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How Does a Bulldagger Get Out of the Footnote? Or, Gladys Bentley's Blues

Miss Bentley was an amazing exhibition of musical energy—
a large, dark, masculine lady, whose feet pounded
the floor while her fingers pounded the keyboard—
a perfect piece of African Sculpture,
animated by her own rhythm.

~ *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes

During the last twenty to thirty years discussions about the gender and sexual preferences of the younger talented tenth of the Harlem Renaissance—1924 to early 1930s—artists, performers, writers, and singers, have challenged the heteronormal perception of this elite group. There is one blues singer whose reputation and image appear in discussions of literary artists from this period and in a very public way embody an insurgent encounter to conventional gender identities. Blues cabaret entertainer, Gladys Bentley, to whom Hughes refers in the opening epigraph, gained popularity with her spirited lyrical renditions of popular melodies that she often performed in formal masculine attire. The colloquial term used for some Negro, masculine, women was bulldagger. At that time “bulldagger” was not a pejorative term in the Black community; they “...are associated with physical strength, sexual prowess, emotional reserve, and butch chivalry. The term has roots in African-American communities of the early twentieth century, especially with the 1920s Harlem where sexual and gender mores were more flexible” (“bulldagger”).

According to Jeanne Flash Gray, “who participated in Harlem gay life in the late 1930s and 1940s,...’There were many places in Harlem run by and for Black Lesbians and Gay Men, when we were still Bull Dagggers and Faggots and only whites were lesbians and homosexuals” (qtd. in E. Garber 1989, 331). One is awed by even a cursory exploration of Bentley as a Black woman musician/entertainer who, during the Harlem Renaissance and beyond, publicly claimed her right to exist openly as a cross-dressing lesbian and later as a bisexual who defied conventions of gender normalcy. When discussing the contributions and personalities of others to the Harlem Renaissance, for example, Bentley is often referred to in autobiographies, biographies and novels from the period because of her unprecedented cabaret performance and audacious lifestyle. Her public and private life reveals a woman to whom others should be made aware; she, openly and unapologetically, crossed boundaries of gender, race, sex and class.

Her visibility and popularity as a confident, blues, cross-dressing performer in a dominant White, patriarchal, heteronormal culture makes Bentley worthy of recognition beyond the footnotes in the stories of other Harlem Renaissance writers, entertainment columns and novels of the era. Beginning in childhood Bentley’s bold ownership of a masculine self-expression clashed with her sociopolitical environment making her family, school mates and

acquaintances aware of her challenge to heteronormal culture, class, and gender perceptions.

Bentley recalled being teased by her school mates, at the age of nine or ten, for wearing her brothers' suits to school. During the first decades of the twentieth century one can imagine a rigid public school dress code aesthetic for girls and boys—girls were always in dresses, jumpers or skirts unless participating in sports or other athletic activities. In 1917, her style choice of a boy's suit suggests leadership, independence, self-dignity, and a middle- to upper-class self-construction. Moreover as a young girl, in elementary school, her play with professional masculine fashion posed a threat to a heteronormal environment. Young Bentley acted on her vision of how she wanted to dress and be viewed—as a stylish young dandy.¹ Consequently, she remembered “I had withstood the fun poked at me by my schoolmates who followed me in the street. Now, I tried to withstand my parents, but they got after me so often [for cross dressing] that we finally compromised, agreeing that I would wear middy blouses and skirts” (Bentley 1952). It appears that Bentley, the first of four children, born to a working-class family, was determined to be comfortable—on her terms—and visible in public school wearing her brothers' suits. As a girl/child crossing a rigid gender role construct Bentley, in 1917, did not view herself as defective in any way.

More recently, psychologist B. Greene (2000) finds in American society, “lesbians violate a fundamental cultural rule. By crossing the boundaries of gender role expectations, lesbians are deemed defective women who want to be men and are socially subordinate to heterosexual women”. Race, gender, class, and sex are all recognizable components in the speakeasy blues singing spectacle of Gladys Bentley. Greene maintains that such elements must be taken into consideration when examining the lives and experiences of Black women and, particularly, Black lesbians. In U.S. culture, Black women have been considered deviant representations of womanhood since enslavement. “Black women are victims that are once again the ‘other’ of the ‘other,’ the deviants of the deviants, regardless of their sexual identities or practices” (Hammonds, 2002). Young Bentley, perhaps oblivious to the sticky terrain of early twentieth century gender role rules but aware of her surroundings responded to her desire and aesthetic taste early. She was such a spectacle in school teachers sent her home to change into what was considered appropriate clothing. It would be at least forty years before girls were allowed to wear slacks/pants in public school classrooms. Bentley accepted herself and developed an early coping mechanisms against homophobia.²

