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If This Be Sin: Gladys Bentley And The Performance Of Identity

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IF THIS BE SIN:
GLADYS BENTLEY AND THE PERFORMANCE OF IDENTITY

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my Dad who gave me his love of weird music. And to both of my parents who always believed in me.

ABSTRACT

Known for her improvisational risqué lyrics and tailored white tuxedo, Gladys Bentley was one of the most notorious figures of the 1930s. Situated in the pansy and lesbian craze of the 1920s and 30s, Bentley's career was part of a broader trend that favored gender-queer performers due to their exotic appeal. Despite being more transgressive than most, Bentley has ultimately faded from society's collective memory.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Known for her improvisational risqué lyrics and tailored white tuxedo, Gladys Bentley was one of the most notorious figures of the 1930s. Situated in the pansy and lesbian craze of the 1920s and 30s, Bentley's career was part of a broader trend that favored gender-queer performers due to their exotic appeal. Despite being more transgressive than most, Bentley has ultimately faded from society's collective memory.

In her prime, Bentley challenged divisions not only between men and women but between blacks and whites, high class and low class, and homosexual and heterosexual. Bentley attracted both high class and low-class crowds, both black and white, both homosexual and heterosexual. However, when faced with increasing anxieties concerning gender and sexuality, gender-queer performers proved to be too transgressive to be allowed to continue to exist as they once had.

Despite Bentley's apparent popularity as a cabaret performer, few scholars have written on Bentley's life. In addition, most of what has been written on Bentley is largely based on Eric Garber's 1988 biographical essay on Bentley for *OUT/LOOK: National Lesbian & Gay Quarterly*. Though the piece is relatively short, it provides an illuminating biographical sketch of Bentley. However, because it was not written for scholarly publication, it is of limited use, as it does not include proper citations. In spite of these short-comings, Garber's piece served as a starting point for my own research into Bentley's life.

Discussions of Bentley's life and career are further expanded upon in James Wilson's 2010 book, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance*. Wilson dedicates a chapter of this book to an exploration of Bentley's life and career. More broadly, Wilson argues that depictions of race and gender in performances throughout the 1920s and 1930s were "often highly ambiguous, ambivalent, and bewildering."¹ My own arguments in this study serve to an extent as an extension of Wilson's. Unlike Wilson, however, my arguments focus more strongly on change over time and shifts in Bentley's performance identity based on external influences. In addition, as a professor of English and Theatre, Wilson's work focuses more strongly on song analysis and literary discourse, while I am more interested in historicizing Bentley's life.

This study takes place largely in the context of Ann Douglas, George Chauncey, and Chad Heap's works. Each of these works describe the "mongrel" nature of New York during the 1920s and 30s—the relationships between white and black, upper class and lower class, heterosexual and homosexual. As Ann Douglas discusses in *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*, "white consciousness of the Negro's right and gifts...and black confidence that Negroes could use white models and channels of power to achieve their own ends" peaked in America during the 1920s.² This is the backdrop in which Bentley gets her start in New York.

In *Terrible Honesty*, Douglas argues that 1920s New York was marked by a cultural revolt against the sentimental, moralizing, matriarchal Victorian ethos and an

¹ James Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 3.

² Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1996), 5.

embrasure of Freudian primitivism in its place, claiming that, in the 1920s, “going public with one’s animal nature became a popular pastime.”³ This study supports Douglas’s cultural revolt, highlighting New Yorkers’ fascination with performers that confused gender norms (a revolt against the Victorian ethos) and the use of primitive language and imagery among both black and white communities. However, this study extends past the 1920s to encapsulate all of Bentley’s career, moving beyond Douglas’s cultural revolt and exploring the closing off of some of the types of entertainment that flourished during the 1920s.

George Chauncey’s book, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, seeks to dismantle what he identifies as the three myths of homosexual culture: “isolation,” “invisibility,” and “internalization.”⁴ Chauncey asserts that homosexuality was much more visible in New York during the first half of the 20th century than it was previously thought to be. Chauncey also emphasizes the centrality of gender blurring and gender inversion in gay history. As someone who was known for performing risqué songs wearing men’s attire, Bentley’s life similarly dismantles these myths of homosexual culture.

In *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940*, Chad Heap asserts that slumming was central to 20th-century constructions of whiteness and heterosexuality. Like Chauncey, Heap argues that nightlife allowed a blurring of sexual and racial categories. Heap expands some of the ideas introduced by Chauncey, noting that, while nightlife allowed for a categorical blurring, it also helped to construct

³ *ibid.*, 48.

⁴ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 2.

notions of whiteness and heterosexuality. Like Heap, this study seeks to emphasize not only categorical blurring allowed by nightlife but also the construction of difference.

This study stands in contrast to traditional studies of women and the blues, such as those by Hazel Carby and Angela Davis. As Hazel Carby points out in her article “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues,” the blues allowed women to break “out of the boundaries of the home and taken their sensuality and sexuality out of the private into the public sphere.”⁵ Traditional blues studies describe the blues as a source of empowerment for women, a means of countering stereotypes of black women and allowing them to take back control of their identities. Unlike these traditional narratives, Gladys Bentley’s blues seem to have limited her sexual, social, and personal freedoms. While she sang parodies of popular “white” songs in live performances, she recorded “black” blues songs. Not only were the lyrics of Bentley’s parodies more transgressive than those she recorded, but for Bentley, it was more transgressive for her to take ownership of popular “white” songs and make them her own than it was for her to sing blues songs written by someone else for the consumption of mass audiences.

⁵ Hazel Carby, “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues,” *Radical America* 20, no. 4 (1986): 22.

CHAPTER 2

“I am a Woman Again”

In 1952, Bentley released an autobiographical piece in *Ebony* magazine called “I am a Woman Again.” In this piece, Bentley claims that she had suffered from a hormone deficiency coupled with an extreme social maladjustment, which caused her to “violate the accepted code of morals that our world observes.”⁶ Bentley explains that this is the reason that she had spent so many years “living in sin”—why she wore men’s clothing and felt attraction towards women.

Much of what is known about Bentley’s personal life is drawn from her *Ebony* piece. However, this article represents Bentley’s ultimate retreat into the social norms that she had previously contested. No longer was she a swaggering, cross-dressing lesbian. Instead, the article features images of her playing the part of the domestic wife, preparing dinner for her husband and tidying up the house. Bentley rejected her previous way of life, explaining that it was a “hell as terrible as dope addiction.”⁷

Bentley wrote “I am a Woman Again” at a low point in her career, during a time in which she experienced increased pushback against her public persona and pressure to stop performing in a tuxedo. In writing this piece, I have sought to avoid citing Bentley and to find external confirmation whenever possible. I am wary of her intentions in writing this piece, believing that her desire to revitalize her career and shift public

⁶ Bentley, “I am a Woman Again.”

⁷ Ibid., 94.

perception likely served as an impetus for the article. Some of Bentley's claims are dubious, and it is unclear how much of the article can be taken at face value.

Unfortunately, Bentley did not leave any other writing to compare the article to. Though she completed a memoir in 1958 (*If This Be Sin*), she was unable to find a publisher, and her memoir has since been lost to time. Despite having conducted extensive research, much of Bentley's life remains a mystery to me—lost to time like her memoir.

