal battle concerning the owners of the Clam House, Nat Palein and Harry Hansberry, who were trying to prevent Bentley from appearing on Broadway. Apparently, she was allegedly breaking a five-year contract to which the club relied on for its patronage from celebrities of the period.\footnote{142 “Seek to Ban Songs Of Gladys Bentley,” \textit{The New York Amsterdam News}, February 22, 1933.} The suit followed her “desertion of her Exclusive Club and the subsequent smashing of her downtown rendezvous by Federal prohibition officers,” not to mention her rise to a sixteenth floor penthouse speakeasy on West 53\textsuperscript{rd} Street.\footnote{143 Ibid.} Even with the legal dispute from the Clam House, Bentley was “severely criticized in several Broadway gossip columns recently following her appearance at a theatrical party where she sang her ‘It’s a Helluva Situation Up at Yale,’ and other equally obscene numbers.”\footnote{144 Ibid.} Regardless, the ousting from Gladys’ Exclusive Club led her to find sanctuary in other clubs she managed to make famous, such as The Ubangi Club.

By this time, with the end of Prohibition in 1933, clubs took on the commerce speakeasies accommodated for. That is, not only were clubs the primary source of Harlem entertainment but they also reinforced the racialization of public space, where speakeasies were hidden and exclusive, clubs were more accessible and catered to white audiences. Indeed, speakeasies dispelled racial lines and hosted improvisational shows, such was the nature of their origins. No wonder jazz would be the music of these spaces; it is an improvisational music and defined the world of vice and leisure. Indeed, shows composed with “black music for white
people, black bodies for the white gaze” were structured, curated, and carefully produced than the informality of the speakeasy. Hence, Bentley’s show would grow into a big production, in conjunction to the rising popularity of swing jazz and having to perform in clubs where most of Harlem’s audiences could be found.

The point here is that racialized districts and sex commerce overdetermined Black culture, ensuring its movement in urban life and the labor conditions Black musicians were confined to. Musicians found work in clubs that was tailored to an audience no longer hidden from surveillance, resulting in the public regulation of de facto segregation. As a result, the music also changed as it moved into larger venues, more space entailed more dancing and bigger bands to compensate the demand. While “black revues”—shows catering to white audiences’ expectations and fascination with Black culture—were prominent and proliferated cityscapes, so too did the racial hierarchy of cities that delineated anti-black practices and white privilege.

Bentley had to adapt to this transition (speakeasy to club) to continue performing, and, though her act remained “far too torrid to please respectable folk,” her performance attracted various fans, Black, white, middle-class, working-class, gay, straight, men, and women. The difference throughout the 1930’s was that Bentley’s blues was amplified, grandiose, and more public than before.

When Gladys moved to Park Avenue, partly to put some distance between her and the Clam House, she remembered the move as a milestone in her career. She recounts, “From Harlem I went to Park Avenue,” where she “appeared in tailor-made clothes, top hat and tails, with a cane to match each costume, stiff-bosomed shirt, wing collar tie and matching shoes.”

145 Mumford, p. 154.
147 Bentley, “I Am A Woman Again,” p. 94.
For Bentley, Park Avenue meant a lavish $300 apartment with servants and a beautiful car.\textsuperscript{148} It also meant she was performing at a mid-Manhattan club that “had a 75-foot silver and onyx bar and mirrors everywhere,” that “overflowed with celebrities,” to the point where she personally played for New York’s mayor, Jimmy Walker, on several occasions.\textsuperscript{149} Walter Winchell, a writer for the \textit{New York Daily Mirror}, took account of Bentley’s move in January 1933. He writes, “the famed cullud shady-song warbler, has retired from Harlem and is now dwelling among the white swells at 77\textsuperscript{th} and Park Ave.!”\textsuperscript{150} The \textit{New York Age} took notice as well when Eric Von Wilkinson wrote, “Gladys Bentley, eminent Harlem song-bird and hip-waver, has deserted the sepia neighborhood and her St. Nicholas avenue apartment…”\textsuperscript{151}

1933 had Gladys playing “new songs and repertoire” at King’s Terrace on 240 West 52\textsuperscript{nd} Street.\textsuperscript{152} The \textit{New York Daily Mirror} also indicated these songs to be from “Ted Brown and His Music,”—Teddy Brown was an entertainer who specialized as a xylophonist and was massive, weighing in at 400 pounds.\textsuperscript{153} That following spring, Gladys is depicted in \textit{The New York Amsterdam News} as an “orchestra leader” that will be featured at the Lafayette Theater. Several men are depicted as dancers in position below her dressed in white tuxedo.\textsuperscript{154} These six men must have been the “Six ‘King’s Favorites’” as advertised by \textit{The New York Amsterdam News} in April.\textsuperscript{155} Lafayette Theatre typically showcased novelty acts, such as the Three Radio Rogues who impersonated celebrities like Bing Crosby or Amos and Andy, and the Washboard

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{152} \textit{New York Daily Mirror}, September 8, 1933.
\textsuperscript{155} \textit{The New York Amsterdam News} (April 7, 1934).
\end{flushleft}
Serenaders, who Gladys recorded with four years prior.\footnote{“Radio Rogues Score Big Hit: The Lafayette Revue This Week Will Feature Gladys Bentley,” \textit{The New York Amsterdam News} (April 7, 1934). Accessed on May 25, 2022: \url{https://queermusicheritage.com/bentley3.html}} Bentley, already the “star of King’s Terrace Revue,” was supported by Consuela Harris, among other acts.\footnote{Ibid.} Once Gladys began performing at Lafayette, she was reported to be called a “gorgeous man” by her six dancers.\footnote{Ibid.}

But in 1934, Bentley’s “lewd ballads” continued to be the target of legal intervention. Police investigations into the King’s Terrace—because of a “police war against indecency, nudity and obscenity”—chased Bentley out of the club and into “more secluded recesses” according to \textit{The Chicago Defender}. She was replaced by Florence Richardson, who was a musician in Bentley’s band and “a pretty white orchestra leader…” Still, the Deputy Commissioner, Harold L. Allen, ordered the King’s Terrace to be locked up over the weekend in April. Such a hinderance would not stop Bentley from taking her “King’s Terrace Revue” to the Lafayette Theater on Seventh Avenue. This show consisted partly of six men that “would be indistinguishable from the chorines” according to one writer from \textit{The New York Age}. It was seemingly the only performance that night that merited an ambulance “to take them all to Bellevue for the alienists to work on.”\footnote{Ibid.}

During April, Gladys also debuted at the famous Ubangi Club. As far as white people were concerned, the Ubangi Club, was “not the aristocratic menage the Cotton Club [was]” but it was also a space for Bentley’s lewdness and shocking musical performances. Don O’Malley, a columnist of New York’s nightlife, shares an account of the show’s “many unorthodox uses for saxophones and kettledrums.”\footnote{Don O’Malley, “New York Inside Out,” \textit{The Lodi News} (February 18, 1935).} Aside from suggestive antics of brass instruments, Bentley’s signature lyrics continued to retain their reference to the sporting life in Harlem. She performed...
with The Washboard Serenaders, playing “Everything I Have Is Yours,” to an audience that had Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Adelaide Hall, and Jimmie Lunceford in attendance.\textsuperscript{161}

Given the diverse assortment of talent that admired Bentley, some critics could still not condone her antics on stage. Vere E. Johns, writing for the \textit{New York Age}, was not a fan of the Lafayette Theater show. He wrote, “They gave first class portrayals of sex perversion” and, as though the shock of the performance could not be registered as reality for Johns, he said that Bentley’s performance “was no play-acting but the real thing.”\textsuperscript{162} But Johns was averse to “the real” because its effect “was a feeling akin to that of seeing some hideous deformed cripple, and a case for the alienists only.” For Johns, there was no chance he would ever admire the spectacle of Gladys Bentley’s perverse show and anyone who enjoyed such entertainment must be “place[d] in the category of morons and moral imbeciles.”\textsuperscript{163}

Despite such criticism, Gladys was still the main attraction at “Harlem’s New Hot Spot,” the Ubangi Club (formerly Connie’s Inn) on Seventh Avenue and 131 Street.\textsuperscript{164} There was a lot of anticipation for Bentley’s revue from Ubangi which included Consuelo Harris and “her well-known male chorus.”\textsuperscript{165} Meanwhile, at The Cotton Club, Lena Horne and Avon Long, and Jimmy Lunceford were some of the attractions that continued to keep the club open with a new revue following Bentley’s move to Ubangi.\textsuperscript{166} However, by September 8, Gladys Bentley was billed as “Broadway’s Queen of Song and Jazz,” performing at Harlem Opera House on 125\textsuperscript{th}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[163] Ibid.
\item[166] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
Street, west of Seventh Ave. The Chicago Defender took note of Bentley’s performance as “the big noise” of the Ubangi revue that was broadcasted that night. The Pittsburgh Courier featured a picture of one of Gladys’ performers, Tony Stuyvesant, who was “one of the female impersonators” featured. 

Marcus Wright, for The New York Age, makes note of Gladys Bentley’s and Jackie Mabley’s show at “Jerry Preston’s Log Cabin Grill,” however, he also mentions Sepia Mae West and Sepia Gloria Swanson, and how “her”[Swanson] absence was caused by the Police Commissioner running her out of town…“ That Swanson’s and West’s names and pronouns are in quotes and parentheses indicate that they were female impersonators or drag queens. Wright would make note of Swanson again in December when he mentions both as “Harlem’s favorite entertainers.” The scare quotes imply discomfort with so-called female impersonation or drag and the antics of their sexual acts. They create distance for the writer to abscond from having witnessed queerness and includes the reader as passive participant, fueling the spectacle of both as strange attraction. Nevertheless, the show at Jerry Preston’s Log Cabin Grill was a display of the multiplicity of Black queer entertainment and culture.

Jackie “Moms” Mabley was a comedian since the 1910’s and toured throughout the American South and Midwest with minstrel groups. She worked on the Theater Owner’s Booking Association (TOBA), otherwise, colloquially known as “Tough On Black Actors/Asses,” by Black performers. The classic blues queens were familiar with TOBA because the association organized and scheduled 67 vaudeville and tent acts throughout the period. For

---

167 “Gladys Bentley Heads Bill At Harlem Opera House,” The New York Age (September 8, 1934).
169 “To Be, Or…?” Pittsburgh Courier (September 22, 1934).
170 Marcus Wright, “The Talk Of The Town,” The New York Age (October 20, 1934).
twenty five cents to a dollar, African Americans could enjoy a variety of acts: blues, comedy, dancing girls, snake or magic acts, and jazz.\textsuperscript{172} Hence, black culture has been created and shared among Black people since the early twentieth century, moving across stateliness with singers and comedians as they travelled from rural to urban spaces. Mabley already had a long career among Black audiences when she performed alongside Gladys Bentley and Sepia Gloria Swanson in 1934.

The lineup was more than a spectacle of queer subjects and novelty antics. Bentley, Mabley, and Swanson showcased the multiplicity of Black sexuality, challenging the norms of heteronormativity and asserting a queerness with agency dressed in pageantry. Despite their differences, they shared some similarities in their act, proving the transversality of Black music culture. For example, Mabley was often “Dressed in an oversized housecoat, floppy slippers, and a short wig and hat,” while she “schooled” her audiences through stand-up comedy, hence, the Moms character.\textsuperscript{173} This maternal figure disarmed her audiences from perceiving her as threatening or hostile in her brashness. Instead, she queered the mammy figure into one of resistance by speaking truths about white supremacy, gender expectations, and making black lesbian subjects visible and heard.\textsuperscript{174} Off stage, Mabley also wore trousers, slacks, suits, and ties when in public just like Bentley.\textsuperscript{175}

\begin{flushleft}
\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid, p. 87.
\end{flushleft}
Wearing clothing of the opposite sex was illegal in public and no different for Sepia Gloria Swanson. She had performed in Chicago before travelling to New York. The *Afro-American* writing in 1931, noted how Swanson, proudly, had “not worn a stitch of male attire in ten years.” Instead, she wore “the daintiest of feminine flimsies,” such as coats of ermine, heeled shoes, and skirts.\(^{176}\) But Swanson was more than queer entertainer. In May 1934, she was included in a massive production for the NAACP National Defense Fund at the Apollo Theater. Performers ranging from Cab Calloway, Ethel Waters, Adelaide Hall, actor Etta Moten to contortionist Valda Hatton, and Pigmeat Markham, among many more, were billed on the show.\(^{177}\) Other drag queens were included in the show such as Sepia Clara Bow and Sepia Mae West. Including drag queens to perform for civil rights’ benefit concerts goes beyond the politics of visibility, meaning, queerness, labor, Black culture, and civil rights politics converged on the entertainment stage. At the same time, queer performers publicly expressed their gender presentation and sexuality and were lauded for their efforts. That these shows were meant to raise funds through the spectacle of Black music and sexuality signifies the transitive nature of Black culture as a politics that redefines racialized gender as it challenges cisnormativity. Bentley, Mabley, and Swanson opposed such conventions through entertainment that was sexually suggestive and amusing. For example, Swanson also sang risqué songs, like “Get’em from the Peanut Man (Hot Nuts),” and “Squeeze Me,” by Fats Waller, while she “danced demurely, raising her skirt just to the knee.”\(^{178}\)

---


James F. Wilson merely speculates the implications to how Swanson, and queer performers like her, were unfavorably received and obscured from a “pre-civil rights, pre-Stonewall era” making his historical analysis corrective, at best. Considering the cultural and political implications of these acts and how they register in queer theory exceeds the limitations of the archive (showbills, newspaper articles, and eye-witness accounts). Bentley, Mabley, and Swanson by performing in the same venues and shows provided a vision of queer inclusion “for future generations to radically envision a society” beyond the categories of race, gender, class, and sexuality, that overdetermine Black life.\(^{179}\) More specifically, using comedy/parody as a tool allowed Bentley, Mabley, and Swanson to “reshape, instigate, and confirm queer and anti-racist worldmaking.”\(^{180}\)

The success of such benefit shows and the notoriety of drag queens herald a period of much acclaim for Bentley. By 1935, the magic of Harlem’s “sinister, licentious and loud” nightlife had begun to dissipate for white patrons and tourists. Paul Harrison, a columnist, accounts for the disappearance of the “gawdy, bawdy” places white people sought after.\(^ {181}\) Connie’s Inn, The Plantation Club, The Log Cabin, Lenox, and The Clam House all determined a Harlem that was subject to white exploration and patronage. Harrison even notes that Gladys Bentley, “who used to sing and play so tirelessly at the Clam house,” went on to become “a real night club entertainer.”\(^ {182}\) Even so, Bentley’s Ubangi Club revue now included a “Cast of 30” under her charge. At that time, she was still sharing playbills with Ted Hill’s orchestra.\(^ {183}\)

---

\(^{179}\) Ibid.
\(^{180}\) Katelyn Hale Wood, p. 105.
\(^{182}\) Ibid.
Later that spring, Gladys Bentley continued to grow her cast from 30 to 50 dancers, performing at Ubangi and Harlem Opera House. By then she was performing alongside international Hollywood star, Nina Mae McKinney, and Erskine Hawkins’s ‘Bama State Collegians band.\(^{184}\) The show was a big hit, particularly because “the bill runs longer than usual” with so many different talents.\(^{185}\) McKinney opens the show with “histrionics” followed by “‘La’ Bentley (or is it?)”—the writer’s way of gesturing to her cross dressing—as a powerhouse pianist and singer whose performance was “threatening to the floor.”\(^{186}\) In July, the show included a dancing number by Earl “Snakehips” Tucker, “drawing just as many rounds of applause as his appearance usually attracts.”\(^{187}\) They performed at the Apollo Theater after Bentley’s tenure at Ubangi took a brief hiatus after eighty weeks.\(^{188}\) By August, Gladys could not be stopped. She shared a bill with Willie Bryant, whose orchestra was under the management of Leroy Broomfield and Aurora Greeley, and Cab Calloway’s revue at the Apollo.\(^{189}\) Included under her name were “The Entire Unsurpassed Cast.” Ted Yates, writing for \textit{Afro American}, determined that the Ubangi revue, then called “the Ubangi Club Follies,” a “fifth edition” of Bentley’s show, was the hottest thing in Harlem.\(^{190}\)

But Bentley was determined to break out of Harlem. In September, she took her show back home to Philadelphia and played at The Memphis Club at 913 Warnock Street, Philadelphia, below Girard Avenue, less than a mile from her childhood home.\(^{191}\) That night, the

\(^{184}\) Advertisement, \textit{The New York Amsterdam News}

\(^{185}\) “Nina Mae McKinney, Gladys Bentley Featured In Show At the Harlem Opera House,” \textit{New York Age} (April 27, 1935).

\(^{186}\) Ibid.


\(^{188}\) Ibid.

\(^{189}\) Advertisement, \textit{New York Age} (August 8, 1935).

\(^{190}\) Ibid.


Memphis Club started the new season “off with a real bang” with Gladys Bentley doing her “provocative best.” Later that week, the Philadelphia Inquirer continued to compare her with Tex Guinan, a Prohibition-era actress that fictionalized herself as a speakeasy proprietress, and Kate Smith, a well-known radio personality. On the 20th, Bentley was scheduled to return to the Ubangi Club after her “two-week sojourn in the mountains,” that “split a[sic] Ubangi run covering over 100 weeks” by then. Her return included her “‘pansie’ entertainment” that made Ubangi Club “one of the most prosperous in Harlem night clubs.”