¹ Dandy is defined as “one whose style is carefully considered and often, as a result, is more self-conscious and deliberate...this self-consciousness, ...mobilizes the figure's currency. ...dandies must choose the vocation, must commit to a study of the fashions that define them and an examination of the trends around which they can continually redefine themselves” Miller, (2010) *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of black Diasporic Identity* (Durham: Duke UP).

² Greene (2000) finds “Most African American women develop a sense of awareness as an African American person long before they are aware that they are lesbian. This means that the development of healthy coping mechanisms against homophobia may be delayed.” 247.

In addition to her choice of bourgeois, masculine clothing, she was charmed by her elementary school teacher: "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" (Bentley 1952). A clear, disruption of "typical" feminine behavior caused her mother to take Bentley from doctor to doctor. "They just didn't know how to cope with a situation which to them was at once startling and disgraceful" (Bentley 1952). She described herself as an unwanted, lonely, large child who always looked older than she was. Armed with youth and a strong sense of self-identity and, seemingly, less influenced by her family, professionals or culture she joined the mass of Black folk who migrated to Harlem. Bentley's trip however was a bit shorter as she moved from Philadelphia to Harlem in 1923, at the age of sixteen; rather than from the south to the north as did many African Americans, specifically blues singers.

Bentley is unique in many ways. Many of the great trail blazing blues women migrated from the South to the North—Bessie Smith, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Beulah "Sippie" Wallace, Bertha "Chippie" Hill, Ida Cox and others; and many of the women performed in tent shows, carnivals and in vaudeville (Carby, 1986). Their primary audiences were Blacks from the south to the north. "The blues artist speaks directly of and to the folk who have suffered pain and assures them that they are not alone; someone understands" (Harrison, 1990). Bentley, it appears, managed to avoid the rugged migratory performing life of carnivals, tent shows and vaudeville being fortunate enough, after arriving in New York, to record "eight record sides" with the help of a Broadway agent (Bentley 1952).

In the opening epigraph Hughes recalls Bentley as being one of the musical highlights of the "Black Renaissance." As a performer, Bentley embodied talent, wit, desire and a self-acceptance that few individuals owned. Perhaps it is her public owning of her masculine/feminine self, gender and desire with a melding of improvisation blues lyrics that has rendered Gladys Alberta Bentley a footnote in the history of the Harlem Renaissance?

Typically the blues women came from working class backgrounds where they faced paradigms of power reminding them daily that Black women were considered inferior beings. Davis (1998) finds that "Blues women were expected to deviate from the norms defining orthodox female behavior." As a young blues singing woman she could certainly bring all the curiosity, pain and rejection from her early years to her performances. Blues women of the 1920s and 1930s were well-known for their honest interpretations of the experiences of their sisters and communities probably leaving mainstream culture shocked that Black women would publicly sing about such private subjects. There does not seem to be another popular blues performer today to rival the act and persona of Bentley. Philadelphia is home to a well-established Negro bourgeois community; yet she describes her family as poor and it appears middle and upper-class influences attracted Bentley to a dandy style of dress (Bentley 1952).

Bentley's on-stage drag king style combined with her risqué lyrics produced a blues performance that flaunted her lesbianism and directly challenged heteronormal gender politics. In addition to accompanying herself on

the piano, appearing in top hat and tails, she “specialized in outrageous ad libs of popular tunes, turning the most tender ballads into raunchy anthems to which her audiences gaily sang along” (Hutchinson, 2006). She physically occupied a privileged space exuding a confident, Black lesbian masculine sexuality. According to Murphy (2003) “a popular song in her repertoire bore the title ‘Sissy Man’s Blues’”. “Sissy Man Blues” is credited to Kokomo Arnold whose famous line is “Lord, if you can’t send me a woman, please send me some sissy man.” There were other songs and blues singers who sang about same sex relationships and specifically bulldaggers also referred to as ‘BD.’ For example, Bessie Jackson, (also known as Lucille Bogan,) sang about rough bulldaggers in her “B.D. Woman’s Blues.” A line from “B.D. Woman’s Blues” proclaims “Comin’ a time, BD women, they ain’t gonna need no men. Oh, the way they treat us is a low down and dirty thing” (Faderman 1991). Clearly, there was a market for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered) performers and music. The lyrics had various meanings depending on the audience’s gender; it could be considered affirming for lesbians, suggestive and encouraging to some bisexual females and provocative for heterosexual men (Faderman 1991). Mabel Hampton, an African American lesbian who migrated to New York in the 1920s, recalls that when she and her friends gave parties “most of the women wore suits...most of them had short hair. And most of them was good-lookin’ women too. There was singles and couples because the girls just come and bring—the bulldykers used to come and bring their women with them, you know” (Nestle, 1993). “Yes, New York is a good place to be a lesbian. You learns so much and you see so much,” affirmed Hampton (Nestle, 1993).