CHAPTER 3

BEGINNINGS IN HARLEM: 1923-1930

Bentley was born in Philadelphia on August 12, 1907. According to Bentley, at sixteen, she left home and moved to New York.⁸ After arriving in New York, Bentley quickly began establishing herself as a capable pianist, playing the rent party circuit and filling in for pianists at night clubs. Despite some early successes, Bentley did not appear in New York's historical record until 1928.⁹ Bentley's first break came after a friend told her that a night club in Harlem known as the Mad House needed a pianist right away. Though her friend had told her that "they want a boy," Bentley did not let this dissuade her, telling her friend that "There's no better time for them to start using a girl." Thanks to an enthusiastic audience response, the manager hired Bentley on the spot, offering her \$35 a week as compensation.¹⁰ Soon thereafter, Bentley began working as a featured performer at Harry Hansberry's Clam House, slowly growing her reputation as an entertainer. Eventually she caught the eye of a Broadway agent and arranged to record and release eight record sides in 1928 and 1929.¹¹ By this time, she had become popular enough to be featured regularly in prominent black newspapers, and from 1928 to 1930, her name became synonymous with the Clam House. One article from 1930 described the

⁸ Gladys Bentley, "I am a Woman Again," *Ebony*, August, 1952, 94.

⁹ "Gladys Bentley: A New Blues Star on Okeh Electric Race Records," [ad] *New York Amsterdam News*, September 26, 1928.

¹⁰ Bentley, "I am a Woman Again," 94.

¹¹ "Gladys Bentley: A New Blues Star on Okeh Electric Race Records," [ad] *New York Amsterdam News*, September 26, 1928, and "Wild Geese Blues," [ad] *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 5, 1929.

Clam House as a place “where everyone goes,” yet noted that “its only attraction is Gladys.”¹² The Clam House had helped to make Bentley more popular, and she in turn helped to increase the reputation of the club, becoming its main draw for black and white slummers. An illustration of night clubs in Harlem from 1932 even referred to the club as “Gladys’ Clam House” rather than “Hansberry’s Clam House.”¹³

Located on 133rd street and 136th street respectively, the Mad House and Hansberry’s Clam House were both positioned within a few blocks of the area of Harlem that downtown whites referred to as “Jungle Alley” or simply “The Jungle.” Jungle Alley was composed of a stretch of 133rd Street located between Seventh Avenue and Lenox Avenue.¹⁴ Clubs in Jungle Alley were known for their high prices and superior entertainment, hosting musicians such as Duke Ellington, Ethel Waters, and Louis Armstrong.

Jungle Alley rose to prominence during the height of the Harlem Renaissance. The rise of Harlem as an artistic and intellectual center during the 1920s drew in crowds of people, eager to experience the cultural attractions that Harlem was now known for. According to Levi Hubert, a writer for the WPA, the Harlem Renaissance was a time in which: “well-meaning, vapid whites from downtown New York...to see for themselves these Negroes who wrote poetry and fiction and painted pictures. Of course... it couldn’t approach the creative results of whites, but as a novelty, well, it didn’t need standards.” Though located in heart black Harlem, the clubs in Jungle Alley catered to affluent white audiences. These white audience were drawn to Harlem because they wanted to

¹² “Harlem Not So Hot,” *Niagara Falls Gazette*, July 23, 1930.

¹³ E. Simms Campbell, “A Night- Cub Map of Harlem,” *Manhattan Magazine*, January 1, 1932.

¹⁴ Aberjhani and Sandra L. West, *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Facts On File, 2003), 185.

experience performances by the likes of Duke Ellington, Ethel Waters, and Louis Armstrong, but also because Harlem held an “exotic” appeal for whites, a sense of “novelty.” Even the name “Jungle Alley” itself helped to increase the area’s exotic appeal in the minds of white patrons.

While white patrons sought “exotic” experiences, they generally did not seek out experiences that would have been considered truly authentic by black Harlemites. Clubs in Jungle Alley provided a “safe” environment for whites to experience black culture in part through the enforcement of the color line. Some clubs, such as the Cotton Club, had strict policies reinforcing the color line, while others enforced the color line simply by virtue of their higher prices. In addition, black Harlemites simply expressed less interest in frequenting businesses that reinforced the color line. As historian Steven Watson notes, the Cotton Club’s racist policy and strict enforcement of the color line “made it the most comfortable stop for a first-timer to Harlem; one could view the black-white maelstrom without actually descending into it.”¹⁵ In order to further provide a “safe” environment for the enjoyment of black entertainment, some clubs, such as the Cotton Club and the Everglades, utilized Southern names and motifs, evoking the history of black subordination in America. As Chauncey points out, by framing black performers in this way, nightclubs played upon “customers’ desire to feel they were transgressing the conventional boundaries of race while resolutely confirming them.”¹⁶ Some clubs, such as the Cotton Club, further encouraged white exoticization of black culture through the use

¹⁵ Steven Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920-1930* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 124.

¹⁶ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 174.

of decor that was reminiscent of the jungle and the sale of “black” cuisine such as fried chicken.¹⁷

White publications at the time often described or conceived of black Harlemites as a “primitive other.” One New York guide book noted in 1925 that one of the pastimes of white New Yorkers “is to observe the antics of members of its enormous negro population...Their unfailing sense of rhythm, their vocal quality, something primitive, animal-like and graceful in their movements.”¹⁸

Similarly, younger black writers of the Harlem Renaissance sought to highlight elements of black identity that previous generations had attempted to downplay such as: “sex, color-consciousness, racism...self-hatred...among blacks, the Negro as ‘primitive,’ ‘decadent,’ ...wild, colorful, and possibly dangerous.”¹⁹ With the Harlem Renaissance, there was an increased interest in and identification with Africa around this time in the African American community. Africa was increasingly discussed as a source of racial pride, and writers increasingly talked about notions of a pan-African identity. In described Bentley’s early years performing at the Clam House and the Mad House, Langston Hughes wrote of Bentley: “[Bentley played] with a powerful and continuous underbeat of jungle rhythm. Miss Bentley was...a perfect piece of African sculpture, animated by her own rhythm.”²⁰ However, this identification with Africa helped to further exoticize African Americans through the eyes of the white community.

Harlem night clubs’ exclusionary policies evoked criticism from both black and white patrons as well as local Harlemites. Langston Hughes argued that the clubs’

¹⁷ Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance*, 126-127.

¹⁸ George Chappell, *The Restaurants of New York* (New York: Greenberg, 1925), 119–20.

¹⁹ Douglas, *Terrible Honesty*, 83.