Gladys Bentley topped the bill for a benefit concert in December 1935. The “Monster Breakfast Dance,” was meant to “Benefit Harlem’s Needy,” at the Rockland Palace on 155th Street and Eighth Avenue. The “Entire Ubangi Club Revue,” was the headliner, which of course included the amazing “cast of 50, featuring Gladys Bentley.” The guest bands that night included Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, Joe Louis and Willie Bryant, among others. The fact that Bentley headlined a benefit concert over Ellington and Henderson should demonstrate the immensity of her celebrity by 1935.

In February 1936, the Afro-American featured a take on “Harlem’s Famous Ubangi Club.” Mabel Scott, a torch singer, and Edna Mae Holly, a dancer, take up the center of the page in full drag. Beneath their photographs, Gladys Bentley was described as “the buxom, mannishly dressed” pianist who “draws a crowd with her double-edge ditties.” Said to have a “cream-colored full dress suit,” as opposed to the white tuxedo she often wore, her hair was still slicked down into a pompadour. Her biggest number was about “Nothing Now Perplexes Like the Sexes,

192 Philadelphia Inquirer (September 11, 1935).
193 “Gladys Bentley Back At the Ubangi Club,” Brooklyn Daily Eagle (September 20, 1935).
194 New York Age (November 2, 1935).
195 The New York Age (December 14, 1935).
196 Ibid.
197 Afro-American, February 8, 1936, p. 11.
Because When You See Them Switch You Can’t Tell Which Is Which.” Later that year in June, *The New York Age* featured a photograph of “The happy family at the gay Ubangi Club.” Willie Bryant was described as the leader of the troupe and the chorines were: Gertrude Gardeen, Frances Hubbard, Margy Hubbard, Marion Egbert, William Stevens Bryant Jr.—described as “the captain of the crew”—and “Frenchie” Mae Johnson.

That same day, *The Chicago Defender* wrote a short story on the Ubangi Club’s new show performances that included Bentley, Avon Long, and Edna Mae Holly. The new revue was headed by west coast producers, Leroy Broomfield and Aurora Greely, who operated as co-hosts. The show was such a success that according to *The New York Post*, Bentley “aquits herself nobly” with a new repertoire of songs that included “My Private Affair,” and “Give It To Him.” Broomfield and Greely attained their experience on the west coast and Midwest, bringing their singing and dancing to the new program; they even perform with the new “Sepianettes” that deliver “an expert cabaret presentation.”

The new Ubangi Club revue would be such a success that by August, Bentley was on show bills with Cab Calloway for the Apollo Theater. The revue grew to such an extent, taking music from Donald Heywood, Broomfield and Greeley included “a cast of 50 sepia performers” that would follow Bentley’s act. Although the Cotton Club was taken to Broadway, the audiences at Ubangi—“a mixed crowd…noisy and intimate and gay”—continued to attend.

---

198 Ibid.
199 *The New York Age* (June 6, 1936).
200 Ibid.
203 Ibid.
show was a spectacle of swing jazz as it was called “Round the World in Swing Tempo” by the end of October. In January that following year, Bentley introduced new compositions that she penned.

In 1937, the show had refined its act to a formula. Willie Bryant would open with some comedy followed by a dance routine from Broomfield and Greely. Bentley would entertain the crowd with more jokes and songs “with a naivette that scores instantly.” Bentley would also introduce “new lyrics of her own distinctive brand,” which suggests she was writing new songs of her own and debuting them at Ubangi. Bryant closes out the show with his orchestra, however, the line-up continued to change that year, adding Mae Johnson—who “makes a switch from being the sepian Mae West to the role of sepian Gypsy Rose Lee” a stripteaser—and changes Willie Bryant for Ovie Alston’s orchestra. Also, the revue took on more of a risqué quality including the contortions of dancer, Tondelayo, from New Orleans. Bentley was playing her newest songs, such as “Gladys Isn’t Gratis Any More,” which unfortunately was not recorded. The show that made the Ubangi Club popular would keep performing after the club closed. After moving to the Plantation Club in Harlem, the Ubangi revue was called “Brevities in Bronze” later that summer.

“Gladys Isn’t Gratis Anymore,” was a party song performed by musicians such as Ace Newell or Jack Golden & His Backroom Boys. Party songs were always sexually provocative and salacious with such titles like “She Tickled The Gentman’s Fancy.” Many of these recordings were pornography. “Gladys Isn’t Gratis Anymore” is about a popular and successful prostitute

---

called Gladys and—although both versions have different rhythms, played in different keys, and have unrelated lyrics—the premise is always suggestive if not direct. Newell’s version has lines such as “You will get a thrill until a bill is handed to you there/ But she only charges ten percent to cover wear and tear.” Golden’s version is more abrasive: “Well, you try to get her on the phone, and she always says, ‘next’/ And to get to her private apartment, why, you got to pass a dozen dicks!” Such a song would be exactly the kind of music Gladys Bentley would often perform during her live shows. Given that the premise of the song was only suitable for private parties, it makes sense she would not record her version of this song herself for any promotional use, especially, due to the policing of indecency by local police. Instead, much of her livelihood came from club shows and tours.

For her act to coincide with other orchestras and grow in dancers—all male chorines—means that her style had to transition in genre. Although her recordings from the 20’s are simple compared to her later work, her piano playing had to cater to swing jazz as opposed to the classic blues she debuted in. This is significant because it demonstrates Bentley’s ability to move between styles and genre to maintain her risqué novelty. In other words, Bentley relied on the versatility of Black music to continue to improvise individuality, a fundamental principle to jazz overall. However, it was not simply the change in style that is significant. The growing number of dancers also indicate to the transformation of her novelty parody into the large production that swing enthusiast relied on.

Swing—or big band, dance, orchestra jazz—was in its development during the decade, however, it had acquired its followers as a dance music since Prohibition. Amiri Baraka names Fletcher Henderson’s orchestra as responsible for large-dance bands becoming jazz bands. Duke Ellington refined the music, using the orchestra to execute “collective improvisatory” blues or
making “wider harmonic possibilities of the thirty-two bar popular song.”\textsuperscript{211} Furthermore, although there were many big bands in New York, they were also found throughout the Midwest and southern United States; Chicago was parallel to New York regarding the cultural production of jazz artists. As Baraka outlines the historical trajectory of swing, including its racialization as Black music, he notes how the emergence of white artists playing the same songs made jazz, particularly swing, the sound of American culture. Indeed, the first recordings of jazz music were from the all-white male Original Dixieland Jazz Band, even though Black people had been made the music decades before. Still, the history of swing is representative of racial dynamics in urban contexts, miscegenation, public sexuality, and how Black vernacular culture became a stand-in for national identity. It is no surprise then that Bentley would rise in fame by playing into the genre.

Despite its popularity with middle-class sensibilities and a younger dancing generation, trouble found Bentley in the spring of 1937. After “Brevities In Bronze” debuted with a new lineup at Ubangi—Bentley’s new dancers were called “The Ubangettes”—she toured her native Philadelphia. There, she was scheduled to perform at The Picadilly Room at 1523 Locust St. The show was advertised as “Harlemania,” a showcase of swing by Johnny Hamilton’s band, a “line of sepia dolls,” and “N.Y. Society’s Favorite,” Gladys Bentley was the headliner. She is featured in her white top hat on the show’s advertisement.\textsuperscript{212} The production was put together by Ben Rash who also owned part of The Picadilly.

The Picadilly Room were several venues in one building at 1523 Locust St. The \textit{Philadelphia Inquirer} also mentions another “Picadilly Room” at the same address, however, this separate Picadilly was run by an Ike Beifel who presented an “intimate show in his regular club

\textsuperscript{211} Baraka, p. 160.
\textsuperscript{212} Advertisement, \textit{The Philadelphia Inquirer} (May 12, 1937) p. 20.


15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

room” that featured acts such as Rosie “Bubbles Shelby” Shatzoff, Jean Farar, Hazel Harman, Linda Ray, Pepper Garet, “and other beauties…” Music was provided by the Three Kings of Swing. The difference between the two rooms were the number of white women being showcased at Beifel’s Room. In other words, the Picadilly was segregated and although Beifel’s and Rash’s clubs were separate, they were under the same roof. The Billboard magazine called the “two-in-one policy” a “noble experiment” of testing the boundaries of segregation. Beifel “leased a room” to Rash on the same floor for the Harlem production. Both managers had a deal between them “on a percentage basis, but with guests meandering from room to room.” This meant that patronage at 1523 Locust Street were integrated although the clubs (rooms) themselves remained segregated.

Bentley was new to the venue, though, she never faltered from playing her “risk-gay ditties” that were not mistaken for their meaning, according to one writer. She played songs such as “Just Give It To Him,” a Wally Simpson-inspired “He Did It For Love,” and of course, “Gladys Isn’t Gratis Anymore.” For more intimate circles, she played “Goody Goody.” As gay and abrasive as her show might have been, Bentley was a crowd favorite. The rest of the show was a typical cabaret with Phil Scott, who performed some scat, Lydia White some dancing, as well as Lula May and Julia McKenny. Tiny Bradshaw was the master of ceremonies when he was not bandleader of his orchestra. Bradshaw tried to “create the fast-moving spirit of Harlemania which the room forb[ade].” In Biefel’s room, where only white entertainers were showcased, “A steady parade of warblers in the informal manner” performed for much of the
night. As interesting an “experiment” in desegregation that The Picadilly Room was (though it can be argued the goal of Beifel and Rash was only profiting from black culture and entertainment), *The Billboard* was not hopeful for the club’s future.

By July 1st, *The Pittsburgh Courier* reported that “racial prejudice” was “breaking up the management’s attempt” to have both black and white entertainment at The Piccadilly.\(^{218}\) Gladys Bentley, along with her show’s colleague Phil Scott, left the venue after “the feeling between the two races became near the breaking point.”\(^{219}\) Nevertheless, others such as Lulu Mae, remained, hoping the situation would deescalate over time. The article goes on to discuss how night clubs throughout the country viewed The Piccadilly’s attempt at segregated rooms as “an experiment doomed to failure,” given that black people suffered “jim-crow tactics used below the Mason-Dixon Line in theatres and other [white] owned enterprises” until the passing of a recent civil rights bill in Pennsylvania.\(^{220}\) The civil rights bill refers to Act no. 132 of the Pennsylvania Equal Rights Bill of 1935 that determines:

> “All persons within the jurisdiction of this Commonwealth shall be entitled to the full and equal accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of any places of public accommodation, resort, or amusement...No person being the owner, lessee, proprietor, manager, superintendent, agent, or employee of any such place, shall directly or indirectly refuse, withhold form, or deny to, any person, any accommodations...thereof...on account of race, creed, or color...”\(^{221}\)

Though segregation was not legal north of Philadelphia, white supremacy still managed the clubs along the East Coast by way of white organized crime. So important was the racial dynamic of whiteness to these European immigrants that they reproduced antebellum conditions (servitude and production of labor under threat of harm/death) to adhere to the ideas of American


\(^{219}\) Ibid.

\(^{220}\) Ibid.

\(^{221}\) Acts General Assembly No. 132, Pennsylvania (June 11, 1935).
citizenship. By the same token, the limitations of racialized gender made cultural spaces a site where the parameters of desegregation/segregation could change. In other words, where anti-blackness made immigrants white, the misplaced fear of sexual violence determined the racial boundaries of physical space, especially because a room full of sexualized white women were just across the hallway from where Bentley performed. As Black, openly queer, and someone who was known for fraternizing with many white women, Bentley was subject to harm, and quickly returned to Harlem. In Harlem, Bentley finds respite from Philadelphia that summer and eventually joins Teddy Hill’s orchestra, returning to the Apollo Theater in December. Instead of being a featured act, Bentley, “Night Club Favorite,” heads the line-up with her co-star Hill, Kentucky Singers, featuring Derby Wilson, The Mighty Clouds of Joy, and Jackie “Moms” Mabley. 222 The show was put together after Hill and the Kentucky Singers returned to the States after their European tour. 223 Bentley herself continued touring again after her appearance at The Apollo. She welcomed the new year “after a vaudeville tour” as the new addition to Jack Hecht’s Cedar Gardens’ revue in Cleveland. 224

During the late 30’s, “Black and tans,” known for their open displays of sex, inversion of racial hierarchies, and “racial mixing,” made queerness emerge in a secluded environment that was both public and private. In other words, Black and tan cabarets secured privacy for visitors that allowed them to be out with their queerness. These spaces also blurred the lines of segregation making them an attraction in vice districts, therefore, vice districts disrupted racial, gendered, and sexual conventions. According to Roderick Ferguson, where sociology epistemologically associated Blackness and homosexuality, Black and tans manifested this

223 Ibid.
224 “Holiday Cheer Served Here,” Cleveland Plaindealer (January 2, 1938).
The Picadilly Room may have not been a “Black and tan” however, the “experiment” of the Picadilly implied its efforts in “racial mixing” Black and tans were known, assuring “racial prejudice” as a result. Indeed, “African American communal and corporeal difference became the symbol of the nonheteronormative perversions of industrializing and urbanizing economies” ensuring their policing and regulation, either from state and local authorities or self-deputized white civilians like at The Picadilly Room. If police usually raided these spaces for their interracial clientele, then white management and patronage were extensions of that enforcement.

By late January 1938, she joined Larry Steele’s *Harlem in Swing* show at Pittsburgh’s Harlem Casino “on her way to the coast for several Hollywood engagements.” In early February, Bentley announced she made plans to leave the east coast for Hollywood “to make a picture for Warner Brothers based on her own career. Miss Bentley further adds she’s written the music for it as well…” Lew Mercur’s famous cabaret, the Harlem Casino, produced three shows a night at 1714 Centre Avenue, Pittsburgh. Of course, the show was an instant hit. At that time, Gladys was being hailed as a “nationally-known delineator of ‘naughty songs.’” The Steele production was a showcase of swing jazz. Spark Plug George covers “Tall, Tan, Terrific,” followed by Emma Smith’s rendition of “I Gotta Get Hot,” proceeded by the orchestra playing a tune called “Reminiscing With Duke Ellington,” who was scheduled to perform the Casino the following week. Bentley, was “The highlight of the show…She’s a star of stars” with a repertoire of 300 songs just eight years in her professional career.

---

225 Ferguson, p. 41.
229 Ibid.
230 Ibid.
Pittsburgh must have been a period of personal creativity and hopeful anticipation to be on the silver screen. While writing her songs for her anticipated biographical film, the reviews were favorable and continued to headline Bentley as the best thing at the Harlem Casino. Still, she continued to tour across the country making her way to Hollywood. After Pittsburgh, she travelled to St. Louis, Missouri, where she performed at The Swingland Café, late in April.231 Her piano style must have been well received given that she headed a show featuring Jimmy Noone, a “veteran Swing maestro.”232 Bentley “captivated the Swingland patrons” that night in St. Louis, likely in her tuxedo because *The Chicago Defender* called her a “male impersonator”.233 When Bentley arrived in Hollywood in July 1938, some of her first shows were at the Mermaid Club on the Hollywood Strip.234 At 24 years old, however, Bentley was stricken ill and hospitalized by September in Los Angeles.235 She was then living at 763 East 41st Place and was the latest attraction of The Mermaid. “Her constant nurse,” was actor and musician Evelyn Pope Burwell, who briefly performed with the Berry Brothers as a pianist at The Cotton Club, before singing in *Hallelujah* (1929), starring Daniel L. Haynes and Nina Mae McKinney.236 Burwell must have been a close acquaintance of Bentley since New York and took care of her while recovering.

Back in New York, Wilbur Young, writing for the Works Projects Administration, featured Gladys Bentley in *Sketches of Colorful Harlem Characters*. Young called her “a product of old Harlem” epitomized by “rent parties, home brew and cooked gin.”237 He also did not

---

231 “Orchestra To Play Big Hop In St. Louis,” *The Chicago Defender*, April 23, 1938.
232 Ibid.
233 Ibid.
236 Ibid.
237 Wilbur Young, “Negroes of New York; Sketches of Colorful Harlem Characters: Gladys Bentley,” Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library
consider her a blues musician, however, did account for her ability to take “the most tender ballad and convert it into a new low with her filthy lyrics.”238 Bentley did this so often that clubs were raided as a result. Young attributes her fame to the success she made at The Ubangi Club, the revue of which “included the famous ‘Male’ chorus, a group of pansies.”239 Young’s report was the first time Bentley is referred to as “queer,” given her attire, short hair, and having a girlfriend.240 To Young, Bentley seemed to relish in the idea that her “odd habits” were the subject of gossip. While she was away in Philadelphia at the time of his writing, Young anticipated her return to New York, once “things get slow out of town.”

It took about a month for Gladys Bentley to recover from her illness and begin working again in Los Angeles. However, instead of performing more shows, Bentley decided to work on her own songs. She was said to have six recordings, according to John H. Levy, who managed Bronze Records & Recording Company.241 The records “were so good and had so much commercial value” that they were sold at local stores, however, these discs were not part of the discography that survived. Although Bentley would record throughout her career well into the 1950’s, the Okeh pressings are all that remain prior to the Excelsior records of the 1940’s. These late Bronze Records tracks can only be speculated to be either her repertoire from the Ubangi shows or the original compositions for the alleged film she was to star in for Warner Bros.

