

Editor's Note: Bulldagger Sings the Blues

GLADYS BENTLEY BOWLS ME OVER. IN THE MIDST OF HER LYRICS OUT STRUTS LOUIS ARMSTRONG; BENTLEY IMITATES NOT ONLY HIS GRAVELLY voice but also his trumpet: plush-toned and grumbly. In “How Much Can I Stand?” she alternates sassy rhymed couplets describing a no-count lover (“One time he said my sugar was so sweet / But now for his dessert he goes off the street”) with a refrain that begins “How much of that dog can I stand?” and ends with liquid syncopation: “Ooooobabababababababrabam.” She lowers her vibrato and growls from the chest. In her bluesy voice, as on the cover of *PMLA*, she stays in drag: not only as a man but also as a brass instrument.

Bentley swept through Harlem rent parties and clubs in the 1920s and 1930s and thrilled a wide range of spectators, including Langston Hughes and Eslanda Robeson. While Hughes praised her keyboard-pounding stamina, Robeson raved to one of her friends, “Gladys Bentley is grand. I heard her three nights, and will never be the same” (qtd. in Garber 56). Bentley’s metamorphic power radiated from her open, theatrical desire for other women, her flamboyantly naughty lyrics, and her elegant male garb. Although we may think of glamour drag as the property of female impersonators, “La Bentley” cross-dressed with the very best of them. Popular at upscale and downscale blues clubs, formidably beautiful in her white tuxedo and top hat, Bentley “could be seen any day marching down Seventh Avenue attired in men’s clothes,” according to the writer Wilbur Young. “She seemed to thrive on the fact that her odd habits were the subject of so much tongue wagging” (qtd. in Garber 58). Bentley vamped through the pages of contemporary novels, including Carl Van Vechten’s *Parties*, Clement Wood’s *Deep River*, and Blair Niles’s *Strange Brother*. At the height of her popularity she rented a \$300-a-month apartment on Park Avenue and had lots of servants, a big car, and a wife whom she supported in high style. She reminisced in the 1950s, “The club where I worked overflowed with celebrities and big star names nightly. . . . I had made my mark in show business” (“I Am” 94).

As swing became stylish and the Harlem jazz scene shifted, Bentley’s act changed as well. She developed a gay following at the mob-owned Ubangi Club on 133rd Street, and when this scene faded,

she moved to California. In the early 1940s she faced legal challenges over her right to perform in male attire during an engagement at Joaquin's El Rancho in Los Angeles: "the nightclub was forced to obtain a special police permit to 'allow Gladys Bentley, 250-pound colored entertainer, to wear trousers instead of skirts, during her act'" (Garber 59). The last half of Bentley's life involved stepping in and out of stigma. She repudiated her lesbian past in an essay in *Ebony* ("I Am"), embraced Christianity, and publicized her marriage to a man—all the time scrambling for work. She died in 1960 at the age of fifty-two. Some of her blues recordings are available, but few of her bawdy lyrics have survived. Her history persists in the archive Eric Garber gathered and bequeathed to the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco.

Bentley graces the cover of the May 2009 issue of *PMLA* as one of the queens of queer modernism. She may have been boisterous, but she was not anomalous. Black male impersonators were part of the early vaudeville scene and widely featured in Harlem clubs during the 1920s. Alberta Hunter, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Ethel Waters sang off-color lyrics and had male and female lovers. Smith was famous for sleeping with any alluring woman in her entourage, and local newspapers gossiped about the tantalizing possibility that Smith and Bentley had had an affair. Meanwhile, cross-dressing contests drew straight and gay crowds and became regular attractions in Chicago and New York. When Bentley married a woman, the event reached the gossip sheets, and she welcomed the publicity. As Garber argues in "Gladys Bentley: The Bulldagger Who Sang the Blues," Bentley was more open about her sexuality than other female blues singers; she personified the most identifiable lesbian stereotype of her period: "the tough-talking, masculine acting, cross-dressing, and sexually worldly 'bull dagger'" (58; fig. 1). In Harlem's universe of speakeasies, numbers rackets, sex circuses, and white tourism, "Bentley found a

place where she could be herself. The sporting life [slang for the criminal underworld] was one of the few arenas where homosexuality was both acknowledged and accepted. . . . She proved particularly accomplished at inventing scandalous lyrics to the tunes of popular melodies." Garber quotes Bill Chase, a *New York Age* correspondent: "Those were the days of double entendre songs with much ennui and if ever there was a gal who could take a popular ditty and put her own naughty version to it, La Bentley could do it" (55).

This issue of *PMLA* focuses on queer modernism, beginning with Heather Love's question in "Modernism at Night": "Is *queer modernism* simply another name for modernism?" Love introduces Brian Glavey's "Dazzling Estrangement," Peter Howarth's "Housman's Dirty Postcards," Ernesto Javier Martínez's "Dying to Know," and Sam See's "Spectacles in Color." Martin G. Eisner and Marc D. Schachter's "*Libido Sciendi*" follows, with an investigation of the differential histories of sexuality. How do we invent "a larger historiographical inquiry" that can explain why figures of sexual desire change radically over time? We can formulate similar questions about Bentley: Why were the 1920s and 1930s a prolific era for lesbian and bisexual blues singers? After experiencing full sexual citizenship in modernist Harlem, why did Alberta Hunter and Gladys Bentley fall on hard times? Who or what legislates a municipal or a national *ars erotica* in a given era?¹

As an uncloseted, blues-singing bulldagger, Bentley finds companionship in George Chauncey's *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940*.² In demanding a more accurate rendition of the pre-World War II queer metropole, which "is not supposed to have existed," Chauncey challenges three truisms about modern gay life and gives us sharper access to Bentley's sexual citizenship.