²⁰ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 225-226.

policies and the influx of whites to the city's clubs was an affront to the African Americans who actually lived in Harlem. Hughes notes that "a large part of the Harlem attraction for downtown New Yorkers lay in simply watching the colored customers amuse themselves," watching them like "animals in a zoo."²¹ Although exclusionary policies were effective in more extravagant venues such as the Cotton Club, in smaller clubs that could not attract big name performers, the presence of an interracial clientele could act as part of the appeal. Some who sought what they perceived to be the untainted, authentic Harlem found themselves disappointed by the exclusionary policies of Jungle Alley's finest clubs. For example, Viscountess Weymouth, a wealthy white Londoner, traveled to New York in order to experience Harlem, "this colorful Mecca of jazz, high spirits and drama." Her first stop was Connie's Inn, one of the most well-known clubs in Jungle Alley. However, the Viscountess found herself disillusioned with Connie's Inn, disappointed that there were nearly no "coloured people in the room" and writing that "the whole atmosphere was so obviously faked to lure the tourist."²²

Though costs in many of the clubs in Jungle Alley were prohibitive to Harlemites during this period, more adventurous downtown New Yorkers could trek a few streets over from Jungle Alley to smaller, more affordable clubs such as the Clam House, which allowed for interracial audiences. With only eight tables, the Clam House was notably smaller than the Cotton Club.²³ While it would not have made the most comfortable stop for a first-timer in Harlem, it drew in many of the same audiences as the Mad House or the Cotton Club. Here, whites could watch black patrons entertain themselves. *Vanity*

²¹ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 225.

²² Viscountess Weymouth, "In 'Nigger Heaven' - Otherwise, Harlem, U.S.A.," *London Daily Express*, April 20, 1929.

²³ "Harlem Not So Hot."

Fair described the Clam House as “a popular house for revelers but not for the innocent young.”²⁴

At the Clam House, Bentley became famous for her scandalous improvised lyrics. According to WPA writer Wilbur Young, though she did sing the blues, Bentley specialized not in singing the blues but rather in ad libbing the lyrics of popular songs.²⁵ In these parodies of popular songs, Bentley injected “low class” humor into bourgeois love songs, infusing bourgeoisie performance spaces with “low class” culture, and “apply[ing] aspects of sexually charged ‘black’ blues to demure, romantic ‘white’ ballads.”²⁶ There are few records of Bentley’s improvisational lyrics due to the ephemeral nature of performance. Moreover, none of Bentley’s reimagined songs were ever recorded, due both to the indecency of the lyrics. In one of the few remaining examples of Bentley’s lyrics, Bentley combined two popular Broadway tunes, “Sweet Georgia Brown” and “My Alice Blue Gown,” and transformed them into 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.²⁷

Young reported that “some of [Gladys’s] lyrics would be so rank that the house lady would look on in despair while Gladys, not content with merely singing them herself...would encourage the paying guests to join in on the chorus, which they did willingly.”²⁸ Bentley’s performances offered experiences that were not only novel and

²⁴ *Vanity Fair* quoted in Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance*, 134.

²⁵ Wilbur Young, “Gladys Bentley,” from *Biographical Sketches: Negroes of New York* (Schomburg Center, New York Public Library: WPA Writers Program, 1939).

²⁶ Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 173.

²⁷ Lyrics quoted in Eric Garber, “Gladys Bentley: The Bulldagger Who Sang the Blues,” *Out/Look* (Spring 1988), 55.

²⁸ Young, “Gladys Bentley,” from *Biographical Sketches: Negroes of New York*.

exotic to white slummers, but they offered experiences that were not necessarily accessible to white slummers outside of Harlem. Among black blues women, Bentley's music was progressive, offering a newfound sense of sexual freedom, beyond what the blues typically offered.

CHAPTER 4

THE PANSY AND LESBIAN CRAZE OF THE 1920S

In addition to arriving in New York during the Harlem Renaissance, Bentley's rise to fame coincided with rise of the "pansy and lesbian craze" in New York. The pansy and lesbian craze was born out of an increased interest and familiarity with queer culture during the 1920s and 30s.²⁹ During this time, queer cabaret performers, particularly male pansy acts, became huge draws in mainstream nightclubs where they had previously been unwelcome. The word "pansy" itself was used as a catch-all, describing female impersonators, cross-dressers, homosexuals, and men who were simply deemed to be too effeminate. While not all pansies were homosexual, the words were largely used interchangeably. In addition, homosexual behavior did not become the primary basis for the labeling of individuals as "queer" until the middle of the 20th century. During the first half of the 20th century, individuals were typically only labeled "queer" if they embraced elements of the opposite gender identity.³⁰

By this time, homosexual characters and topics had become increasingly common in popular fiction, theatrical productions, and film. Articles in newspapers and other print publications such as *Variety* similarly suggested a growing consciousness of pansies. In an article entitled "Female Impersonators En Masse Play a Show for School Children," one journalist remarked that "a company of Greenwich Village lads" put on a play in

²⁹ Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 66.

³⁰ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 18.

Provincetown with reduced prices for school children entitled “The Woman-less Wedding—a musical burlesque in three spasms.” Rather than bemoan the state of the nation, which allowed a troupe of pansies to perform a show for school children, the journalist simply reported on the details of the performance, commenting that the show would make the youth of the nation more “pansy conscious.”³¹

The pansy and lesbian craze was not an entirely new concept in America. Pansies shared a certain familiarity with the “sissy” character that performers had been doing for decades in vaudeville and burlesque.³² Queer cabaret of the 1920s was also reminiscent of earlier Thompsonian Burlesque, which had largely died out a few decades before. Both shared notions of gender nonconformity, with critics remarking that performers appeared to be members of an “alien sex.”³³ However, queer cabaret provided a greater emphasis on sexual nonconformity, tying notions of gender nonconformity with notions of sexual nonconformity.

Despite homosexual characters having become increasingly common in the media, homosexuals were frequently targeted by the police. Around 1910, the New York police department tasked the vice squad with surveilling gay men, whom they labeled “male prostitutes.” From 1910 on, police increasingly began picking gay men and women up off the street as well as raiding businesses that were associated with gays. In addition, gay men and women were increasingly arrested for charges such as “disorderly conduct” and “degeneracy.”³⁴

³¹ “Female Impersonators En Masse Play a Show for School Children.” *Variety*, June 2, 1931, 1.

³² Heap, *Slumming*, 234-235.

³³ For more on burlesque, see: Robert Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

³⁴ Chauncy, *Gay New York*, 133-134.

A gay subculture formed in Harlem in the 1920s, for though people in Harlem expressed a certain disdain for homosexuals, they were granted a greater degree of tolerance in Harlem than elsewhere.³⁵ Though establishments in Harlem did experience raids, vice organizations generally devoted less effort to the regulation of Harlem than of white neighborhoods.³⁶ In addition, many of the well-known black male writers in New York during the 1920s were known to be—or at least suspected of being—gay, including: Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, Alain Locke, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Claude McKay.³⁷ At the same time, despite the prevalence of well-known queer figures during the 1920s, most queer middle-class African Americans led a double life, seeking to keep their homosexuality a secret from the broader heterosexual community.³⁸ As Chauncey points out, though gays and lesbians in Harlem “might earn a degree of grudging respect from others, they had no hope of respectability.”³⁹

Though offered a relative degree of toleration in Harlem, the gay community had many detractors. Many middle-class and churchgoing African-Americans rallied against gays, grouping them in with “undesirables” such as “prostitutes, salacious entertainers, and ‘uncultured’ rural migrants.”⁴⁰ Churches served as important political drivers and centers of social in Harlem, leading the statements of ministers to carry a lot of weight in the community. Though some churches tolerated the presence of homosexuals, many ministers spoke out against homosexual “vice.” For example, Adam Clayton Powell, pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church from 1908 to 1937 and one of the most famous

³⁵ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 73.

