Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies

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“In My Well of Loneliness”:
Gladys Bentley’s Bulldykin’ Blues

What make you men folk treat us women like you do?
What make you men folk treat us women like you do?
I don’t want no man that I got to give my money to.

Call me a leper giving nothin’, but I know.
Call me a leper giving nothin’, but I know.
‘Cause right back I told him, man, I ain’t no billy goat.

Give my man everything from a diamond ring or dough.
Give my man everything from a diamond ring or dough.
The next thing I’m gonna’ give him six feet in the cold, cold ground.

—GLADYS BENTLEY, “WORRIED BLUES”*

SEXUAL PERVERTS ON PARADE

With the enforcement of the Wales Padlock Law and stricter censorship of Broadway plays, musicals, and revues, lesbians and gay men in mainstream theater audiences had to content themselves with sly allusions and coded innuendo. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Broadway performers like Ethel Waters teased the limits of decency with double meanings that the censor politely ignored, but the city made it very clear that it would no longer tolerate blatant sexuality or “perversity” on its public stages. Standing behind the rationale that New York City was the entertainment capital of the world, state and city elected officials were intent on promoting a respectable, wholesome image of Broadway and taking back New York City’s mantle as “the most moral city in the universe.”¹ Thus, police batons and political crackdowns on obscenity charges kept
the New York theater’s closet door rather securely closed, and only coy refer-
ences to homosexuality, such as indirect suggestions and questionable charac-
ter traits, escaped the vigilant public censor.

Up in Harlem, however, where drag balls continued to attract thousands of
spectators, and cross-dressed men and women could be spotted daily on the
streets, many of the nightclub floor shows and theater revues—although
officially held accountable under the same state censorship laws—were as
course and rowdy as ever. Female impersonators, “bulldykin’ women,” and
“freakish men” appeared on stage with great regularity during this era, and al-
though there were sporadic efforts to clean up Harlem’s reputation, tourists de-
manded that the neighborhood live up to its image as a place of racial and sex-
ual exotica. Because one of the functions of the ghetto is to provide a controlled
site for a certain amount of lawlessness—A. B. Christa Schwarz refers to
Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s as “New York’s premier red-light district”2—city
authorities had a far more relaxed legal attitude in Harlem than they did in
Midtown. It should come as no surprise, then, that some of the best-known
Harlem acts were those that flaunted the qualities deemed impermissible on
Broadway. As New York Age writer Marcus Wright reported in his weekly “Talk
of the Town” column in 1934, some of Harlem’s most popular entertainers in-
cluded a bawdy lesbian comic, Jackie “Moms” Mabley, and a pair of female im-
personators, the Sepia Mae West and the Sepia Gloria Swanson.3

If the Sepia Swanson and West were Harlem’s queens of risqué perfor-
man...
was just a matter of time before the house got raided.” Off stage, Bentley’s persona was similarly ignominious. She only wore men’s clothing in public, and she married a white woman in a highly publicized New Jersey civil ceremony.

Indeed, by the mid-1930s, Bentley was known as much as a neighborhood personality as she was a performer. In March 1936, for instance, the New York Times described her as “not only a fixture at Harlem’s Ubangi Club but a figure in the community.” Yet she was not relegated to the fringes of Harlem’s social and entertainment worlds. Her nightclub act regularly transferred to the neighborhood’s large theaters, though the critics often disparaged her for her suggestive songs and the chorus of “pansies” who accompanied her. Writing about a show Bentley headlined at Harlem’s Opera House, one critic described it as “one of the rankest revues this commentator has witnessed in many a moon.” Remarking that a group of novelty musicians called the Washboard Serenaders was the only redeeming performance on the program, the critic vehemently urged audiences to stop paying to see entertainments that featured repugnant acts like the one Gladys Bentley presented:

If patrons would refrain from attending shows of the nature of the current Opera House revue, probably the management wouldn’t embarrass us by parading sexual perverts and double entendre jokes crackers. I have no fault to find of “men” earning their living as “chorus girls,” but why glorify them on the stage of a theatre patronized supposedly by respectable people?

But people did not stay away. Throughout much of the 1930s, Gladys Bentley continued to pack people, both black and white, into Harlem’s largest theaters and most fashionable nightclubs with her outrageous and frank performances.

But this is only part of the story. Indeed, Gladys Bentley was quite conventional in many respects. She recorded a number of blues songs, including “Worried Blues,” “Moanful Wailin’ Blues,” and “How Much Can I Stand?” that depict a woman wronged by a man. In her later years she cast off her characteristic tuxedo, claimed to be from Port-of-Spain, Trinidad—although she was born and raised in Philadelphia—and wore flowers in her hair, dresses, and pearls while performing jazz and blues standards. She is, to say the least, a complex figure in the Harlem Renaissance even though she is often regarded in performance studies and lesbian and gay history as the ultimate symbol of defiance against prevailing images of femininity and heterosexuality. This is quite understandable when one looks at the photos of her in her white tuxedo and reads the sensational eyewitness accounts (along with Eric Garber’s excel-
lent a 1988 biographical overview of her in *Out/Look*). But on the other hand, the principal artifacts of her career—an autobiographical apologia for *Ebony* magazine, a handful of blues recordings, and an appearance on Groucho Marx’s *You Bet Your Life*—depict her as a woman-who-loves-men blues singer (of considerable talent), who never joined the ranks of other blueswomen with the likes of Bessie Smith, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, and Alberta Hunter. These contradictions in Bentley’s public and performance persona are what make her particularly intriguing. Examining the creative output of her career as well as contemporary accounts of her personal and professional life, one sees that Bentley toyed with and manipulated the social, sexual, and artistic conventions of her era. At times parodying these norms and at others embracing them, Gladys Bentley simultaneously subverted the rigid dualities of male/female, hetero/homosexual, and black/white. “She was,” as Langston Hughes said, “something worth discovering.”

### IF THIS BE SIN

In 1928, the year that Gladys Bentley began her performance career in New York, another lesbian narrative was playing out on the international arts scene. Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* was the subject of a literary and legal melee in the United Kingdom, and the novel was banned for its “offense against public decency.” Nevertheless, the novel, which focuses on Stephen Gordon, a “mannish lesbian” and her unfortunate relationships with other women, received a great deal of support from England’s literati. In October 1928, customs officials in the United Kingdom seized copies of the book that had been published by a French company, and “literary giants” H. G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw spoke out against the action. Shaw stated, “I read it, and read it again, and I repeat that it ought not have been withdrawn. It speaks of things people ought to know about.” And although she did not think the book should have been published because it might cause people to speculate about “unmarried women living alone,” Virginia Woolf wrote in a letter dated September 2, 1928, to her sister that “much of Miss Radclyffe Hall’s book is rather beautiful.” The presumed or actual merit of the novel notwithstanding, the literariness was precisely why magistrate Sir Charles Biron ordered police officers to destroy the seized copies. He argued, “It must appear to every one of intelligence that the better an obscene book is written the greater is the public to whom it is likely to appeal. The more palatable the poison, the more insidious it is.”
Released in the United States in December 1928 by the Covici-Friede Publishing Corporation, the novel met with a similar response. In January 1929, John S. Sumner, secretary of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, filed injunctions against the publishers for violating “Section 1141 of the Penal Code relating to the circulation of indecent literature.” The case was eventually dropped in April of that year, but the legal attention certainly did not hurt sales. The book was an immediate best seller and sold an impressive 20,000 copies in its first month of release. The Well of Loneliness received favorable responses as well from Harlem’s prominent literary figures. Richard Bruce Nugent considered it “a superbly written and conceived work,” and Alain Locke stated that he did not know “whether to admire more its beauty or its quiet bravery.” The novel’s success, either as a result of its literary merits or the controversy surrounding the subject matter, ensured its standing as the quintessential lesbian narrative, helping to define the ways in which lesbians were presented and viewed for much of the twentieth century. That is, while the fictional character Stephen Gordon put forward a sympathetic and heroic portrayal of a lesbian, ironically, the magistrate who claimed that the novel would have a powerful effect on its readers was at least partially right. Stephen Gordon became the archetype for lesbians in the popular culture and social consciousness.

Knowingly or unknowingly, Gladys Bentley drew on the notoriety of Radclyffe Hall’s novel as she created her own iconic persona. Before examining Bentley’s theatrical and performance career in depth, it is useful to examine the ways in which Bentley, at least on reflection in her later years, framed and constructed her own public representation. Her performance of the mannish woman, to apply Judith Butler psychoanalytic literary theory with the historical terminology for a butch lesbian, seems to derive from Bentley’s own (close) reading of The Well of Loneliness. Bentley certainly knew of Hall’s novel since she performed a number called “In My Well of Loneliness” in the musical revue Brevities in Bronze (1937). And in 1952, as a preview of a full-length memoir entitled If This Be Sin, she wrote an autobiographical piece for Ebony called “I Am a Woman Again” in which she claimed that one of her primary reasons for writing was to “help people who are trapped in a modern-day ‘well of loneliness.’” Bentley herself seems trapped in the narrative arc of The Well of Loneliness because she rehearses several of the key plot points, especially when writing about her childhood and adolescence. Her relationship with her parents, her attraction to male clothing, and her own sexual awakening, which preceded her rise to fame as a performer, are all sensationally recounted in the Ebony ar-
article. In the essay, Bentley alternates between boasting about her career and bemoaning her miserable existence, but the narrative thrust mimics the Bildungsroman of fictional Stephen Gordon, albeit with significant differences.