Talent, wit, confidence and self-assurance were characteristics found in popular blues women. In her study of prominent blues women Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billy Holiday, Davis asserts:

The blues women openly challenged the gender politics implicit in traditional cultural representations of marriage and heterosexual love relationships. Refusing, in the blues tradition of raw realism, to romanticize romantic relationships, they instead exposed the stereotypes and explored the contradictions of those relationships. By so doing, they redefined women’s “place.” They forged and memorialized images of tough, resilient, and independent women who were afraid neither of their own vulnerability nor of defending their right to be respected as autonomous human beings.

Blues women of the 1920s and 1930s acknowledged the conditions of their sisters when they sang about love, love lost, abusive love, travel, sex and the day to day experiences of working-class Black women. Blues was considered racially specific and the records of the time were known as “race records.” The classification “race records” alerted a “respectable” White public to recordings that were considered inappropriate for decent listeners. During its early recordings blues women dominated the genre. Further, the legendary Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith, neither of whom conformed to

bourgeois notions of womanhood, also sang and wrote about dating and loving women among other topics.³ Hence, their intra-gendered affairs were not restricted to a private realm. Rainey's 1928 song "Prove It On Me Blues" is about a cross dressing lesbian. Rainey's lyrics announce:

Went out last night with a crowd of my friends
They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men
It's true I wear a collar and a tie... (Davis 1998).

Cross dressing and women privileging the company of other women are examples of lyrics that assertively proclaimed a public defiance of patriarchal heterosexual culture. Unlike Bentley, Rainey and Smith were not known as cross dressing performers and "their physical presence was a crucial aspect of their power; the visual display of spangled dresses, of furs, of gold teeth, of diamonds of all the sumptuous and desirable aspects of their body reclaimed female sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire" (Carby 1986).

The lifestyles of Rainey, Smith, Ethel Waters among other blues singing women, embraced their bisexuality in public ways. Rainey was indiscreet about her lesbian affairs. She was said to have initiated Bessie Smith into lesbianism, who though also married participated in lesbian relationships.

Alberta Hunter, another blues singer, married in 1919 to obfuscate the conclusion she knew many people drew that she was a "bulldiker," and she apparently reasoned that although she did not live with her husband, marriage gave her a protective coloration—not of heterosexuality, which would have been going too far in favor of conservatism, but of bisexuality (Faderman 1991).

Socialite A'Lelia Walker probably influenced some members of the middle to upper classes in Harlem to accept bisexuality if they wanted to remain in her company and among her well-traveled guests.⁴ "...Walker threw large and popular cross-race, cross-gender, and cross-class parties; lesbian 'marriages' were celebrated with exuberant panache" (Vicinus, 1992).

Unquestionably Bentley was a controversial entertainer who performed mixing masculine and feminine attire to tuxedos. April 7, 1934 the *Chicago Defender* describes her as the "masculine-garbed, smut-singing entertainer" at the King's Terrace (8). After she mysteriously left the New York police padlocked the nightspot. The article went on to report that "...the findings of the police investigations into the lewd ballads of Gladys Bentley, importation from the Exclusive Club [where she performed prior to King's Terrace] ...would chase that dame to more secluded recesses" (1934, p. 8). Gossip columnist Walter Winchel mentioned her in a 1940 column "...and three nights later the law ordered the club to close and asked that Gladys look for fertile grounds in Jersey or some

³ Harrison (1990) details the evolution of race records for Black women .

⁴ A'Lelia Walker is the daughter of the famous beauty entrepreneur Sarah Breedlove better known as Madame C. J. Walker.

other state" (Monroe, 1940). Bentley fascination and popularity can be witnessed in the entertainment section of the Negro newspapers, autobiographies, biographies and fiction works.