³⁶ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 174.

³⁷ Douglas, *Terrible Honesty*, 97.

³⁸ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 185.

³⁹ *ibid.*, 161.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 177.

African-American clergyman in the nation, emphasized the dangers of lesbianism to the black community, describing it as a threat to the family unit.⁴¹

Despite criticisms from the church and middle-class African Americans, Harlem witnessed a rise of queer cabaret performers. Bruce Nugent, a gay writer and painter of the Harlem Renaissance, describes this period in Harlem as a time when: “‘male’ and ‘female’ impersonation was at its peak as night club entertainment...[and] gender was becoming more and more conjectural.”⁴² Male and female impersonators were frequently discussed in black and white newspapers, some critics described them as among of Harlem’s favorite entertainers.⁴³ With the rise of female impersonators came the rise of drag balls, such as the famous Hamilton Lodge drag ball, which attracted thousands to Harlem each year. During the 1920s and 30s, drag balls had become so “popular and publicly accepted” in New York that they were regularly covered by some newspapers.⁴⁴ The pansy and lesbian craze was not exclusive to performance venues in Harlem, extending into downtown New York. *Variety* reports that during the height of the pansy and lesbian craze in New York in 1930, two of Times Square’s three most successful clubs “depended upon ‘pansy personalities’ for their main draw.”⁴⁵

Harlem was home to several clubs in and around Jungle Alley that attracted a queer clientele and provided queer entertainment including the Clam House, Dickie Wells’s Theatrical Grill, the Log Cabin, and the Club Hot-Cha. The Clam House, which Bentley performed in regularly, was one of the best-known gay and lesbian hangouts in Harlem.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 178-179.

⁴² Richard Bruce Nugent and Thomas H. Wirth (ed.), *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 222.

⁴³ Marcus Wright, “The Talk of the Town,” *The New York Age*, December 22, 1934.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, xi.

⁴⁵ *Variety* quoted in Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 420.

The Clam House attracted patrons that were both black and white, homosexual and heterosexual. Similar to the way whites were drawn in by the exotic appeal of Harlem, heterosexuals were drawn to the Clam Club due to the perceived exotic appeal of male impersonators, female impersonators, and the like. Queer African Americans who were denied entry to establishments in Greenwich Village (the larger, more well-known gay enclave in New York) due to segregation relied upon establishments such as the Clam House as places in which they could freely express themselves. Queer whites who frequented Harlem clubs could express greater degrees of freedom at these clubs than ones in the Village because they carried less risk of running into heterosexual friends or acquaintances. Frequenting Harlem clubs kept queer whites' homosexual and heterosexual lives separate.

While working at the Clam Club and the Mad House, Bentley reported that “one of the unique things about my act was the way I dressed. I wore immaculate white full dress shirts with stiff collars, small bow ties and skirts, oxfords, short Eton jackets and hair cut straight back.”⁴⁶ Thus, early on in her performance career, Bentley embraced dressing in male clothes not only as a part of her personal identity, but as a part of her performance persona. Bentley's attire became something during the 1920s and 30s that could be potentially profitable because so many people expressed an interest in queer culture. As Bentley notes, it was one of the things that made her act stand out, allowing her to create a niche in the market.

Though considered to be an outgrowth of Bentley's identity, Bentley's outward sexual orientation and gender identity were also likely an intentional construction. As

⁴⁶ Bentley, “I am a Woman Again,” 94.

James Wilson points out in *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, over the course of her career, Bentley appears to have directly referenced and drawn upon the notoriety of Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* on several occasions.⁴⁷ *The Well of Loneliness* was first published in the United States in 1928, just as Bentley was beginning to formulate her performance persona. The book was an immediate best seller, selling over 20,000 copies within its first month of release, the popularity of the book increasing the visibility of lesbians in American culture.⁴⁸ The novel follows the life of Stephen Gordon, a "mannish" woman whose "sexual inversion" (i.e. homosexuality) becomes apparent at an early age. Wilson argues that "Stephen Gordon became *the* archetype for lesbians in the popular culture and social consciousness," leading Bentley to "knowingly or unknowingly [draw] on the notoriety of Radclyffe Hall's novel as she created her own iconic persona."⁴⁹

Like Gordon, Bentley played the part of the "mannish lesbian," but the similarities between the two go far deeper. For example, in 1937 during the musical revue *Brevities in Bronze*, Bentley performed a number called "In My Well of Loneliness."⁵⁰ Similarly, in her 1952 article for *Ebony* magazine, Bentley wrote that one of her main reasons for writing the piece was to "help people who are trapped in a modern-day 'well of loneliness.'"⁵¹

Mabel Hampton, a dancer during the Harlem Renaissance and a member of Bentley's cohort, reported that though Bentley is remembered as an out-and-proud lesbian, she was in fact bisexual. Hampton asserts that during the height of Bentley's

⁴⁷ Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 157.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 158.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ "Club Revue is Entertaining and Brilliant," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 3, 1937.

⁵¹ Bentley, "I am a Woman Again," 97.

career it had been more profitable to portray herself as a lesbian due to the public's fascination with her "outrageous image."⁵² Rather than hide her relationships with women, Bentley was known to openly flaunt them. According to Young, "rumors had it that she was queer and even sported a girlfriend."⁵³ Reportedly, Bentley even married a white woman in a New Jersey civil ceremony.⁵⁴ This kind of marriage between women was not unheard of in Harlem during the 20s and 30s. Lesbian couples could even obtain real marriage licenses either by masculinizing a first name or by having a gay male surrogate apply for the license for the couple.⁵⁵

In contrast to the traditional male impersonator, Bentley did not seek to "pass" as a man or attempt to trick her audience into thinking that she was biologically male. For the first few years that she performed in male attire, Bentley wore a skirt rather than pants, and she continued to wear makeup throughout her career. Despite the feminine connotation of "la," Bentley became known as "La Bentley" rather than "Le Bentley," much to the confusion of some critics.⁵⁶ Instead of seeking to pass as a man, Bentley "exerted a 'black female masculinity'...that troubled the distinctions between...masculine and feminine."⁵⁷ Through her embrace of both male and female characteristics, Bentley resisted categorization based on the gender binary, leading some critics among both the black and white press to suggest that she was a member of a "third sex."⁵⁸

⁵² From an interview with Lillian Faderman in *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 72.

⁵³ Young, "Gladys Bentley," from *Biographical Sketches: Negroes of New York*.

⁵⁴ Garber, "Gladys Bentley: The Bulldagger Who Sang the Blues," 58.

⁵⁵ Faderman *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 73.

⁵⁶ "Bentley at Opera House," *New York Age*, April 27, 1935.

⁵⁷ Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 172.

⁵⁸ Duckett, Alfred. "The Third Sex." *The Chicago Defender*, March 2, 1957.