Ethel Mae Levy co-managed Bronze Records and marketed the new songs as major successes in Hollywood.242 Bronze Records was a black-owned label and Bentley was pleased by

238 Ibid.
239 Ibid.
240 Ibid, p. 2.
241 “Gladys Bentley Records,” The Chicago Defender, April 1, 1939.
the “forward looking couple” that also managed other acts across the country, such as The Four Tones in Texas.\textsuperscript{243} By June, Bentley was performing at El Rancho Club and was a secured act.\textsuperscript{244} Black gossip columns revered her for her “original suggestive songs in male attire” and followed her shows at El Rancho on Vine Street.\textsuperscript{245} That following year, Bentley would become friends with pianist Phil Moore. She was reported to have performed songs at Moore’s residence between gigs at El Rancho.\textsuperscript{246} The club was the heart of Hollywood, according to Cleo Wilson, a writer for \textit{The Chicago Defender}.\textsuperscript{247}

Gladys Bentley performed at El Rancho until February of 1940. \textit{The Chicago Defender} enthusiastically announced the reopening of The Ubangi Club in Harlem after being “closed for so many months.”\textsuperscript{248} Though the short article recounts the glory days of Bentley and Willie Bryant and his orchestra, it gestures to the police closing Ubangi’s doors years prior. The new management planned to open The Ubangi again after the failed attempt under the Plantation name in 1937. This reopening would “again bid the favor that once belonged to the place…”\textsuperscript{249} But the attempt at reviving The Ubangi was brief because Walter Winchell, who often wrote about Bentley’s obscenity without favor for years, wrote about her show at the reopening, “three nights later the law ordered the club closed and asked that Gladys look for fertile grounds in Jersey or some other state.”\textsuperscript{250} New York’s crackdown of indecency managed to isolate many performers from Harlem, including Bentley after her return. Police surveillance notwithstanding,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{243} \textit{Ibid.} \\
\textsuperscript{244} Cleon Wilson, “Hollywood Chatter Box,” \textit{The Chicago Defender}, July 1, 1939. \\
\textsuperscript{245} Harry Levette, “Gossip of the Movie Lots,” \textit{Atlanta Daily World}, July 10, 1939. \\
\textsuperscript{246} Helen F. Chappell, “Chatter and Some News,” \textit{The Chicago Defender}, January 6, 1940. \\
\textsuperscript{247} Cleo Wilson, “Hollywood Chatterbox,” \textit{The Chicago Defender} (September 23, 1939). \\
\textsuperscript{249} \textit{Ibid.} \\
\end{flushright}
many black performers were anticipating the reopening of Ubangi, “who have become hungry for the deluxe entertainment of several seasons ago.” However, the spectacle of the Ubangi shows were never recaptured, and Gladys returned to Hollywood.

Los Angeles proved to be a profitable venture and one that allowed Bentley to expand her celebrity to Hollywood. From the speakeasies and rent parties of Harlem to stages in Broadway and a penthouse in Park Avenue, Gladys Bentley rose to prominence in a short amount of time. Given that her rise paralleled the end of Prohibition, Bentley’s signature act of indecency needed new spaces outside of Harlem and the sporting life. Because of the abrasive sexual content of her songs, many of them could not be recorded because they would be difficult to market. Blues music, although considered a low-art and specific to black audiences at first, was declining in sales and popularity. Also, jazz would determine the music of the coming decades, leaving any blues artists by the wayside. Gladys Bentley was neither a blues star nor jazz musician but both because her specialty was delivering cabarets. Her songs were more novelties compared to the repertoire of her contemporaries and she toured in very specific productions that capitalized on the exotica of Harlem.

Though Bentley was acquainted with high society, sponsored by wealthy white patrons, and lived in a penthouse outside of Harlem, she was still exposed to the policing of New York’s crackdown on indecency; the sporting life she found sanctuary in as it was represented by public cross-dressers and female/male “impersonators.” Police simply closed the clubs she performed at if any white critics were offended, deputizing white civil society as an authority on decency. In other words, white music critics also enforced the boundaries of black lesbian/gay culture as much as it fostered its popularity. While organized crime dictated the racial dynamics of white

251 Maurice Dancer, “The Cotton Club To Reopen In Old Spot In Harlem, Will Change Name to Ubangi; Signs Stars: Announcement Is Welcomed By Many Actors Now Unemployed,” The Chicago Defender, August 30, 1941.
supremacy in popular black cultural spaces, clubs, and speakeasies, local authorities concentrated on black lesbian/gay enclaves that gained the notoriety and captured the imagination of a white public. Gladys Bentley moved to Hollywood to make a film about her life, but it was also the result of fleeing the heightened police power of New York. Throughout the 1940’s, she found sanctuary again among the white lesbian communities of San Francisco before returning to New York after several years.
CHAPTER 4: “AMERICA’S GREATEST SEPIA PIANO ARTIST” OR “THE BROWN BOMBER OF SOPHISTICATED SONGS” (1941-1951)

“...After Park Avenue came a string of successful engagements in the best white clubs all over the country, including Cleveland, Pittsburgh and Chicago. Next came Hollywood and an engagement in a small, intimate and beautiful San Bernardino club. The whole Hollywood colony turned out to see and hear me. Mary Astor frequented the club. So did Arthur Treacher, Cesar Romero, Bruce Cabot, Hugh Herbert, Cary Grant, Johnny Weismuller, George Burns, Gracie Allen, George Raft, Barbara Stanwyck, Robert Taylor, Alice Brady, Lawrence Tibbett and Ruth Chatterton. ...”

Gladys Bentley remembered her time in Hollywood with awe yet there’s sadness to her recollection. Maybe the struggles of policing and persecution of lesbian and gay communities on the East Coast reminded her of why she enjoyed Hollywood and the company of its stars, but she would face similar trials in Los Angeles. Nevertheless, in August 1941, The Chicago Defender had high hopes for the re-opening of The Ubangi Club in New York, despite its closing the year before.

Bentley would return east a few years later.

When Black people served during World War II, it emboldened their efforts in challenging white supremacy at home when so many Black women and men were fighting fascism abroad. Moreover, as segregation carried over into the armed forces it further undermined the logic of Jim Crow. At the same time, war in Asia and Europe made the American coasts bastions of repressive politics to lesbian and gay spaces. For example, in 1942 anti-vice initiatives were meant to police servicewomen and servicemen ready to deploy from most US cities. Therefore, American culture mirrored the regression of vice and retaliation of Black

---

253 Maurice Dancer, “The Cotton Club to Reopen In Old Spot In Harlem, Will Change Name To Urbangi; Signs Stars,” The Chicago Defender (August 30, 1941).
progressivism. Bebop jazz embodied the resistant individualism of, mostly, Black men returning home after war and police harassment of lesbian/gay performers made gay spaces susceptible to their decline. However, 1942 also marks the first time Gladys Bentley was hailed “America’s Greatest Sepia Piano Artist” and “The Brown Bomber of Sophisticated Songs,” by the San Francisco Chronicle; her celebrity had only increased, and her raunchy performance continued to be a unique show throughout the decade.

One of Bentley’s earliest venues after returning to Hollywood, following the San Bernadino club, was Mona’s 440 Club on 440 Broadway Avenue. She headlined with Miss Jimmy Reynard who was “Direct from Hollywood’s Famous ‘Café International’.” Mona’s 440 was the first lesbian club in San Francisco when it opened on Union Street in 1934. After moving to Columbia Avenue in 1936, Mona and Jimmie Sargent had plans to have writers and artists frequent their place. The San Francisco Life called it a “bohemian” club which was considered code for “sexual unconventionality.” When Police Sergeant Glen Hughes conducted a routine inspection of Mona’s in 1938, he couldn’t tell the women from the men and vice versa. Hughes arrested Mona and she was charged with keeping a disorderly house. Impromptu performances from the patrons and hired staff continued informally until Mona’s moved to 440 Broadway in 1939. At that point, Mona Sargent hired male impersonators, from Los Angeles and New York City, paying for their advertisements in tourist magazines.

---

255 Advertisement, San Francisco Life (December 1942).
256 Ibid.
257 Boyd, p. 68.
258 Ibid.
259 Ibid.
260 Boyd, p. 69.
261 Ibid.
Nan Alamilla Boyd chronicles the emergence of lesbian neighborhoods in San Francisco with the proliferation of lesbian clubs after Mona’s. With the addition of places like Tommy’s Place, Ann’s 440, Miss Smith’s Tea Room, the Tin Angel, the Copper Lantern, the Anxious Asp, The Front, and Our Club, “North Beach became San Francisco’s first lesbian neighborhood.” According to Boyd, it is not until the repeal of Prohibition that lesbian public spaces (gay clubs existed long before the repeal) were opened and made the lesbian community foster in a public way. Such communities overlapped with the city’s vice districts as “sexualized and racialized entertainments” grew in popularity and demand, exposing these lesbian enclaves to the same policing sex workers were subject to. In other words, where state authority controlled the bounds of vice districts in San Francisco—sex workers would often conduct their business in these lesbian and gay clubs—cross-dressing entertainment and “male impersonators” were scrutinized by association.

Such was the environment Gladys Bentley was entrenched in when she performed at Mona’s, however, she was adored by the public. San Francisco Chronicle noted she was “going over in a big way with patrons of Club 440.” Throughout the year, Bentley continued to perform with Miss Jimmy Reynard along with Rose O’Neill, billed as a “Female Fred Astaire,” and “Butch” Minton, who sang gay songs. In 1942, Bentley briefly played in San Diego’s “Gayest Cocktail Lounge,” the Top Hat. Manager Fred Lacarra hired her to bill the venue for seven weeks until her return to Mona’s in April. She continued to perform with Miss Jimmy

262 Ibid.
263 Ibid, p. 70.
264 Ibid. p. 77.
265 The Owl, “After Night Falls,” San Francisco Chronicle (June 29, 1942).
266 Advertisement, San Francisco Examiner (November 26, 1942).
267 Advertisement, San Diego Union (March 7, 1943).
268 Ibid.
Reynard although the lineup changed. Caroline Snowden came from New York’s Cotton Club, following Reynard’s act, Bentley performed after Snowden with Emily Minton, “Little Giant of Song,” to close the show. By July, Stella Brooks and Bob Robertson would replace Reynard’s absence. It would take a year until Miss Jimmy Reynard would return to Mona’s, heading her comeback show with Bentley, Virginia Jansen, Emily Minton, Kay Scott, and Bob Robertson.

Kay Scott was one of the male impersonators who were popular among the regulars at Mona’s 440. Scott started performing at the original 1936 location and held a decade-long tenure with the club until 1946. She dressed in a tuxedo and had short-cut hair, a typical presentation of many entertainers at Mona’s. The popular songs that were parodied at Mona’s were direct about their affinity to homosexual desire. Boyd distinguishes these lyrics that gesture to “female masculinity”—particularly by using the term “dyke” in song—as reminiscent of female impersonators of the vaudeville stage. Where entertainers like Kay Scott (including others like her) transgressed “the security of sex and gender normativity,” such gender transgressions derive from Black cultural history, given that the vaudeville stage of the twentieth century replaced the minstrel stage of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, that male impersonation entailed men’s “haircut, shirt, and tie,” with tuxedo—an outfit coded with class and gender—determines the reiteration of flouting high culture as a means of “cultivat[ing] a common sense of whiteness” essential to Mona’s lesbian entertainment. Although Boyd details the overlapping entertainment industry made up of sex and racial tourism (mostly whites fascinated with both),

---

269 Advertisement, San Francisco Examiner (June 25, 1943).
270 Ibid (July 23, 1943).
271 Ibid (March 1, 1944).
272 Boyd, p. 74.
273 Ibid.
proximity did not determine consolidation. Still, Mona’s continued to host Bentley and Tina Rubio, who “performed ethnic entertainments,” as part of the club’s regular acts.\textsuperscript{275} Just like how minstrelsy and vaudeville provided employment to many Black women entertainers, with the added success of white women in the 20’s, white lesbian entertainment provided a space for Bentley, and others, to find space in San Francisco during the 40’s, however, such accommodations did not challenge the racial dynamics in San Francisco.\textsuperscript{276}

Additionally, if vice was historically tied to redeeming “fallen women,” according to Kevin Mumford, and prostitutes shared the same spaces as queer communities, according to Chauncey and Boyd, then policing in San Francisco also resulted in a policing of queer women in the service and entertainment industry. Reba Hudson, a friend of Mona’s, remembered that queer people “fell into the vice squad category, right along with the whores and the pimps and other vice squad victims…Others got harassed more often, like the dykes that dressed in men’s clothing.”\textsuperscript{277} Drag or public cross-dressing, assured harassment and surveillance for racialized bodies or gendered bodies read as unconventional to heteronormative presentation. However, the police and vice squads dressed as “plainclothesmen” to “hassle the gay bar owners” who did not pay off the police. Where organized crime ran Black clubs in New York, the police extorted gay bars in San Francisco.

Though Bentley would continue to perform at Mona’s, wartime industry was not necessarily inclusive of racial minorities. Boyd claims “World War II functioned to elaborate and extend the tourist-based cultures that emerged in the post-Prohibition era, rather than to fundamentally alter them.”\textsuperscript{278} However, according to critical theorist Roderick A. Ferguson,

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{275} Boyd, p. 74.
\textsuperscript{276} Amiri Baraka, \textit{Blues People; Negro Music in White America} (Quill William Morrow; New York, 1963) p. 93.
\textsuperscript{277} Ibid, p. 64.
\textsuperscript{278} Boyd, p. 9.
\end{flushleft}
postwar industrial expansion did not deter racial exclusion as it offered low-paying employment opportunities to African Americans, Asian Americans, and Chicanos. Therefore, Boyd’s observations of tourist entertainment suggests that postwar opportunities were indicative of expansion for white lesbian communities tied to the service industry. Nevertheless, repeal of Prohibition followed by wartime industry could not alter the racial hierarchy that maintained entertainment, regardless of the sexuality or gender of the entertainers. In other words, where queer communities experience policing for their sexual behavior and presentation in public, passing—particularly for cross-dressers and female/male impersonators—did not guarantee Black entertainers sanctuary or opportunity. Moreover, Ferguson suggests that “aesthetic culture”—such as literature or, in this case, music entertainment—becomes the means to perfect liberal capitalism” as opposed to fulfilling its promise to minority groups. For example, from 1940 to 1950, the local Black population increased from 4,846 to 43,460. Yet, Black people “faced intensified degrees of housing discrimination” resulting in de facto segregation during the war.

Still, Boyd’s examination of San Francisco shows how repeal effected queer communities and their response. For example, she juxtaposes her San Francisco to George Chuancey’s New York because “repeal seemed to stimulate the development of queers and gender-transgressive entertainments,” as opposed to being shut down as they were on the east coast. Her reasoning being that there was less control of vice on the state level due to liquor’s control on the state tax board—the State Board of Equalization—and the state’s “traditionally hostile approach to liquor

280 Ferguson, p. 68.
281 Boyd, p. 113.
282 Ibid.
283 Boyd, p. 11.
control.” Yet, this was true for San Francisco during the 30’s as policing and state authority would collaborate to harass lesbian and gay bars during WWII followed by the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement in the 50’s. Hence, Bentley missed the growing queer culture on the west coast by a decade and arrived for a tenure at Mona’s club during this period of heightened policing. Furthermore, although many butch performers at Mona’s were subject to policing, they managed to hold institutional power like that of their gay counterparts, through their whiteness. Indeed, drag queens, butch women, and racialized groups “necessarily possess a different relation to normative institutions from that identified with white elite metropolitan gay men,” making operating in different social contexts historically separate.

Yet Bentley’s tenure at Mona’s presents an interesting relationship to white clubs in San Francisco despite their queer orientation. From 1942 to 1944, Bentley performed regularly at Mona’s 440 demonstrating some relative stability from being chased out of New York. This “flight to whiteness,” or “racial drag,” as Mae G. Henderson calls it, allowed Bentley “a way to open up a space of possibility” after police raids closed Harlem clubs and Black female impersonators were arrested. Using James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* as a theoretical framework, I position San Francisco instead of Paris as “a site configuring both cultural possibility and transgression” for Bentley. Racial drag also works to challenge ideas of nation and national identity, making Bentley’s tenure at Mona’s a material representation that functions to “alleviate the anxieties menacing the white American male subject…to produce a nationally inflected notion of racialized masculinity.”

---

287 Henderson, p. 301.
minorities, and sex workers are analogously subject to policing, then, such surveillance reinforces the legitimacy for cisnormative patriarchal policing to overdetermine Black queer subjectivity and invest power in racialized and gendered citizenship.