The essential differences between the subjects are their race and social class. While Stephen Gordon was born to white British aristocrats (Sir Philip and Lady Anna Gordon), Gladys Bentley was born in 1907 to black working-class Philadelphians (George L. Bentley and Mary C. Mote). The conditions of their births, according to the two texts, however, are remarkably similar. Stephen’s parents desperately hoped and assumed that their child would be a boy. In fact, so sure of the sex of the child were they that they named the infant before birth. The narrator says, “When the child stirred within [Lady Anna] she would think it stirred strongly because of the gallant male creature she was hiding; then her spirit grew large with a mighty new courage, because a man-child would be born.” According to Bentley, a similar willfulness and obsessiveness was evident in her mother’s desire for a boy, but the distinctions of class and race underscore the Gordons’ and Bentleys’ gender preference. This is apparent in Bentley’s own memoir as she details her parents’ (especially her mother’s) basis for wanting a son so strongly. While the aristocratic Gordons represent the Victorian desire for a male heir to carry on the family name and provide “complete fulfillment,” Mary Bentley demonstrates a widespread attitude held by mostly whites, but also by some African Americans, that working-class, black women were naturally drawn to immorality and corruption. Perhaps in response to publications such as the one by mulatto schoolteacher William Hannibal Thomas, who declared that “innate modesty is not a characteristic of the American Negro woman” and who spoke of their “bestial instinct,” Bentley’s mother zealously prayed for a son. According to Gladys Bentley, “Girls,” her mother believed, “were fated for trouble.” In both cases, whatever the cause for wanting a boy over a girl, the “gender inversion” of both children is an implied result of their parents’ yearning, ardent prayer, and visualization of the coveted son.

Just as Stephen Gordon’s relationship with her mother is fraught with disagreement and misunderstanding, Gladys Bentley places much of the blame for her own childhood unhappiness on her mother, who would not touch the child and refused to nurse her for the first six months. In both narratives, clothing represents the primary cause of conflict between the mothers and daughters. Hence, male attire assumes central importance as a site of gender assertiveness and filial revolt. *The Well of Loneliness* depicts the struggle between Lady Anna and Stephen:
These days there was constant warfare between them on the subject of clothes; quite a seemly warfare, for Stephen was learning to control her hot temper, and Anna was seldom anything but gentle. Nevertheless it was open warfare, the inevitable clash of two opposing natures who sought to express themselves in apparel, since clothes, after all, are a form of self expression.

Likewise, Bentley explains that she used to wear her four younger brothers’ suits to school. She endured the scorn of her teachers and her classmates, who taunted her for not wearing dresses on her “large and stocky” body. Describing the contretemps with her parents over the issue, she says, “Now, I tried to withstand my parents, but they got after me so often that we finally compromised, agreeing that I would wear middy blouses and skirts.” For both young women, their clothes, as it were, make the man. Stephen and Gladys are uncomfortable with their ungainly and chaotic bodies, which are both biologically feminine and structurally masculine. Only by donning the outer effects of manhood are they able to rectify the gender confusion for themselves.

Gender is not the only identity construction at play here, but as recent and not-so-recent critiques of The Well of Loneliness show, Radclyffe Hall conflates gender categorization with sexual preference, and the author intermingles various theories of sexual orientation that were floating around at the time. For instance, she merges Sigmund Freud, who forwarded a notion of the psychological origin of sexuality; Havelock Ellis (who provided a short prefatory commentary for the novel), who argued that one’s sexual disposition is inborn; and notably, German sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, who equated one’s gender role with one’s sexual desires and behaviors. As a result, there is a certain amount of confusion about where the authors (Hall and Bentley) position themselves. On the one hand, they seem to be advocating understanding based on the subjects’ innate characteristics. On the other, they seem to fault the child-rearing habits of the parents. As Laura Green notes in her analysis of Stephen Gordon, “The confused origin story that Hall gives Stephen is to some degree emblematic of a more general confusion, during the period, of how to conceptualize and represent identities.” Indeed, Bentley reiterates this confusion in her own narrative through her explanation of her inborn masculine leanings, which are matched by fervent desires to be a boy that are at odds with her repudiation of men.

Yet young Stephen and Gladys are sexual creatures as well, and they both have sexual awakenings at an early age. For seven-year-old Stephen, the object of her desire is the young housemaid Collins, whom the very thought of makes
Stephen “go hot down her spine.” The culmination of Stephen’s preadolescent desire occurs when Collins rolls down her stocking and allows the young girl to touch her knee, which is swollen with fluid as a result of scrubbing hard wooden floors. The moment is charged with sexual tension when Collins “displayed the afflicted member,” and “Stephen’s eyes filled with quick, anxious tears as she touched the knee with her finger.” Thus, the child becomes not only male-identified in temperament and behavior, but also in her sexual preference. Similarly, young Gladys realized her own sexual attraction to women at a young age. According to her Ebony article, she was attracted to one of her teachers, recalling:

During recess, I stayed in the class and helped her, dusting and arranging things on her desk, cleaning blackboards. Sometimes she would let me comb her long, beautiful hair. In class I sat for hours watching her and wondering why I was so attracted to her. At night I dreamed of her. I didn’t understand the meaning of those dreams until later.

In this passage, Gladys Bentley complicates her identity, which during her career as a performer both her critics and admirers tended to reduce her to her indeterminate gender (“mannish”) and size (“ample”). In the autobiographical essay, she declares for herself a sexual preference based on physical attraction to another woman. In 1952, this was a brave act.

The naive sexual encounters experienced by Stephen Gordon and Gladys Bentley have a deeper significance as well. The description of the young women’s inner desires (manifested in physical sensations and dreams) and innocuous physical realizations of those desires (touching Collins’s knee and combing the teacher’s hair) help point to the “naturalness” of the women’s sexuality. Because the childlike sexual feelings are intuitive and reflexive, they deflect labels of sinfulness and immorality. Heike Bauer explains that the discussion of sexuality in children was a new phenomenon at the turn of the twentieth century, but it changed the way in which psychologists discussed sexuality. Both Sigmund Freud in his Three Essays on Sexuality (1905) and Krafft-Ebing in his Psychopathia Sexualis (1886) point to sexual desire (or as Krafft-Ebing describes “sexual instinct”) in preadolescence, which implies that it is an inherent personal attribute. Rather than something adults actively choose, then, sexual preference resides in the person from at least childhood. Since their depictions of sexuality are positioned as instinctive or psychologically rooted, the narratives of Stephen Gordon and Gladys Bentley, with their emphasis on sexual in-
nocence and gender blamelessness, register as a call for tolerance and understanding. Yet in neither narrative does the protagonist experience tolerance and understanding. Instead, the central figures of the texts come across as martyrs; they are destined to live lives filled with loneliness and unhappiness.

Both Stephen and Gladys Bentley advance through childhood and adolescence not comprehending the basis of their unhappiness. In the novel, Stephen’s father “understands” his daughter’s difference (which he does not share with her) from reading Krafft-Ebing. At age twenty-one, Stephen comes across her dead father’s notes in the book, and she is horrified by what she reads. She suddenly recognizes herself as one of the “thousands of miserable, unwanted people, who have no right to love.”

Bentley, on the other hand, explains that her parents took her “from doctor to doctor” to cure her of her proclivities. Nothing seemed to work, but she points out that her mother and father “meant well.” “They just didn’t know,” she claims, “how to cope with a situation which to them was at once startling and disgraceful.” For both women, eventual knowledge of their “inversion” is associated with bodily affliction, which they merge with early-twentieth-century psychoanalysis and Christian notions of sinfulness. They claim for themselves martyrdom based on their inborn “faults.” For Stephen, God has made her “hideously maimed and ugly,” and she wears the “mark upon Cain.”

For Bentley, the diagnosis of her “difference” is a “malignant growth festering inside [her],” which long undetected causes her to become a “victim of her own sins.” In true heroic fashion, the recognition of their plight leads to a casting out and a break from the community in which they were raised. For Stephen Gordon, exile from her parents’ estate would lead her to London. For Gladys Bentley, the destination was New York City.

It is important to remember that Gladys Bentley’s rewriting of *The Well of Loneliness* took place eight years before she died, most likely to resuscitate her moribund career. Yet the text serves as a fitting foundation for scrutinizing her performances on stage and off during the Harlem Renaissance. Bentley’s reception, both critically and socially, was similar to that of the novel. While she had many fervent admirers, who praised her for her talents as a musician and singer, she had as many detractors, who reproached her for her vulgarity and sexual immorality. These responses echo the social tension over homosexuality, which was becoming increasingly visible on the stages and streets of Harlem in the 1920s and early 1930s.

For good or ill, Gladys Bentley’s tuxedo-clad persona reinforced the stereo-
typical image of the bulldagger and strengthened the alliance of lesbianism and masculinity (and the resultant and inevitable sadness). As Esther Newton writes about Stephen Gordon, the depiction of the “mannish lesbian” fuses gender identity with sexual preference, thereby bolstering the homosexual as invert model.\textsuperscript{38} Nearly twenty-five years after the novel was published, Bentley reinvigorated the language of early sexology to tell her own story and proved the durability of the familiar mannish lesbian character. The character had not changed much in that quarter century, and Bentley mimics—only slightly revising—the destitution of her literary sister, Stephen Gordon.

To make matters more confusing, the fictional character was based in part on real-life figures, having her origin in the author’s own lived experience and in psychological case studies of “female inverts.” Krafft-Ebing’s delineation of “the extreme grade of degenerative homosexuality,” whose only “feminine qualities” are “the genital organs,”\textsuperscript{39} finds its way into both \textit{The Well of Loneliness} and Bentley’s “I Am a Woman Again.” Krafft-Ebing refers to the female invert as a member of a “third sex” who cannot be defined as either male or female. Describing Stephen’s feelings of solitude, for instance, Hall writes, “She had not yet learnt that the loneliest place in this world is the no-man’s-land of sex.”\textsuperscript{40} Bentley’s version is only slightly different: “For many years I lived in a personal hell. Like a great number of lost souls, I inhabited that half-shadow no man’s land which exists between the boundaries of the two sexes.”\textsuperscript{41} This highlights the interplay between reality and fiction in Gladys Bentley’s memoir. Intertwining her life with Stephen Gordon, Bentley’s own identity has many levels of recycled images and conflicting stances on homosexuality that are grounded in personal experience, popular fiction, and scientific case studies. As a result, she is like the shadows in Plato’s cave: determining the real Gladys Bentley is a nearly impossible proposition.