First, Chauncey breaks open the "myth of isolation," the idea that extended gay

FIG. 1

Gladys Bentley in the Ubangi Club, Harlem. Photograph by Sterling Paige. Courtesy of the Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, NY.



subcultures did not exist in the decades before Stonewall and the gay rights movement. He explains that many straight New Yorkers responded to the gay world of the 1920s with curiosity rather than ostracism: "Gay men had to take precautions, but, like other marginalized peoples, they were able to construct spheres of relative cultural autonomy in the interstices of a city governed by hostile powers" (2). During this period Bentley lived in nested social networks that celebrated, or at least tolerated, her female lovers and transvestism.

Second, Chauncey assaults the "myth of gay invisibility," which holds that "even if a gay world existed" before World War II, "it was kept invisible and thus remained difficult for isolated gay men to find. But gay men were highly visible figures in early-twentieth-century New York, in part because their lives were more integrated into the everyday life of the city in the prewar decades than it would be after World War II" (3). Just as gay men flashed identifying insignia (bleached hair, red ties), Bentley dressed in male attire, filled her lyrics with passion for other women, and came on to women in her audience. The line between outrageously performative and lived lesbianism blurred in her singing, much as it did in Ma Rainey's "Prove It on Me Blues." An advertisement for Rainey's song shows her avatar staring boldly at two attractive women and daring her audience to "prove it on me"—that is, to provide evidence that the singer is a dyke (fig. 2):

Went out last night. Had a great big fight.
Everything seemed to go on wrong.
I looked up. To my surprise,
The gal I was with was gone.

Rainey's lyrics veer from this ordinary blues refrain to a mischievous, teasing query about what happens when the singer turns out the lights:

They say I do it. Ain't nobody caught me.
Sure got to prove it on me.

Went out last night with a crowd of my friends.
They must've been women, 'cause I don't like
no men.

Rainey flirts with invisibility in the amply repeated refrain ("They say I do it. Ain't nobody caught me. / You sure got to prove it on me"), but she also flaunts the bulldagger's insignia: "Wear my clothes just like a fan. / Talk to the gals just like any old man."

As a "mannish" woman whose fans crossed gender and sexual boundaries, Bentley disproves Chauncey's third stereotype, "the myth of internalization," which insists that modern gays absorbed the hatred and pervert loathing of the dominant culture and succumbed to antigay policing. Bentley may have kowtowed to these norms in the 1950s, but in her heyday, the era of a blues-based, lesbian-biased *ars erotica*, Bentley's lavish persona was, in itself, a polemic against heterosexual norms.³ In the Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s her drag identity could be loud, queer, and proud. As the foremost member of a gang of celebrity male impersonators, Gladys Bentley exemplifies the strange quotidian life of a queer modernist.

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NOTES

I want to thank Cookie Woolner for sharing her thorough knowledge of Bentley's life and the lives of other queer blues artists.

1. I'm echoing Valerie Traub's question about sexual salience: "Why do certain figures and tropes of eroticism (and gender) become culturally salient at certain moments, becoming saturated with meaning, and then fade from view?" (130).

2. Chauncey explains that "the closet" did not become a metaphor until later in the century. Bentley would not have used this term to describe her own identity.

3. For an analysis of the facts versus the stereotypes of black women's sexuality and blues singing during this period, see Carby. For an analysis of the politics of women's blues, see Davis.

Fig. 2
Advertisement in
the *Chicago Defender*
(22 Sept. 1928,
natl. ed.: 7).

"PROVE IT ON ME BLUES"

by
"Ma" Rainey

What's all this? Scandal? Maybe so, but you wouldn't have thought it of "Ma" Rainey. But look at that cop watching her! What does it all mean? But "Ma" just sings "Prove It On Me" in this great new Paramount Blues No. 12668, with a bang-up accompaniment by the Tub Jug Washboard Band. Don't fail to get this record from your dealer, or send us the coupon.

[12668—Prove It On Me Blues and Hear Me Talking To You, "Ma" Rainey and the Tub Jug Washboard Band.]

12666—Penitentiary Blues and Long Lartin' Levin', Blind Lemon Jefferson and His Guitar.
12664—Bona Orchard Blues and Western Union Blues, Ida Cox; Piano, Banjo and Cornet Acc.
12665—Low Down Mississippi Bottom and Tom Cat Blues, "Mr. Freddie" Spruell; Guitar Acc.
12660—Ash Tray Blues and No Need of Knockin' On the Hind, "Papa Charlie" Jackson and His Blues Banjo.
12661—Saint Louis Man and Kentucky Stomp, Dixie Four.
12657—Rumblin' And Rumblin' Bee Constrictor Blues and Detroit Bound Blues, Blind Blake and His Guitar.
12656—House Rent Stomp and Big Bill Blues, Big Bill and Thomps; Guitar Acc.
12660—Lectric Chair Blues and See That My Grave Is Kept Clean, Blind Lemon Jefferson and His Guitar.
12659—Jimmy Rodgers Blue Yodel and Way Out On The Mountain, Louis Warfield; Guitar Acc.

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