CHAPTER 5

PUBLIC PERSONA VERSUS PERFORMANCE PERSONA

By the end of the 1920s, Bentley had made a name for herself as a cabaret performer. However, while she had a reputation for transgressing gender, race, and class boundaries in her performances, this was not the case with regards to her recording career. The eight sides that Bentley released with Okeh in 1928 and 1929 differed greatly from the performance persona that Bentley developed in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In contrast to her live performances where she primarily ad-libbed on popular ballads and show tunes, record companies marketed Bentley as a traditional blues singer, recording only blues songs. As James Wilson notes, the blues provided women like Bentley a means of “resisting the popular images of black women as asexual and domestic...or exotic and uncontrollably sexualized...affirm[ing] black women as rational, complicated individuals who are very much in control of—and empowered by their sexual desires and emotions.”⁵⁹ However, the songs that Bentley recorded stood in stark contrast to Bentley’s performance persona. In contrast to much of the existing scholarly literature surrounding the blues, which portray the blues as empowering to women, through the blues, Bentley exhibited less control of her sexual desires, emotions, and life in general.

While black and white newspapers describe Bentley (the nightclub performer) as someone who had achieved economic, social, and sexual freedom, her songs are often

⁵⁹ Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 165.

self-pitying and defeatist, dealing with issues such as domestic abuse and economic exploitation by men. For example, in “How Long, How Long Blues,” Bentley sings:

I was an angel,
he was born to treat me right.
Who in the devil ever heard of angels
that get beat up every night?
How much of the dog can I stand?⁶⁰

Here, the singer bemoans her fate, asking herself how long she can stay with a man who beats her every night. Although she is aware of her situation and wonders how much more of this can she take, the song offers no solution. Similarly, in “Big Gorilla Man,” Bentley sings:

That big gorilla, a woman killa, and I ought to know.
He mistreats me, knots and beats me, still I love him so...
Every mornin', when day is dawnin', I get so dog-gone scared
that he'll wake me, he might shake me, until I lose my head.⁶¹

Here, the singer lives in fear of her lover, a violent “gorilla” of a man. As in “How Long, How Long Blues,” the song offers no solution, and the singer chooses to stay with the man despite his abuse because she “love[s] him so.” Similar themes occur throughout most of the songs that Bentley recorded for Okeh records. As James Wilson points out, the songs that Bentley recorded were “undeniably and audaciously heterosexual...the women in these songs define themselves in relation to men”⁶² Bentley did not have an extensive recording career, but she would eventually go on to record a few sides for several different recording companies over the course of her career including Victor, Excelsior Records, Swingtime Records, and Flame Records. None of the songs from these records

⁶⁰ Gladys Bentley, “How Long, How Long Blues,” Okeh 8612, 1928.

⁶¹ Gladys Bentley, “Big Gorilla Man,” Okeh 8707, 1929.

⁶² Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 171.

reflect the independent, foul-mouthed, cross-dressing lesbian that Bentley appeared to be when performing in night clubs.

Although it could be profitable to portray herself as a cross-dressing lesbian in New York during the 1920s, this was not the case universally in the United States. The pansy and lesbian craze did not extend everywhere in the United States, but rather, it emerged in isolated pockets in and around big cities such as New York and Chicago.⁶³ Bentley's performance persona would have carried too much risk for a record company to endorse. Moreover, the songs that Bentley performed in night club venues were too scandalous for record companies to release. In addition, in parodying popular "white" songs, Bentley had stepped outside the allotted realm of "race records." She "cheapened" white songs with her low-class humor, parodying the bourgeoisie culture.⁶⁴ Instead of recording her ad-libbed versions of popular songs, Bentley fell back into tried and true blues tropes such as that of the scorned woman. Her music no longer transgressed race, sex, or class boundaries. She became a woman who wore dresses and loved men. She sang "black" music that appealed to working-class women's issues rather than parodying "white," bourgeois music. In this instance, relying on the blues and heteronormativity was more profitable for Bentley, enabling her to cut records with several record companies and leading to the creation of two separate public personas.

RISE TO FAME: 1930 TO 1937

The Wall Street crash of October 29, 1929 led to the demise of the Harlem Renaissance. Langston Hughes marked the spring of 1930 as the end of the Harlem Renaissance, explaining that by this time, "we were no longer in vogue anyway, we

⁶³ Heap, *Slumming*, 66.

⁶⁴ Karl Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

Negroes. Sophisticated New Yorkers turned to Noel Coward...[P]atrons found other uses for their money.”⁶⁵ Before the stock market crashed, *Variety* reported in mid-October of 1929 that Harlem’s “night life now surpasses that of Broadway itself...Never has it been more popular.” According to *Variety*, Harlem was, at this time, home to eleven “class white trade night clubs” and more than five hundred “colored cabarets of lower ranks.”⁶⁶ However, by 1932, only three major night clubs were still in operation in Harlem. Both of the clubs where Bentley got her start, the Clam House and the Mad House, had gone out of business. In describing the state of nightlife in Harlem, one journalist remarked that “Harlem’s famous Jungle Alley—133d St.—now looks exactly like 132d and 134th Sts., is replete with laundries, employment agencies and the like.”⁶⁷

Because of the continued popularity of queer cabaret performers and shows, the pansy and lesbian craze relocated to more mainstream nightspots in New York’s Times Square.⁶⁸ Local authorities permitted these nightspots to operate relatively unimpeded until the mid 1930s, largely due to the popularity of this type of entertainment among affluent New Yorkers.⁶⁹ However, even in Times Square, employment was uncertain. As *Variety* noted in 1931, “show business, as the current year closes out, is in the most chaotic condition it has ever known.”⁷⁰

While patrons were beginning to abandon Harlem, Bentley’s wealth and social status were increasing. The popularity of queer cabaret performers and shows had allowed some performers such as Bentley to avoid the immediate brunt of the

⁶⁵ Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 334.

⁶⁶ “Night in Black Belt,” *Variety*, October 16, 1929, 1.

⁶⁷ “Capsule Comment,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 19, 1932.

⁶⁸ Heap, *Slumming*, 70.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 73.

⁷⁰ Lewis Ernberg, “From New York to Middletown: Repeal and the Legitimization of Nightlife in the Great Depression,” *American Quarterly* 38, no. 5 (Winter 1986): 763.

Depression. By this time, Bentley had been discovered by a group of white patrons, chief among them Carl Van Vechten. What precisely drew Van Vechten and other patrons to Bentley is unclear. Bentley appears to have served as the inspiration for one of the musicians in Van Vechten's novel *Parties: Scenes from Contemporary New York Life*. In it, Van Vechten describes the musician as someone who "does her hair so her head looks like a wet seal and when she pounds the piano the dawn comes up like thunder."⁷¹ The characterization is similar to that of Langston Hughes' in that both Hughes and Van Vechten indicate that Bentley regularly performed all night at the Clam House. However, other than this short description it is unclear what exactly it was about Bentley that caught the eye of wealthy patrons.

In the spring of 1930, Bentley moved to downtown New York.⁷² Because of the continued patronage of wealthy white New Yorkers, in 1931, Bentley was able to open her own club on 136th Street that was known as "Barbara's Exclusive Club," which she ran for several years.⁷³ By 1933, she had moved into a \$300-a-month apartment on 77th street and Park Avenue, where she employed a small staff of servants. She began performing in tailor-made tuxedos, complete with a matching top hat and cane. According to Bentley, the clubs she worked on Park Avenue "overflowed with celebrities and big star names nightly." In addition, during this time, Bentley reported that she played a number of private affairs for New York's mayor, Jimmy Walker.⁷⁴ The end of Harlem Renaissance and the economic decline of Harlem during the Great Depression lead to a shift in Bentley's career. Instead of playing for interracial audiences as she had

⁷¹ Carl Van Vechten, *Parties: Scenes from Contemporary New York Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), 45.