Descriptions of and responses to Gladys Bentley’s New York performances in the late 1920s through the mid-1930s indicate that she was indeed nearly impossible to categorize as well. As a singer of the blues, in which she first made her mark as a performer, she posits the image of a down-on-her luck, sexually starved woman who has been treated badly by a man. In her nightclub and theater act, she offered a very different image. In her trademark tuxedo, she gave the impression of an independent, self-assured, and sexually empowered individual. Her multiple personae teased the boundaries between male and female; homosexual and heterosexual; aristocrat and working class; and white and black. In short, Gladys Bentley seemed to revel in occupying an identity in the
entertainment world that could only be described as a “half-shadow no man’s land.”

**HOW MUCH CAN I STAND?**

Although there is no record of Gladys Bentley in Harlem before 1928, she claims that she left home in 1923 to go to New York City. This would have made her sixteen years old. Other accounts, however, suggest that she arrived in Harlem around 1925. But whenever she got there, Harlem was the perfect place for a disenfranchised young woman like Gladys Bentley. As Eric Garber writes, “It was within [Harlem’s] nocturnal milieu of illicit sexuality, gambling, and drugs that Gladys Bentley found a place where she could be herself.” Playing piano in the Harlem rent party circuit, she quickly established herself as a highly proficient pianist and secured a modest living. Although black male musicians dominated the circuit, Bentley earned a formidable reputation as a pianist and singer, and she was soon playing, first as a substitute then as a featured performer, in small nightclubs in Jungle Alley. Her first break came when a friend told her that a club on 133rd Street, called the Mad House, was looking for a pianist right away. “But,” he informed her, “they want a boy.” Without missing a beat, Bentley replied, “There’s no better time for them to start using a girl.” She rushed over, persuaded the reluctant owner to give her a chance, and immediately wowed the audience. Starting at $35 a week, she was soon making $125 plus tips, which was an impressive salary for a black woman entertainer in the 1920s.

As a result of her burgeoning notoriety as a pianist and singer, a recording contract seemed imminent, and in 1928 record producers were willing to take a chance on Harlem’s new talent. She signed with an agent, and in 1928 and 1929, Bentley recorded a total of eight sides (or what today would be called “singles”). In this era of 78 RPM records, a singer would release two songs at a time, one on each side of the record, which sold for about seventy-five cents. Bentley recorded with OKeh Race Records, the white-owned studio that gave a jolt to the music industry when it took a chance on an unknown blues singer, Mamie Smith (no relation to Bessie), in 1920. In 1926, the powerhouse recording company Columbia Records acquired OKeh. On August 8 and 31, 1928, Bentley recorded her first four sides, “Ground Hog Blues,” “Worried Blues,” “How Long—How Long Blues” and “Moanful Wailin' Blues.” She recorded her last four sides with OKeh, “Wild Geese Blues,” “How Much Can I Stand?” “Big Go-
rilla Man,” and “Red Beans and Rice,” on November 15, 1928, and March 26, 1929. Because blues records sold particularly well among black consumers, the records were primarily promoted in the major black newspapers. The first two records must have sold reasonably well to warrant a follow-up, but either because of her scandalous image or because her records never found a huge audience, Bentley did not record any other songs for OKeh.

Like the blueswomen who came before her, Gladys Bentley often used the musical form to counter the common perception that black women were merely objects to be controlled, degraded, or looked down upon. A great deal has been written about this aspect of the blueswomen songs of the 1920s, especially about some of the biggest names of the era, including Bessie Smith, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, and Alberta Hunter. Sandra Leib, Hazel Carby, and Angela Davis in their own studies have all pointed to the empowerment that the blues afforded black women, which they see as an early form of black feminism.

Looking at the songs as forms of social and political protest, they argue that the blues provided one of the few public arenas in which black women, representing working-class sensibilities, could speak out against widespread injustice, such as prejudice, financial hardship, and domestic violence. Angela Davis, for instance, building on the ideas of Hazel Carby, argues that many of the songs of “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith “begin to articulate a consciousness that takes into account social exploitation, racism, and male dominance as seen through the lenses of the complex emotional responses of black female subjects.” Indeed, resisting the popular images of black women as asexual and domestic (i.e., the mammy representation) or exotic and uncontrollably sexualized (i.e., the banana-adorned, savage figure), the blues songs affirmed black women as rational, complicated individuals, who are very much in control of—and empowered by—their sexual desires and emotions.

In many ways, these attitudes are strongly evident in several of the songs Gladys Bentley recorded, and in some cases wrote, in the late 1920s. She drew upon such social issues as domestic violence, abandonment, and exploitation. But Bentley’s songs are not all about social and political assertion. In a not uncommon (but not often discussed) aspect of the blues by women performers, Bentley’s songs also can be defeatist, self-pitying, and (by our own standards) anti-feminist. I would argue, however, that Bentley, rather than undermining and limiting the social and sexual agency of the blueswomen, expands upon the images of black women, presenting an even more complex view of black experiences, concerns, and sexuality.
“Worried Blues,” one of Bentley’s earliest compositions, signifies on—to use Henry Louis Gates’s term—the blues advice song—to use Angela Davis’s classification. A blues advice song speaks directly to a presumed audience, offering guidance and warnings based on personal experience. When singing about male-female relations, for instance, the singers often challenged men for their actions and counseled women on how to recognize warning signs in a relationship and what to do if a male lover treats them poorly. “Worried Blues” urges women to be alert both because of men’s natural weaknesses and the influence of calculating, immoral women. In a warning that reflects the Lulu Belle motif, the song highlights the effects of a bad woman on a good man, explaining how difficult it is to “keep a real good man nowadays” because “any young chippie gal has got so many doggone ways.” At the same time the song highlights the dangers of weak men, but it also pits women against other women.

Bentley’s lyric represents the quintessence of the formidable woman blues song. The tone is defiant and cautionary, and depicts a female subject who is to be both respected and feared. The lyric begins with a rhetorical question concerning the treatment of women by men. The singer positions herself as both a victim of male oppression and as one speaking out against it: “What make you men folk treat us women like you do? / What make you men folk treat us women like you do?” The third line, which is typically the “response” to the first two lines in a classic blues stanza, answers this question by avowing a personal stance. In the process, the singer articulates her financial independence and refusal to be financially exploited by relationship: “I don’t want no man that I got to give my money to.” In the following stanzas, the singer reiterates the this economic exploitation of women by the man, speaking out against the parasitic “sweetman.”

The third and fourth stanzas continue the discursive shift of the song’s focus and intended audience. While in the first stanza the singer speaks on behalf of all women and from a shared experience, in the second, the singer registers a personal complaint against a particular man: “Give my man everything from a diamond ring or dough.” Emphasizing the awesome power of the wronged woman as well as a warning to anyone who crosses her, the singer responds: “The next thing I’m gonna’ give him six feet in the cold, cold ground.” The threat of violence underscores the singer’s fearlessness and refusal to submit to subjugation, which is a rather common motif in blues songs. As Paul Oliver writes, the violence that is often evident in the blues helps to convey and encourage resilience among the listeners “by emphasizing assertiveness and unwillingness to submit to repression.” 49
At the end of the song, the lyric once again reaches out to a wider audience. Yet rather than directing it to “you men folk” as in the first stanza, the moral is intended for young women, who may not be able to resist the sexual pull (as presumably the singer was unable to) of the men who prey upon them: “You can never tell what an old, old man can do. / You can never tell what an old, old man can do. / Keep your eyes open, girls, ’cause he’ll put that thing on you.” While the sweetman of the singer’s own experience metonymically represents the possible dangers of all men, the lyric points to the sexual weakness of women, who often give in to the sexual temptations of men. The title of the song, “Worried Blues,” underscores the subtextual sexual anxiety of the singer. By the end of the song, it appears as if the aggressive and confident singer is “worried” that she will yield to her own sexual desires.

Bentley’s performance of the song on record intensifies this overtly sexual interplay and erotic tension. Her growling, rumbling vocal delivery is complemented by the pounding, sultry piano (which she is playing). In addition, her high-pitched muted-trumpet-like scatting—one of Bentley’s most distinctive musical features—in the song’s musical breaks adds a feminine quality to the song. While speaking out against male-female sexual attraction, the song itself is seductive and arousing in its delineation of pure heterosexuality.

The images and themes Bentley introduces in “Worried Blues” weave throughout her other songs as well. “Ground Hog Blues” is the lament of a woman who bemoans (literally, in terms of the guttural groaning and moaning in which Bentley prefaces the song) the fact that she is a “low-down dog” because her man is both taking her money and cheating on her. As in “Worried Blues,” the singer is financially independent and respectable, but she feels used and cheated. In this song, the singer emphasizes her moralrespectability as well, claiming at one point that she “went to church / Like all good women do.” At the same time, “How Long—How Long Blues” and “Moanful Wallin’ Blues” emphasize the sexual yearning of the singer. These recordings feature Eddie Lang on guitar with Bentley singing and accompanying herself on piano. The twanging acoustical guitar punctuates the lyric, responding to and reinforcing the singer’s melancholic complaint. In “Red Beans and Rice,” the only double-entendre song Bentley recorded, the sexual yearning is even more pronounced. The singer’s sexual hunger, as it were, is evident through the abundant food imagery and Bentley’s leering vocal rendition. In the song, the singer must live on a diet of rice and beans without meat (stating regrefully, she “don’t get no chicken”). As with most of her songs, she financially supports her man, whom she suspects has “some outside gal.” He is so stingy, though, he will not even
“buy no sugar to sweeten his own tea.” At the end of the song, she announces her sexual frustrations, declaring that she “can’t keep working with only rice and beans in sight.” The playfulness of the double entendre is accentuated by the sudden hastening tempos during the musical breaks that just as quickly revert to a mock somberness during the blues accompaniment. The song hints at what Bentley’s scandalous reputation as a performer might have been like.