To be clear, racial dynamics do not take precedence over challenges to gender and sexuality, however, it is important to note that Mona’s provided a sanctuary for Bentley from the persecution of Black lesbian/gay clubs in New York. Though San Francisco’s nightlife was determined by lesbian communities and racial enclaves—for example, “Chinatown” was close to North Beach—that overlapped, most of the patrons, entertainers, and spectators were white. As a result, San Francisco’s lesbian nightlife was like that of Harlem, white people exploring their whiteness by placing their bodies in spaces that determined the bounds of acceptable public sexuality and gendered norms. Unlike Harlem, however, San Francisco did not have a variety of all-Black institutions with deep roots in the city’s history. In late 1944, Bentley left San Francisco to return to Harlem. By late September, she made a brief stop and performed at Los Angeles’ Swanee Inn at 133 North La Brea Avenue before returning to New York in the following weeks.288

Bentley’s time in San Francisco influenced her to consider how institutional power was imperative to maintain a successful career. She would have witnessed this in Harlem from her literary friends and in the queer communities of San Francisco. As a result, Bentley deliberately sought out Black-owned venues and companies that were sensitive to Black cultural production in the music industry. Moreover, Bentley would write new original songs that were a departure from her classic blues and preserve the swing jazz of the previous decade. Furthermore, during the 1940’s, “Black political activists increasingly linked Black representation in visual

288 Advertisement, Los Angeles Times (September 23, 1944).
productions to the struggle for racial justice,” making Bentley’s visibility part of a wider cultural movement for self-determination.289 So, as Bentley travelled across the US, performing her signature parodies and sexual innuendos while wearing tuxedos, her music embodied the temporal cultural and political shift of the war period that reflected the sound of Black music. Certainly, she moved with the times as she moved between state lines.

“Gladys Bentley Opened Thursday At Tondelayos,” read the enthusiastic headline in the *New York Amsterdam News*. It hailed Bentley as “Queen of Cabarets,” who’s last appearance was at The Ubangi Club. At the time, Tondelayo’s main attraction was Billy Daniels, who often played with jazz acts throughout his career. Wilhemina Tondelayo Gray was a dancer of Cotton Club fame and must have known Gladys Bentley during her shows there with the Broomfield and Greely production in 1937. Gray opened Tondelayo’s Café Restaurant on 18 West and 52nd Street, “near Fifth avenue and around the corner from Radio City” in 1944. From chorus girl to club owner in mid-Manhattan, Gray was the owner of the “Only Race-Owned Night Club On 52nd Street.”290 The shows were described as “a new departure from the old scheme of things” alluding to the mob-run clubs and speakeasy culture of the 20’s.291

October 1944 proved to be a favorable month of good publicity for Gladys Bentley. Floyd Snelson, reporting for *The Chicago Defender*, announced Bentley’s return to New York from Hollywood after eight years appearing on Broadway.292 Actor Franchot Tone and his wife were happy to receive her.293 Al Monroe, an editor for theater highlights in the *Chicago

---

290 Advertisement, *Pittsburgh Courier* (October 7, 1944)
293 Ibid.
Defender, and his wife, Mrs. Blythe Ford Monroe, were vacationing in New York late that month. They visited Tondaleyo’s and were pictured with Pearl Baines, Billy Daniels, Tondelayo, John Levy, Dorothy Rhodes, Floyd Snelson, Mr. and Mrs. Al Monroe, Gladys Bentley, Johnny Bedford, and Rita Rose. In the picture, Bentley is wearing a men’s formal suit with a bow tie and her hair is flat. Another photograph captures her in public among friends such as, pianist and Broadway actor, Bob Howard. Bentley is seen wearing a wide-brim hat, white gloves, dark shirt and suit jacket.

Bentley was pictured wearing less formal attire (suit jacket, hat, gloves) when she was with friends and colleagues. According to scholar Alix Genter, butch women—lesbian women that performed a specific form of masculinity—were marked as “the public face of lesbianism” and were guides into the know for other women. However, race and class influenced the mannerisms and codes associated to lesbian culture, courtship, and visibility, meaning that for the midcentury, lesbian women were appropriating masculine and feminine styles before gay liberation regulated the queer world to an “in” or “out” dichotomy. For Bentley, her fame as entertainer allowed her to appear in typical butch fashion, however, her Blackness also heightened her susceptibility to homophobic and racist violence.

In New York City, “bulldykin’ women,” or the classic blues queens, including Bentley, were the epitome of lesbian figures in the 20’s and 30’s. This includes Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, and Bentley, who not only performed in drag but also sang about “sissy men” in their blues. Thus, lesbian culture was about what registered audibly as much as it was about what registered visually. The 40’s took on a different style when drag shows introduced butch

294 “Defender Scribe Feted In N.Y.” The Chicago Defender (October 28, 1944).
295 Bob Howard Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library.
crooners, lesbian performers “in tuxes and tails who made their female fans swoon.” However, crooners have a history going as far back as the late nineteenth century, when Tin Pan Alley publishers were producing ballads based on vaudeville acts. However, crooners were considered effeminate and emasculated by popular culture (film, cartoons, pop songs), religious leaders, and music critics, engendering a race and class ideology to the style. In other word, crooners and the ballads they sang were antithetical to white masculinity. Although white men represented the public image of crooners, crooning shares its roots with the development of the microphone and the lead vocals of “sweet’ jazz dance band leaders” such as Bing Crosby.

This means that crooners, when white, are associated to the excesses of sexuality and gender performance within racist ideology that legitimizes the universality of white sexuality and gender presentation. In other words, ballads and popular music are “low” art forms because of their emasculating effect on white masculine ideals and their association to the novelties of minstrelsy/vaudeville and white nostalgia of antebellum history which conjure the ideas of Black sexuality as excess. For Bentley to characterize the image of the crooner, meant she parodied the emasculation of white masculinity while flouting its absurdity and reading race and gender ideology as farce. Though the crooner was the image of East and West Coasts butch entertainers, like Jimmy Renard and Kay Scott, Bentley queered the crooner figure, retaining its association to Black music and presenting a nuanced masculinity to racialized gender. As white crooner

---

298 Ibid.
vocality catalogued a gentle quality, Bentley’s vocals registered pleasure, sexuality, and Black vernacular culture as a nuanced masculinity.

Ted Yates, writing for *The New York Age*, witnessed Gladys Bentley’s return to the New York stage. She returns to the city “after a triumphant Hollywood stand giving New Yorkers a repeat performance reminiscent of The Clamhouse, Queens Terrace days…” Gladys was “Direct from Hollywood,” which must have bolstered her celebrity beyond the glory days of the classic blues in the 1920’s. Favorable reviews followed into November by Yates, who wrote “we were thrilled by Gladys Bentley. [Tondelayo’s] where the elite and the so-and-so folk get the best of entertainment that was reminiscent of a Harlem (that was gay), we were greeted and treated like human beings.” Given that many music critics made the distinction that the magic of the 1920’s were nostalgia in the 40’s, Yates accounts that “No entertainer, say what you will, can command your attention like Bentley—the purveyor of tunes suggestive.”

As much as she was a novelty act of a by-gone era of classic blues, Gladys Bentley managed to keep her repertoire fresh and exciting enough for live performances to continue to consider her the “Queen of Cabarets.”

Tondelayo’s had the only all-Black show on Broadway at a time where Black acts were regarded nostalgic enterprise given the appropriation of jazz by white musicians. John Levy, her husband, was the owner where she was considered the “operator” because Black women were not allowed to be indicated as business owners. Still, it was clear that Tondelayo owned and ran the place. There was a $2 minimum after 10 P.M. and the show was expected to last from 10:30 P.M. to 4 A.M. Billy Daniels and Kenny Watts open the show with cover songs such as “I

---

301 Yates, (November 4, 1944).
302 Ibid.
303 “Night Club Reviews; Tondaleyo’s, New York.” *The Billboard* (November 4, 1944).
Don’t Want To Walk Without You,” and “I’m Lost.” Bentley is known as coming from “the bathtub gin era,” who “works in a male get-up, top hat and pants.” She builds up to her “blue material” with pop songs and, according to the reporter, “wears out her welcome.” Nonetheless, Bentley was writing music as she was performing on the Broadway stage. In November, The New York Age, wrote a short blurb on Bentley’s newest compositions that were assigned to Belltone Music Publishers, Inc. She was to rehearse in an Eddie Cantor Broadway musical where she was expected to perform a Black “imitation of ELSA MAXWELL.” The songs contracted by Belltone were “Me Without You,” “You’re Still In My Heart,” “Sing The Blues,” and “My Red-Headed, Blue-Eyed Colleen.”

Wilhemina Gray fell ill in December with “a severe cold” that kept her from her duties as hostess. During her recovery, she received many letters to her request for a Black Frank Sinatra-like singer to add to her show. Meanwhile, Gladys Bentley continued to impress the audiences at Tondelayo’s. Alvin Moses, writing for The Cleveland Gazette, opined “[Bentley] might rightly be styled the ‘queen of night clubs,’ a modern red-hot mama who puts the Sophie Tuckers of yesteryear in the shade by no uncertain margin…” Chicago Defender echoed his praises of her, noting how her “Ted Lewis top hat and mannish attire” captured the fascination of her audience. That following spring, Gladys Bentley billed a big show at The Apollo Theater. She headlined with “Hot Lips” Page and orchestra, Ralph Cooper and His Stooges, a line of chorus girls called “Ziggy Johnson’s Brownskin Chorus,” and Tab Smith, a swing band leader.

---

304 Ibid.
305 “Music Publishers Handle 4 Bentley Compositions,” The New York Age (November 11, 1944).
306 Ibid.
307 Snelson, “Broadway Jumps Again As Tondelayo Quits Her Bed,” The Chicago Defender (December 2, 1944).
308 Ibid.
310 “Alvin Moses Says,” The Chicago Defender (December 30, 1944).
Much of the anticipation to Bentley’s performance was for “the originality of her own songs” that were of “international reputation.”\(^{311}\) She was only there for a week, however, before performing at the Spotlight Club on 56 and W. 52\(^{\text{nd}}\) Street with Tiny Grimes and Clark Monroe as host.\(^{312}\) It was not long after the Spotlight Club that she made her way back west, stopping in Atlantic City to play at Club Bali. She co-starred the show in June with comedy team Moke and Poke.\(^{313}\)

Back in Hollywood, Bentley must have tired from the constant touring and live performances that decorated most of her career. In 1945, she recorded new songs after almost fifteen years of performing across the country. Although her prospects for a film about her life fell through, Hollywood was an opportunity to widen her professional network. After returning to Broadway and with the added success of her comeback at Tondelayo’s Café, she must have felt capable of taking her career beyond the heights of her Ubangi Club days. She recorded ten sides with Excelsior Records: “Boogie’n My Woogie,” “Thrill Me Till I Get My Fill,” “Red Beans & Rice,” “Find Out What He Likes (and How He Likes It),” “Big Gorilla Blues,” “Lay it on the Line,” “Boogie Woogie Cue,” “Give It Up,” “Notoriety Papa,” and “It Went To The Girl Next Door”. All 10-inch shellac discs credit The Gladys Bentley Quintette, who were Byron Johnson on guitar, Billy Hadnot on bass, Sylvester Scott on piano, Bentley listed as vocalist, William Woodman on tenor sax, and Robert Rose on drums.

This shift from large production ensemble to a small five-piece set is significant to Bentley’s blues because it marks her departure from swing although not quite bebop or early rhythm & blues either. Bebop jazz was a subcultural response to the commercialization and

---

\(^{311}\) “Ziggy, Page, Bentley, Tab, Others On Bill,” The New York Amsterdam News (May 12, 1945).
\(^{312}\) Advertisement, New York Post (May 18, 1945).
\(^{313}\) Abe Hill, “Theatrical Jottings about this and that,” The New York Amsterdam News (June 30, 1945).
glamorization of swing in Black music culture and American popular culture, more broadly. It also proliferated the number of mixed bands (Black and white musicians) Also, bebop was a product of young Black musicians returning to the USA after fighting fascism abroad, only to encounter similar prejudices and discriminations that determined a segregated America. Therefore, the music was not danceable and had a political quality, it was a representation of “the evolved sensibility of a modern urban black American.” Moreover, Bentley’s singing and sound changed with the technology of the period. For example, “Red Beans & Rice,” and “Big Gorilla Blues,” were originally recorded on Okeh in 1929, however, they are almost completely different renditions of the songs that have more bounce, up-tempo, and rhythm than their original blues style. Furthermore, while her sound and singing may have changed, her lyricism retained its classic blues sensibilities in that her lyrics offered advice to women about romance and desired women as well.

For example, in “Find Out What He Likes (And How He Likes It),” Bentley instructs women how to keep their men from cheating on them because “they’re gonna find new chicks outside” and leave. Bentley also counsels women to not rely on their beauty alone: “You may be kinda cute and sorta young in years but some of these old dames fly in heels without shiftin’ gears.” Although the song title suggests that the needs of men are the focus, “find out what he likes and how he like it/ and give it to him just that way” she also adlibs “(or vice versa)” at the end, she emphasizes, “You understand what I’m trying to say, girl…satisfy that man!” Bentley sings to the women throughout, looking out for their security and happiness. She even compares men to dogs, “And a man is like a bulldog, if your cane ain’t strong, then he might go sneaking out after any old little cat that might come along” encouraging women to have the power to

---

314 Baraka, p. 201.
determine their relationships with men, inverting the gendered expectations of courtship resting on the chivalry of men. For blues women, referring to men as dogs “marks a gender-role reversal that encapsulates the disruptive and dangerous form of femininity,” they embody.\(^\text{315}\)

“Boogie’n My Woogie,” is a song that sounds like an early form of rhythm & blues influenced by jazz styles ranging from Bentley’s boogie woogie piano to post-war jazz. In a 1946 advertisement for Excelsior Records, “Boogie’n My Woogie,” is listed under “Party & Novelty Records” but the track is a barrelhouse blues.\(^\text{316}\) The piano frantically opens the song followed by the whirling tenor saxophone. Bentley’s lyrics are comedic throughout; she visits a doctor to ask: “I wonder who’s boogie’n my woogie now, hey doc, hey doc, hey doc, hey doc?” Her lyrics present listeners to how coded her songs were with sexual innuendo, “Said the little red rooster, the little white hen, ‘ain’t had no lovin’ since I don’t know when.” Bentley also includes her flirtation, “Roses are red, violets are blue, if you take my man, I’ll take yours too,” and sexual pleasure, “Takes a big fat man to make me lose control but a little skinny pup who satisfies my soul.” Throughout the song, women’s sexuality and desire remain the central focus, “There was a hip old lady who lived in a shoe, she had no children, she knew just what to do.” Most interesting is perhaps her queering the song’s focus of heterosexual relationships by placing herself in the position of a soldier returning home after war “I was in the army, now the war is through, look out, pretty momma, I’m comin’ home to you!” By taking the position of the soldier in her lyrics, Bentley continued to express her desire for women.

Bentley’s “Lay It On The Line” is more of a jazz tune, especially, in the way the acoustic guitar carries the rhythm bouncing throughout the composition. The song is a hedonistic


\(^{316}\) The Billboard (June 15, 1946) p. 41.
celebration of heaven’s pleasures but, most significantly, it opens with a confession to meeting “a hollow gentleman, who said, ‘what’s yours is mine.” This “hollow gentleman,” kills her because she lives in heaven for the rest of the song: “But now I know a rounded shrine of an angel, Gladeline.” So, Gladys becomes Gladeline. She also uses images of angels, a deacon, and God, to tell a story of pleasure in self-indulgence, thus, queering the images of the sacred to celebrate debauchery. The lyrics also read as a confessional in the opening verses, “I haven’t any worldly goods, got no property. I’ve got no cash ‘cause I’ve been rash with generosity.” It’s as though Gladys Bentley herself is sharing her feelings about her career and success when she sings “I’m livin’ up in heaven and I’m livin’ mighty fine. Since I’ve laid it on the line, full bottles of vine!

Another way Bentley personalizes the lyrics in “Lay It On The Line,” is when she refers to her desire for all the women in heaven, even stealing them from the angel Gabriel: “When Gabriel blows his trumpet, I don’t even hear it, ah! ...When he calls his angels, he says ‘all these chicks are mine.” She doesn’t pay Gabriel any mind, however, Bentley/Gladeline poses a threat to his being beautiful and attractive, resulting in his defensiveness towards her and calling his angels to him. But she also talks about a music that is unfamiliar to white people, an allegory for their relationship to Black music, “The place is full of music. White folks, you ought to hear it.” She doesn’t necessarily invite white people to listen but gestures to the excitement of a music they have not found for themselves, making her blues divine and unfamiliar, queering the relationship Black music has been racialized by a racist music industry. Her libido, sexual innuendo, and personal experience follow the theme throughout the song, “You know, I get somethin’ every night and I’m sure it ain’t no spirit. ‘Cause I’m sittin’ up in heaven drinking Sacramento wine. Since I’ve laid it on the line, Full bottles of vine!” Given its confessional quality, “Lay It On The Line” reads as Bentley sharing a little about herself and the risk involved
having built a successful career in entertainment. As Gladeline, she anticipates relishing in life’s pleasures to the point where the angels envy her “hallelujah spirit.” On the other hand, as Gladys, she tells her story to the women who are willing to listen, “You heard of blessed adventures, well sister, I’ve had mine! Since I’ve laid it on the line…” Here, her lyrics read as though she contemplates her travels West, the policing of clubs and queer performers. It had been a major risk to build her success as a cross-dressing lesbian entertainer, however, it was also very fruitful, hence “Full bottles of vine!”