⁷² Bentley, "I am a Woman Again," 94, and "Broadway Chatter," *Variety*, April 2, 1930, 56.

⁷³ "Capsule Comment," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 25, 1931.

⁷⁴ Bentley, "I am a Woman Again," 94.

at the Mad House and the Clam House, Bentley began playing primarily in “white clubs,” such as King’s Terrace, for primarily white audiences.⁷⁵

By 1934, Bentley returns to Harlem, seemingly having lost the support of her patrons or having been forced out of the white clubs that she regularly performed in, her own club having previously been shut down for unknown reasons. Given the increase in regulation surrounding the sale of alcohol following the Repeal of Prohibition in 1933, Bentley was likely forced out of white clubs due to her sexuality and the content of her performances. Before her return to Harlem, Bentley had been a headliner at a club in Broadway known as King’s Terrace. A few weeks after a police investigation into Bentley’s songs, the police had shut down the club. One journalist noted that “it was as good as a fact that the findings of the police investigations into the lewd ballads of Gladys Bentley...would chase that dame to more secluded recesses.”⁷⁶ The police investigations were successful, and Bentley left Broadway for Harlem.

The Repeal of Prohibition in 1933 and the subsequent passing of regulations regarding the sale of alcohol had a profound effect on nightlife in New York. Prohibition had failed in New York. Instead of preventing people from drinking and socializing in improper ways, Prohibition had led to the growth of an underground economy of speakeasies. When surveyed in 1933, political, civic, and business leaders cited “bootlegging, racketeering...defiance of law...hypocrisy, the breakdown of governmental machinery, [and] the demoralization in public and private life” as being among the most dangerous consequences of Prohibition.⁷⁷ The Repeal of Prohibition

⁷⁵Bentley, “I am a Woman Again,” 94, and “King’s Terrace,” [Ad], *New York Daily Mirror*, September 8, 1933.

⁷⁶ “New York Police’s War on Cafes Ends,” *Chicago Defender*, April 7, 1934.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 231.

helped to legitimize night clubs, and respectable entrepreneurs such as John D. Rockefeller and Vincent Astor began opening their own night clubs. Thanks to the Repeal of Prohibition, these “legitimate” night clubs could now compete with the Prohibition-era speakeasies that were run by mobsters and gangsters.⁷⁸ The construction of legitimate night clubs helped to remove associations with criminal activity such as bootlegging and racketeering. This newfound sense of legitimacy helped to revive nightlife in New York.

In 1934, the state of New York created the State Liquor Authority (SLA) and the Division of Alcoholic Beverage Control. In the SLA’s first annual report, the SLA stated that one of the main purposes of the agency was to provide for “the protection, health, welfare and safety of the people of the State.” In order to achieve this goal, the SLA was granted exclusive authority to license the sale of alcohol.⁷⁹

Ironically, the Repeal of Prohibition led to an era of increased surveillance and control. By passing new liquor regulations, the SLA was effectively able to police urban sexuality. The SLA’s regulations often targeted gays and lesbians, seeking to remove them from the public sphere. In an effort to “prevent the return of the saloon,” the SLA required that licensed establishments not “suffer or permit such premises to become disorderly.”⁸⁰ This rule had an immense impact on the gay and lesbian community in New York. While the SLA did not pass legislation that explicitly prohibited bars from serving homosexuals, they made it clear that the presence of gay men and lesbians made an establishment “disorderly.” During the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, the SLA closed hundreds

⁷⁸ Ernberg, “From New York to Middletown,” 767.

⁷⁹ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 232.

⁸⁰ Alcoholic Beverage Control Law, section 106, subdivision 6, quoted in Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 232.

of bars and nightclubs that encouraged or tolerated the presence of gay men and lesbians. Because of the exclusive power of the SLA to grant liquor licenses, bars and nightclubs that served even a single person who was suspected of being a homosexual could potentially lose their liquor license.⁸¹

The pansy and lesbian craze survived for a few more years in New York despite increased regulations and police intervention. However, after Repeal, hiring queer performers and putting on queer cabaret shows became riskier for night clubs in downtown New York. They could potentially lose their liquor license through their association with queer performers and patrons. Some performers left downtown New York, looking for clubs that were willing to take the risk of hiring them. Because of this, the pansy and lesbian craze relocated to Harlem during the last few years of the craze, temporarily revitalizing the “Negro vogue.”⁸²

Almost immediately upon returning to Harlem, Bentley headlined the Lafayette Revue at the Lafayette Theatre in a one-time performance. Bentley’s show at the Lafayette Theatre took the spectacle of her early performances in Harlem and magnified it. Gone were the days that Bentley sang all night long, accompanying herself on piano. According to Langston Hughes, by the time Bentley returned to Harlem, she had acquired an accompanist and sang pre-written lyrics rather than improvising them during performances⁸³ Bentley’s performances were beginning to become thought-out large-scale productions, requiring her to acquire an accompanist.

Despite increased regulations policing one’s sexuality, Bentley continued to make an effort to intentionally confuse boundaries between genders. According to one critic,

⁸¹ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 339.

⁸² Heap, *Slumming*, 72.

⁸³ Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 225.

Bentley appeared at the Lafayette Theatre with a troupe of six pansies who referred to her as a “gorgeous man,” while she referred to them as “‘fellows’ and then apologizes to them for so doing.” Detailing his discomfort with the ways in which the troupe expressed their gender, the critic also noted that “if these boys were put into dresses they would be indistinguishable from the chorines.”⁸⁴ Another critic described Bentley’s revue as a “first class portrayals of sex perversion.”⁸⁵ Bentley made a spectacle out of the conjectural nature of gender, questioning the boundaries between male and female and refuting perceived binary nature of gender. While reviewers were increasingly critical of the ways in which Bentley questioned the boundaries between genders, Bentley enjoyed continued support from some reviewers. Alvin Moses, for example, wrote of Bentley’s performance at Tondaleyo’s in 1944 that “If there is any name on our morning patrol along the Broadway rialto that out rates that of Gladys Bentley as a draw—you call me up and tell me who is the owner of it.”⁸⁶

Soon after Bentley’s performance at the Lafayette Theatre, the Ubangi Club opened in Harlem with Bentley as one of their headliners.⁸⁷ The Ubangi Club, located at 131st Street and 7th Avenue, was born out of efforts to rebrand and revitalize Connie’s Inn. The Ubangi Club proved to be wildly popular among white slummers. Throughout 1936, *The New Yorker* listed the Ubangi Club as one of its top after-theater hot spot in its “Goings On About Town” column—a designation which had previously been granted to only two other Harlem cabarets, the Cotton Club and Connie’s Inn.⁸⁸ Like the Cotton Club and Connie’s Inn, the Ubangi Club relied heavily upon exoticism and novelty as

⁸⁴ “Lafayette Theatre,” *The New York Age*, April 14, 1934.

⁸⁵ Vere E. Johns, “In the Name of Art,” *The New York Age*, April 28, 1934.