The bleakest of Bentley’s songs is “Wild Geese Blues,” which is as close to an existential nightmare as a lyric can get. The initial stanzas introduce nature’s unsympathetic relation to the singer’s dejection. The “wild geese” of the title mock her sentiments of entrapment, and the image of the “weeping willows swaying” metaphorically reflects her own sorrows. Furthermore, the application of the classic blues structure with its repeated two-line “call” followed by the third-line “response” effectively emphasizes the main themes of the song. Despair and loneliness are ever present and unending in the singer’s world: “Heard that lonesome music just about the break of day, / Heard that lonesome music just about the break of day, / Wash my feet in molasses tryin’ to keep bad luck away.” Even as she tries to find solace by ventilating her sadness and attempting to release her sense of abandonment, nature itself seems to conspire against her: “Threw my window open just to air these loves of mine, / Threw my window open just to air these loves of mine, / Groundhog saw his shadow, six more weeks of wintertime.” In the last stanza, the song switches from a focus on lost love to the grim realities of being poor and destitute. While many of Bentley’s songs portray an independent woman, here the singer faces an uncompromising and cruel existence: “Hard coal in my cellar, only got to shovel more, / Hard coal in my cellar, only got to shovel more, / Can’t get no more credit from butcher or the grocery store.” Many African Americans of the era would recognize their own struggles in this song, and as Daphne Duval Harrison explains, this is one of the points of the blues. One of the primary functions of the blues, according to Harrison, is to articulate the “agonies and pain of life as experienced by blacks in America.”

“How Much Can I Stand?” and “Big Gorilla Man” Bentley introduces another unfortunate reality: domestic violence. “How Much Can I Stand?” is unique among Bentley’s blues in that it is grounded in the psychological development of a particular woman. In musical theater terms, it would
be classified as a “character song” because the lyric charts the emotional growth of the singer. She moves from complete dependence on a man, who used to be attentive and caring, “but now he treats [her] like a darn stepchild,” to contemplation of suicide as a result of the physical and mental abuse, to sexual and emotional autonomy of the woman as she announces that she will not fall into the same pattern again.

The song includes the repeated refrain, “How much of that stuff can I stand?” which takes on more urgency as the song progresses. Early in the song, for instance, the singer reiterates the cheating man motif (along with the food/sex connotation): “One time he said my sugar was oh, so sweet, / But now for his dessert he goes across the street. / How much of that stuff can I stand?” A few stanzas later, the song powerfully and poetically evokes the horror of domestic abuse: “Said I was an angel, he was born to treat me right. / Who the devil heard of an angel that gets beat up every night? / How much of that stuff can I stand?” The refrain is employed differently in the next stanza when it relates directly to issues of life and death as the singer considers suicide (or is it murder?): “Went down to the drugstore, asked the clerk for a dose, / But when I received the poison, I eyed it very close, / How much of this stuff can I stand?” At the end of the song, however, the singer does not swear off men completely. Not only does she state her intention of getting another man, but while asserting her own respectability, the singer claims she will marry him. The lyric concludes: “The next man I get must be guaranteed, / When I walk down the aisle, you’re gonna’ hear me scream, / How much of this stuff can I stand?” The lyric represents a process of self-realization as the singer announces her determination to continue to love men, yet the application of the final refrain indicates that the abusiveness of men is inevitable.

Frank references to physical abuse were not uncommon in the women’s blues songs of the 1920s. The responses to it, however, were complicated and contradictory by today’s standards. In some of the songs, women stand up to it or take revenge on the abusers. In “Blood Hound Blues,” for example, Victoria Spivey sings about escaping from prison after poisoning her abusive lover, lamenting, “I know I’ve done wrong, but he beat me and blacked my eye, / But if the blood hounds don’t get me, in the electric chair I’ll die.” Similarly, Ma Rainey’s recording of “Black Eye Blues” concerns a woman who resolutely says that she will “hang around” even as her man beats her and cheats on her, but she waits for the day when she gets revenge after catching him with his “britches down.” In other cases, though, women submitted to the abuse either out of
necessity or because it was a fact of life. Bessie Smith’s “Outside of That” gestures toward this attitude. The singer claims that her man “blackened my eye,” and “knocked out both my teeth,” she contends, “Outside of that, he’s all right with me.”

Gladys Bentley’s recording of “Big Gorilla Man” pushes this notion of acceptance a bit further. The singer recognizes the violence of the titular figure, admitting that he “makes [her] scared.” And when she sees his eyes “gleaming,” she begins “screaming.” But she is unable to extricate herself from the abusive relationship because of the sexual fulfillment the “big gorilla” provides. The song begins:

That big gorilla, a woman killa’,
And I ought to know.
He mistreats me, knocks and beats me,
Still I love him so,
’Cause he’s got that something that I need so bad.

It is clearly not fear that keeps her in the relationship, but her own need for sex, which she stresses with the repeated line, “’Cause he’s got that something that I need so bad.” On the recording, Bentley further enhances the primal sexuality of the song by groaning, scatting, and intensifying the sense of urgency of the repeated line. As with many of the blues songs, “Big Gorilla Man” offers the view of an emotionally complex woman who knows that on one level she is in an unhealthy relationship, but on another receives a great deal of sexual gratification. In this case, sex trumps security.

In “Sexuality, Authenticity and the Making of the Blues Tradition,” Marybeth Hamilton says that the early race records of the blues were located “in a nexus of sex, commerce and urbanism.” Bentley’s recordings, with their emphasis on sexual attractions, financial support/independence, and the competition posed by young, single women (“chippies”) in the urban context, fit squarely in this tradition. They do not, however, fit the image of the cross-dressed, butch lesbian, which one normally associates with the performer. One might assume that that is because the issue was taboo in this musical genre, but lesbianism was not uncharted territory in the blues. The most famous of these songs is Ma Rainey’s “Prove It On Me Blues.” Recorded just a few months before Bentley recorded her first two sides in 1928, “Prove It On Me Blues” is sung from the point of view of a woman who dresses in “a collar and tie” and can “talk to the gals just like any old man.” Yet even as the singer flaunts her lesbian
appearance and mannerisms (Rainey’s own attraction to women was well known), she defies anyone to prove her sexual preference:

They said I do it, ain’t nobody caught me
Sure got to prove it on me
Went out last night with a crowd of my friends
They must’ve been women, ’cause I don’t like no men.\(^{55}\)

Simultaneously obvious and hidden, public and private, she is a sexual desperado tauntingly floating between genders. The singer is deliberately evasive, because to her, sexual desire is a matter of personal choice. In another famous lesbian blues song, Lucille Bogan’s “B.D. Women’s Blues” (which she recorded as Bessie Jackson), men are represented as dispensable in their roles as both sexual partners and monetary supporters. The song contains the following lyric: “Comin’ a time, B.D. womens ain’t gonna need no men, / Comin’ a time, B.D. womens ain’t gonna need no men, / The way they treat us is a lowdown and dirty sin.”\(^{56}\)

It is tempting (and perhaps possible) to read into Bentley’s own compositions, as well as her selection of songs by others, a decidedly lesbian point of view. Her deep, forceful voice and her indelicate way with a piano keyboard match the cultural depictions of a bulldyker. The songs also all share in common a negative portrayal of men, a sentiment Bentley herself expresses in her autobiographical essay.\(^{57}\) There are no “good men” in the songs, only exploiters, abusers, and cheaters. The only usefulness of these men is the sexual gratification they provide. Otherwise, they cause heartbreak, loneliness, and animosity among women. Yet the songs are undeniably and audaciously heterosexual. Granted, the songs were recorded before Bentley created her signature cross-dressed, proudly lesbian persona, but the women in these songs define themselves in relation to men. There is not even a hint of female companionship. Even so, I would argue that there is a transgressive element in the collective performances.

Through much of the twentieth century, the blues were considered a truly African American art form, or as Ann DuCille describes, “the metonym for authentic blackness.”\(^{58}\) Evoking the class-based view of black “realness,” James Weldon Johnson referred to the blues as “folk-poetry,” which in his estimation offered an unmediated view of the struggles and concerns of working-class African Americans.\(^{59}\) Similarly, W. C. Handy, who is regarded as the “Father of the Blues,” referred to the blues as the black “mother tongue” in his 1941 autobi-
ography, and as an art form that could be imitated by non-Blacks but one that could not be “delegated outside of the blood.”60 And Amiri Baraka describes the “native American music” as “the product of the black man in this country,” emphasizing that the “blues could not exist if the African captives had not become American captives.”61 Read all together and against her autobiographical essay, Bentley’s blues recordings point to the performative nature of race.