Niles (1931) novel, *Strange Brother*, constructs a character named Sybil, who is clearly based on Bentley. Through a character named June, Sybil is described in detail:

"She looks like the heart of Africa...the heart of darkness! And the way she's dressed!"

"June watched, fascinated at the way rhythm possessed Sybil's great clumsy figure.

"For Sybil's big feet wore old, down-at-the-heel, black oxford ties. Sybil's legs were in gray cotton stocking. A short tight black cloth skirt was stretched taut about Sybil's heavy thighs. A white blouse and dark coat clothed Sybil's shapeless torso. And set close to her shoulders was Sybil's head; with its protruding lower jaw, its flat receding brow, and its hair, oiled and brushed to an unnatural straightness, as though the hair were Sybil's one vanity.

"Phil she is extraordinary!...But this Sybil is just an untidy fat woman! Putting herself over by sheer genius...nothing but sheer genius!" (Niles 1991)

Bentley was a well-known entertainer at the "Clam House" and the fictional Sybil performs at the "Lobster Pot." June sees "an untidy fat woman" until she hears Sybil sing; "at the sound of her deep man's voice coming suddenly into the room, June started and exclaimed softly, 'God!'" (Niles 1991). The physical description suggests half of Sybil's attire is more feminine than the other and she appears almost primate like.

According to Bentley, the unique aspect of her actual 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" (Bentley 1952). In the political economy of cross dressing "traversing the boundary from female-to-male also involves tres-passing onto the terrain of another class. The trajectory of female-to-male is not always correlated with upward mobility, obviously; the butch aesthetic focuses attention on working-class clothing and style" (M. Garber 1993). Some audience members believed Bentley was a man, a male transvestite while others said she was a lesbian (Harrison 1990). Her publicity photographs show her wearing lipstick with eyebrows shaped and darken in full dress white or black tie and tails. Likewise, performers Josephine Baker and Marlene Dietrich are also photographed and performed in top hat, tie and tails. It is considered Dietrich's signature costume and one that female impersonators don when imitating her (M. Garber 1993). "Lesbian styles of the twenties—men's formal dress, top hats and tails—popularized onstage by entertainers like Marlene Dietrich and Judy Garland, became high-fashion statements, menswear for women re-sexualized as straight (as well as gay) style" (M. Garber 1993).

Those in the entertainment field were well aware of Bentley's cross dressing performances. Cross dressing was fashionable and thus acceptable on Dietrich, Garland, Betty Grable and, in Europe, Josephine Baker. One wonders how much of an influence, if any, Bentley had on the chic cross-dressing women entertainers who, unlike Bentley, performed occasionally in drag. Further, her style of dress extended into her personal life. The perception of beauty, her race, skin tone, short hair, cross dressing, being overweight, and her blatant and continued flirtations with women, and voice limited Bentley's access to a larger audience. She was not and is not the mainstream culture's idea of a public woman entertainer. Nevertheless she had to be talented and charismatic to attract and hold audiences for thirty years. Her personal life was discussed as much as her cabaret acts.

Lesbian Marriage and Public Life

Widely publicized was her 1928 marriage to her White girlfriend in Atlantic City (Serlin 2004). Likewise the Sybil character is also married to a woman, Amy, in Niles' novel. Amy is described as so jealous management does not want her in the club: "She makes trouble. Can't stand it if a woman looks at me" (58). Sybil's relationship is portrayed as slightly conventional. She even has a visiting mother-in-law—albeit "Amy an I couldn't keep under cover one more day" (58). Amused, the other character responds: "You an' your mother-in-law! What'll I hear next! Next you'll be tellin' me that you and Amy are expectin' a son an' heir!" (58). The Sybil character is portrayed as approachable, friendly, charming, extremely personable and just as at home on stage as sitting and chatting with patrons. Affluent and upscale crowds adored Bentley and paid for private performances. At a celebration anticipating the publication of Nella Larsen's novel, *Passing*, for example, banking heir, Edward Wasserman hired Bentley to perform at thé dansant at his home (Hutchinson, 2006). Carl Van Vechten so enjoyed Bentley's performance he became her patron and hired her to entertain at one of his parties (Bentley 1952). In his 1930 novel *Parties*, a character describes an unnamed Bentley type jazz performer when talking to another:⁵

There's a girl up there now you oughta hear. She does her hair so her head looks like a wet seal and when she pounds the piano the dawn comes up like thunder. Say, she rocks the box, and tosses it, you can bet, and jumps it through hoops, and wait till you hear her sing Subway Papa and then go back to the farm and tell the folks and your pappy'll hitch lions to the plough instead o' mules (Vechten, 1993).