“Lay It On The Line,” demonstrates Bentley branching out in terms of her music’s themes and style. Played in a swing jazz style, the novelty of the song has a commercial element that implies dance, and the lyrics refer to the levity of libation. However, that the song is consistent with classic blues women’s themes—homosexuality, sex, desire, and colloquialisms—decades after the blues craze of the 1920’s, indicates Bentley’s roots in blues women’s lyricism and sound, while generating a new way of performing said music. Angela Davis examines these themes through the lyrics of class blues queens, however, to understand Bentley’s nuance requires the consideration of her queer personal experiences put on display in her performance. Bentley’s gender transgression manifests beyond her lyricism and presents itself in the styles she incorporates to her repertoire, which includes her attire, piano-playing rhythms and lyricism. Furthermore, she has worked with labels who have shown some sort of fascination with the everchanging nature of Black music—beyond the appropriation and commercial success it offered administrators in the music industry.

While Bentley’s shift from classic blues was determined by her growing live show and swing orientation, her departure form swing is resembled by The Gladys Bentley Quintette, a

---

jazz-oriented blues-style band. Women, who were pianists and boogie woogie artists, were major contributors to the genre, such as Hazel Scott and Mary Lou Williams, to name a few. Apart from playing the new thing, Bentley’s blues allowed her to continue singing about women and take the perspectives of men or at least challenge the men in her songs. The medium provided her with a nuanced way of expressing a masculinity that was not predicated on white cisnormative ideas. Bentley also recorded these originals in Los Angeles, far removed from Broadway’s influence and decreasing demand of large productions. Her being entrenched in San Francisco’s lesbian enclave and relocating to Los Angeles put her closer to Hollywood, making her desire to appear on television more accessible. She slowly made her way onto the silver screens.

Bentley’s records were published by Excelsior Record Company, established by songwriter Otis Rene in 1944. Located at 3661 S. Gramercy Place, Los Angeles, Rene had written and oversaw the publishing of “I’m Lost,” as performed by the Nat King Cole Trio, earning him about $25,000. Rene was a savvy businessman who understood the role big labels had in the music industry. His own discs were selling at $1.05 as opposed to the usual 79 to 89 cent prices, typical of 78 RPM records that proliferated the market post-war. Excelsior’s specialty was an independent label that “will always release tunes of a race nature”. According to Rene, if his price was too high for consumers, to him it meant they “jump around from one type of music to the other”. Rene had plans to print standards and classics under his label likely to preserve the rights of Black music on an independent label. His brother, Leon Rene, headed a separate Exclusive Records label as well. The Rene’s were considerate about their independent status in a market dominated by major recording companies. In late August, Leon was on a committee to draft by-laws and a code of ethics, with other independent label owners, under the

318 "Buck-Five Disk Of Indies Seen Different Ways," The Billboard (September 1, 1945) p. 86.
319 Ibid.
group Associated Independent Record Company Operators (AIRCO). AIRCO was a division of the Pacific Coast Record Manufacturers Association that was a larger organization. By September, Otis Rene was named president of the group and Leon was chosen to serve on the director’s board. Rene’s vice president was his distributor, Jack Gutshall of Jack Gutshall Distributing Company, who was contracted with, both, Exclusive and Excelsior labels.

Michael Roberts describes the roles independent labels have had in a corporate American music industry throughout the twentieth century. “The Big Five,” the major companies that have determined much of American popular music for the past hundred years (AOL Time Warner, Vivendi/Universal, Bertelsmann Music Group [BMG], EMI Distribution, and Sony Music), usually set the terms of production, distribution, and marketing the independent labels do not have the resources for. Therefore, the independents serve as “subcontractors as the mega-corporations lock up control over distribution…the flow of finance capital and distribution.” During the late 1940’s to the mid-50’s, the creation of monopolies in the music industry by way of buying independent labels is attributed to the popularity of new Black music: Rhythm & Blues and Rock n’ Roll. Also, another major component of this shift is due to a new majority of Black music consumers: white teenagers. The proliferation of Black music in American popular culture compelled major corporations to cash in on the access independent labels had on R&B and Rock n’ Roll. In the late 1940’s, RCA Victor, Columbia, and Decca Records were the three major

---

320 “Indie Record Group To Get Ethic Rules; Label Owners Organize,” The Billboard (September 1, 1945) p. 85.
321 Ibid.
322 “West Coast Platter Makers Otis Rene of Excelsior To BE President of New Group: Disk Producers Hold Second Meeting in Los Angeles,” The Billboard (September 22, 1945)
324 Roberts, p. 31.
firms that owned and operated their own production studios, manufacturing plants, and
distribution centers.\textsuperscript{325}

As swing music declined—new jazz artists were taking different directions with smaller
bands resulting in bebop—some bandleaders relied on the blues for their inspiration, such as
Louis Jordan and Wynonie Harris. R&B resembled the shift of Black people’s preferred music
and the importance of independent labels to The Big Five.\textsuperscript{326} Many of these independents, such
as Excelsior Records, “produced the largest number of significant R&B labels” in 1945.\textsuperscript{327}
Therefore, it is no surprise Gladys Bentley changes her style, rooted in the blues of the 1920’s
and 30’s, to play the new music—R&B—of the 40’s and 50’s. Not only are her later singles
R&B songs but she makes sure to maintain the song credits under her name to collect royalties.
Moreover, Bentley’s preference for small recording companies were indicative of the range she
was willing to explore.

In 1947, Gladys Bentley continued to be billed as “America’s greatest sepia piano artist”
and “The Brown Bomber of Song” by newspapers. She played at Frank Mell’s Hollywood Mad
House at 1841 North Cahuenga, two blocks away from Hollywood Boulevard.\textsuperscript{328} Later in March,
she appeared at The Bentley Room (seemingly no relation to her) and was “giving away a
complete album of her records nightly” at 1837 North Cahuenga.\textsuperscript{329} This album must have been a
book of all her Okeh and Excelsior singles because she never recorded a long-play (LP) 12-inch
studio album. Instead, much of Bentley’s later compositions continued to be singles and as a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{325} Ibid, p. 33.
\item \textsuperscript{326} Nelson George, \textit{The Death of Rhythm & Blues} (Penguin Books; New York, 1988) p. 25.
\item \textsuperscript{327} George, p. 26.
\item \textsuperscript{328} Advertisement, \textit{Los Angeles Times} (February 28, 1947).
\item \textsuperscript{329} Advertisement, queermusicheritage (March 21, 1947) Accessed on June 10, 2022:
https://www.queermusicheritage.com/bentley5.html
\end{itemize}
featured guest on other musicians’ songs. Song credits usually assured royalties and compensation for musicians more so than live shows.

In fact, during July 1947, Bentley filed a claim against Paul Kalmonovitz, owner of The Jade Restaurant. The claim was filed through the Musician’s Protective Association, Local 767, in Los Angeles, for $21.50. It may have not been a large lump sum, however, Kalmonovitz refused to pay Bentley for a performance she had done in June “unless he was made [to pay] by the union.” It took a couple of years for the Board of Directors to receive and allow the claim. The plea the recording secretary made was that Bentley did not finish her performance at The Jade in June because “the police entered the premises, arrested the bartender took down the signs and closed the place on the basis that an indecent show was taking place…” Gladys Bentley’s provocative show was assured to be policed and shut down by local authorities to where it affected her livelihood. Even though she was a union member, Bentley made it a point to have her music credited to her, assuring that she could financially rely on her written work.

Towards the end of the decade, Bentley was credited by Mills Music as a composer by Variety in 1948, however, she would not appear on television until the early 1950’s on Groucho Marx’s You Bet Your Life. Her contract as a composer was briefly mentioned in her Ebony article “I Am A Woman Again” although her failed efforts to appear on a Hollywood film were never mentioned. This was probably because “In Hollywood none of the studios hired Black

---

332 “Out Of The Horns’ Mouth,” Variety (April 14, 1948).
musicians,” and when they did—such as Bessie Smith or Ethel Waters—it usually was in racist stereotypes and classist assumptions. Additionally, a report in 1947 by the National Negro Congress on cultural, found that “jazz clubs [were] the only exception to a whites-only musical universe.”

In April 1948, nearly two decades after her rise in Harlem, Bentley was being eclipsed by other musicians who were doing similar acts. The Chicago Defender deemed Nellie Lutcher to be “giving forth the same thing” that Bentley did during her time at the Ubangi Club years ago. But the column revealed more than the nostalgia to the Harlem Renaissance and The Roaring Twenties. Rob Roy, writing for The Chicago Defender, said Gladys “didn’t play the piano much, although she knew the instrument. Instead, Gladys concentrated on composing her own tunes, and the lyrics to some of them were a wow.” Small intimate spaces described Bentley’s glory days to Roy, and he called her repertoire “The dim cabaret stuff…” However, Lutcher’s jazz songs were tame when compared to Bentley’s Okeh classics. Nevertheless, the indecent lyrical style that made Bentley a unique star was a thing of the past.

More interestingly, Roy attributes Bentley’s decline in fame and her lack of making a studio album to “a peculiar accident.” According to Roy, Gladys Bentley’s decline started when “A famous columnist and radio commentator started her eclipse with a story about another singer in another club.” This nameless singer was a “master at the intimate risqué style and did some of his numbers impersonating women.” Apparently, this singer “impersonating women” resulted in the police moving in on “Harlem spots.” Roy notes Bentley’s escape to New Jersey soon after

---

332 Biondi, p. 94.
333 Ibid.
334 Ibid.
335 Rob Roy, “Nellie Lutcher’s Style Recalls Gladys Bentley, Rage Of The Thirties; Gal With Slacks, Clever Ditties, Also ‘Real Gone’,” Chicago Defender (April 24, 1948).
336 Ibid.
and concludes that her unique style faded along with her. The article references Bentley’s escape from the police during the height of her fame at The Ubangi Club and attributes police shutting down Harlem spots that entertained her kind of performance as gender transgression that enabled the state to regulate its power against Black lesbian/gay communities.

The Chicago Defender was not the only paper reminiscing about police persecution of Black lesbian/gay clubs in Harlem. Mel Heimer, writer for Olean Times Herald, shared his thoughts on the “dim and subdued Harlem” recounting his walk on 125th Street in August. Thinking about The Clam House, he mentions Bentley’s music being “just plain dirty” and how they “could not correctly be adjudged risqué...”337 Places like The Last Stop, The Lenox, and The Nest were on his list of clubs open all night in those days and he wondered about the laws that led to them being closed, confirming the Harlem Bentley gained notoriety from as a distant past. By September, Bentley made an appearance in clubs outside Los Angeles, performing at El Adobe Motel. She was featured as a follow-up act to The Bal Blue Three Dance Orchestra who put on a show of “Buffoons and Mimics”.338 She was marketed as “The ‘Sophie Tucker’ of Dark Town.” Then on the west coast, she made another brief appearance in 1950 at the Clover Club at 923 S.W. Taylor and 10th, Portland, Oregon.339

Making her way West was a big decision for Bentley’s career and her personal life. She escaped the harassment of police in New York only to find it again in Hollywood, however, where policing of Black venues was determined by white organized crime, the surveillance of white queer venues was the result of extortion from state and local officials. Despite these challenges, Bentley persevered in a new emerging pop music, small-band jazz, and became a

338 Advertisement, Bakersfield Californian (September 16, 1948).
339 Oregonian (September 5, 1950).
bandleader herself. Her new direction was unfamiliar to the classic blues but retained its queer lyricism, humor, and sexual innuendo that was unique to her. Through her sound and lyrics, she maintained a masculine presentation that exacerbated the inversion of cisnormative ideology, using the image of the crooner to queer the politics of culture. The midcentury had Bentley queering her image and sound once again, except this time, it was an apology and redemptive narrative arc she fashioned, making up for the “mannish style” of the past twenty years.

“For many years I lived in a personal hell.” So began Gladys Bentley’s only published biographical work. *Ebony* magazine printed her short essay in their August 1952 issue. The title of her piece appeared as a headline on the front cover, which featured Mardelle Rogers in a yellow swimsuit to promote “New Fashions in Beachwear.” “I Am A Woman Again” was the only featured article under *Ebony*’s Sex category. The subtitle captured the publication’s intent: “Fabulous entertainer tells how she found happiness in love after medical treatment to correct her strange affliction.” Spread across six pages, Gladys Bentley briefly tells her life’s story through her success in New York, Los Angeles, and the intimate relationships she made along the way. As her story unfolds, she can be seen with some notable stars, some promotional pictures during her cross-dressing days, and then in long dresses as she “enjoys domestic role which she shunned for years[^sic^].”[^340] Most of the article has a tone of condemnation to lesbian/gay desire, however, in her opening paragraphs, she sounds hopeful and in solidarity with anyone who is “in a restless, constant search for happiness.” For Bentley, her “strange affliction” is one determined by her “personal way” and as a performer. Therefore, the liminal space between personhood and performance was how she determined her transgression of “the accepted code of morals that our world observes…”

As much as the article labors over condemning lesbian and gay desire while avoiding further persecution from the law for her career, Gladys Bentley did not succumb to the persecution that many black female impersonators of the decade contended with. Instead, “I Am A Woman Again” is a discursive act “in which gender becomes a terrain to make space for

living” coupled by the final recordings of Bentley’s original music. In other words, although McCarthyism was a real threat targeting lesbian and gay people in the US government during the 1950’s, Bentley’s article and music are moments in which the logic of gender can be read as discursive gestures toward citizenship during a burgeoning Long Civil Rights Movement. Not only did Bentley’s original work reflect such discursive instances—a liminal space where gender and liberty coincide—but so too did her performances take on legible interpretations of gender that were unfamiliar to her initial cross-dressing days as resembled by the many photographs she took and one-time television appearance.

1952 was the same year Christine Jorgensen made her public debut “as an exceptional figure of trans embodiment.” Although Jorgensen’s New York Daily front-page story, “Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty,” is printed in December, I juxtapose her narrative with Gladys Bentley’s “I Am A Woman Again” to demonstrate how the spectrum of gender and gender-making are complicated by racial logic as represented by anti-black maneuver and white supremacist ideology. That is not to say that Jorgensen and Bentley are in contention with one another but, instead, to highlight the differences in their practices and understandings of gender and its performativity as a way of attaining first-class citizenship, whether that is through racial or gendered politics. To achieve this requires abandoning the teleology of trans embodiment and gender in the 1950’s and pivoting toward the conditions that constituted the necessity of Gladys Bentley’s “I Am A Woman Again” and Jorgensen’s media story.

Additionally, white trans jazz musician Billy Tipton made his debut in 1955, with a studio album of jazz standards. Tipton had played in several bands throughout the late 1940’s, however,

---

342 Snorton, p. 139.
his studio work provides material evidence to how whiteness holds currency in passing—legible masculinity and gender presentation without suspicion to the performance. Juxtaposing Tipton’s studio LP with Bentley’s singles demonstrate how Black music culture make Blackness and whiteness visible while obscuring gender performance. In other words, Billy Tipton’s instrumentals depicts how whiteness can pass and blend into cisnormative representation without suspicion of gender transgression by way of Black cultural performance, such as jazz. Moreover, vocals were a way to distinguish a trans masculinity, according to Stephen Pennington, that looks differently for Black performers when considering the gospel performances of Willmer “Little Ax” Broadnax. These entertainers demonstrate the complexities to cultural and gender performance when imbued with race and sexuality. For Bentley, her transition to woman adds nuance to trans masculine vocality as expressed through Black popular music.

In order for Bentley to declare herself a woman again, it required two things that she “had bitterly fought with all [her] heart, mind and body”: a man who could love her and “the magic of modern medicine…” 343 Much of her plea for a happy life is represented by the relationships with men she had since moving to Los Angeles; meeting and eventually marrying a sailor named Don, stationed in San Diego, then, J.T. Gipson, a columnist, and finally, Charles Roberts, a cook from Sacramento. However, before she could conceive of following through with her first marriage (Don, the sailor), she “would have to make a clean break from [her] old life.” 344 This “clean break” meant visiting a doctor in Los Angeles for her weight. She was concerned that she “once weighted more than 400 pounds” and felt her body needed a medical examination. The doctor was “thorough” in that his examination—after Bentley confessed she intended to get married—revealed “what [he’s] known for a long time.” According to her nameless doctor, Gladys

343 Bentley, p. 94.
344 Bentley.
Bentley’s “sex organs [were] infantile. They haven’t progressed past the stage of those of a fourteen-year-old child.” Therefore, she was tasked with “taking three shots weekly for six months” of hormonal injections.\(^{345}\)

Emily Skidmore considers the narratives of white trans men in newspapers, during the early twentieth century, as reinforcing white masculinity: being a productive sexual, political, and economic member of patriarchal society. Apart from gendering the role of citizenship to discredit women’s rights movement, newspapers did not challenge notions of masculinity through trans narratives but strengthened the ideas of convention through celebratory stories. For example, Murray Hall lived as a man until his death in 1901, “and even when his corpse was discussed, it was described using respectful language, even in newspapers far removed from New York City.”\(^{346}\) For trans people, autopsies have usually been moments of outing—revealing a “true sex”—however, for white trans men, they are not only celebrated for the gender performance in masculinity but lauded for their success in remaining hidden. The *New York World* even avoided commentary on Hall’s marriages “a silence that preserved the respectability of all those involved, and also protected Hall from the suggestion of sexual deviance.”\(^{347}\)

Conversely, Bentley was the author of her own article. She discussed her relationships with women, briefly, compared to the heterosexual relationships and failed attempts at marriage. Additionally, Bentley did not celebrate her masculine presentation. Indeed, much of the article condemns and pathologizes homosexual desire as a moral issue, making herself the object of immorality for her nonconformity to domesticity. If Bentley’s condemnation of masculine presentation were to be forgiven by her adherence to gendered domestic roles and expectations,

---

\(^{345}\) Ibid.
\(^{347}\) Ibid, p. 74.
then she certainly understood that such deviant behavior would also register as un-American, that is, deprived of first-class citizenship and all its assurances. During Cold War America and anticipating the Civil Rights Movement, Bentley’s article is a timely effort to secure those protections of citizenship. By virtue of being a Black woman, such celebrations would not extend to Bentley that have historically applied to white trans men. Interestingly, she would be the subject of scrutiny regarding understanding “the third sex” by Black newspapers such as The Chicago Defender and Jet magazine, after her transition to woman.