The recordings embody the struggles and obstacles African American women continually encountered in the United States, but one must keep in mind that Bentley’s blues were produced and distributed by a white-owned company.62 The result is black artistic expression with the intervention of white marketing and commercialism. In addition, the lyrics convey the strength, determination, and articulate protest of black women—indeed, a form of protofeminism, as Carby and Davis indicate. Yet Bentley’s overly (hetero)sexualized portrayal makes even this come across as an act. I do not wish to imply that the image of an empowered black woman in the 1920s was based on fiction. Certainly, history and personal accounts by black women demonstrate that financial exploitation, abandonment, and domestic violence were all too real. Nevertheless, read through her literary mannish-lesbian performance in the Ebony article, Gladys Bentley’s blueswoman performances—and recognition of them as performances—reflect the inability to synthesize a black woman’s experience into a single, universal experience. Examining Bentley’s career as a Harlem fixture, nightclub performer, and headline attraction in a series of black revues, in which she merged her opposing images, one may see how Bentley opened a space for additional representations of black women.

LORD, HOW I ADORED IT

While other lesbian and bisexual performers such as Ethel Waters, Ma Rainey, and Jackie Mabley did not publicly flaunt their sexuality, or at least dared others to “prove it on them,” Bentley made it an essential part of her early career. Both on stage and off, she was the epitome of masculine swagger and braggadocio. Although she was sometimes referred to as a male impersonator, a term she used to describe herself in the Ebony article, in modern language Bentley’s signature performance would more appropriately be called a “butch lesbian.”63 Differing from the traditional male impersonator, or drag king, in the popular theater, Gladys Bentley did not try to “pass” as a man, nor did she playfully try to deceive her audience into believing she was biologically male. Instead, she exerted a “black female masculinity,” to use Judith Halberstam’s ter-
minology, that troubled the distinctions between black and white and masculine and feminine. Through her manipulation of gender and racial identities, she demonstrated the constraints of those cultural binaries.64

Both Bentley’s success and her controversy as a performer in the Harlem clubs and theaters of the 1920s and 1930s were a result of her parodying and exaggerating the socially concretized demarcations between gender, race, and class. This larger-than-life quality of Bentley’s persona was symbolically attached to her weight, which most of her critics emphasized in their reviews. A critic quipped about one of her theatrical performances that she and her enormous bulk “threaten[ed] the floor by tap dancing—a little.”65 Wilbur Young begins his biographical sketch, “Huge voluptuous chocolate colored Gladys Bentley,” and later compares her to “an overstuffed beer barrel.”66 Variously referred to as “ample,” “buxom,” “portly,” “large and ungainly,” Gladys Bentley reversed the stereotype of the ideal woman as frail, or, at the very most, shapely (à la Mae West). Bentley was a hyperbolic response to the black woman representing the “world’s body,”67 and she resisted and subverted a Freudian and Lacanian notion of woman as lack, symbolically absent in phallocentric subjectivity. Her extreme corporeality, though, was the opposite of deficient; it was a sign of surplus and hyperpresence. Hence, Bentley’s overstated performance and appearance destabilized the conventional identity roles assigned within the divisions of black/white, woman/man, high class/low class, and homo-/heterosexual and reflected the possibility of, in Marjorie Garber’s words, a “category crisis.”68

Bentley developed her cross-dressed, mannish persona on the rent party circuit and in private gatherings in the late 1920s. She quickly became well known for her parodies of popular songs, turning bourgeois love songs into scatological odes. Simultaneously mocking “high” class imagery with “low” class humor, she applied aspects of the sexually charged “black” blues to demure, romantic “white” ballads, creating a culture clash between these two musical forms. None of these parodies was recorded, most likely because they far exceeded the bounds of decency and also because to record them would violate copyright laws. One of the lyrics, a lampoon on “Sweet Georgia Brown” and “My Alice Blue Gown,” familiar Broadway show tunes of the day, survives. Bentley’s version became an homage to anal sex:

And he said, “Dearie, please turn around”
And he shoved that big thing up my brown.
He tore it. I bored it. Lord, how I adored it.
My sweet little Alice Blue Gown.69
Although reactions to Bentley’s version are not available, it seems fairly clear why such a song would be the catalyst for a raid of the club, an effect that, according to Wilbur Young, Bentley’s performances often had.

The song’s allusions to sexual gratification and preference establish a connection with the blueswomen of the 1920s. Like the women who ironically sang about loving the men who blackened their eyes and knocked out their teeth, the singer’s enjoyment of the violent sexual act is a way of accentuating her own sexual choices. In addition, the song registers a direct affinity with male homosexuality. Dressed in masculine clothing, Bentley’s acknowledgment of the pleasures of anal intercourse could be an activity between two men. In fact, one of the most controversial features of Bentley’s act was her allusion to homosexuality, which she made a central part of her act. For individuals who looked to Harlem to fulfill their longings for the taboo, Gladys Bentley more than fit the bill.

By 1929, Bentley had become a mainstay of Harlem cabarets and speakeasies, especially at the Mad House and Harry Hansberry’s Clam House, both of which were in Jungle Alley. She appealed to both white and black audiences, but she was a particular favorite of white patrons, who, according to an Amsterdam News columnist, went to Harlem precisely to “engage in vices which they would not attempt in their own communities.” This is evident in an entry in a 1931 Harlem guidebook by Charles G. Shaw, a Vanity Fair columnist. He described the Clam House as

A narrow room in Jungle Alley, catering to a large white patronage and featuring Gladys Bentley, pianist and torrid warbler. A popular house for revelers but not for the innocent young. Best after 1 A.M. and open until all hours.

With her deep, rumbling voice, closely cropped, greased down hair, and masculine clothes (she was not wearing full tuxedos yet, but a variation on her schoolgirl outfit including skirts, dress shirts, and bow ties), she was an intriguing sight.

Her unique appearance and expert musicianship attracted celebrities and artists alike, who were drawn to her blend of blues and scandalous banter. Eslanda Robeson, the wife of actor Paul Robeson, gushed, “Gladys Bentley is grand. I heard her three nights, and will never be the same.” Langston Hughes had a similar reaction when Bentley first started out as a performer in small clubs:
For two or three amazing years, Miss Bentley sat, and played a piano all night
long, literally all night, without stopping—singing songs like “The St. James
Infirmary,” from ten in the evening until dawn, with scarcely a break between
the notes, sliding from one song to another, with a powerful and continuous
underbeat of jungle rhythm. Miss Bentley was an amazing exhibition of musi-
cal energy—a large, dark, masculine lady, whose feet pounded the floor while
her fingers pounded the keyboard—a perfect piece of African sculpture, ani-
mated by her own rhythm.  

At other times, Bentley’s performance could be exceedingly moving, as indi-
cated by Harlem schoolteacher Harold Jackman in a letter to poet Countee
makes you weep your heart out.”

The contradictory descriptions of Bentley are typical of those who saw her
perform. Merging cultural expectations of blackness, she seemed to exude a
throbbing, primal Africanness that Hughes pinpoints, as well as a soul-stirring
vocal delivery derived from spirituals and gospel music. This image collided
with her representations of whiteness, specifically through her high-class, mas-
culine appearance and Broadway elegance. Therefore, writers like Hughes de-
noted her primitive, “jungle”-like qualities as the basis of her wide appeal, and
others described her sophistication, which she accentuated by her “immaculate
white full dress shirts with stiff collars, small bow ties and skirts, oxfords, short
Elton jackets and hair cut straight back.” She seemed to represent a clash of
low and highbrow cultures in one body: At one moment she appeared to be the
model of refinement and restraint, but then the next she erupted into a display
of blues and raunch. Although Bentley refined her act in small clubs and
speakeasies in Harlem, by the end of the 1920s, she was the toast of New York’s
cosmopolitan set.

One of the first people to discover Bentley was author and socialite Carl Van
Vechten, who was intrigued by her. He religiously went to see her perform at
the Clam House between 1929 and 1930, and in his 1930 novel, Parties, he in-
cluded a reference to her in the guise of a peculiar night club pianist. In the
novel, one of the characters persuades another to go with him to Harlem, urg-
ing, “There’s a girl up there now you oughta hear. She does her hair up so her
head looks like a wet seal and when she pounds the piano the dawn comes up
like thunder.” In truth, Van Vechten was enthralled by Bentley, and as evident
in separate diary entries of 1929 through 1930, he saw her perform on nearly
twenty different occasions at the Clam House and at private parties. In November 1929, for example, he gave a cocktail party and supper for twelve, which included Cecil Beaton and Langston Hughes, and Bentley played piano, sang, and danced. A few weeks later he saw her at a party thrown by blues singer Clara Smith, and then again at another party hosted by wealthy sophisticate Eddie Wasserman, and at which Van Vechten met Cole Porter. According to gossip columnist Louis Sobol, Van Vechten’s appreciation for the singer even extended to his bestowing upon her a gift that would become her trademark, a white tuxedo.

In 1930, Gladys Bentley had her own weekly radio program in which she performed jazz and blues standards, and by 1933, her star was still rising. She moved from playing private parties, speakeasies, and the radio to nightclubs and legitimate theaters. After making a name for herself in Harlem’s nightclub scene, she headlined a series of musical revues, first at King’s Terrace, an after-theater nightclub on Fifty-second Street near Broadway, and her performance was considered even more shocking in Manhattan’s Midtown. In March 1934,
for instance, Bentley’s “dirty songs” led to a formal complaint against the management of the King’s Terrace, for presenting what the police commissioner dubbed “vile” entertainment. One of the songs in Bentley’s repertoire was “It’s a Helluva Situation Up at Yale,” which includes the lyrical limerick:

It’s a helluva situation up at Yale.
It’s a helluva situation up at Yale.
As a means of recreation,
They rely on masturbation.
It’s a helluva situation up at Yale.

Bentley was supported by a chorus of pansies, described as “eight liberally painted male sepians with effeminate voices and gestures,” who “assisted the singer in throwing this piece of filth at a blushing audience.” According to one observer, the lewd stage show was not the biggest offense on the audience’s senses. “The chief and filthiest offering of the evening, however, is a personal tour of the tables by Miss Bentley. At each table she stopped to sing one or more verses of a seemingly endless song in which every word known to vulgar profanity is used.”