Although she does not mention names or gender Bentley recalls "I have known in their private unguarded moments, some of the most brilliant stars

⁵ Carl Van Vechten is an important chronicler of the Harlem Renaissance personalities and events. He maintained friendships with Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, among others.

whose fame has flashed across the fabulous Broadway and Hollywood scene” (Bentley 1952). In addition to Langston Hughes, Van Vechten and Wasserman many celebrities came to see Bentley, Cary Grant, Mary Astor, Bruce Cabot, Franchot Tone and his wife, Harold Jackman, Eslanda Robeson, J. P. Morgan, the Prince of Wales and Frances E. Williams among others (Bentley 1952; Serlin 2004; E. Garber, 1989).

A Black lesbian subculture seemed to flourish. Many upper and middle-class New Yorkers, by their support of gay performers, appeared to accept homosexuality, at least among African Americans. “...in Harlem tolerance extended to such a degree that black lesbians and butch/femme couples married each other in large wedding ceremonies, replete with bridesmaids and attendants. Real marriage licenses were obtained by masculinizing a first name or having a gay male surrogate apply for a license for the lesbian couple” (Faderman, 1991).⁶ Duckett asserts in an article titled “The Third Sex” that:

Miss Bentley ...from her teen years she became involved in recurring alliances with women who attracted her attention...On one occasion she lived in a Park Ave. penthouse as the paramour of a very wealthy woman. Miss Bentley accompanied her rich “wife” to the opera, she wearing a full dress suit, and her “wife” eloquently gowned (1957).

Working class venues such as rent parties were also locations where Bentley performed. A rent party is “a party given in one’s home to make money to pay the rent. Entertainment includes live or recorded ‘race music,’ and guests pay for admission and for food and drinks” (“rent party” *Juba to Jive*). E. Garber points out “private parties were the best place for Harlem lesbians and gay men to socialize, providing safety and privacy” (1989). “One lesbian blues song, ‘BD’s [bulldaggers] Dream,’ has been described by historians of the 1920s and 30’s music as one of the most frequently heard songs in the rent party repertoire” (Faderman 1991). Rent parties were generally heterosexual consequently the song was popular with all party goers (Faderman 1991).

Like the classic blues singing women Bentley’s audience seems to have been a mix of interracial, homo- and heterosexual individuals but her public performances seem to be limited to nightclubs or speakeasies in Harlem, during the 1920s and 1930s, like the Clam House, Ubangi Club and Rockland Palace and 1940s in San Francisco, Mona’s and the 440 Club, (Boyd, 2001). In 1944, columnist Alvin Moses describes Bentley “who affects a Ted Lewis top hat and mannish attire catches the fancy of white Americans, is a caution beyond a mere word description...Nitely Miss Bentley sets the Tondelayors...on fire with her risqué songs and fancy piano-plucking” (*Chicago Defender*, Dec. 30, 1944). Langston Hughes was impressed with Bentley’s performing stamina—being able to play the piano all night long and sing. When she became popular she moved to a better club, had an accompanist, and “the old magic of the woman and the

⁶ Nestle (1993) Hampton details a lesbian wedding that took place around 1938.

piano and the night and the rhythm being one is gone" (Hughes, 1993). Bentley's audience wanted to hear her provocative lyrics.

The suggestive or raw lyrics used by some blues singing women demonstrates their sense of freedom, what their public wanted to hear and made a statement about the culture. They understood their subjugation in an environment where they were historically despised and rejected for their race and gender and more specifically their desire was devalued, beauty denied, wage/labor diluted, lovers temporary and provisional, protection self-initiated or non-existent, and ability to perform conditional. They could expect hard times, rejection, and travel. Possibly they could look forward to family and a friend—if they had them. Nevertheless Bentley and others were audacious in the face of sociopolitical oppressions. It is well established that she "invented obscene lyrics to popular contemporary melodies" but she also brought crowd to tears when she performed her rendition of Louis Armstrong's "St. James Infirmary" (E. Garber 1989). Her presence and public free flowing lyrics suggests that lesbianism was accepted.