So, even after transitioning to woman, Bentley queers the publicity of trans narrative. Skidmore’s work shows that whiteness secured the respectability and accomplishments of white trans men, during and after their outing as trans, however, Blackness complicates that security, making it tenuous at best. This is so, because despite Bentley’s efforts to highlight her marriages to men as she condemns homosexuality, Black publications share her story as a corrective to Black queer sexuality. Whereas white newspapers celebrated the success of masculinity by white trans men, Black newspapers highlight the legitimacy of cisnormativity as represented through science, marriage, and family. In other words, her story becomes an example of Black sexuality benefitting from institutional power. This inversion of publicized trans narrative, as autobiography, was intended to secure first-class citizenship, while subject to second-class citizenship, under segregation.

C. Riley Snorton, in an effort to catalog how race constructs biology and whether sex (as category) is possible without flesh, observes how black women were always subject to the instruments and experimentation of modern medicine and science. More specifically, Snorton connects the experiments leading to the treatment of vesicovaginal fistula (VVF), as led by

---

348 Snorton, p. 20.
James Marion Sims on the bodies of Anarcha, Betsey, Lucy, and other “unnamed captives”, as the material and metaphysical result of blackness as flesh, the foundational instrument to American modern medicine.\textsuperscript{349} Furthermore, following Judith Butler’s analysis of gender as “an act of cultural inscription’ that moves alongside and away from sex” animates black culture as a liberatory discursive that makes it transgressive to the determinations of modern science.

For Bentley to redetermine her own narrative to declare womanhood, she had to couple her personal relationships with that of medical intervention. At the same time, such determination was relied on black sociality as it was resembled by heteronormative expectations. In other words, black life contains “value [which] is conveyed not merely through the hegemonic ordering of the center and the margins” in this case, heterosexuality and homosexuality, “but also in a poetics of relation that had the potential to disrupt that very paradigm.” Such relations are not only constituted by her music, but they also include her personal relationships (romantic and platonic), her literary work, and her demonstration of American womanhood \textit{during} a time when queer bodies were being persecuted by the federal government and before the publicity of the civil rights movement captures the nation’s attention by 1955.

In her personal relationships, Bentley was surprised to be treated with such adoration from Don, a sailor from San Francisco. She met Don in Hollywood sometime during the 40’s when she first arrived in the west coast. He looked her up when mutual friends in San Francisco suggested they meet, to her apprehension, because she felt sailors “represented…the utmost aggressiveness in romance-minded men.” He was supportive of her throughout their relationship, “even though I had a creed which made me want to reject him” she recalled. She wondered if her creed of “old habits” that “were impossible to suppress” would get in the way of her marriage to

\textsuperscript{349} Ibid, p. 18.
Don or as she puts it “a bid for happiness.” Her marriage would not last though and she would then marry J.T. Gipson by the time she recorded with Swing Time label.

At that time, “Jingle Jangle Jump” was recorded in 1952 and was the last song that Gladys Bentley appeared as a featured vocalist. She performed with Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray, tenor saxophonists who wail in a bebop style. For a Christmas song, Bentley’s performance is jovial and powerful in an almost early R&B sound. Though she sings with bebop jazz musicians, her vocals wail just as loud as the two tenors when the band follows her lead. The track was produced by Swing Time, Bentley was credited as the composer. “Jingle, Jangle, Jump” was not the only composition she published through Swing Time, however, other originals include “After Midnight,” “Two Fisted Daddy,” “Easter Mardi Gras,” and “The Juneteenth Jamboree.” Her contract was “lucrative” in early February. Although the record label reads that she was accompanied by an orchestra, the California Eagle called her band “a combo of stellar instrumentalists” suggesting a bebop band arrangement.

The lyrics are short and sweet commercialism for Christmas shopping; however, Bentley makes some of the gentle imagery of “Silent Night” unfamiliar to listeners and familiar to bebop music. In other words, Bentley queers the commercial symbols of Christmas in a standard bebop jazz rendition. She opens quietly with familiar images “There’s a Christmas tree, there’s the man in red, and the lady with the bell. The kids are writing notes again. It’s time to sing Noel.” These verses are backed by solely an organ before it breaks out into a quick-paced jazz tune. The bridge also queers Christmas carol standards, “The Silent Night is not so quite, there’s Christmas in the air. There’s much applause for Santa Claus. Hang that mistletoe, right there.” She references “Silent Night” to express Christmas as the opposite, suggesting the overpowering boisterousness

of holiday cheer as direct opposition. Also, that she mentions Santa Claus being celebrated makes him an exposed character when he is the figure of myth, inverting the quiet—referring to Kevin Quashie’s ideas of the interior—of Christmas mythology. In other words, what was kept quiet is now out, much like Bentley herself. Perhaps she identified with the mythology of Santa Claus in “Jingle Jangle Jump” although she doesn’t sing from his position. Instead, she invokes sexual innuendo at the song’s conclusion: “Hip that chick to Old Saint Nick with a jingle...jangle, jingle jangle jump!” Bentley’s feature, although novelty on the surface, demonstrates her sexual innuendo hidden between the verses; she suggests to “hip that chick” with ringing her bell, after all. The bebop style rushed her coded suggestion and exposes its commercial quality, thus, queering the uses of bebop jazz.

Bebop music was not well received during the 40’s and resulted in being recognized as a component of jazz music overall. Minton’s Playhouse on West 118th Street was one of the early spaces in Harlem to have black pioneering jazzmen explore the “more challenging and exhilarating” sound.351 Such musicians include Charlie Christian, Thelonious Monk, Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray were also among the pioneers of the new music. Although “Jingle, Jangle, Jump” could be characterized as a novelty tune for its reference to the holidays, the arrangement is in league with other early bop songs of the time. According to Eileen Southern, music theory aside, what makes bebop “its own distinctive format” is the consistency of two brass instruments: trumpet and saxophone.352 “Jingle, Jangle, Jump” not only has two brass instruments but includes twin tenors as well. Furthermore, that the tenors “announced the theme [of the song] in unison” followed by improvisation to conclude the

352 Southern, p. 490.
song with “a repeat of the unison theme-statement by the horns” demonstrates Gladys Bentley experimenting with bebop style.\(^{353}\)

This point is of great significance because it demonstrates Bentley’s ability to experiment with many forms of black music beyond the classic blues of the 20’s and 30’s. Much of the success of the classic blues is attributed to black women that popularized its novelty, however, swing jazz (including its white appropriation) made popular jazz lose meaning for black people “nor was it expressive of the emotional life of most young [black Americans] after [WWII].”\(^{354}\)

Therefore, bebop pioneers, coming from their years performing and honing their craft with swing bands, replaced the orchestras as the symbol of American popular music. Bands were smaller, jams were meant to be competitive, and after-hours spots birthed the new music. Bentley had recorded for jukeboxes before when she was contracted with Brown records, however, given that R&B singles saturated the market, jukeboxes were more lucrative in the 50’s than they were in the 40’s. Columnist Les Henry, also noted Gladys Bentley’s “FINE COMBO” and the “truly superb performance on FLAME LABEL” with which she also published “The Juneteenth Jamboree,” “Easter Mardi Gras,” and “Before Midnight.”\(^{355}\)

Bentley swings into the first verses of “Juneteenth Jamboree,”: “If you really want a plate, we just set aside a date. Grab your duds and come with me, the Juneteenth Jamboree.” The referent ‘we’ can be read as African Americans throughout the country, however, I consider Bentley declaring her inspiration for boogie woogie and barrelhouse piano-style associated to Black Texan culture. Immediately, she places the setting in the American South and Midwest, painting a queer picture of the South as a place of merriment—“Man they really pitch a ball,

\(^{353}\) Ibid.
loads of wigs, jive, and all. Everything is strictly free, the Juneteenth Jamboree.”—as opposed to antebellum imagery. The song’s title does not dismiss the history of enslavement but makes its abolition the focal point. Furthermore, that the song opens with an invitation to the colloquial cookout, suggests the involvement and support of non-black people for liberation. More importantly, queers the South as a place of total liberation because everything is strictly free, meaning, when Black people are free, so is everything else.

“Everything is strictly free” implies the freedom from labor and wages necessary to access goods—in this case food and drink—with the following bridge: “There’s no shirkin’, no one’s workin’; everybody’s stopped.” Although there is no labor necessary, it is not a result of neglect or dismissal of responsibility to community, yet it is an intentional display of the power of organized workers. Even so, the celebration is still had: “Gums are chompin’, corks are poppin’, doing the Texas Hop.” Juneteenth commemorates the day General Gordon Granger informed enslaved black people in Galveston, Texas, about their freedom, on June 19, 1865. Annette Gordon-Reed’s On Juneteenth tells the history of black Americans in Galveston, Texas and the triad of Hispanic and settler-colonizers of the period. Therefore, the subject of Juneteenth also includes the history of settler-colonialism in North America and racialization of Spanish America. Bentley’s opening verses— “If you really want a plate, we just set aside a date”— reference this relationship black Americans have shared with other nonwhite people in America where other peoples can share in black struggle and celebration, further extending the ideas of nation to one defined by solidarity.

As much as the song celebrates black joy it also propositions an adherence to nationalism. Kevin Quashie summarizes black nationalism as having its roots in the antebellum, defined by racial unity under blackness as its banner while abolition and liberation are its goals.
It is a collective identity of self-definition and self-determination that can be represented as “imaginary as well as material, geographic as well as historical, embodied/corporeal as well as psychic; politically, it can be pluralistic, integrationist, and/or separatist.” Furthermore, that black nationalist ideology has been prominently represented by “the civil rights and black power movements of the 1950s and 1960s” indicate nationalism as a vehicle for first-class citizenship. Bentley’s “The Juneteenth Jamboree” encapsulates “black nationalism as an expansive concept, despite the narrow ways in which it is sometimes represented.”

The tempo is upbeat and includes a pair of brass instruments that solo between choruses, a tenor saxophone and muted trumpet. Although the song may register as a classic jazz tune, it is more aligned with the sound of early R&B as defined by Louis Jordan during the 40’s. According to Nelson George, Louis Jordan bridged the gap between rural and urban, southern and northern black culture. Coming from Chick Webb’s swing band, Jordan achieved fame as a solo artist and pioneer of the genre with his own Tympany Five by 1938. His band set the standard for postwar black dance bands with fewer horns making “the rhythm more pronounced,” offering more space in arrangements. Another part of Jordan’s R&B style that set the standard for the new music was its continuation of black vernacular, making such songs like “Beans and Cornbread,” or “Ain’t Nobody Here But Us Chickens,” an “urbane yet rootsy mold.” Louis Jordan And His Tympany Five recorded their own “June Teenth Jamboree” in 1940 on the Decca label.

---

356 Kevin Quashie, p. 74.
357 Ibid.
358 Eileen Southern, p. 517.
359 Nelson George, p. 19.
360 Ibid.
Bentley’s own “The Juneteenth Jamboree” was credited by her new stage name, Fatso Bently[sic]. This new name, Fatso Bently, eliminates the gendered implications of her previous characters like Gladeline. Fatso is descriptive of an ungendered body and warrants no suspicion to gender transgression, however, Bentley’s lyrics maintain a level of sexual innuendo that allow her to portray a masculinity of her own. That is, where her subjects in her songs are named or characterized, she eliminates description all together, relying on pronouns to refer to the narrator’s perspective. In this way, she is literarily eradicating gender binary, queering the cisnormative subject from Black vernacular music, using the fungibility of Black music transcapability to perform queer desire, nonetheless.

“The Juneteenth Jamboree” is indicative of a black woman musician who honors her cultural roots while envisioning a potential future of self-determination disguised under the pretense of nationhood. That the song is not quite jazz but not quite R&B resembles the liminal space, between genre and category, that Bentley intentionally occupied. This in-betweenness, was the space she used to (re)define herself into ways of being that may have constricted her sense of self but secured a life made livable by the categories of gender and sexuality. Added by her biographical essay, the result of her “strange affliction” as history’s fault, and how science and cisnormative relationships restored her personal happiness, Gladys Bentley satisfied “the qualifications of being” a woman that were required “before representation could be extended.”

---

361 Gladys Bentley is credited as writer for “The Juneteenth Jamboree” under the name Fatso Bently. There are two compilations that credit Fatso: Boogie Woogie Playgirl: Texas-Style Jump & Barrelhouse, 1948-53, Eddie’s Records 1001, and The Best of Bob Dylan’s Theme Time Radio Hour, Volume 2, Chrome Dreams CDCD5021 (UK, 2008).

Indeed, the *Eagle* continued to sing her praises in this new direction Bentley was taking with her sound. Described as a “versatile entertainer,” gone were the racialized comparisons to Sophie Tucker, “Sepia” pianist or “Brown Bomber” titles. Instead, she was a “new Gladys Bentley” that recorded original songs presenting “a new refreshing light.” Furthermore, a photograph depicts her in women’s fashion, wearing wigs, and smiling under a microphone for the article. She was transforming herself into a female musician from the “male impersonator” trying to recuperate her fame from Prohibition. In fact, her change in image was so drastic, it was included in Izzy Rowe’s Notebook, a fashion column, for the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Gladys was “doing a complete switch from her top hat and tails personality to dresses and wigs for a feminine front…”

It was at this time that Bentley may have married J.T. Gipson, the well known West Coast theatrical columnist” she last mentions in her “I Am A Woman Again” piece. However, Gipson denied ever having been married to Gladys and died in July, a month before her article was published; he was 35. *Jet* magazine would even indicate he died of “internal hemorrhages” while in his car. Harry Levette, *Associated Negro Press* correspondent, supported the fact that Gipson was found dead in his vehicle and wrote that, according to Maceo Sheffield, Gipson’s last words were: “I am not, and have never been married to Gladys Bentley.” After threatening to sue the publishers for *Ebony*, he also references the article, “…that confession article of hers. Now I am a woman again.” Whether or not this marriage was a publicity stunt, it did not stop Bentley from marrying a third time, then to Charles Roberts. In September 1952, *Jet* would cover

---

their honeymoon and future endeavors in a short column that featured an image of Bentley during her cross-dressing days. The couple held a private ceremony in Santa Barbara—where Roberts is from—and went to Mexico City for a two-week honeymoon.\footnote{Mr. & Mrs.: Gladys Bentley Marries Calif. Cook,\textquoteleft\textquoteleft Jet (September 18, 1952).}\footnote{Ibid.} Roberts served three years in the army, doing combat duty in Europe, made their home in Los Angeles, and had plans to open a drive-in restaurant. Bentley was noted as the “nationally-famous” Bobbie Minton who penned her life in \textit{Ebony} “in which she told how an operation ‘helped change my life completely’.”\footnote{Bentley.} \footnote{Bentley, p. 93.}

“I Am A Woman Again” was a plea to “those of us who have taken unusual paths to love”; that they can “find someone in the opposite sex who can teach us love as love really ought to exist.”\footnote{Bentley’s autobiographical attempt at redeeming her “abnormal life” was meant to save her “from my sins.” However, as much as the piece condemns homosexual desire and gender transgression (as represented by female/male “impersonation”), she also laments the difficulty and loneliness that defines the margins of homosexual life: “Our number is legion and our heartbreak inconceivable.”\footnote{She defends queerness in all the ways she is familiar with, “Some of us wear the symbols and badges of our nonconformity. Others, seeking to avoid the censure of society, hide behind respectable fronts, haunted always by the fear of exposure and ostracism.” Still, she also anticipates the sexualities and genders yet to be determined: “a great number of us do not understand ourselves.”}

Bentley received favorable responses from her audience by October 1952. A Loyal Reader from Fort Pierce, Florida, recognized that “there are many of us successful in a material sort of way” however, those who are considered different for their sexuality or gender
presentation “seem so incomplete.” Virginia, from Jersey City, also remarked about how they were “once like [Gladys Bentley]. Now I am a happily married woman and a devoted mother.” Furthermore, that both roles would be maintained by prayer and God’s help. J.W. from Brooklyn was less conservative. He makes a case for his own masculinity “in appearance and mannerisms,” that should shield him from the “personal hell” he and Gladys Bentley talked about. J.W. goes further to say that his employment, never having committed a crime, or solicited underage boys, should ensure his safety yet that he, as a homosexual, is considered a “menace to society.”

Alfred L. Dennis, from Charleston, South Carolina, encouraged Bentley’s sexual life story as an example for black people to “see that life isn’t always what it starts out to be, but what you the individual make it.”