A few weeks later the police padlocked the King’s Terrace, presumably as a result of “the masculine-garbed, smut-singing entertainer,” Gladys Bentley. Undeterred, Bentley took her act back up to Harlem, and her King Terrace Revue transferred to the Lafayette Theatre, where it played for a limited engagement of a week. A publicity photo for the show depicts Bentley wearing her immaculately tailored white tuxedo standing suavely behind a group of kneeling black men in sailor suits, who are described as “the six Favorites of the King.” The billing plays on the familiar drag king/queen nomenclature, but it also amusingly, and not so subtly, points to the blatant homosexual content of the act. The picture of the sailor chorus surely was a reference to the gay subculture, which transformed New York’s waterfront into a legendary homosexual cruising spot. For gay men, the sailor on leave was a symbol of masculine eroticism, pent-up sexuality, and rough trade.

The homosexual content may have been coded in advertisements for this, Bentley’s first show in a Harlem proscenium house, but it was even less subtle in performance. The theater critic for the New York Age, Vere Johns, mockingly referred to the revue as a “‘fairy’ good show,” but he was actually quite put off by the production’s cross-gender representations and the allusions to “perverse” sexuality.
A large and ungainly woman (if I may say so), who cuts her hair and dresses in tuxedos and calls herself Gladys Bentley, albeit that her troupe of six refer to her as a “gorgeous man” is supposed to be the headline attraction at the Lafayette this week. And she refers to her six boys as “fellows” and then apologizes to them for so doing. As a matter of fact if these boys were put into dresses they would be indistinguishable from the chorines. I, personally, could not enjoy their part of the show as I had a burning desire to rush out and get an ambulance backed up against the stage door to take them all to Bellevue for the alienists to work on.

The critic did, however, enjoy an act by Consuelo Harris and her dance partner. Unfortunately, Gladys Bentley sabotaged his enjoyment of that act as well. In his review, he asked, “Won’t someone please chase Gladys Bentley off the stage when Consuelo and partner are doing their dance?” In the next several years Bentley continued to nurture this outrageous and controversial persona in a succession of revues at the Ubangi Club.

When the popular Connie’s Inn, which fostered the talents of Louis Armstrong and Thomas “Fats” Waller, moved to Midtown, the space had trouble keeping a tenant. The Harlem Tavern and the Harlem Club both folded rather quickly, but when it reopened in April 1934 as the Ubangi Club, the neighborhood had a new major attraction. With a name intended to evoke associations with Africa and “the suggestion of voodooism,” the Ubangi Club traded on the taste for the exotic that tourists craved from Harlem. Its shows were frequently reviewed in the major black papers, including the *Amsterdam News*, *Chicago Defender*, and *Pittsburgh Courier*, but there were some rumblings that the club barred black customers, or at least those attending in mixed racial parties. In its “Night Club Notes” column the *New York Times* refuted this claim in 1936, stating, “The Ubangi still draws a mixed crowd, is noisy and intimate and gay—altogether Harlem, in short.”

Shortly after the club’s opening in June 1934, Bentley headlined a revue, and continued to do so for the following three years. In fact, her name became synonymous with the club, as indicated by another announcement in another *New York Times* column: “The Ubangi Club, Harlem’s reigning hot spot, will offer a brand new revue tomorrow evening, featuring (of course) Gladys Bentley.” Bentley’s series of revues included such fairly big names as comedian Jackie Mabley, bandleader Willie Bryant, and singer-dancer Avon Long. The shows were built around her formidable reputation and talents, and included such titles as *Club Ubangi Revue* (1934), *The Ubangi Club Follies* (six editions in
1935–36), *High, Wide and Handsome* (1936), *Round the World in Swing Tempo* (1937), and *Brevities in Bronze* (1937).\(^{94}\)

In general, the reviews for the shows were positive, and she attracted sizable crowds. Writing about her show in 1934, one columnist reported that she was a huge hit with the crowd and was “solidly breaking them down” with her risqué entertainment.\(^{95}\) In 1935, the *Ubangi Club Follies* played a one-week engagement at the Apollo, where it preceded the Warner Baxter film vehicle *Under the Pampas Moon*. Lou Layne of the *New York Age* found the live entertainment enjoyable but thought that, at ninety-nine minutes, it “could be cut without impairing the show.” He did, however, have high praise for Bentley, stating that she “sings, dances and plays the piano in typical night-club fashion, delighting her listeners every moment she’s on-stage.”\(^{96}\) By the end of 1935, Bentley’s Ubangi Club show had made her a bona fide Harlem celebrity. In December of that year, for instance, she appeared in a star-studded benefit for “Harlem’s Needy” at the Rockland Palace. The “Monster Breakfast Dance,” as it was called, began at 10:00 p.m. and went until dawn, and it featured such bandleaders as Fletcher Henderson, Willie Bryant, and Duke Ellington. Guest appearances included world-champion boxers Jim Braddock, Jack Dempsey, and Joe Louis, along with stage and screen stars Jimmy Durante and Lew Clayton.\(^{97}\)

As Bentley’s celebrity grew, double entendre and gender play remained a central feature of her act, but she discarded her “King” designation. Perhaps poking fun at regal star designations, like Bessie Smith’s identification “Empress of the Blues,” or in an effort to establish her own mainstream imperial status, Bentley took on a new title. When her Ubangi Club show played the Harlem Opera House in 1935, she appeared in her familiar white tux, and although she never played a Broadway house, she went under the ironic billing “Broadway’s Queen of Song and Jazz.” Around town she was also popularly known as “La Bentley,” causing one critic to remark on the confusing gendered article, implying that “Le” might be more appropriate.\(^{98}\) Consistently toying with and undermining gender classifications, Bentley seemed to enjoy the bafflement she caused.

By 1936, Bentley was the headliner of Harlem’s biggest nightclub floor show. The *New York Times* said that it “continues to hold its ground and turn out its sizzling entertainment.”\(^{99}\) But at this point, Bentley was better known as a teaser of the limits of propriety than as a musical performer. For example, the title of one of her club editions, *High, Wide and Handsome*, called attention to the star’s image (tall, heavy, and masculine) rather than the evening of songs and dances the show contained. And even though she introduced a few new songs
for each edition of her nightclub show with provocative titles like “The Devil Trucks His Rounds,” the *New York Times* said she was “no great shakes as a singer but who seems to have ample personality.” She continued to annoy some critics, who often found her act offensive, but her popularity with audiences could not be denied. About her Ubangi Club show that transferred to the Apollo Theatre in 1936, a critic from the *Age* wrote that Bentley was still plying her sexually laden songs to the audience’s acclaim:
You know what Gladys Bentley does, something suggestive as usual. Somehow, I’ve never learned to appreciate her work but that doesn’t stop her from being a prime favorite with the mob. After all, how much do I know?  

Later in the same year when she returned to the Apollo, the same critic wrote dismissively, “Ample Gladys Bentley, who is as much part of the Ubangi Club as the scenery, delivers a couple of those songs that have come to be identified with her, dual meaning lyrics that really have only one.”  

A mark of Gladys Bentley’s success is her regular appearance in the gossip columns of the 1930s. Whether or not it was a calculated performance, her offstage persona received as much attention as her onstage act. She attracted attention as a regal presence, hobnobbing with New York’s elite. Columnist Marcus Wright, for instance, reported that “Gladys Bentley and her sophisticated group were seen in Jones’s Bar and Grill on last Wednesday night. They solidly beat it up, and carried on.” She also made a very public display of her lesbian identity, making it an essential part of her image both on stage and off. Wilbur Young, writing in 1939, stated:

As Gladys grew in popularity, rumors had it that she was queer and even sported a girl friend. To add to these whispers, she could be seen any day marching down Seventh Avenue attired in men’s clothes and she seemed to thrive on the fact that her odd habits was the subject of much tongue wagging.

She was often seen with a host of young women, who appeared to be smitten by her masculine charms. Gossip columnist Archie Seale, for example, reported seeing “the buxom Gladys Bentley entering the Alhambra [Theatre] late Saturday afternoon while three chicks stood amazed.” And as an ultimate act of heterosexual repudiation, she married a white woman in a New Jersey civil ceremony. Louis Sobol, a gossip columnist for the New York Evening Graphic, recalled Bentley approaching him and telling him: “I’m getting married tomorrow and you’re invited.’ When Sobol asked who the lucky man was to be, she giggled and replied: ‘Man? Why boy you’re crazy. I’m marryin’ ——‘ and she named another woman singer.

By 1937, however, Bentley’s act seemed to have lost much of its potency. Her shows seemed slick and stagy, and what had once seemed daring and impertinent was now self-conscious and deliberate. She had already dropped one of the most effective elements of her performance, her piano playing, and sang...
while someone else accompanied her. Although she still sang double-entendre numbers, her shows emphasized the superficial glitz of “respectable” Broadway fare. As Langston Hughes claimed, when “she got famous,” Bentley “acquired an accompanist, specifically written material, and conscious vulgarity.”

Her final show in Harlem, *Brevities in Bronze*, a rousing, blues-inflected revue that originated at the Ubangi Club, was much like a polished Cotton Club show. The revue was aimed at an audience that expected a nightclub confection to be one part naughtiness, one part rhythm and jazz, and one part downtown sophistication. In *Brevities in Bronze*, Bentley was backed not by a chorus of “pansies” but the Ubangettes, a chorus of black women, who were dubbed “The Gorgeous Fast Stepping Sepians.” She sang her obligatory double-entendre songs, and also on view was a woman striptease artist who went by “Gypsy Rose Lee in Bronze.” The reviews for the show were mostly positive, but it is evident that the show lacked the spontaneity that Bentley’s performance had once conveyed. *Brevities in Bronze* seems to have been created with the express purpose of shocking for the sake of shocking. The *Amsterdam News* called it a “diverting bit of entertainment,” and said that it was “carefully gauged to suit the sensibilities of night club goers, who love their entertainment to center on the risqué.”