As mentioned previously she also performed at rent and other private parties. "Lesbians and gay men were active participants in rent parties" black lesbians and gay men were still subject to social and political persecution and backlash (E. Garber). Although there was tolerance in the Black community toward homosexuality "black homosexuals, like their white counterparts, were continually under attack from the police and judicial systems" and "...developing psychiatric institutions" (Garber, 1989). As Americans moved closer to the 1950s tolerance waned as political conservatism continued nurturing racial segregation and racism permeated urban environments while suburban lifestyles helped map class distinctions gender differences like other differences were less tolerated and forced further and further underground.

Mary Frances Berry points out that during the nineteenth century more than half of the states enacted miscegenation laws to prevent interracial marriage. "The main target of these laws' enforcers was not fornication but interracial marriage" (Berry, 2000). "...all cross-racial intimate relationships are informed by the dynamics of racism and white supremacy" (Hooks, 1989). In addition to Bentley's 1928 interracial lesbian marriage she was described as "involved in recurring alliances with women who attracted her attention" (Duckett 1957). Visibly, Bentley was not White, light, male, poor, slim or heterosexual. Her gendered performance was an affront to the judicial system but she continued and, in 1937, moved to Los Angeles, California with her act and her mother. It appears that her mother learned to tolerate her lesbian lifestyle.

Black Woman Performing Gender

In 1940 the local authorities prohibited her wearing pants during her act at Joaquin's El Rancho on Vine Street (Boyd 2001). This patch of western terrain was concerned less with her lyrical indiscretions and more by her perceived fashion transgression. By 1942 she had moved to San Francisco where there was a liberal judicial system and tourists who enjoyed the nightlife (Boyd 2001). Mona's a popular San Francisco nightclub known for lesbian entertainment

featured Bentley; “Her unflinching style shocked tourists while it delighted locals, and decades later many queer patrons vividly remember her performances” (Reba Hudson qtd. in Boyd 2001). Boyd reports “through the 1940s, lesbian and gay nightclubs were policed by the San Francisco Police Department, the California Alcoholic Beverage Control Boards, and the U.S. Armed Forces Disciplinary Control Board” (Boyd fn9). The tourist economy in San Francisco, according to Boyd, “supported the emergence of publicly visible lesbian cultures” (2001) but away from that environment when Black women sing in public about erotic desires and sensuality they are viewed as violating appropriate public expressions of Black female sexuality (Collins 2000).

Her performances were monitored by the authorities and her public offenses, according to columnists, seemed to be many: performing in drag, reworking of popular lyrics, overall failing to approximate the norm. Without access to Bentley’s risqué lyrics there are still conclusions that can be drawn about her recognition, performance and authority. Bentley was a signifier of an authentic kind of facts—definer of her own identity/reality. Like many Black women she claimed self-definition and authority with her voice and performance serving to confront taboos and the politics of domination. Initially, in the clubs, she used her piano, voice, body, fashion and words. Her continued elementary school sessions in her brothers’ suits let her family, schoolmates, teachers and school administrators know she refused to be limited to a certain style. Her choice of suits, then later tuxedos, or mixture of skirts with jackets and ties probably involved a level of comfort and vision on her part yet it was a direct act of resistance, a conscious claim to socioeconomic status and a form of aggressive speech. Aggressive speech, or sass, is one of the distinguishing features of the communication style attributed to many Black women and particularly the Black women blues singers. An African American woman who claims her voice and speaks her mind is perceived to be threatening and historically open to violence in the extreme by the dominant culture. The goal of such violence is fear and silence or rather an attempt to silence. During the 1920s-1940s, she took her sassy, gender-bending act on the road where she confronted race/gender/class in the form of a dandy “bulldagger.”

Denotatively bulldagger was the closest description one could use to characterize the embodiment of Bentley’s individuality because it simultaneously invokes race and gender. Conversely a “butch” depiction has negative consequences. It has been pointed out that some dark-skinned Black lesbian fems and their “continued exclusion from conceptions of womanhood by an always present misreading of the black lesbian body as automatically butch” (Harris 1996). Thus “These black fems express the contradictions of desire and frustration that come with claiming such an identity precisely due to the negative sexual definitions accorded black women’s bodies as not feminine, as not woman, and as oversexed and aggressive” (Harris 1996). They subvert and disguise but highlight a view of Black women physically and emotionally. Bentley, assumed a dandy style of dress on and off stage, but not always. Her publicity still photographs, ‘top hot and tails’, show her face heavily made-up. Bentley may have been masculine in appearance but she was not trying to be a

man. Even when she performed in skirts some folk found her masculine. On occasion she assumed the stage name Bobbie Minton—'ie' being the feminine spelling of the name. Overall she continued to perform using her birth name Gladys. Physically she preferred the clothing of socially well-off men. Her tuxedos were tailor made but they did not hide the fact that she was a buxom woman.