Jet ran an article in January the following year that asked, “Can Science Eliminate The Third Sex?” The piece opened with a brief reference to Christine Jorgensen’s “unusual story,” calling her an ex-soldier in Denmark (where she received her surgery), transitioning from man to woman through a series of operations and hormone injections. The points made by the article are that science made Christine Jorgensen, people considered “third sex” were “in-between” binary gender, and, lastly, how science could eliminate this liminal space. In the same article, Jet presents Gladys Bentley’s case as one of several that demonstrated “her change from ‘third’ sex to true female” with the aid of medical attention and her doses of hormones. “Can Science Eliminate The Third Sex” recapitulates the validity of a cisnormative gender binary—represented by female/male sex—that also reinforces the power of white supremacist logic through gender.

---

371 Letters To The Editor, Ebony (October 1952).
373 Ibid.
In other words, using Snorton’s ideas on transcapability—the capacity for gender, though biologized, “not fixed but fungible…revisable within blackness, as a condition of possibility”

—Bentley’s transition to being a woman again “expresses how ungendered blackness provided the grounds for (trans) performances for freedom.” Although Snorton’s transcapability registers in the antebellum period, cross-dressing and cross-gender modes of being provided means of escape, fugitivity, and freedom; making use of “gender fungibility.”

Furthermore, while “the cross-gender aspects of the escapes titillated abolitionist audiences, they also required resignification” on the part of the narrators, to indicate the extreme measures necessary to escape enslavement, captivity, and death. Consequently, passing “expresses a form of agency as well as a promise of restoration…[which] signals a ‘return’ to a natural-cum-biological mode of being.” So, for Gladys Bentley to become a woman again, she decided to pass as one to achieve first-class citizenship; make life more livable through gender’s fungibility and blackness’ transcapability. Whereas Christine Jorgensen adhered to womanhood by whiteness, Bentley adhered to “ungendered blackness” as a way of securing womanhood, as demonstrated by her new direction in her original music coupled with her efforts to restore her personal happiness through “the accepted codes of morals…”

In Gladys Bentley’s final years, her public appearances were sporadic. She was billed as “The Queen of Risque” at The Mirror Room in Tucson, Arizona. She played “at the boogie piano” nightly for an undisclosed amount of time. Another venue she would appear at was

---

374 Snorton, p. 59.
375 Ibid, p. 58.
376 Snorton, p. 57.
377 Ibid, p. 58.
378 Ibid.
379 Gladys Bentley, “I Am A Woman Again,” in Ebony (1952) p. 94.
380 Advertisement, Tucson Daily Citizen (May 29, 1953).
Barnett’s Alyce Blue Gown on Van Nuys Boulevard in Los Angeles in July of 1954. In September, she was briefly mentioned in *The New York Age* in a blurb about her Ubangi days. The column mentions how “few people ever noticed the handsome chap backstage,” during those years and that he was “the only man Gladys Bentley ever loved.”  

Apparently, in one of her scrap books, she noted that “Bob Dean”—the man in question—“whom I shall love forever” was “the dearest man I have ever known.” Although this reference to Bob Dean is not necessarily romantic, its inclusion does confirm an attempt to portray heterosexual desire.

The *Chicago Defender* featured her old photograph with top hat and tuxedo from her tenure at Tondelayo’s. The article remembered her as “Miss Night Club” and as the first musician to “awe cafes and jams with ‘8-To-The-Bar’ style singing.” Her headshot was flanked by Rose “Chi Chi” Murphy, a composer and dancer, and Nellie Lutcher, a pianist. Rob Roy wrote that the main difference between these three entertainers in their style of singing was that Bentley’s effort “was strictly vocal.” Bentley “sings through her teeth, after a fashion, and dispenses vocal tones instead of whistles.”

This vocal style Roy was referring to is indicative of Bentley’s ease with the blues. Blues music was how she made a name for herself in Harlem and broke out as a unique classic blues performer. However, her piano playing separated her from her contemporaries because it was predicated on boogie woogie music, which predominantly was fashioned by black men. Gilbert Millstein, writing for *New York Times*, was also lamenting an old New York that belonged to the speakeasies and night clubs in Harlem. He even went on to write about the gangsters that permeated the late night clubs with crime and pilfered booze during Prohibition. According to Millstein, “money, taxes, television, and the suburbs” are all

382 Ibid.
reasons why New York’s nightlife had taken a turn over the 40’s and 50’s. However, some frequenters remembered Harlem for The Ubangi Club and The Clam House where “Gladys Bentley’d sing ‘The Boy in the Boat.’ That was real rock and roll.”

By the fall of 1955, Bentley was playing at the Eddie Davis Restaurant on 1743 Cahuenga, and in December, The Frolics on 6216 Van Nuys Boulevard. At The Frolics, she performed Monday through Thursday every week in a space of 2,500 square feet. That same year, the Billy Tipton Trio debuted with *Sweet Georgia Brown*. The album included several musical covers and jazz standards like “What Is This Thing Called Love,” “Take the ‘A’ Train,” and “Sweet Georgia Brown” its title track. All these recordings are instrumental and are in the bebop style. The liner notes themselves celebrate Tipton’s achievements: he was born in Oklahoma City in 1919, moved to Kansas City Missouri, studied music at The Horner Conservatory of Music, played saxophone in college, and appeared on radio shows during the 40’s in the Midwest, like KOMA, Oklahoma City, and KWTO, Springfield, Missouri. He also married several women throughout his life and adopted children whom he parented as well. I summarize Tipton’s biography because Judith Halberstram warns scholars of the violence of transgender biography, in that its “sometimes violent, often imprecise project…seeks to brutally erase the carefully managed details of the life of a passing person” inaccurately portraying passing as “deception, dishonesty, and fraud.” Bentley’s transition also sensationalizes the

---

386 Ibid.
linear narrative of transition that obscures the queering of her lyrical and biographical work because, as James F. Wilson understands, “we can’t know the real Gladys Bentley.”

Still, without producing the familiar tropes of non-trans “experts” in obscuring, justifying, or recapitulating erasure of trans lives, my analysis focuses on the trans music of Billy Tipton and Gladys Bentley. Their trans music derives from the trasncapable nature Black music has historically rooted itself in for survival, queer expression, and resistance to dominant discourses of race, gender, and sexuality. One example are the vocals of Jimmy Scott. “Little” Jimmy Scott was a jazz high counter tenor that registers as “female” to the point of inspiring the styles of Nancy Wilson. For Halbertstram, Scott’s vocals register as a “transgender voice,” meaning that his vocal abilities “extend the category of maleness” than fitting into cisnormative ideals of what male vocals should sound like. Therefore, Scott is not marked by categories determined by dominant ideology but transcends those categories through his vocal style and capability, resulting in a trans voice. Despite Bentley’s own transition into cisnormative categories of being, her voice and music remain a trans music, rooted in Black vernacular culture that gives nuance to the ways Bentley presents a “female masculinity” or queerness.

Stephen Pennington discusses how trans vocality transcends the strictures of gender conformity and a cisnormative binary. Willmer “Little Ax” Broadnax was an African American high tenor, from Houston, Texas, who began performing in gospel vocal quartets in the late 1930’s. He sang for groups like the Spirit of Memphis Quartet, the Fairfield Four, and the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi throughout the 40’s and 50’s. For Pennington, Broadnax’s vocals were based in the voices of Black women who modernized gospel music by the midcentury, such as Marion Williams and Mahalia Jackson. Their vocals, as Broadnax shows, were a “form of

---

390 Halberstram, p. 68.
smoothness and sonic blend [that] insists on an alternative black middle-class masculinity” that does not reproduce the racist stereotypes on Black bodies that lead to their policing, maiming, and overall destruction. That Broadnax would model his vocals to Black female vocalists only expands the versatility of trans voice. Both Broadnax and Scott are trans singers—without necessarily fitting into the category of trans—by way of Black music culture, its communality, expression of human experience, and inherent opposition to dominant modes of being.

Then, as Billy Tipton covers jazz standards without his voice appearing on any of the recordings, however, playing piano with vocality, Gladys Bentley challenges the gendering of Black music by queering her aesthetic, discursively declaring womanhood “again,” and coding the feminine as the object/model of desire in her music. Furthermore, she does this, partly, as Fatso Bentley, an ungendered persona that embodies the bandleader to her queer blues. Halbertsram observes the imperative of narration as essential to trans visibility and archive to “locate the oddly gendered subject in the world and in relation to others.” Black music achieves this, sets the stage, and provides the means to articulate and make legible identities unseen through their audibility, whether through technological (instruments, radio, television) or harmonic means. In this sense, Black music is trans music.

“I’m from Port of Spain, Trinidad” said Bentley, in response to Groucho Marx on his television show *You Bet Your Life* in a late 1950’s episode. “Did you have a job, Gladys?” Groucho asks. she says, “Yes, I am an entertainer. I sing and play for a living in nightclubs all over the country and I just finished a book called *If This Be Sin.*” Although her book was never published after its completion, it was often referenced after her death. This episode is the only

---

known video footage of her and she appears on the show dressed in a long silk dress, her hair is
adorned in flowers, and she is ornamented by large pearl necklaces and earrings. With her left
hand resting on her hip, she readily answers Marx’s interview with quickness and a casual
comfortability. Marx continues his inquiry about her book, “Well, what is it about, is it about
geometry—” and before he can finish, she interrupts his comedic sarcasm with the truth: “My
life’s story.” He replies in astonishment and defeat “You’re THE Gladys Bentley!? I thought your
name sounded vaguely familiar.”

For Black entertainers, television was a sign of reaching new levels of success in the
twentieth century. Bentley, herself, wanted more than anything to be in movies like her classic
blues contemporaries, Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters. The entertainment industry grew alongside
the growing technologies of the period, such as television and radio. Nelson George equates the
spread of Black rural music and Black sports leagues with the advancement of radio and
television technology. Furthermore, the relationship between “technology and commerce that
spawned new music, new aesthetics,” for Black people, suggests that American capitalism
propelled this spreading of Black vernacular culture as much as its creators and innovators.
Therefore, television and radio were technologies that contained race ideology. Television history
runs parallel to trans history because many times, television entertainment works as “a prosthetic
extension of technology and the self.”392 Also, “technologies of television and medical transition
debuted publicly contemporaneously,” as post-war advances into modernity.393

Alan Nadel’s study on the relationship between television and race support this theory.
For Nadel, “Technology in combination with mythology…made television an instrument of Cold

War consensus that offered compelling instructions on normal American life.”

So, the mythology Nadel references is the history of whiteness as a currency for political security through citizenship. Also, television, specifically, projected the national ideal of what and how Americans should live. When considering the gendered expectations of American idealism, the cisgendered nuclear family is the epitome of national exceptionalism because Americans should be productive (sexually and economically) members of society under threat of communism or anti-capitalism. Thus, for Black entertainers, television is a means to realizing the promises of first-class citizenship, economic success, and legitimacy as exceptional Americans post-WWII. Gladys Bentley certainly understood this as a public figure and Black queer entertainer.

Furthermore, that she appeared after her transition to woman and publishing her article, makes her television appearance an attempt to secure her investment in conventional gender roles.

Bentley presents herself genuinely throughout the few minutes she is on air. Marx asks her how long she has been singing and performing in nightclubs to which she says, “for about 40 years”; encapsulating the blues of the 20’s, theater venues of the 30’s, west coast recordings of the 40’s, and her jazz and early R&B of that decade. “What kind of songs do you sing?” he asks, “Well, I do everything, all kinds of songs” she replied, “I have about 500 on hand, what do you want to hear?” Marx wasn’t invested in any song and offered her to choose. “If you had a small piano or somethin’ I could do ‘Them There Eyes” she said. He replied, “Suppose we had a large piano, what could you do?” Bentley, without missing a beat, “Well, I could do other…maybe somebody else’s eyes.” The audience laughs with her as she chuckles to her own amusement.

“Them There Eyes,” was written in the 1930’s by Maceo Pinkard, William Tracey, and Doris Tauber. Some of the earliest recordings of the song were performed by Louis Armstrong,

---

Duke Ellington, and Bing Cosby. However, the song did not reach mass popularity until Billie Holiday recorded it on July 5, 1939.\textsuperscript{395} Holiday’s rendition would be released again for Decca Records on her self-titled 1953 Extended Play (EP) 45rpm vinyl disc and included again on her “The Lady” Sings album in 1957. Consequently, out of the 500 songs in Gladys Bentley’s repertoire, it isn’t such a surprise that she decided to play her own interpretation of the same song on Marx’s show the following year. As she sits in front of the small electric piano, she plays the chords with haste, playing Holiday’s version at double the speed.

When Bentley sings, she is looking at Marx’s direction, sometimes focusing on the keys or glancing over to him, “Fell in love wit’cha the first time I looked in them there eyes.” However, as Marx is off camera, he eventually captures the audience’s attention during her verses when he starts to dance alongside an African guest. She continues however, “Jumpin’ you started something with them there eyes. Watch out brown eyes if you’re wise! They sparkle, 0they bubble, they get you in a whole lotta trouble, yeah! Baby, them there eyes!” Again, Bentley queers the meaning of the song when she plays faster in her boogie woogie style. Instead of playing the song as the ballad it was meant to be, she glances over to Marx, as though she is reading him. This performance is representative of a diasporic contention to white commercialism and historical colonialism. She returns Marx’s gaze, as though she is directly confronting the white monopoly of entertainment industry and its colonial legacy of enslavement and settler-colonialism. She is not enthralled with her host by any means, however, the audience is none the wiser, particularly given that her African companion is dancing to her blues.\textsuperscript{396}

Bentley whirs into a solo indicative of boogie woogie piano, demonstrating her reliance on the craft after so many years. Also, “Them There Eyes,” as Billie Holiday popularized it, included an orchestra directed by Sy Oliver, and although Groucho Marx offered his house band to follow Bentley’s playing, she performed without them. In boogie woogie piano, Eileen Southern describes what each hand is doing on the keys; “The right hand played a highly embellished melody that set up the cross rhythms against the left hand [that played bass notes] and was distinctive for its tremolos.” Tremolos are a rolling of notes in a chord structure that make a rhythmic sound. It is exactly what Bentley does in her solo with her right hand during “Them There Eyes,” and when she would snap her fingers, her left hand continued the rolling basses, never losing the tempo she set for herself or the loudness of her sound.

Similarly, how Billie Holiday’s performances were “primarily with the idiom of white popular song” who’s discography “consisted largely in transforming already existing material into her own form of modern jazz,” Gladys Bentley reinterprets popular song to create her own form of modern blues. Furthermore, her new blues music—the liminal performances between classic blues, novelty acts, early R&B, signature smut and bebop jazz—also work to complete her transition from being remembered as a “male impersonator” to becoming a woman again. The resignification of blues music Bentley performed through “Them There Eyes,” “transformed ways of representing black female sexuality” as transcapable; resignifying gender as a means for self-definition, regardless of how it recapitulates gender norms.

---

398 Southern, p. 378.
400 Ibid.
Moreover, where Davis is concerned with Holiday’s lyrical content as transforming “contrived and formulaic sentimentality,” I highlight Bentley’s performance of “Them There Eyes,” having been televised, making her public display of gender more accessible, visible for consumption. Reebee Garofalo, in chronicling the white appropriation of R&B to rock ‘n’ roll, finds television to be a major reason why R&B became so popular and widespread throughout the country in the early 50’s. Just a year before Bentley’s appearance on You Bet Your Life, there were 39 million television sets in use, representing 80% of American homes. Additionally, many images of the civil rights movement were on television as well, proliferating news media as the movement galvanized black America well into the following decade. In 1958, Bentley continued to appear on TV spots. The Long Beach Independent reported her appearing on “Club Checkerboard” at 7p.m., following a 30-minute showing of “The Count of Monte Cristo,” starring Hurd Hatfield. Bentley’s co-stars were Earl Grant and Champ Butler.

Gladys Bentley intentionally leans into a future vision of black liberation and possibilities of black womanhood and sexuality. With the advent of the Civil Rights Movement spurring public interest throughout the country, concerning ideas of freedom and citizenship, Bentley uses the national momentum to restore a happiness she makes for herself through the fungibility of gender in relation to Black transcapability. Although her bid to womanhood may have reinforced gender norms, such as binary gender and cisnormativity, it also allowed her to live a life without the fear of further legal persecution for her explicit content, arrest for cross-dressing, and exposure to harm for being involved with women during McCarthyism. Instead, Bentley chose to secure a future for her family, living her final years with her mother and siblings in Los Angeles.

---

Despite Bentley’s transition to the conventions of domesticity, cisnormative gender roles, and feminine aesthetics, she continued to queer some aspects of her personal life as it related to her visibility in the public sphere.

In April 1959, Ziggy Johnson writing for *The Chicago Defender*, briefly reports Gladys Bentley “now preaching the gospel...” During that year, she was studying to become an ordained minister having dedicated much of her time to evangelism at the Temple of Love in Christ Church, Inc. By May, she appeared at a nightclub at 1016 West Slauson that tried to capitalize on Los Angeles tourism by promoting a “Golden 20’s” event. The Golden 20’s had all the glamor one would expect from a showcase of excess entertainment: a block-long parking area, long carpet, and golden door. Inside, patrons were encouraged to find the Garter Room, “where the waitresses wear appropriate costumes.” In the Garter Room, Bentley helmed the piano. Even though she was an ordained minister, her music remained her pride and joy. Given that the event was revisiting and glorifying the 1920’s, it is likely she played some of her classic blues songs. Such an event was typical for Bentley, as entertainer, however, she personally reveled in the limelight and appreciated the adoration she received throughout her career. Nothing would change the fulfillment she received from her exploits, whether it was marrying women, singing pop songs with sexually explicit lyrics, dressing in tuxedos or suits or becoming an ordained minister. Her craft remained the same.