The *Sun* wrote that *Brevities in Bronze* “is a big revue that sets out to be shocking and succeeds nobly.” The critic of the *World Telegram* called it “the kind of show one expects from the bronze belt; fast, robust, dancing across—and through—the thin ice of good taste with a laugh and a leer.”

But in an appropriate coda to her provocative Harlem performances, Bentley’s big number in *Brevities in Bronze* articulated her defiant stance against social expectations. In this number, fittingly called “Gladys Isn’t Gratis Any More,” and just as she did in her blues songs almost ten years before, she proclaimed her economic, social, and sexual independence. With music and lyrics by Donald Heywood, the song perfectly articulated Bentley’s unwillingness to fit into the assumed category of what an African American black woman should be. The *New York World Telegram* claimed, “Portly Gladys Bentley, in white tails, gives her number all she has (about 300 pounds).”

Just as the thirty-year-old Bentley was being discovered by the major New York papers, unfortunately, the public’s fascination with Harlem was severely on the wane. Harlem was not the tourist attraction it had once been, and Midtown was ensuring its status as the world’s entertainment epicenter. As the *New York Times* reported in 1936, “Harlem’s moon has gone into something of an eclipse more recently, what with downtown activity speeding up and the Cotton Club moving to Broadway.” In 1937, the Ubangi Club closed, and *Brevi-
ties in Bronze transferred for a brief run to the Plantation Club, the former home of the Cotton Club. By 1938 there were judgments and tax liens against the Ubangi Club. In 1944 the club tried to recapture its former glory by reopening—sans Bentley—in Midtown (right around the corner from the site of the old King’s Terrace, Bentley’s former haunt). Even with floor shows with titles like *Top Hats and Tom Toms* that drew on the familiar cultural collisions of white and black entertainment, the nightclub only lasted two years.

Many of Harlem’s largest clubs and theaters persevered for a time with the onslaught of the Great Depression. It even managed to retain some of its appeal with the repeal of Prohibition, which removed much of the exuberant lawlessness that the neighborhood seemed to offer. As James Hatch explains, the Depression was the great leveler, transforming the optimism of the 1920s “into a movement concerned with social problems and leftist politics.” In addition, Harlem’s riots of 1935, which Claude McKay described as “the gesture of despair of a bewildered, baffled, and disillusioned people,” shattered Harlem’s sense of optimism. In a time when a large percentage of the population was spending much of its time on relief lines and breadlines, Gladys Bentley’s nightclub act seemed inappropriate and strangely naive.

But Bentley’s own relatively brief Harlem career can in no way be termed a failure. In the 1920s and 1930s she defiantly demanded respect as an African American, a woman, and a butch lesbian. Her blues songs named and called attention to issues affecting working-class people, and her exaggerated, larger-than-life appearances on stage and off poked fun at cultural ideologies associated with race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Bentley’s refusal to capitulate would exact a terrific price in the 1950s, but in the 1920s and 1930s, she represented one possible model of black womanhood, who was at once robust, self-supporting, and sexually liberated.

“In THE TWILIGHT ZONE OF SEX”

In May 1958, Gladys Bentley appeared on Groucho Marx’s television game show, *You Bet Your Life*, which is apparently the only extant video of her. Wearing a plain-colored, short-sleeve blouse, a matching skirt falling below her ankles, pearl necklaces (two), pearl bracelets, large daisy-like earrings, and flowers in her scooped-up and scooped-back hair, Bentley presents a very different image from the one she did twenty-five years before in the Harlem nightclubs. On the show, she is partnered with a Nigerian man, who wears traditional African clothing, including a brightly colored fila (round cap) and buba
(long-sleeved, oversized blouse). Underneath the Nigerian attire, however, he wears a gray suit, white dress shirt, and a plain tie. The pair makes for an exotic duo, which is clearly the intent. The rest of the contestants and the entire audience (or at least those who are visible when the camera pans the studio) are white. The cultural and racial distinctions are highlighted by Groucho’s remarks in an aside to the live-studio audience. “One thing about our show,” he quips, “you never see any unusual people.” Groucho continues to riff on the foreignness of the participants, particularly in his interview with the Nigerian man. He mock-bungles his name, asks him “what part of Nebraska [is he] from,” and invites the man to talk about Nigeria (especially about the culturally acceptable polygamy). Groucho eventually turns his attention to Gladys Bentley, apologizing for not engaging her sooner, but, as Groucho jokes, “It isn’t often we get a charming lad from Guatemala.”

Bentley, perhaps not to be outdone by her game show partner, claims that she too is foreign. She says she is from Port-of-Spain, Trinidad (which, incidentally, is her mother’s country of origin). In the brief interview that follows, Bentley’s main intention for appearing on the show is to plug her upcoming book and club appearances.

GROUCHO MARX: Do you have a job, Gladys?
GLADYS BENTLEY: Yes, I’m 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.

GM: Well, what is it about? Is it about geometry?
GB: My life story.
GB: Yes, that’s right.
GM: I thought your name sounded vaguely familiar. Gladys, how long have you been singing in nightclubs around the country?
GB: For about forty years.
GM: What kind of songs do you sing?
GB: Well, I do everything—all kinds of songs.

Looking somewhat older than her fifty-one years—claiming that she had been performing in nightclubs for the last forty years (starting then presumably when she was eleven) does not help—Bentley’s manner in the interview is professional and cool. The image of the bawdy, mannish lesbian of her youth is nowhere to be seen, and the once torrid blues singer comes across on television as surprisingly matronly.
Groucho invites Bentley to perform, but in the process, he also gets in a joke about her weight, cautioning, “Watch that [piano] stool” as she takes a seat. But then Bentley performs a jazzy and rousing version of “Them There Eyes,” made famous by Billie Holiday, and the years seem to disappear. Her voice is in fine form, recalling her characteristic interplay of a throaty alto with her improvisational trumpet-like notes that seem to pop out of the top of her head. While her fingers fly over the piano keys with ferocious speed and vigor, one is reminded of Langston Hughes’s description of her as an “amazing exhibition of musical energy.” And in what might be considered a portent of Hughes’s connection to her as “a perfect piece of African sculpture,” her Nigerian game show partner begins dancing to the music. The man’s polycentric dance movements, including vibrating hands, pelvis, and pulsating feet evoke images of ritualistic images of African celebration. To the audience’s delight, Groucho, his trademark cigar firmly clamped on the side of his mouth, joins in with his own imitation of African dance while whooping for her to increase the already hot tempo.

At the end of her performance, Bentley is greeted with enthusiastic applause, and Groucho tells her, “You sang ‘Them There Eyes’ so realistically, I could see the contact lenses.” At this point in the show, the contestants take part in the actual game, and they correctly identify four tunes and win $1,000. Groucho tells them that they would have the option to wager this money on the opportunity to win more. Later in the show, the pair returns saying that that they will not risk losing the money they have won by spinning the wheel for a chance at $10,000. Then, there is a revealing moment in which the audience gets a glimpse of Bentley’s legendary toughness and swagger. She defiantly shakes her head and tells Groucho, “I don’t want no part of that wheel.”

This is the last record of Gladys Bentley, and while she continued to perform in clubs across the country, there is not a great deal of information about her between her final show at the Ubangi Club and her death in 1960. In 1938 Bentley left New York and eventually settled in East Los Angeles, where she lived with her mother in a small home on South Crawford Avenue. Over the next twenty years, Bentley had tried several times to rejuvenate her singing career but with mixed success. She appeared at the Paradise and Swanee Clubs in Los Angeles in 1938 and 1939, but Los Angeles in the 1940s and 1950s was far less tolerant of a 250-pound butch lesbian than New York City in the 1920s. Her career was directly affected by the rising tide of conservatism that took hold in the 1940s and continued into the 1950s. During an engagement at Joaquin’s El Rancho in February 1940, the nightclub had to file for a special police permit that would allow her to appear in pants rather than a skirt. Yet Bentley persisted.
She performed occasionally at Mona’s, San Francisco’s well-known lesbian bar. In 1942, for instance, she appeared on a bill as “America’s Greatest Sepia Piano Artist” and the “Brown Bomber of Sophisticated Songs.” She also made a handful of recordings in the 1940s, notably with Excelsior under “Gladys Bentley and her Quintette,” such as “Boogie’n My Woogie” and “Thrill Me Till I Get My Fill.” In September 1944 she returned to New York City and opened at Tondayos nightclub, and according to press reports, Bentley was not only a versatile entertainer but also a gifted “linguist and composer,” and her act included songs performed in French, Spanish, and Yiddish. The following year she was once more a headliner at the Apollo on a bill that included trumpeter Oran “Hot Lips” Page. The Amsterdam News indicated that Bentley was still worth watching and carried with her an “international reputation.” The review states, “Despite her weight she is a clever and nimble dancer. But her fame rests upon the originality of her own songs.” Bentley was back on the West Coast by 1946 and performing at the Cobra Club in downtown Los Angeles.
In the 1950s she recorded a handful of songs, including a Christmas song, “Jingle Jangle Jump” with jazz saxophonist Dexter Gordon. At about the same time she recorded “Before Midnight” for Flame Records, a jazz record that did not have a lyric, just a series of doo-wahs and scatting. Still, it is a good match for the resonant blues quality she developed in the late 1920s. She even tried her hand at marriage—to a man—but, according to one reporter, “she returned to her old ways.” Supposedly, a friend of the writer visited Bentley shortly after the wedding and noticed two photos, one of a man and the other a woman, on Bentley’s bureau. When the writer’s friend asked about the identities of the individuals, Bentley reportedly responded, “Oh. That’s my husband (pointing to the male) and that’s my wife.” She was divorced a short time later.