⁸⁶ “Night Club Reviews: Tondaleyo’s New York,” *The Billboard*, November 4, 1944.

⁸⁷ “Ubangi Club Opening,” *The New York Age*, April 14, 1934.

⁸⁸ Heap, *Slumming*, 77.

tools to draw in crowds of white downtowners. The name was intended to evoke associations with Africa through the “suggestion of voodooism.”⁸⁹ However, rather than rely on the exoticism and novelty associated with African Americans, the Ubangi Club was a hit because it emphasized the exoticism and novelty of queer performers. In addition, the decline of queer cabaret shows in Times Square and Broadway, enhanced possibilities for a queer cabaret show in New York.

Bentley’s show at the Ubangi Club created an even bigger spectacle than her show at the Lafayette Theatre. At the Ubangi Club, Bentley was joined on stage by a troupe of forty to fifty pansies, a marked increase from the six she had at the Lafayette Theatre.⁹⁰ Though Bentley appear to have lost at least some of her earlier patronage, the fact that had a troupe of forty to fifty chorines during the depression indicates that white patrons continued to indulge in “exotic,” queer entertainment. Bentley continued gaining notoriety for her scandalous lyrics, though they were pre-written now rather than ad-libbed. She added songs to her set to further make a spectacle out of gender such as her one about “Nothing now perplexes like the sexes, because when you see them switch you can’t tell which is which.”⁹¹ Throughout the 1930s, Bentley was able to remain relevant and successful despite the impact of the Depression on nightlife and the passing of SLA regulations that targeted gays and lesbians. Her revue provided an experience outside the realm of what was offered in downtown New York, as many of the queer cabarets in downtown New York had already been shut down by the SLA.

⁸⁹ “Theatricals,” *New York Age*, April 14, 1934.

⁹⁰ “Here’s What Happens at Harlem’s Famous Ubangi Club: Writer Lets You Spend a Night in the Gotham Hot Spot,” *Afro-American*, February 8, 1936.

⁹¹ “Here’s What Happens at Harlem’s Famous Ubangi Club: Writer Lets You Spend a Night in the Gotham Hot Spot,” *Afro-American*, February 8, 1936.

Despite the popularity of Bentley and other entertainers who questioned gender norms, they certainly were not without criticism. In describing a show that Bentley headlined at Harlem's Opera House, one critic referred to it as "one of the rankest revues this commentator has witnessed in many a moon." The critic called upon readers to stop supporting acts such as Bentley, stating that "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?"⁹² Reviews such as this were a double-edged sword—the notoriety helped to increase the prestige of their show in some circles, but it also led to increased pressure put on clubs by police.

Bentley was not able to escape the impact of SLA regulations or police raids. The Ubangi Club experienced several police investigations, but they allowed to continue operation for a number of years, while hundreds of other clubs were shut down. According to Wilbur Young, Bentley "toned her songs down somewhat so they were now called risqué" rather than filthy.⁹³ Due to pressure from the police, the pansy chorus was also replaced with female dancers known as the Ubanettes a few years after the opening of the Ubangi Club. The owners of the Ubangi Club were known to have connections to the mafia, and may have simply been paying off the local police to avoid being shut down like King's Terrace had been. As one columnist noted, although Bentley's act at King's Terrace had been "raided in short order when commissioner John F. O'Ryan took

⁹² "Washboard Serenaders Feature at Opera House," *The New York Age*, September 15, 1934.

⁹³ Young, "Gladys Bentley," from *Biographical Sketches: Negroes of New York*.

charge,” less than two months later, she and her “effeminate retinue” were allowed to headline Harlem’s Ubangi Club “under the very eyes of the local police.”⁹⁴

By this time, Bentley had lost support from many of the local Harlemites, focusing her attention on the patronage of wealthy whites. Like the Connie’s Inn before it, Harlemites censured the Ubangi for catering to white patrons. Some chastised Bentley for deserting Harlem for “the swankier and lighter part of life,” electing to live “among the (ofay) socially prominent”⁹⁵ One journalist described the Ubangi as “owned and controlled by white racketeers for the patronage of slumming whites and petty gangsters,” asserting that the Ubangi offended “the solid colored citizens who are forced to live near the joints.”⁹⁶ Another journalist described the Ubangi as a “canker” growing within New York’s black community, “produced and fostered by and for low-minded white[s] and performed by cheap, grasping Moses,” comparing the black cabaret performers of the Ubangi Club to the “Mose” character common in minstrel shows.⁹⁷ In addition, Bentley’s performances, which relied upon “low class” humor and sought out shock value, stood in contrast to social uplift politics espoused by the black middle class.

By the spring of 1937, Harlem’s pansy and lesbian craze had largely run its course. Local authorities had shut down most of New York’s queer night spots, citing them for being “disorderly” due to the presence of queer patrons and entertainers. Signaling the end of the pansy and lesbian craze in Harlem, the SLA revoked the Ubangi Club’s liquor license in April of 1937.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Roi Ottley, “This Hectic Harlem,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 19, 1934

⁹⁵ “Ofay” is a usually disparaging word used to describe white people—Eric Von Wilkinson, “Gallivanting About Brooklyn,” *The New York Age*, January 14, 1933.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Heap, *Slumming*, 252.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*

⁹⁸ “The Ubangi Club Loses License to Sell Liquor,” *New York Herald Tribune*, April 16, 1937.

CHAPTER 6

DECLINE AND FALL INTO OBSCURITY: 1938 to 1960

With the end of the pansy and lesbian craze in New York in 1937, Bentley played a series of short engagements around the United States. After leaving the Ubangi Club in April, Bentley performed for a couple of months at the Picadilly Room in Philadelphia. Here she returned to playing for African American patrons rather than affluent whites. As an experiment, the Picadilly Room had sought to put on both a white revue and a black revue simultaneously.⁹⁹ However, Bentley and a few other performers left the show in June because “the feeling between the two races became near the breaking point.”¹⁰⁰ Race tensions had proved to be too high to allow the experiment to be seen as a success. After leaving the Picadilly Room, Bentley continued to play a series of short engagements at venues in different cities. In February of 1938, she starred in the “Harlem in Swing” revue at the Harlem Casino in Pittsburgh.¹⁰¹ In April, she headlined the Swingland cafe in St. Louis.¹⁰² At all of these clubs, Bentley continued to wear her signature tuxedo; however, it is unclear whether she was permitted to continue singing her scandalous songs or if she updated her repertoire.

In July of 1938, Bentley left for Hollywood in attempt to revive her career. Bentley told a reporter with the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* that she was going to Hollywood

⁹⁹ “Putting White and Negro Niteries Under 1 Roof,” *Variety*, May 12, 1937, 49.

¹⁰⁰ “Black and Tan Revue Can’t Hit,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 3, 1937.

¹⁰¹ “Gladys Bentley Joins Harlem Casino Show,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 31, 1938, and “Gladys Bentley Big Hit at Harlem Casino,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, February 18, 1938.