"A Woman Again"

Bentley a woman who, it appears, existed outside of the proverbial closet opens its' door and succumbs to gender and class oppression in her 1952 autobiographical essay with a title announcing "I Am A Woman Again." At some point during the late 1940s and early 1950s she subjects herself to expensive estrogen treatments.⁷ A doctor revealed to her that "your sex organs are infantile" and hadn't "progressed passed the age of a fourteen-year-old child" (Bentley 1952). Allegedly the treatments allowed her to take on a new (hetero) "normal" domesticated role of a middle-aged, middle-class Negro wife. The photographs of homey Bentley preparing dinner, making a bed, and selecting jewelry were offered as proof of her domestication and the success of hormone therapy—a former B.D. transformed into a lady. Her voice remained self-assured and she appears independent—keeping house for herself.

Even without the "sensational publicity" that once surrounded her she continued to claim public space and voice in *Ebony*. She confirmed "I am still haunted by the sex underground in which I once lived" (Bentley 1952). Her confessional narrative makes her appear to be more a trickster than a reformed B.D.

Today I am a woman again through the miracle which took place not only in my mind and heart—when I found a man I could love and who could love me—but also in my body—when the magic of modern medicine made it possible for me to have treatment which helped change my life completely. I am happily married and living a normal existence. (Bentley 1952).

The domestic pictorial features her alone without her man. In the article she vacillates between describing herself as "different" to "living in hell as terrible as dope addiction" (Bentley 1952). Her hair is covered, face made-up, her large dark body is draped consequently she does not appear weak, fragile and vulnerable but strong and in control because she is performing domestic labor. She demonstrates that what is important is what she does around the house not how she feels. Covered and physically large she appears to mask her vulnerabilities but the object is to portray a Black woman in control. The only thing Bentley doesn't do is wink at the reader. "While strength highlights Black

⁷ Serlin (2004) writes on this treatment and Bentley at length in his chapter entitled "Gladys Bentley and the Cadillac of Hormones." He finds "...endocrinology's ability to transform bodies and regulate behavior was clearly a powerful incentive for consumers like Gladys Bentley".

women's reputedly limitless ability to endure and care, it does so while mystifying and denying the toll of such demands on their psyches, bodies, and relationships" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). Yet she does not want to forget nor does she want the public to forget her bulldagger performing days as she is photographed, with a smile, viewing her clippings. To her credit she does not subordinate or minimize her past to the reading public. In short the article was not all about her alleged heterosexual lifestyle and being a selfless wife. Her supposed marriage to newspaper columnist J. T. Gibson was easily proven to be untrue. "...Gibson denied that he and Bentley had ever wed. In 1953, Bentley did marry a cook named Charles Roberts, but the two eventually divorced (Serlin 2004).

Interestingly, Bentley (1952) begins her story in the present tense with a clear connection to "us" or "we" (lesbians/homosexuals) a clear displacement with being heteronormal: "Very few people can understand us... We wince at the many harsh suggestions of what should be done to rid the world of the abnormalcy to which we cling... To the great majority of us, at some time or other, has come the feeling that the world would be better off without us;... If we cannot find happiness in our personal lives..." Her introductory paragraphs detail the rejection and pain experienced by lesbians and gays living in a homophobic world. Her wounds and pains matter—she refused to be a silent self-sacrificing strong Black woman/victim. Though she had taken the treatment and offers the pictures to prove heterosexuality she exhibits a continued connection to her bulldagger past and a clear image that she is still in charge.