Sadly, Bentley never replicated the fame she had achieved headlining at such nightclubs as the Clam House, Kings Terrace, and the Ubangi Club. And she never again attracted the audiences that packed the Lafayette, Apollo, and Harlem Opera House. Before her death from the Asian flu in 1960 (she was fifty-two), she invested a good deal of her energy in evangelism, and she was a prominent member at the Temple of Love in Christ Church, Inc., where she was ordained a minister just a few weeks before her death. On January 23, 1960, with her mother making all of the necessary arrangements, Gladys Bentley was buried at Lincoln Memorial Park in Carson, California. According to gossip columnist Dorothy Kilgallen, Bentley had completed her autobiography, which might have strengthened her legacy, but she hadn’t found a publisher.

Gladys Bentley’s descent into obscurity is particularly unfortunate because beginning in the late 1950s, the United States witnessed a renewed interest in blues and folk songs. Corresponding with the civil rights movement and an attention to the plight of downtrodden people, whom these singers represented, many of the classic blueswomen were coaxed out of retirement, and they attracted a whole new audience. Performing in smoky Greenwich Village clubs, folk festivals, and blues concerts, these women introduced the form to a new generation of music fans. Alberta Hunter, Ida Cox, Ada “Bricktop” Smith, Sippie Wallace, Victoria Spivey, and Edith Wilson all benefited from the revival and brought to their songs an added layer of toughness and a deeper affirmation of survival. Even more unfortunate for Gladys Bentley is that she did not live long enough to celebrate the revolutionary temperament of lesbian and gay pride that the Stonewall Riots initiated in 1969.

Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s may have tolerated a butch lesbian like Gladys Bentley, but in the McCarthy era of the late 1940s and early 1950s, she
would have been perceived as something of a national menace. The “excess” of Bentley’s persona, as marked by her flagrant violation of acceptable female behavior, appearance, and desire, challenged the presupposed notion of femininity and necessarily had to be reclaimed by patriarchy. In her 1952 Ebony article, “I Am a Woman Again,” Bentley renounced her previous identity and “the sex underworld in which [she] once lived,” presumably as an attempt to resuscitate her moribund career. But even in this article, Bentley once again appears to be the ultimate chameleon. Like a gifted, adaptable actor, Bentley sheds the costumes, dialogue, and props of one role and sets the scene for a new dramatic interpretation. Yet rather than completely concealing her former self within the new characterization, Bentley occasionally offers privileged, unmistakable glimpses of the performer within the role, presenting the impossibility of locating the “real” Gladys Bentley and affirming the impossible task of finding the truth behind the portrayal.

Bentley’s denunciation in the 1950s of her former life was a reflection of the prevalent cultural attitude of the era. David Savran shows that the image of the American nuclear family offered a comforting refuge from “an increasingly anxiety-producing and dangerous world” torn apart by World War II and confronted by the Cold War. Within this representative image “was the strict prescription of masculine and feminine roles defined by the interrelationship of both men and women in both home and marketplace.”¹³¹ Gay men and lesbians posed a direct threat to this picture of safety and tranquility, because they could corrupt and potentially destroy the sanctity of the American family with their perversity. The postwar United States was intent on reflecting an idyllic scene of harmony and impenetrability founded on the notion that men and women had particular roles to play.¹³² If Bentley wanted to be a part of this stolid new vision of the United States, which had no room for a sexually and economically independent black woman, she necessarily had to change her public and private act. In short, she had to be domesticated.

To this end, she describes her previous life as “tragic,” a “living hell,” and a “strange, heart-twisting existence,” but she refers in loving detail to her former apparel, including “tailor-made clothes, top hat and tails, with a cane to match each costume, stiff-bosomed shirt, wing collar tie and matching shoes.”¹³³ She talks about her luxurious “$300-a-month apartment,” the servants who attended to her, and her beautiful car. These images are a far cry from the drab, shapeless white housedress covering her huge body that she wears in the article’s pictures. Throughout the article are photographs of Bentley appearing domesticated: “Turning back cover of bed to make homecoming husband com-
fortable,” “taste-testing dinner for her husband,” and “making selection from jewel case for an evening out.” Whereas she lived amid New York’s splendor, the photo captions state that she now lives in a “modest, tastefully appointed home directly in rear of a similar home she purchased for her mother.” One is forced to wonder which life indeed is the “personal hell” that she describes.

Whereas in the 1920s and 1930s, Bentley proclaimed her sexual and economic independence from men, in this article, her melodramatic take on the theme, she describes her newfound happiness upon finding the love of a “real man.” She rehearses the familiar image of the butch lesbian as a “failed woman,” to employ Sally Munt’s phrase. According to her autobiographical essay, she had enjoyed the fame, money, and critical adoration of her professional life, but in her “secret heart, [she] was weeping and wounded because [she] was traveling the wrong road to real love and real happiness.” Then, the “miracle” arrived. She explains:

The miracle came about when I discovered and accepted the one glorious thing which, for so many years, I had bitterly fought with all my heart, mind, and body: the love and tenderness, the true devotion of a man who loved me unselfishly and whose love I could return; the awakening within me of the womanliness I had tried to suppress.

In an ironic understatement, Bentley says that she is no longer married to her savior (a sailor, who calls to mind her “ Favorites,” a “pansy” chorus dressed as sailors), but she still treasures the precious gift he gave her. In fact, at the time of her writing she was soon to be married again, this time to a writer on the theater. She adds that she “hope[s] and pray[s] this marriage will last.” It did not, and her “husband” denied that they were ever married.

Bentley’s surprising—albeit histrionic—reversal is a reflection of the conservative viewpoints that had swept the United States by the 1950s. Even as lesbian subcultures were evolving in such places as San Francisco and Buffalo, the lesbian (i.e., the visible butch lesbian) was culturally regarded as a tragic and desolate figure. She was, according to the pulp novels of the era, guaranteed a life of solitude and misery unless she renounced her sinful way of life. Martha Vicinus writes, “The doomed lesbian was a remarkably durable image. By the 1950s everyone knew what a lesbian was; she had been assigned a clearly defined role. Defiance and loneliness marked her life, according to the pulp romances.” On one level, the novels offered evidence that lesbians existed and provided a sense of solidarity to lesbians reading the books. But on another
level, the novels’ emphasis on an ill-fated existence helped to reinscribe heterosexual values.

In February 1954, *Jet*, a popular black magazine, included an article that focused on “the problems of hundreds of women who are trapped in the half-shadow, no-man’s-land of the man-woman.” The article outlines the deception, which lesbians employ to ensnare unwitting women, and it warns, “The lesbian, like the male homosexual, who stalks a married home is to be considered a dangerous person.” Particularly vulnerable to the lesbian’s advances, the article claims, are widows, spinsters, lonely women, and “those who have suffered from nervous breakdowns and other mental ills.” The essay is not without its hopefulness, though. It contends: “Despite the lesbian’s power of persuasion or slyness of approach, she stands a slim chance of debauching a normally sexed woman who is happily married or deeply in love with a man. Studies show that most women feel it is still much nicer to have a man around the house.” The author also points to Gladys Bentley’s narrative as an example of a “happy ending” for “the lives of strange women.” Referring to Bentley’s *Ebony* article a year and a half earlier, the author offers the entertainer’s “return to womanhood” as proof that “manlike women” can be rescued from their sexually deviate condition.

Bentley’s reclaiming of a womanhood that she never admits to having could serve as the content of one of Freud’s case analyses, and her article is filled with allusions to Freudian rhetoric. The cause of her “strange” situation, according to the physician she visited, appears to be her failure to pass through the Oedipal complex. After she decided to seek help and to willingly become a woman, he told her: “That’s just what I wanted to hear. Now I can tell you what I’ve known for a very long time. Your sex organs are infantile. They haven’t progressed past the stage of those of a fourteen-year-old child.” The way out of this “sex underworld in which [she] once lived” was not only the “unselfish” love of a “real” man, but also the “miracle” of science, which consisted of regular injections of female hormones to counteract the excess of male hormones her body produced. The combination of these two elements allowed her to reciprocate the man’s love, as well as enjoy “the awakening of the womanliness [she] tried to suppress.”

Gladys Bentley’s transition (back) to a woman figuratively sets out to show the stability of the gender categories. According to the rhetoric she adopts, they are necessary and truthful if one is to find fulfillment and personal completeness. But in an interesting way, her article subverts her intention as we follow the continually shifting images of her persona. In an effect similar to a fun
house of mirrors, Bentley’s article juxtaposes pictures of the performer in drag from the 1920s and 1930s with pictures of her in 1952 wearing floral-printed dresses. The reader becomes aware of the instability of the roles Bentley is performing in each shot. Although she claims the “truth” of one role and the happiness it has brought her, her previous role does not seem to foretell misery and shame. On the contrary, posing regally in the early pictures, Bentley appears dignified and independent; while the pictures of Bentley at the time of the writing show her as domestic and dependent. The fluidity of her identity is most cogently revealed in the largest picture, which frames the article. Displaying a scrapbook with photos of herself in top hat and tails, Bentley beams. Looking at the picture of pictures and charting her various personae, the reader is faced with the impossibility of discerning the “real” Gladys Bentley. The endless shifting between what appear to be the boundaries of masculine and feminine, black and white, homosexual and heterosexual produces an unsettling and exciting promise of a category crisis.