Black women composers and singers who were religious was not a new sight. For example, women such as Lucie Campbell and Willie Mae Ford Smith were “neither invisible or silent” and “wielded formidable respect and power” in gospel music during the early twentieth century.

---

403 James F. Wilson, p. 187
405 Ibid.
Sacred music and the emergence of gospel, specifically, held space for women to be at the forefront, visible, and revered. Smith was also an ordained minister in the A.M.E. Zion Church by the late 1930’s, early 1940’s, and changed her membership to a denomination that was less restrictive to women in ministry during the 1950’s. However, Bentley was not performing gospel music. The similarities are found between their aesthetic choices during performances and their status in their respective churches. For example, Smith was known to wear a flower in her hair and a cape which “bec[a]me part of her persona” like Bentley’s tuxedos. Furthermore, the piano was an essential component to the rise of Black church songs, transitioning hymns and spirituals to a new level of worship music. By midcentury, the gospel sound was amplified by electric organs, guitars, and drums. The piano-style was always based in blues, “primarily diatonic…rarely modulated, and embellished [popular church songs] moderately,” transitioning the music from acoustic to electric or moving toward modernity.

Jazz historian Albert Murray views the church as a training ground for blues musicians. As he describes, the dichotomy and relationship between, what he calls “merriment,” singing, stomping feet, clapping hands, overall, making a “joyful noise,” is essential to Black culture. For Murray, the blues and “downhome church” music are not much different in their sound than their religious register. In other words, the “barrelhousing and ragging and jazzing” were not exclusive to the blues because such pleasure and dancing is also found in the pulpit during worship.

---

407 Burnim, p. 211.
408 Ibid, p. 212.
410 Southern, p. 475.
Both genres overlap in style and derive their meanings from their respective, spaces, creators, and audiences. Both, Black church music and the blues, represent “rituals of resilience and perseverance through improvisation in the face of capricious disjuncture.” I would add, that both, secular and sacred, transition into one another, in performance, in sound, and in dance. For Bentley to be an ordained minister and play at a nightclub is an example of this phenomenon. Therefore, while Bentley makes the efforts to live as a successful women entertainer, her music retains its trans quality, thus, queering the image of ordained minister.

Gladys Alberta Bentley died at 52 years of age on January 18, 1960, from “a severe virus infection that led into bronchial pneumonia.” She was survived by her immediate family: her father, George, her mother Mary, her two brothers, George and Wilbur, and her sister, Mary; all but her father lived in Los Angeles. Funeral services were held at Armstrong Family Home, 1201 South Hope Street. Her burial was held at Lincoln Memorial Park. Some of the obituaries mentioned her autobiography, If This Be Sin, as an incomplete project. Dorothy Kilgallen’s “The Voice of Broadway” column mentioned that Bentley couldn’t find a publisher. Jet briefly mentioned her death and her career of “30 years [as a] sophisticated cabaret singer who specialized in risqué songs and male impersonations…” The profile included a picture of her in housewife presentation. As much as Bentley’s life constituted gender transgression and eventually succumbing to the ideal image of domesticity, her music remained as queer as ever. Whether she was gender-bending characters, desiring women, including sexual innuendo in her lyrics or changing the style of her sound, Bentley’s blues moved through genres, venues, and temporality, as a result, allowing her to make Black vernacular culture unfamiliar to those

---

412 Murray, p. 42.
outside her “personal hell” and familiar to this with a “strange affliction.” Despite her disavowal of queer life, she remained a symbol of bravery in the face of adversity and a beacon to others who desired stability from an anti-queer world that overdetermines structures of family, love, and public life.
When Bentley died, few newspapers continued to write about her recent music or future endeavors. Instead, they wrote about her early career, particularly the 1930’s, her risqué songs, and male impersonation. They read as though they preferred Bentley in top hat and coattails, singing her “double entendre tunes.” According to Chazz Crawford, writing for the California Eagle in 1960, “The Last Time I Saw Harris,” was Bentley’s “most popular song.” The song was not recorded as it was likely a parody of “The Last Time I Saw Paris” written for the 1941 film, Lady Be Good. In the movie, Ann Sothern, playing Dixie Donegan, sings “The Last Time I Saw Paris,” a tune of longing for the French city. The lyrics romanticize Paris as an object of desire: “A lady known as Paris, romantic, and charming/ has left her old companions and faded from view…” The city is referred to in “she/her” pronouns throughout. The song continues, “The last time I saw Paris, her heart was warm, and gay/ I heard the laughter of her heart in every street café…” Gay, in the context of the song means joyful, however, given Bentley’s style, she would have given the word emphasis to mean queer as well. Interestingly, at the song’s conclusion, the following verses transition to melancholy: “The last time I saw Paris, her heart was warm and gay/ no matter how they change her, I’ll remember her that way.”

I labor in sharing the film’s version of the song because the scene is reminiscent of Bentley’s white tuxedo. Ann Sothern stands before a grand piano as she sings the song in an all-white dress, wearing gloves and a veil. In the film, Eleanor Powell leads an extravagant musical production dressed in a tuxedo and top hat. For Bentley to change “Paris” to “Harris” in parodying the song is a continuation of her queering popular music, the film was a musical comedy after all. It is likely she identified with Paris in the original because “no matter how they

---

416 Crawford, p. 1.
417 Lady Be Good, directed by Norman Z. McLeod (1941: MGM).
change her, I’ll remember her that way” could be a sad reminiscence of her “male impersonation” and everything Bentley personally experienced, as a result. Moreover, the plot to *Lady Be Good* involves a songwriting couple that have a difficult marriage to the point of divorcing twice, just like Bentley. Whether Harris, standing in for Paris in Bentley’s version, is referred to with “he/him,” pronouns, Bentley still queers the original song by making Harris the object of her own desire compared to most of her career. In other words, if she were to long for a Harris, it would have been unfamiliar to her fans that were familiar with Bentley’s signature presentation as “male impersonator.”

“Male impersonations” were the bedrock of Bentley’s blues and allowed her to live authentically in her personal life. For example, she lived in domestic partnerships with women, travelled often, and, for all intents and purposes, lived like a man with a successful professional career. Even after declaring “I Am A Woman Again,” Bentley’s music retains a perspective that desires women, such as “Easter Mardi Gras.” If lyrics were not enough, the genre she plays it in is a jazz ballad, she sings in a blues-style like that of Billie Holiday; her rhythm is gentle, and the piano is restrained from the powerful instrument it can be in Bentley’s command. Singing about unrequited love while leading the song instrumentally, blurs the dichotomy of how jazz is recognized by the primary archetypes of male instrumentalists and female vocalists. She combines the two figures of instrumentalist and vocalist in “Easter Mardi Gras,” while in love with the subject of the song’s desire: “we’ll be a solid pair/ all the chicks will stare/ I’ll introduce you to my ma,” connotes a merging of these masculine/feminine figures that does not determine the object of desire for Bentley. In other words, Bentley, through her blues in “Easter Mardi Gras,” embodies the liminal space between masculinity and femininity, while occupying both by lyrical content and instrumental style.
These songs, recorded after her transition to woman in 1952, record a new way of queering Black culture that Amiri Baraka calls “the changing same.” The changing same is a process of production based on Black identity, history, and culture. Furthermore, the changing same articulates “the interplay between the reaction and adaptation to the lived experience” of Black people that inspires art.\textsuperscript{418} In other words, the changing same transcends material realities without disavowing “the material repression of black citizenship associated with the class and caste hierarchy of…racial capitalism.”\textsuperscript{419} Therefore, as cultural praxis (action, doing, movement), the changing same indexes the violence of race and racism while providing ways of expression that resist systematic power. Bentley proves the changing same is queer and essential to Black music as trans music because her songbook evolved over time in sound and genre without disavowing its gender transgressions and queering of Black vernacular culture and American popular mainstream (read as white). In this sense, Bentley’s Flame label recordings remain queer and transversal to popular music. “Easter Mardi Gras” demonstrates this including its complimentary single, “Before Midnight,” found on the opposite side of the 10-inch release.

“Before Midnight” is a completely instrumental track that Gladys Bentley published with the Flame label. It is also the same exact recording of “Fourth of July Boogie” she recorded with Swingtime in 1953 as Fatso Bently. It is a special recording from her repertoire that is still available today because it is an early R&B tune, and it includes her signature scatting from the late 20’s. Her piano style is heavier than anything she played before, perhaps because the recording equipment was more advanced than her Okeh records. Still, the evolution of her piano-style can be heard on “Before Midnight” and indicates the influence of barrelhouse piano from


\textsuperscript{419} Ibid.
Texas during her time recording with Excelsior Records. Her sound is reminiscent of Little Richard’s heavy piano chords and her vocals are guttural. The horns are a major component to the chorus that gives the song its R&B orientation, complimenting song’s key. The instrumental is a clear indication of Bentley’s departure from the classic blues into a modern music, early rock ‘n’ roll. She doesn’t abandon the styles of blues she began her career with but performs in a way that makes the familiar blues vocals, unfamiliar: a transversal early R&B. “Before Midnight” is an exciting display of where Bentley could have taken her music career. Perhaps, she could have been a precursor, if not a contemporary, to the music of Mabel Louise Smith, also known as Big Maybelle, who recorded on Okeh Records in 1955.

Early rock ‘n’ roll, a whitewashed version of R&B, also has “queer roots” as Tyina Steptoe has argued. Considering the performances of Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton and Richard Wayne Penniman—more famously, Little Richard—Steptoe demonstrates how their recordings and performances “subverted normative notions of gender at a time when the sanctity of a traditional heterosexual family affected society, politics, and culture,” during the Civil Rights Movement and Cold War repression.420 Both performers “came of age” during the 20’s and 30’s, therefore, it is no surprise the classic blues would be a major influence on the sound, style, and genre of R&B. Additionally, their gender presentation defied the conventions of feminine and masculine representation. Thornton presented masculine for most of her life and Richard was known to wear make-up. These “queer acts” were not completely threatening to the established order of heteronormativity because they constantly toured, never settling in small towns for too long. On the other hand, such queer visibility and performance was considered a

spectacle for entertainment and rewarding, “reciev[ing] adulation and money for behaviors deemed unacceptable to their families.”

If Big Mama Thornton and Little Richard are the epitome of queer rock ‘n’ roll, then Gladys Bentley was the archetype of a queer blues essential to transversal black music. In other words, the blues was a space for queer black performers to express their sexuality and determine their gender presentation and continued to do so as new genres emerged and the music industry commodified Black vernacular culture. Blackness and queerness have culturally functioned as inherently transgressive and innovative by necessity to survive. Therefore, Bentley’s blues—along other queer entertainers—continued to be a transversal music, a music that calls into question the boundaries that contain race, gender, and sexuality while “articulat[ing] submerged forms of relationalities that need not be visible to have effects.”

I argue that it can be heard if not seen by way of Black vernacular culture. More specifically, transversal music takes genre and style as ways to challenge the logics of race and gender as it creates space for queer visibility. Bentley’s blues sustained its creativity even after she transitioned into a cisnormative life: she married men and performed in dresses, but her music remained queer.

Aside from Bentley’s later work being less known or acknowledged by historians, the Flame label songs prove her venture into newer sounds. Those sounds were popularized by the fascination of younger audiences, Black and white alike. Despite its newness, it retained its inspiration from Black queer experiences that contributed to its versatility of Black vernacular culture. Bentley transitioned into conventional womanhood, however, continued to play music with queer roots just like when she began her career in the 1920’s. With all the repressive political and legal action against her shows and lyrical content, she continued to express her

---

421 Ibid, p. 60.
422 C. Riley Snorton, p. 10.
unique sound that ultimately challenged ideas of presentable Black femininity/masculinity, queerness, and gender presentation. Even though Bentley became an ordained minister at the end of her life, she continued to perform in familiar 1920’s fashion, after her efforts to disavow that time of her career.

In her lifetime, Gladys Bentley claimed to have penned 500 songs, however, her recorded material amounts to a fraction of that total (23 singles including her featured appearances). Much of her performance relied on cover songs of popular music that she emphasized in her own style: provocative for the sexual and gendered norms of the time. She wore a tuxedo for most of her shows, travelling the country like many Black musicians, finding work where she could get it in major cities. While she didn’t appear on television until after her transition to woman, she did make it to Hollywood following her success, even though she didn’t break into the movies like her contemporaries, Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters. Her act troubled the lines between race, gender, sexuality, and class, whether she was in New York or Los Angeles. Despite being met with efforts to shut her down by local authorities, Bentley always performed her style of blues, a queer blues that was a trans music. Once she conceded to conventional gender and sexuality, her prospects of being on television began to slowly become a reality but illness caught up with her. All those years on the road, late night shows, and consecutive lineups must have worn her out to die at a young age. Despite her early demise, her music repertoire shows a woman willing to adapt and change, to move in the direction of the new, irrespective of the cost.


Afro-American, February 8, 1936.


Bentley, George Leonard. United States Registration Card, order number 3386 (1918).


*Billboard*, June 15, 1946.


“Buck-Five Disk of Indies Seen Different Ways.” *Billboard*, September 1, 1945.


Campbell, E. Simms (Elmer Simms), 1906-1971, creator. [A night-club map of Harlem : the stars indicate the places that are open all night, the only important omission is the location of the various speakeasies but since there are about 500 of them you won't have much trouble]. Accessed on August 16, 2023, 
https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/15808571.


Chappell, Helen F. “Chatter and Some News.” Chicago Defender, January 6, 1940.


Dancer, Maurice. “The Cotton Club To Reopen In Old Spot In Harlem, Will Change Name to Ubangi; Sign Stars: Announcement is Welcomed By Many Actors Now Unemployed.” Chicago Defender, August 30, 1941.


“Defender Scribe Feted in N.Y.” Chicago Defender, October 28, 1944.


Finkel, Ken. “Gladys Bentley and the ‘Noble Experiment’ at 1523 Locust Street.”


“Gladys Bentley and Her Entertainers.” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 7, 1934.


“Gladys Bentley Heads Bill At Opera House.” *New York Age*, September 8, 1934.


“Gladys Bentley Records.” *Chicago Defender*, April 1, 1939.


“Holiday Cheer Served Here.” *Cleveland Plaindealer* (Cleveland, OH), January 2, 1938.

“Hottentots’ Making Whoopee At Elmore Theater This Week.” *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 23, 1929.


Howard, Bob. Bob Howard Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscript, Archives and Rare Books Division. The New York Public Library.


“Indie Record Group To Get Ethic Rules; Label Owners Organize.” *Billboard*, September 1, 1945.


“Letters To The Editor.” *Ebony*, October 1952.


*Los Angeles Times*, September 23, 1944.


McLeod, Norman Z. *Lady Be Good*. MGM 1941.

Moses, Alvin. “Night Life in Gotham.” *Cleveland Gazette* (Cleveland, OH), December 1944.


“Mr. & Mrs.: Gladys Bentley Marries Calif. Cook.” *Jet*, September 18, 1952.


“New twist in nightclubs, the Golden 20’s, open night.” *Los Angeles Tribune*, May 8, 1959.

*New York Daily Mirror*, September 8, 1933.


*The New York Age*, April 14, 1934.


“Night Club Reviews; Tondelayo’s, New York.” *Billboard*, November 4, 1944.

“Night Clubs Star Stage Celebrities In Revue Programs, Each One Strives to Outdo All Others in Variety of Entertainment.” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 12, 1937.

“Nina Mae McKinney, Gladys Bentley Featured In Show At the Harlem Opera House.” *New York Age*, April 27, 1935.

*The New York Age*, November 2, 1935.


*The New York Age*, June 6, 1936.
The New York Amsterdam News, August 8, 1936.


“Orchestra To Play Big Hop In St. Louis.” Chicago Defender, April 23, 1938.

“Out Of The Horns’ Mouth.” Variety, April 14, 1948.


Philadelphia Inquirer, May 12, 1937.

Philadelphia Inquirer, September 11, 1935.

“Picadilly Room, 1523 Club, Philadelphia.” Billboard, June 12, 1937.

Pittsburgh Courier, January 5, 1929.

Pittsburgh Courier, May 19, 1934.

Pittsburgh Courier, October 7, 1944.

Pittsburgh Courier, October 27, 1928.


Roy, Rob. “Nellie Lutcher’s Style Recalls Gladys Bentley, Rage Of The Thirties; Gal With Slacks, Clever Ditties, Also ‘Real Gone.” *Chicago Defender*, April 24, 1948.


*San Francisco Examiner*, November 26, 1942.

*San Diego Union*, March 7, 1943.


Snelson, Floyd G. “Broadway Invades Chicago To Drop Music And Singing.” *Chicago Defender*, October 7, 1944.

Snelson, Floyd G. “Tan Manhatten.” *Chicago Defender*, October 14, 1944.


“To Be, Or…?” *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 22, 1934.

*Tucson Daily Citizen* (Tucson, AZ), May 29, 1953.