¹⁰² “Orchestra to Play Big Top in St. Louis,” *The Chicago Defender*, April 23, 1938.

in order to make a movie for Warner Brothers based on her own career, adding that she had written the music for the film as well.”¹⁰³ However, it is unclear whether Bentley was actually traveling to Hollywood to work out the detail of a possible film, or if she was simply trying to inflate her own sense of celebrity. Regardless, Bentley continued performing short engagements with local venues in Hollywood such as the Mermaid Club.¹⁰⁴

By 1940, Bentley was back in Harlem, performing at a revival of the Ubangi Club. The revival proved to be short-lived. After a tabloid columnist for the *New York Daily Mirror* mentioned Bentley, the police swiftly “ordered the club to close and asked that Gladys look for fertile grounds in Jersey or some other state.”¹⁰⁵ The relative freedom of the 1920s has passed, and throughout the 1930s the SLA and vice squad increasingly policed individuals’ sexualities.

From 1940 to 1945, Bentley performed at several clubs that offered gay entertainment for largely gay audiences, including Hollywood's Rose Room, Mona's 440 in San Francisco, and Joaquin's El Rancho in Los Angeles. While the pansy and lesbian craze had run its course, SLA regulations had ironically spurred the creation of exclusively gay bars, allowing queer night life to continue throughout the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. Rather than gays and lesbians from the public sphere, SLA regulations helped to foster the creation of exclusively gay bars. After Repeal, bar owners risked losing their liquor license if they served a single person suspected of being a homosexual. As a result, most bar owners became reluctant to serve gays and lesbians,

¹⁰³ “Local Scrappings,” *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, February 7, 1938.

¹⁰⁴ “Earl J. Morris in Grand Town,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 16, 1938.

¹⁰⁵ Monroe, Al. “Swingin’ the News,” *The Chicago Defender*, June 15, 1940.

leading to the growth of exclusively gay bars.¹⁰⁶ Due to SLA regulation in different states and the frequency of police raids, most gay bars lasted only a few months or years.¹⁰⁷

Because of police and SLA harassment, gay bars and performers at gay bars like Bentley had to keep moving and relocating. Bentley began experiencing problems with the police almost immediately after arriving at Joaquin's El Rancho and at Mona's 440 in 1940. The clubs were required to obtain special permits that allowed Bentley to perform wearing pants rather than a skirt.¹⁰⁸

Bentley performed periodically at Mona's 440 from 1940 to 1945. Mona's openly advertised itself as a lesbian club, and as such, had a number of incidents with the police, relocating several times. According to Reba Hudson, a San Franciscan who frequented gay bars during the 40s and 50s, San Francisco had been home to several gay bars in the 40s and 50s, but "they were mainly run by straight people because if a gay person was openly gay, they could not get a liquor license. So straight people ran them and hired gay people."¹⁰⁹ In addition, police were known to intimidate and threaten people in attempt to dissuade them from going to gay bars.

While Mona's 440 was a lesbian bar, it was also a tourist destination. Throughout the 1940s, Mona's was featured in several "underground" tourist guides such as *Where to Sin in San Francisco*, which noted that "the little girl waitresses look like boys. The little-girls-who-sing-sweet-song look like boys. And many of the little girl customers look like

¹⁰⁶ Heap, *Slumming*, 247-248.

¹⁰⁷ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 339.

¹⁰⁸ Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 185.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Reba Hudson in Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 63.

boys.”¹¹⁰ Mona’s slogan at the time was “The Place Where Girls Will Be Boys.”¹¹¹ Here, Bentley was once again able to make a spectacle out of gender and sexuality.

In 1944, Bentley returned to Broadway, performing nightly at Tondaleyo’s. At Tondaleyo’s, Bentley sought to recapture some of her fame of the early 1930s, again performing risqué ballads for wealthy white patrons in her signature tuxedo. However, Bentley’s show seems to have lost some of its appeal for wealthy white New Yorkers. In 1944, a critic for *Billboard* reported that, while talented, Bentley “wears out her welcome,” adding that her “costume makes her look grotesque.”¹¹² Reviews of Bentley’s performance at the Apollo in 1945, another downtown venue in New York, were similarly tepid, a critic for *Variety* remarked that Bentley’s performance was “far from a triumph.”¹¹³

In 1950, Bentley returned to Los Angeles in order to take care of her ailing mother. During the 50s, Bentley had come under the scrutiny of the U.S. House Committee on Un-American Activities because of her same-sex marriage in New Jersey. Pressure on queer performers had increased throughout the 1950s thanks to the McCarthy-Age witch hunt conducted against homosexuals.¹¹⁴ In order to counteract mounting fears against homosexuals, Bentley sanitized her act—she began performing traditional blues wearing women’s clothing. During this time, Bentley released her autobiographical piece in *Ebony* magazine “I am a Woman Again,” retreating into the social norms that she had previously contested. In 1958, she made an appearance on *You Bet Your Life*, Groucho Marx’s game show. In place of her signature top hat and tuxedo, she wore extravagant-

¹¹⁰ Boyd, *Wide-Open Town* 69.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, 65.

¹¹² “Night Club Reviews: Tondaleyo’s New York,” *The Billboard*, November 4, 1944.

¹¹³ “House Reviews: Apollo, N.Y.,” *Variety*, May 16, 1945, 49.

¹¹⁴ Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 185.

looking jewelry and a dress, eschewing masculinity and embracing her femininity. Instead of singing risqué, parodies of popular “white” songs, she performed a sanitized, lyrically unaltered version of “Them There Eyes,” a popular jazz song.¹¹⁵ Further cementing this idea of Bentley as an upstanding moral citizen, Bentley began preaching the gospel, becoming an ordained minister at the Temple of Love in Christ Church a few weeks before her death in 1960.¹¹⁶

Despite this apparent shift, it is unclear to what extent Bentley actually embraced the norms that she previously shunned. A defamatory article in the *Chicago Defender* reported published in 1957 that soon after her publication of “I am a Woman Again,” Bentley “returned to her old ways.” To support this point, the journalist relayed an incident in which one of Bentley’s friends inquired about two pictures on Bentley’s dresser, to which Bentley replied: “That’s my husband (pointing to the male) and that’s my wife.”¹¹⁷ However, this incident was not corroborated in any other newspapers. On the other hand, Bentley did continue to perform at the Rose Room, a gay club in Hollywood, throughout the 1950s, though she performed a sanitized version of her act and wore a dress.¹¹⁸

Bentley became famous thanks to her nightclub routines that challenged divisions between men and women, blacks and whites, high class and low class, and homosexual and heterosexual. Like other black performers and other gender-queer performers, Bentley shaped aspects of her public identity in order to achieve success

¹¹⁵ Marx, Groucho. *You Bet Your Life* (filmed April 1958 and broadcast May 15, 1958). Episode #57-34 on DVD on *You Bet Your Life: The Best Episodes*. Produced by Paul Brownstein. Shout Factory and National Broadcast Company, 2004.

¹¹⁶ “Zig and Zag with Ziggy Johnson,” *The Chicago Defender*, April 18, 1959.

¹¹⁷ Alfred. “The Third Sex.” *The Chicago Defender*, March 2, 1957.

¹¹⁸ “Pneumonia Claims Gladys Bentley,” *Los Angeles Tribune*, January 21, 1960.

throughout her career. However, even as she retreated back into social norms towards the end of her career, she continued to subtly challenge social norms, finding success despite SLA regulations and continuing to perform at gay clubs despite having already sworn off that lifestyle.

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