In her literary claim to womanhood she is neither quiet nor subtle about gender or sex because both are connected to her "strange affliction." To add controversy to her confessional claim, almost five years later, Alfred Duckett's, March 2, 1957, column declares Bentley "...had returned to her old ways" after disclosing to a visitor who inquired of her about two photographs found on her dresser, one of a woman the other a man. "Oh,' Miss Bentley replied. "That's my husband (pointing to the male) and that's my wife." (*Chicago Defender* 7). Outside of lesbian communities African American lesbians are for the most part unsupported (Greene 2000). In a battle against isolation show business is an area where some lesbians and gays find acceptance; it was certainly a place where Bentley found approval. Finally before her death she became active in church. She was to become a minister at the Temple of Love in Christ, Inc. "Denominations vary in their official policies on homosexuality, but many commentators have observed that the Black church sweeps eroticism under the rug and fails to give homosexuality a 'foot in the door' (Greene). What an ironic choice for a woman who lived most of her life as a blues singing bulldagger, then within the last ten years to take the treatment and claim heterosexuality with the innuendo of being bisexual while claiming a place in one of the most homophobic environments—a Christian church. On the other hand, in the black community all "good" black women, single or married, attended or were affiliated with a church.

Serlin believes the politics of the time encouraged her to embrace mores of the NAACP and the gender philosophy of the middle-class Negro bourgeois with *Ebony* magazine being the ideal place to reach the public. In the 1950s

lesbians and gays lost military and government jobs; additionally, public knowledge of a known lesbian during the McCarthy period would make the woman an outlaw (Vicinus 1992). Race, gender, class and sexual stereotypes alienated African American women from full participation in the sociopolitical environment of the country. Bentley had lived most her life embracing a bulldagger lifestyle then had to face being over-weight, middle-aged and a fading career in a culture that embraced the politics of heterosexual domination. To battle the racist and sexist portrayals of Black women as sexually deviant middle-class women engaged in what historian Hine (1989) identifies as a "culture of dissemblance" buying into the notion of Victorian womanhood and creating a silence about sexuality and assuming outward conforming behavior. However, Bentley's limited literary voice specifically addresses sex and gender issues hence publicly violating the cult of dissemblance and reinforcing perceived hypersexuality of Black women. As a middle-aged, large, dark complexioned, domesticated African American woman photographed working around the house her body is easily misread as a non-sexual mammy. Some middle-class Negroes, at the time, who wanted to fit in with the dominant culture would have found Bentley an embarrassment.

Gladys Bentley was an extremely talented and popular blues singer during the Harlem Renaissance and into post World War II. She is remembered for performing in drag and her audacious lesbian lifestyle. Her owning of gender and desire perhaps contributed to her being rendered a foot note to the history and culture of the Harlem Renaissance. Her heterosexual pronouncement seems more a mocking tribute to the healing properties of hormone treatment, notification to a homophobic middle-class black culture and to appease a society that rejected or ignored large, dark, a self-assured, woman who still connected with homosexual desire.

She begins her story with a pain filled descriptions of sadness, loneliness, rejections by families, communities by those who have the "strange affliction." Head-on Bentley confronts her life as a black, masculine/female, lesbian, visible performer, with working-class roots that disrupted all layers of privilege. Her open rejection and early claim to a public space in drag is an intentional claim to own her being and a deliberate act of resistance to oppression. Her resistance does not change as she attempts to fit into a cheery role of domesticated heterosexual Black woman. There is one photograph, taken in her bedroom, where her reflection is captured in a mirror. But finding her true image is up to a viewer/reader. Her lighthearted images and her descriptive words reveal the complexities and pain involved in being Gladys Bentley. In 1960, when she died, it is clear that she still claimed a voice hoping to lead a congregation rather than an audience.

Once she became popular Langston Hughes found that Bentley became too commercial and "planned for the downtown tourist trade and therefore dull" (1993). Her career is a testament that she understood how to entertain an audience and be accepted for herself. In 1944, after an eight year absence, when she returned to New York, Alvin Moses reported "If there is any name on our morning patrol along the Broadway rialto that outrates that of Gladys Bentley

as a draw—you call me up and tell me who is the owner of it... Gladys Bentley is a fixture as long as she cares to check her luggage there" (*Chicago Defender* Dec 30, 1944). Rob Roy found that "...Gladys could be provocative and intimate, and she wore slacks during her acts. The upshot of it was that Gladys left New York and headed for Jersey. No one else on the scene could hold a candle to her style, so it faded" (*Chicago Defender* April 24, 1948). Throughout her career, Bentley was decisive, talented and unique.

"Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived. As credible bearers of those attributes, however, genders can also be rendered thoroughly and radically incredible" (Butler 1990). Overweight, Black, bulldagger, heterosexual, bisexual, poor to middle-class, entertainer, lover, loving, cross-dressing, self-assured, sassy, believer, domesticated, blues singing, piano player— Gladys Alberta Bentley was an incredible woman—who has earned recognition beyond a footnote.

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